

F. Scott Fitzgerald

The Great Gatsby

Objectives

1. Identify the **modernist** traits of *The Great Gatsby*.
2. Recognize the function of allusion in the novel.
3. Recognize the history context of *The Great Gatsby* as a commentary on contemporary politics, economics, and social transformations.
4. Recognize how social circumstances shape the production of literature.
5. Identify Fitzgerald's regionalist and international commentary in *The Great Gatsby*.

Reading Assignment

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Adelaide: Planet eBook, 2012.

Dimock, Wei Chee. "4. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*" Yale University. New Haven. 5 April 2012.

— — —. "5. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*" Yale University. New Haven. 5 April 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06ernhU235g>

Commentary

[F. Scott Fitzgerald](#)'s *The Great Gatsby* has shaped America's literary scene for more than half a century. It was a recognized landmark in American literature from its first publication, but academics and the wider reading public relatively overlooked it during Fitzgerald's lifetime. Nonetheless, after his death, the novel became both a critical and popular success. It has been made into a film five times and is considered the central literary work of the Jazz Age, which can also be called **American High Modernism**. Much of its social context derives from the post-[World War I](#) world in which widespread disenchantment with technological progress, Western decadence, and social meaning became a common theme in many art forms. This was a time of reconstruction following mass-deaths during the war, untold destruction from the industrialization of armed conflict, and global

pandemics that killed more young people than the Great War had. This profound loss of meaning and the collapse of a belief in modernity created a deep sense of loss in the general population and the artists who sought to express the sentiments of their age. Much of *The Great Gatsby's* literary context emerges from the movement we now call **Modernism** or more specifically High Modernism. Many American artists, in particular those who moved to Europe, sought to reshape the arts and “make it new.” This Modernist spirit reached its peak in 1922 with the publication of [James Joyce's](#) novel *Ulysses*, [T.S. Eliot's](#) epic poem *The Waste Land*, and the founding of the literary periodical [The Criterion](#). In the same year, the literary world saw the first publication of [Hermann Hesse's](#) *Siddhartha* and [Virginia Woolf's](#) *Jacob's Room*. Fitzgerald's novel was profoundly influenced by this literary milieu.

This historical context of the novel specifically includes the prohibition of alcohol in the United States of America from 1919 to 1933 (all consumption of alcoholic beverages was illegal during these years under “Prohibition”). Fitzgerald's novel was published in 1925 at the height of prohibition, and for this reason, the excessive alcohol consumption in the novel should be rethought by modern readers – it reflects the class that could afford to acquire and be caught with such materials. Moreover, modern readers may recall the [Great Depression](#) that ran from 1929 across the 1930s, but this overlooks the 1920-1921 Depression that saw unemployment rise from 1.4% to 11.7% and the Gross Domestic Product drop by 17% – it was the largest ever deflation across a single year in economic records, with wholesale prices declining by nearly 40% in a single year.

The period we now most strongly associate with Modernism, per se, is the 1890s through the 1950s. Many modernist scholars will limit this further to 1914 to 1945: the period from the outbreak of the First World War to the end of the Second World War (some limit it further to 1914 to 1928). This short period of scarcely 31 years saw some of the most profound transformations of human society and expansions to the scope of human possibility. The First World War signaled the end of all previous notions of heroic pre-industrial war, symbolized in the end of Calvary warfare and the rise of the tank, chemical warfare, and the machine gun. World War I saw the rise of wireless communication, armoured vehicles, aircraft, modern artillery, and automatic weapons. This is a profound transformation of humanity's destructive capacities. In many respects, WWI was seen as the culmination of industrialization, imperialism, and capitalism – industry was made profitable again by the war, which helped to end the economic depressions that had created social instability since the

1890s; much of the war was fought in Europe over control of imperial territories; and technological invention brought the now-profitable industry to the battlefield and created an industrial war machine.

For the context of *The Great Gatsby*, the interbellum years, from 1919 to 1939, were marked by major social changes. [Ireland](#) achieved independence in 1922 while Greece lost its war with Turkey and the ancient populations from Smyrna were deported. In 1917 the [Russian Revolution](#) began and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 instantiated British policy to establish a Jewish state in Palestine. Four major empires ended: the Hohenzollerns, the Habsburg, the Romanovs, and the Ottomans. The war also paralleled the spread of infectious disease, including epidemic typhus, the 1918 influenza pandemic that was most deadly to young adults (the Spanish Flu that began in Kansas), malaria, and the terrifying Sleeping Sickness (Encephalitis lethargica). Up to 100 million people perished from disease, 16 million in the war, and 21 million were left wounded. An uncertain number perished in the several related genocides. In all, up to 150 million people alive in 1914 had perished by 1922 in a world with a population of fewer than 2 billion people. The result was a tremendously altered social vision of progress, technology, mass transportation, new forms of industrialization, industrial warfare, and a profound doubt about the merits of being “modern.”

Many branches of what we now call “Modernism” express the two faces of discontent with modernity versus enthrallment with industrialization. Many American modernist authors (and artists of many types) were paid to document American culture as a part of the New Deal that developed in response to the Great Depression.

During the 31-year period from the beginning of World War I to the cessation of World War II, pandemic disease hurried by new transportation technologies and globalization, in tandem with warfare rendered more efficient by technology, claimed nearly 200 million lives or approximately 10% of the entire human population of the period. This mass mortality was concentrated among the younger members of human society who had less immunity to disease and who were more likely to serve in the war efforts. This left subsequent generations with a major gap, a missing generation of young men. Much of the population born in the 1890s and the 1920s was simply absent, either permanently or temporarily, or was crippled for life and wounded psychologically.

This complex relationship between industrialization, economic instability, warfare, technological advancement, and unprecedented levels of destruction (as well as unprecedented rises in wealth and standards of living) all inform Modernism as a cultural movement.

These are the central anxieties and conditions to which Modernism as an artistic movement responds, in large part using the philosophical visions developed in the mid to late Nineteenth Century.

The Literary Context

It is not surprising, given the historical context above, that Fitzgerald had wished to title the novel *Trimalchio*, which we find in the opening paragraph of Chapter 7 in *The Great Gatsby*. The name refers to Gaius Petronius's *Satyricon*, a novel from the late First Century C.E. The narrative centres on the narrator Encolpius, a former gladiator during the reign of the Roman Emperor Nero, whose reign is associated with tyranny and extreme decadence. Nero's rule witnessed the burning of Rome and ended with his own suicide, after which Roman rule collapsed into chaos. The title "Trimalchio" implies this end-stage of a great empire and extreme decadence, both of which are recurrent themes in the *Satyricon*. The Trimalchio section is specifically centred on a luxurious and grotesquely decadent party, as is much of *The Great Gatsby*.

Apart from this, *The Great Gatsby* is profoundly influenced by T.S. Eliot's 1922 poem *The Waste Land*, which shaped a generation of writers. The poem focuses on Spring and the impossibility of rebirth or pilgrimage in the modern world – Fitzgerald's novel is set during the Spring and Summer of 1922 as well. As Letha Audhuy has argued, "Fitzgerald, consciously and unconsciously, drew upon *The Waste Land* as a whole to the point of making it the informing myth of his novel" (Audhuy 41). Her article reconstructs and details the extensive textual allusions in Fitzgerald to Eliot's poem. Both Audhuy and Dale B.J. Randall note the function of the Valley of Ashes (Audhuy 42; Randall 51) as a parallel to Eliot's waste land. A main theme that emerges from this Eliotic context is the impossibility of spiritual rebirth in the modern world.

Major Themes

Truth & Lies

Nick is consistently the only person who tells the truth. Our narrator is the only honest figure in the novel. Jordan Baker is a pathological liar, Gatsby has a fake identity (albeit mainly for social mobility), Tom is keeping a mistress for an extramarital affair, Myrtle is cheating on her husband, and everyone lies about the accident at the conclusion of the novel. For several scenes, the spread of rumours is key (such as the

opening of chapters 4 & 6 and even after Gatsby's end), and even Owl Eyes is deeply surprised to discover that Gatsby's library is real. We are greatly surprised as readers to discover how much truth Gatsby has actually told across the novel.

Social Class & Race

While it may seem obvious that Nick regards his social class as beneath that of Gatsby's, and moreover as the novel progresses Gatsby's own "class-climbing" by adopting an Oxford history and family heritage above his real origins, we should also keep in mind the complexities of class and race in America. Although America is envisioned as a classless society, *The Great Gatsby* continuously reinforces the complexities of class divisions in both material and social forms. The Valley of Ashes is one such classed location (in reality this is a trash burning station in north-central Queens, New York, midway between the Plaza Hotel in New York City and the lushly green town of Great Neck, which he renames West Egg). As a dividing point between the luxuries of the plaza hotel and the exclusivity of West Egg (Great Neck), the Valley of Ashes marks class in a clear and recognizable manner. In the valley, the Protestant eyes of T.J. Eckleberg watch over the poor, keeping them to a moral and ethical value system that ensures their domination by a wealthy ruling class that is not watched by T.J. Eckleberg and that demonstrably flouts the same social ethical values. In tandem with this, we should recall Tom Buchanan's profound racism, which reflects on his origins in Kentucky (one the slave holding "northern" states in the American Civil War, which continued to hold slaves but did not join the South in breaking from the Union). In tandem, we have Jay Gatsby's Jewish identity, which he hides in order to avoid being belittled in New York City – only at the end of the novel when his father visits do we, as readers, discover that Gatsby was Jewish and had therefore faced racial discrimination during his early love affair with Daisy.

Time and Duration

Fitzgerald attaches his novel's images to one of the heated discussions in the arts for his time period: time. Philosophers such as [Henri Bergson](#) had made the discussion of time a major concern for modernist writers, ranging from James Joyce to [John Dos Passos](#). The final pages of Chapter 6 in *The Great Gatsby* stress the impossibility of repeating the past and Gatsby's grand attempt to do so in recuperating his lost relationship with Daisy. In this moment, it is "as if the past

were lurking here in the shadow of his house" (118). As an anticipation of this problem and impossibility with time, the novel opens with Nick's observation that the beach was "jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens" (9) to reach Tom Buchanan. Tom, not Gatsby, is of the time, as indicated by the sun-dials (natural clocks). The novel's conclusion reinforces this limitation of time and the impossibility of Gatsby's failed goals. When Nick thinks that Gatsby's "dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it" as Gatsby's grew ever more prosperous and successful over time, he also recognizes that Gatsby was pointing his aims in the wrong direction of time since "He did not know that it was already behind him" (193). Moreover, this moment connects with the discussion above of Trimalchio and the fall of empires, since Gatsby's American Dream, like the nation itself in Fitzgerald's analysis during the economic depression following after the Second World War, is "somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (193), which suggests that just as Gatsby is moving into the future in a futile attempt to recover the past, so too is the republic itself: America. The result is nostalgia such that "we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (193).

Questions for Self-Review

1. How does race function in *The Great Gatsby*? Is it important that Tom and Daisy are married in the American south, at the Seelbach Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky?
2. Daisy and Myrtle, Tom's wife and his lover, are both named for flowering plants. Does their difference in name reflect differences in class and social status? How do these differences mark their treatment and value to Tom?
3. How does Nick shape our understanding of the novel by acting as a first-person narrator? Are we more or less sympathetic to particular characters based on Nick's attachment to them?
4. How is the novel a reflection of or an allegory for the social and economic state of America following the First World War?
5. Why do you think the novel contrasts New York City, the Valley of Ashes, and West Egg so frequently?

Works Cited & Supplemental Reading

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