

CliffsNotes.com® Conversation Starters for **THE GREAT GATSBY**

In 1925, when *The Great Gatsby* was published, the novel served as a snapshot of the frenzied post-war society known as the Jazz Age. Why after all these years is the novel still so popular? What is it about the novel that makes it one of the great American classics? What social movements were taking place in the “Roaring 20s” that Fitzgerald highlights in the novel?

The notion of the American Dream figures prominently in the novel. How do you define “American Dream”? Is pursuing the American Dream necessarily a good thing, as evidenced by *The Great Gatsby*?

Explore the character of Nick. How are you supposed to feel about him? In what ways does he come off as a reliable or unreliable narrator?

Fitzgerald’s story shows the clear delineations between different classes of society: new money, old money, some money, and no money. How do you interpret his comments on each of these groups? Does he hold any one group above the other? Are there ways in which people of all groups are alike?

Throughout the story, Gatsby has difficulty accepting that the past is over and done with. Where do you find evidence of his trying to recapture the past? What does this say about him? Should people live their lives yearning for something in the past? Why or why not?

Part of Fitzgerald’s strength as a writer comes from his imagistic style. His writing is very sensory-oriented. What examples of sensory-oriented imagery (sight, taste, touch, smell, sound) do you find in the story? What kind of atmosphere do these details help create? How do they affect you as a reader?

It’s not uncommon to hear the term “a self-made man.” What does this term mean? How does Gatsby fit into that definition? In what ways does he take it too literally?

Although Gatsby professes to love Daisy, there is a sense that he is not in love with her as much as he is in love with the *idea* of her. Where can you find evidence of Gatsby’s devotion to an ideal rather than an actual person?

Although Nick Carraway has his reservations about Gatsby, it’s clear he thinks of him fondly; after all, the title of the book is *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby leads a questionable existence and comes to a tragic end, yet Nick (and by extension, we as readers) feel empathetic toward him. Does Gatsby deserve to be called “Great”? In what ways is he great? In what ways is he not? In the end, which wins out: greatness or mediocrity?

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In Chapter 1, Nick Carraway, the story's narrator, remembers his upbringing and the lessons his family taught him. What are some of these lessons?

The reader knows immediately from Chapter 1 that the story has already taken place and that Nick is telling it to us through the filter of time. He is distanced from the events at hand and is recounting them by way of memory. It is imperative that readers trust him, then, because time can distort memories, and the reception to the story hinges largely on his impartiality and good judgment. Do you trust Nick? Does he have good judgment? How does Fitzgerald establish our trust in Nick?

Nick settles in West Egg, living in a small rental house adjacent to Gatsby's mansion, rather than in East Egg, where Tom and Daisy live. How do the two Eggs compare? What are they symbols of?

How does Fitzgerald describe Tom when we first meet? How do the physical descriptions of him mirror his personality?

In Chapter 1, Fitzgerald sets the women, Daisy and her friend Jordan Baker, in an almost dreamlike setting. Why? What is Fitzgerald emphasizing about them?

At the end of Chapter 1, Nick sees Gatsby stretching out his arms toward a green light across the water. What is significant about this green light? What does it symbolize?

At the beginning of Chapter 2, Nick tells us about a stretch of land lying "about half way between West Egg and New York." What does Nick call this stretch of land? How does he describe it and the mysterious eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg on the dilapidated billboard?

How is George Wilson described in Chapter 2? How does his character compare to Tom's? How does he compare to his wife, Myrtle?

Through Tom's assault on Myrtle later in Chapter 2, what is Fitzgerald trying to demonstrate about Tom and his callousness toward humanity? Tom is a symbol of the Jazz Age, so what might Fitzgerald be implying about that Age?

Chapter 3 is, in many ways, like Chapter 2, moving from one party to another, encouraging the juxtaposition of the two events. How are Tom's party and Gatsby's party different? How they alike? What does this say about the two men?

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In Chapter 3, having Nick at Gatsby's party provides an unprecedented chance to peer into the lives of the seemingly well-to-do people who attend. How would you characterize these people?

The only person Nick encounters at the party whom he knows is Jordan Baker. Although little is known of her up to this point what does her presence at the mansion suggest about her? Is she someone whom you trust?

While Nick and Jordan mingle at Gatsby's party, they learn many intriguing things about Gatsby, and everything they learn underscores the idea of reality versus rumor that underlies so much of *The Great Gatsby*. How so? What do they learn about Gatsby that underscores this theme?

How does Fitzgerald describe and characterize Gatsby at Gatsby's party in Chapter 3? What do Gatsby's actions infer about his character?

What major incidents happen in Chapter 4? What common purpose do they all serve within the context of the story?

Meyer Wolfshiem is introduced in Chapter 4. Who is he? What images do his name conjure? How does he know Gatsby? What does Nick think about him?

In Chapter 4, how would you characterize Daisy from the story that Jordan tells about her?

Chapter 5 introduces the heart of the matter: Gatsby's dream of Daisy. But what is this dream? Is it attainable for Gatsby? Why or why not?

On the day of the appointed visit between Gatsby and Daisy in Chapter 5, what things does Gatsby do that demonstrate just how vulnerable he is about meeting Daisy?

In Chapter 5, do you think Gatsby's and Daisy's actions and interest in one another show that they really are a good match for each other? Why or why not?

Much of the mystery surrounding Gatsby is cleared away in Chapter 6 and the reader learns more about who he really is, where he comes from, and what he believes. Who *is* Gatsby? What *does* he believe? Is he a likeable character do you think? Why or why not?

How is the party that Gatsby hosts at the end of Chapter 6 different from the ones he's hosted before? What is the significance of these differences?

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Which major character in Chapter 7 comes out looking stronger than the others by the time the chapter ends? Like all the other characters, which character is tested in this chapter but grows and develops in a positive way?

In Chapter 7, Gatsby, stripped of all his illusions, stands outside Daisy's house, vulnerable and tragically alone. Although he begins the chapter with his customary Gatsby dignity, when he comes up against Tom's hardness, the illusion of Jay Gatsby comes tumbling down. What does Tom do to strip Gatsby of his self-illusions?

Daisy's recklessness results in Myrtle's brutal death in Chapter 7. Do you think Daisy intentionally killed Myrtle? Why or why not?

In Chapter 8, how does Nick react to finally hearing Gatsby's true story? What do Nick's reactions say about his character?

Wilson explains the purpose of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg's enormous eyes in Chapter 8. What is that purpose according to Wilson?

Ultimately, do you admire Gatsby? Why or why not? What's admirable about him compared to not admirable?

What's the significance of the book *Hopalong Cassidy* that Gatsby's father shows to Nick in Chapter 9?

In Chapter 9, when Nick and Tom meet on the street, Nick at first refuses to shake Tom's hand and then later does shake hands. Why did Nick first refuse to shake hands but does later?

What is the significance of the novel's final line?
