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The Great Gatsby

Summer reading, 2022

I hope you enjoy this novel. I have read it several times now; once in high school, once in college, and three times as a middle-aged teacher. The book has changed for me (or maybe I've just changed and the book reads differently now) and I hope to convey the subtle nuances that have propelled this story to the top or near the top of many lists: “The Greatest American Novel,” “The Most Memorable Character,” “The Most Tragic Character,” “The Best Portrayal of America’s Rise and Fall” --- and the lists go on.

I know there is a movie. It's not the first, and it won't be the last. In my day, it starred a young Robert Redford and a waifish Mia Farrow. A few years ago, it was Leonardo DiCaprio, Carey Mulligan, and Tobey Maguire. I know it is a temptation to watch the movie, and some of you have probably already seen it; however, if you have not, just hold off a little more. Read Fitzgerald's masterpiece first, and picture for yourself Gatsby's mansion, Nick's cottage, Daisy's estate, and the sweltering wasteland known as “The Valley of Ashes” before you access the movie to see Baz Luhrmann's version of it all. His movies are known for their excessively lavish visuals, and while they are dazzling to watch, this one at least doesn't give a realistic portrayal of New York City/Long Island's uber-wealthy and their social lives.

Here is how I want you to approach this novel.

1. Read the list of characters on the next two pages of this document.
2. Move on to the page that lists themes, locations, and symbols from the book, along with some questions that you need to answer before classes begin in August. The questions are in bold font. Hand write your answers on notebook paper, and have them ready to turn in to the new English III teacher.
3. Read the book with these pages of characters, themes, locations, and symbols close by, so you are able to answer my questions as you go.
4. Remember – it's best to have your personal copy of this book so the teacher can lead the class through annotations, lectures, and notes in August, but the novel is also available for free on virtually dozens of websites, so you can read it anywhere, even on trips, if you don't have your book with you. Just Google ‘Great Gatsby text’ and there it is.

The best plan? Do this in June, **enjoy your summer**, read over your answers the day before school begins, and be ready to discuss and take lecture notes when you begin your year of study together.

Have a wonderful summer break!

The Great Gatsby

List of Characters

The Great Gatsby takes place on Long Island and in New York City during the Roaring Twenties. Specifically, it's 1922, Prohibition is in force, and the Jazz Age is in full swing. If you are unfamiliar with those historical terms, do a quick search to educate yourself.

1. Jay Gatsby

The iconic main character of the story, Jay Gatsby is fabulously wealthy, throws outrageous weekend-long parties at his Long Island, NY mansion, and seems to embody The American Dream. He is also utterly alone in the world.

2. Daisy Buchanan

From upper-crust Louisville, Daisy first met Gatsby when he was a poor man's son, stationed at the army base there. They fell in love, the war called, and we get to watch their reunion five years later. Oh, and by the time they meet again, she's married and has a daughter.

3. Tom Buchanan

One of the most detestable characters in American literature (my call on that one, but it's a safe call) Tom Buchanan is sexist, racist, elitist, arrogant, violent, and selfish. Judging from the last name, he's also Daisy's husband.

4. Nick Carraway

Nick is the narrator of the novel, and isn't from the east coast at all. He is fresh from WW I, wants more out of life than his Midwestern upbringing promises, and heads to NYC to partake in the seething mass of humanity there. Through a series of events, he finds himself living next to the city's most enigmatic resident: Jay Gatsby.

5. Jordan Baker

A thoroughly modern woman, Jordan Baker is a professional golfer with a jaded, apathetic view of life, and a taste for bootleg liquor, men, and Gatsby's parties.

6. George Wilson

Wilson works on Tom Buchanan's cars and lives in a horrible stretch of land between NYC and the wealthy on Long Island called 'The Valley of Ashes.'

7. Myrtle Wilson

She may be George Wilson's wife, but she is romantically involved with Tom Buchanan – right under her husband's nose. She is complex – a selfish predator one moment, a victim the next.

8. Meyer Wolfsheim

Wolfsheim is a crime boss with enormous influence. He is also a friend of Gatsby. He wears cufflinks made from human molars, if that gives you an indication of his lifestyle choices.

9. Henry Gatz

Oddly, this is Jay Gatsby's father. The mystery of the last name will be solved as the book unfolds.

10. Dan Cody

A world explorer, adventurer, and yachtsman, Dan Cody gave Gatsby his first true taste of 'the world,' and was, for a moment, a father figure to the impressionable young man.

The Great Gatsby

Themes, Locations, and Symbols

The questions that you need to answer before the first day of school are in bold print and are numbered. There are nine of them.

1. Themes

“Theme” is such a meaningless word sometimes. We throw it around in English classrooms, and yet it doesn’t seem to have any meaning *outside* of the classroom because we rarely see it being used anywhere *except* the classroom. Exactly what is a theme? It’s the take-away -- it’s the message -- the main message(s) that the author wants us to dig out from his story line. Here are some of Fitzgerald’s messages to us in *The Great Gatsby*.

A. Decay: When something has decayed, it’s not as good as it once was. It has gone downhill, has lost its original luster, isn’t as healthy, or may even be falling apart. Think of a neighborhood that is in a state of decay with its peeling paint, torn shingles, overgrown yards, and hovering sense of hopelessness. In The Great Gatsby, however, most of the action takes place in opulent rooms occupied by any number of wealthy Americans.

- 1. How is this a picture of decay?**
- 2. Why did Fitzgerald see the Roaring Twenties as a time of decay?**

B. Illusion vs. Reality: This is huge. In fact, the title of the novel is a reference to those magicians who are able to mystify us with their grand illusions. The disappearing car, jet plane, or skyscraper --- the escape artist who very nearly lost his life in that tiny box --- “The Great _____ !!!” You will see, as the novel unfolds, that there is a strong dose of illusion here.

C. Class Struggle: This is an easy one. You will see the lives of the wild and wealthy youth of New York City and the contrasting lives of the poor in The Valley of Ashes. Pay attention to Fitzgerald’s portrayal of the two classes, and ask these questions:

- 3. Does Fitzgerald seem to favor one class over the other?**
- 4. Does he portray one as superior to the other?**

2. Locations

Pay attention to these locations, and to the atmosphere of each one. What is *atmosphere*? It is made up of many things ---- the weather, the temperature, the cleanliness or filth of the air, the physical surroundings, the ‘closeness’ or ‘openness,’ and the overall mood of the characters. Please write a quick description of the atmosphere at the following locations. One sentence for each location is fine.

- 5. The sunset dinner at the Buchanan estate**
- 6. Gatsby’s parties**
- 7. Nick’s little house when Gatsby and Daisy reunite after a five year separation**
- 8. Tom Buchanan’s NYC apartment**
- 9. The Valley of Ashes**

3. Symbols

There are many symbols in this story --- small things that may seem insignificant, yet stand in for important, larger, even universal things. Here are a few I want you to spot and think about. You do not need to write anything about these four symbols, but we will definitely spend some time discussing them. This is just a heads-up.

1. The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg
2. The green light
3. East vs. West
4. Meyer Wolfsheim

Happy reading!