

The Great Gatsby – Setting essay

The Great Gatsby is a novel written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Within the novel, setting plays a significant role. The novel is set in and around New York, in the 1920s, post World War One, at a time known as the Jazz Age, when prohibition was the order of the day, but many people ignored the law and partied hard. The setting, both in time and place, is hugely important to our understanding of the novel as a whole and helps us understand the characters and many of the key themes.

The two main settings in the novel are West Egg and East Egg and they are both important for both characterisation and key themes. The story is narrated by Nick Carraway, who comes from a wealthy family, but chooses to make his own way in the world, so moves to New York to work in stocks and shares. He finds himself living in an area called West Egg, a suburb of New York, which is full of self-made people, those of “new money”, such as Jay Gatsby, after whom the novel is named. Across the water from Gatsby’s mansion is Tom and Daisy’s Buchanan’s mansion, in the very wealthy “Old Money” of East Egg. Tom and Daisy are central characters in the novel, as Daisy is Nick’s cousin but she is also Gatsby’s former lover and in fact they rekindle their relationship in the course of the novel, after 5 years of Gatsby’s obsessive searching for her. One of the key themes in the novel is “Old money” versus “new money” and throughout the novel we see the conflict between these two classes, in particular we see it through the conflict between Jay Gatsby who is representative of “new money” and Tom Buchanan, representative of “Old money”. We see the conflict between the two most clearly in the turning point of the novel when they have a heated argument over Daisy. Ultimately though, Daisy chooses her husband, showing that she, like many other characters in the novel is superficial and the wealth and status are more important to her than the possibility of true love and happiness.

Gatsby’s mansion is another hugely significant setting in the novel. Early on in the novel, Fitzgerald gives us a very detailed description of the outside of his mansion as he compares it to an “imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy”. He is a man who does not do things by halves, building a house that is described as ‘colossal’. He is not afraid to show off his great wealth. By having a “marble pool” Fitzgerald suggests a man who is a great consumer of expensive items. We are given an insight into Gatsby that helps with our appreciation of the character for the rest of the novel. However, the description of the mansion not only allows us an insight into Gatsby’s character, but also into American society. We see a society that is obscenely wealthy and the writer is suggesting a tension between the ideals of the United States and a society that lets people grow so rich.

The setting of one of Gatsby's parties allows further insight into the novel as a whole. We see a society that likes to enjoy itself with alcohol: "floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden". Not completely surprising, however when the reader realises that this party took place during the era of Prohibition and that any selling or transportation of alcohol was illegal. This gives us the view that the person who has organised this party, Gatsby, has broken the law; and that everyone who is attending the party is knowingly involved in that breaking of the law. We see a society that does not mind breaking the law. It is a society that would prefer to have fun than be 'legal', and this might possibly extend to other areas such as how people make money. By the phrase 'casual innuendo' Fitzgerald portrays a society that is sexually liberal and promiscuous; a society that does not have to remember a person's name to go to bed with them. People do not seem to take a deep interest in each other and rather go about seeking their own pleasure: "enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names." Here a superficial society is portrayed by Fitzgerald. With this description of the party once again the author allows us to appreciate some key ideas about the novel, and provides a clear image of the society in which the novel is taking place. Our appreciation of the novel continues to be informed and enhanced by the writer's use of setting.

The excessive wealth of the central characters in the Eggs, is in complete contrast with another key setting in the novel: The Valley of The Ashes. This is an area between the wealthy suburbs of the Eggs and New York city itself. The Valley of the Ashes is a filthy, unhealthy place where the impoverished working classes live. It is compared to a "fantastic farm where ashes grow". Fitzgerald very deliberately uses this image to show us how unnatural this place is. He describes the people as: ash grey men" to suggest they are deeply unhealthy, no wonder living in such appalling conditions - a consequence of recent industrialisation. Here, the people are crumbling; they are being burnt up in the process of working and living their harsh lives. Fitzgerald is showing us a society where there is a huge division between the haves and the have-nots and he is perhaps suggesting that capitalism is a system that destroys life. The system that creates such massive wealth also creates terrible poverty. It is no accident that two of the novel's secondary characters, Myrtle and George Wilson, live in The Valley of The Ashes. These characters are sorely misused by the wealthy characters in the novel and ultimately pay with their lives. Perhaps the writer is suggesting that throughout society, the rich exploit the poor and the poor always suffer as a result. This key setting clearly brings out the theme of class and the darker side of capitalism.

Throughout the novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald has made very effective use of setting to demonstrate to the reader his ideas about society at that time. While some people regard this novel as an American classic, this novel does little to compliment modern America. Through his use of opulent settings contrasted with areas of extreme poverty, Fitzgerald is making a clear statement about his keen disregard for obscene wealth and greed and the corruption that comes with it.