

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S



the
GREAT
GATSBY

'Brilliantly insightful, witty and wide-ranging,
this is an indispensable guide to a classic novel'

WILLIAM BOYD

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by John Sutherland & Jolyon Connell

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Introduction

When *The Great Gatsby* was first published, in 1925, reviews were mixed. H.L. Mencken called it “no more than a glorified anecdote”. L.P. Hartley, author of *The Go-Between*, thought Fitzgerald deserved “a good shaking”: “his imagination is febrile and his emotion over-strained... *The Great Gatsby* is evidently not a satire; but one would like to think that Mr Fitzgerald’s heart is not in it, that it is a piece of mere naughtiness.”

Yet gradually the book came to be seen as one of the greatest – if not *the* greatest – of American novels. Why? What is it that makes this story of a petty hoodlum so compelling? Why has a novel so intimately rooted in its own time “lasted” into ours? What is it that posterity, eight decades later, finds so fascinating in this chronicle of the long-gone “Jazz Age”, flappers, speakeasies and wild parties?

It is, after all, scarcely a novel at all, more a long short story. But it has a power out of all proportion to its length. It is beautifully written, making it feel even shorter than it is, and is full of haunting imagery. It is also, perhaps, the most vivid literary evocation of the “Great American Dream”, about which it is profoundly sceptical, as it is about dreams generally. In the end, however, as D.H. Lawrence would put it, it is “on the side of life”.

Gatsby’s dream may be impossible, so much so that the book can end in no other way than with his

death, but up to a point he is redeemed by it and by the tenacity with which he clings to it. It is this that makes the novel so moving and so haunting.

The overwhelming majority of novels come, enjoy their brief moment, and go into oblivion never to return, but not this one. As George Orwell said, “Ultimately there is no test of literary merit except survival”. As every bookshop and educational syllabus testifies, *The Great Gatsby* has survived.



A Summary of the Plot

Gatsby's story is narrated by Nick Carraway, a Midwesterner in his mid-twenties who has "come East". The story covers the summer of 1922 and is set mainly on the two spits of land off Long Island: East Egg and West Egg. West Egg, which is nearer New York, is populated by "new money", the more exclusive East Egg, by "old money".

Nick has taken a job as a bond salesman in Wall Street, where he commutes daily by train. He lives in a ramshackle "cardboard" house on West Egg adjoining "an elaborate road house", owned by the mysterious and very rich Mr Gatsby, who throws parties which, even for the Jazz Age, are extravagant. Rumours swirl around Gatsby: he is a gangster, a war hero, an aristocratic foreigner.

In another mansion – on more fashionable East Egg – lives Daisy Buchanan, a cousin of Nick's. Daisy is married to Tom, whose main interests in life are his polo ponies and his mistresses. Nick was a classmate of Tom's at Yale where he (Tom) was a star footballer. Now he is a bully, a snob, a racist and an inveterate adulterer. He and Daisy have come East after an ugly business involving a car accident and one of his "sweeties".

Tom has more recently found another sweetie in Myrtle, the coarse but sexually alluring wife of a local garage owner, George Wilson. Tom has set

up a love-nest for her in Manhattan. Myrtle's husband suspects nothing. Daisy, however, knows about her husband's infidelities.

Before Tom married Daisy, we learn, she had been engaged to Jay Gatsby, then a young army officer. But Gatsby, after being sent to France, was delayed in Europe for several months after the war had ended – and during the delay, Daisy married Tom. Now Gatsby, who has felt spiritually "married" to Daisy ever since, has returned to New York to win her back.

Keeping Daisy company over the summer is her girlhood friend Jordan Baker – a champion golfer. She and Nick start an affair, which gives him an insight into the unfolding Buchanan-Gatsby drama as it moves towards its climax.

It is never really clear where Gatsby's immense riches come from, but gradually we learn more of his history. He was born Jimmy Gatz, the son of an unsuccessful farmer in the Midwest. Scraping a living on the shores of Lake Superior, young Gatz caught sight of a yacht in danger of being wrecked on a sandbar. He rowed out to warn the owner, Dan Cody. Cody, a "debauched" magnate enriched by his investments in metal mining, took to "Gatsby", as the young man promptly renamed himself. Over the next few years, he became Cody's right-hand man. More importantly, he

learned how to look and act rich.

On Cody's death, Gatsby was left almost penniless, having inherited nothing from his former mentor, but contrived to get himself on an officer's training course, when America joined the war against Germany. It was as Lieutenant Gatsby that he won the heart of the southern belle, Daisy Fay.

After the war, having lost Daisy to Tom, Gatsby was taken up by another patron, the Jewish gangster, Meyer Wolfsheimer, and became involved in the racketeering that boomed in the Prohibition era (1919-33): fixing sports events, rum-running, running illicit casinos, speakeasies and brothels, dealing in stolen bonds, even – it is rumoured – murder. We are uneasily aware of all this as a “foul dust”, trailing the dazzling Gatsby glamour.

By 1922, Gatsby is rich enough to pursue his dream of reclaiming Daisy and the main narrative of Fitzgerald's novel revolves around a series of summer parties, lavish (in Gatsby's West Egg mansion) and squalid (in Tom's New York love nest).

There is a final showdown between Gatsby and Daisy's husband, Tom, in the Manhattan Plaza Hotel. Gatsby declares his intention to run off with Daisy. She is present, as are Nick and Jordan, and cannot decisively say which man she loves. After this tense encounter, Gatsby and

Daisy drive back to Long Island together. She is driving, allegedly “to steady her nerves”.

As they pass George Wilson's garage, Myrtle contrives to break out from the bedroom where her husband (suspicious at last) has locked her. The unlucky woman assumes Tom is in the speeding car, rushes into the road, and is killed. Daisy, terrified, drives on. The police are later unable to identify the “death car”.

Gallantly, Gatsby does not reveal that Daisy was the driver. Tom tells Wilson it was Gatsby, and Wilson, in a fit of homicidal rage, guns down Gatsby in his swimming pool before shooting himself. Nick knows the truth about the hit and run incident but keeps it to himself. The Buchanans “retreat into their money”. Nick returns to his home in the Midwest.



What is *The Great Gatsby* about?

The Great Gatsby is a young man's novel – a novel about being young, and about the loss of youthful dreams.

No-one, Fitzgerald proclaimed, after the triumph of his first book, *This Side of Paradise*, should live beyond the age of 30. That novel was published when he was a precocious 23. *The Great Gatsby* is another novel about the 1920s, written by a novelist still in his twenties. It has a narrator in his twenties and a hero only a year past them attempting to recover the woman he loved when he was 27. Our twenties are not only the best time in our lives, *The Great Gatsby*

THE GREAT GATSBY

THE TITLE

Few novelists have entitled their work more poetically, or more aptly, than F. Scott Fitzgerald. Finding the “right” title for his third novel, however, caused

chronic problems for the author and his faithful editor, Maxwell Perkins.

The Great Gatsby was, the manuscript workings reveal, an early title, soon discarded. Fitzgerald initially disliked it. As he told Perkins “*The Great Gatsby* is weak because there's no emphasis, even ironically, on [Gatsby's] greatness or lack of it”.

Other titles the two men kicked around between them were: *Among*

asserts. They are the only worthwhile time in our lives.

The novelist Jacqueline Susann once observed that “for every woman, forty is Hiroshima”. Fitzgerald was even more apocalyptic. In his world, thirty is the “far side of paradise”. The point is stressed when, late in the novel, driving back with Tom from New York, Nick Carraway, the narrator, suddenly realises that it's his birthday. He has passed, without realising it, what Joseph Conrad called the “shadow line” in his life. Darkness awaits:

I was thirty. Before me stretched the portentous, menacing road of a new decade... Thirty – the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of

the Ash Heaps and Millionaires (Perkins thought the stress on “Ash” would put readers off); *Gold-hatted Gatsby* (grotesque in the image it evokes); *Trimalchio in West Egg* (as Fitzgerald's friend Ring Lardner pointed out, no-one would know how to pronounce Trimalchio, or know who the hell he was – or, come to that, what kind of hen laid west eggs); *On the Road*

to West Egg; The High-bouncing Lover, or, pure and simple, *Gatsby*.

Fitzgerald's last brainwave, communicated to Perkins by telegram – after the novel had gone to press – was *The Red White and Blue* (alluding to the *Star-Spangled Banner*, composed by Fitzgerald's distant relative, Francis Scott Key).

Perkins eventually persuaded his author to go with *The Great Gatsby*.