

The Great Gatsby

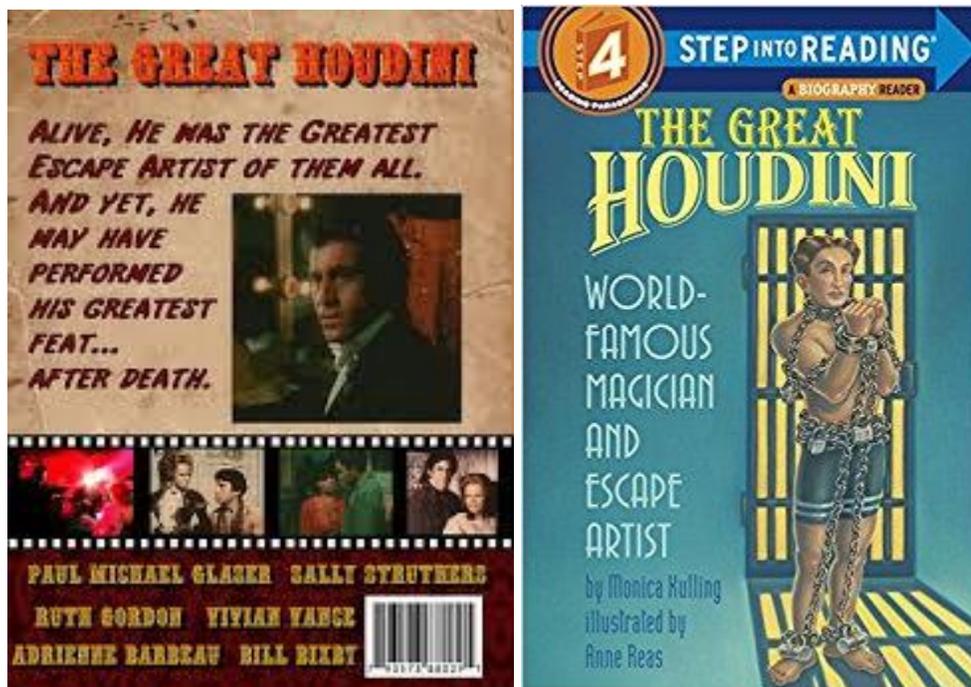
By F. Scott Fitzgerald

A Radical Introduction

Most readers are not ready to make deep and radical readings of literature. The most unprepared readers treat books like *The Great Gatsby* as pure fiction, some readers grasp that such books criticize certain aspects of their civilization, very few readers understand that such books are condemnations of their entire civilization.

Gatsby is not a portrait of an atypical American; not only Gatsby but also Nick and Tom represent the essence or culmination of the American and civilized man. They are utterly incapable of sympathy for others, completely uninterested in life and children, incapable of conducting an intelligent dialogue, incapable of wit and humor, and always viewing humans and all of Nature as either worthless or deserving to be taken by any means possible, to be owned and finally even displayed as a trophy for public approval. In fact, all the characters in *The Great Gatsby* are mentally ill; the only worthwhile distinction to make among them is that the sickest ones are the ones who seem most successful only because civilization has normalized and accepted their psychopathic behaviors, while the victims of the most successful men like Tom Buchanan are the ones whose pain is recognized as depression and whose vengeful actions are punished.

The Great Magic Show: Illusions and Escape Acts



Harry Houdini was a magician and escape artist who lived and performed while F. Scott Fitzgerald was writing his novel. Houdini was incredibly popular. Gasby, the protagonist, is like a magician. He creates

lies or illusions that people believe so that he will seem *worthy* of Daisy. Explain how Gatsby is like a magician and an escape artist whose greatest magic trick fails and costs him his life *because a greater magician named Tom Buchanan had more powerful spells and illusions*.

Sociopaths and Communication

The Great Gatsby provides an extremely ugly but accurate portrait of America's ruling or upper class and its lower class. Besides illustrating their criminal and cruel activities, their bigotry, greed and love of false wealth, the novel portrays them as mentally deficient and unable to communicate intelligently, sympathetically or even in a friendly manner.

Nick is the only one who communicates eloquently, but only as a narrator. As a character, he is reticent, and as both a character and our narrator, he is cold and *rarely* communicates human warmth or passion. Other characters don't listen to anyone, only hear what they want to hear and never engage in conversations about anything very personal, let alone anything social, political or philosophical *unless they are afraid or angry*.

Explore these points.

American Justice

Discuss evidence from the text that morality and the justice system are completely corrupted. Specifically, address evidence that police forces are owned by wealthy elites, and that morality has been crushed by both greed and by fear of the police and their 'justice' system. Consider, for example, evidence that Gatsby and Tom have corrupted justice, and evidence that Nick is afraid of reporting the truth about Tom and Daisy. However, you should also discuss evidence of other immoral and criminal behaviors such as drunk driving, Cody's murder, Wolfshiem's business, and so on.

The Untrustworthy Narrator

From the start of the novel, Nick Caraway admits that Gatsby is an exception and is the one person he does not judge or hate. What factors might make him biased in favor of Gatsby?

Gatsby is a compulsive liar, but Nick seems to believe most of his lies and he seems to reject most of the negative rumors about him. Discuss this pattern and try to identify some of the lies he believes. An example of one lie the claim that Gatsby's 'mentor' Cody sailed around the continent a few times – though obviously, back in the early 20th century, no one could sail around North America because the Panama Canal had not been built yet, I think, and certainly the Arctic was impassable due to ice.

False Wealth

The novel is replete with evidence that Americans care only about seeming to be rich and wealthy, or, as we say, they only care about looking good. Compose a thesis about this cultural problem and its impact on human relationships. Then compose an informal essay with quotations and in-text citations. Your evidence should discuss at least three characters.

Wealth Inequality

Write annotated paragraphs proving that the author has deliberately contrasted the environments inhabited by the wealthy and the poor, by people like Gatsby, the Buchanans, and the Wilsons. Much of your evidence can come from chapters 1 and 2.

Background reading, research and response

- What are government war bonds? How were they used before WWI?
- How does a government pay its bond holders or creditors?
- How is a bond similar to a credit card?
- In the novel, who profits selling and buying bonds? Who are the ultimate losers?
- What is your opinion of the bond-selling reality?
- In the novel, do any of the characters understand or care about the war they fought and funded and how it devastated Europe?

Love in America

Gatsby fell in love with Daisy's wealth when he was young. Both Tom Buchanan and Gatsby used their wealth in order to catch women, but neither man ever experienced true love with anyone. Nick's love life is not better. Explain.

The Isms

- Mr Wofshiem is an unpleasant and Jewish character. What is anti-Semitism and was it common in the U.S. during the early 20th century? Why do you think the author included such an unpleasant Jewish character in his novel?
- What other forms of racism are evident in the novel? What evidence do we have the Nick is not only racist but he thinks his family roots make him superior?
- What evidence can we find of sexism and misogyny? Consider how women and children are treated as objects of wealth instead of as human beings?
- Materialism: how are homes and cars treated as objects of wealth rather than as objects that provide homes and vehicles for life and love?
- How do some women in the novel treat their own bodies as if they were treasures or objects of wealth to be desired by men?
- What evidence can we find of classism? Consider how Mr Wilson is treated and what Nick's "snobbishness" and his father's belief about people born without "fundamental decencies".
- What evidence can we find that the upper class is divided between two groups that do not exist in harmony?

The Great Gatsby as Satire of Christianity

1. Jay Gatsby = Jimmy Gatz = Jesus Christ; Gatz is probably a Jewish name

2. Quotation: “The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. **He was a son of God**—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about **His Father’s Business**, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.”
3. Gatsby’s early life is mysterious, like the early life of Jesus.
4. Gatsby worked for a criminal with yacht, as Jesus worked with fishermen.
5. Gatsby has wealthy friends, like Jesus.
6. Gatsby began his life in poverty, like Jesus.
7. Gatsby is not married, like Jesus.
8. Gatsby dies for a crime he did not commit, like Jesus.
9. Gatsby is connected to liquor, as Jesus is associated with wine.