

The Great Gatsby – F Scott Fitzgerald – character essay – Jay Gatsby

The Great Gatsby is a novel written by F Scott Fitzgerald. The novel consists of many interesting characters and themes. I'm going to concentrate on the main character, Jay Gatsby, and the way our attitude towards him changes throughout the novel.

The story begins with Nick Carraway, our narrator, moving to NYC. He becomes friends with Gatsby, whom we discover is in love with Nick's married cousin, Daisy. They begin an affair which lasts until Daisy's husband, Tom Buchanan grows suspicious (despite the fact that he himself had also been unfaithful). In a heated argument, and the turning point of the novel, Tom confronts Daisy and Gatsby. This when Daisy decides her allegiance lies with Tom. Despite this, her and Gatsby drive back into town together and Daisy accidentally knocks down Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress. Daisy allows Gatsby to take the blame, which results in his death as Myrtle's husband, George was led to believe that Gatsby was the one having an affair with Myrtle and so he tracked Gatsby down, shot him and then killed himself. Despite Gatsby's lavish parties, none of his s-called friends came to his funeral, including Daisy, who left town with Tom. The novel ends with Nick reflecting upon Gatsby's character and his life.

At the start of the novel, Gatsby is a figure shrouded in mystery. Nick, our narrator, does not properly meet him until well into the novel. But Nick receives an early invitation to one of his famous parties. When he arrives at Gatsby's mansion, he hears all kinds of rumours, such as "he killed a man". But nobody seems to actually know him properly or understand where all his money comes from. This makes us suspicious of Gatsby and initially we don't know how to feel about him. Another evening, Nick observes him with his arm stretched out towards the water. Nick "could've sworn it was trembling". The rumours Nick heard at the party suggest a dangerous character. However, the way his arm was outstretched towards the water was more endearing and in fact, this makes us feel a little sorry for him, although at this point we don't really know why, but there is the hint of sadness about Gatsby from very early on. Later, of course, we do find out the relevance of the Gatsby reaching out to the water – it was to his lost love, Daisy, who lived across the water from him. On one occasion, Nick notices that as people are coupling up at the end of one of Gatsby's parties, the host stood alone: "no-one swooned backward on Gatsby". Here we begin to feel some pity for him.

As Gatsby and Nick's relationship grows, we discover that Gatsby is in love with Daisy, and we feel more pity for him. We learn that they had a short affair before Gatsby left for war, five years before the novel began. We find out later that Daisy had promised to wait for Gatsby but he never returned, so she married Tom Buchanan instead. Towards the end of the novel, we find out that Gatsby had gone to visit Daisy, but when he arrived at her large and luxurious house, he realised he had nothing to offer her, coming from a poor background himself. Wealth was highly regarded in this society, so Gatsby spent the next few years making his millions in order to win her back. When we learn about Gatsby's past with Daisy, we feel incredible pity for him as he lost out on the love of his life through no fault of his own, but because of war and the class system at the time.

Near the start of the novel, we learn that Gatsby's motivation for his extravagant parties was to try to meet Daisy again. Gatsby told Jordan that he "half expected her to wander in one night." We start to find some of Gatsby's behaviours a bit extreme and we wonder whether he is truly in love with her or now just obsessed with the idea of her. Another scene which raises this question is during

Gatsby and Daisy's reunion when Gatsby has been showing Daisy around his mansion, clearly hoping she'll be impressed by his vast wealth. He shows her a book: "Look, here's a lot of clippings – about you." Daisy is clearly flattered, the response Gatsby was hoping for, but it leaves the reader feeling a little uneasy at his somewhat obsessive behaviour. During this reunion, Nick describes him as an "overwound clock", which links to one of the novel's key themes – that of time. Throughout the novel, Gatsby is desperate to turn back time and when challenged by Nick: "You can't repeat the past", Gatsby's response is "Why of course you can". At this point in the novel, while we do want the rekindling of Daisy and Gatsby's love to take place, we are a little uneasy about it.

Another reason we may feel slight unease about Gatsby's character is that through the entire novel, we see Gatsby through Nick's perspective and as the novel progresses we begin to wonder if Nick is a reliable narrator as he seems rather biased towards Gatsby. We discover that Gatsby's money has been made illegally through "bootlegging" and we also learn that he has lied to everyone about who he is and where he has come from. As part of his new persona, he even changed his name from James Gatz. And on top of all this he is now having an affair with a married woman and has manipulated Nick into helping this happen. However, Nick still feels that he is "worth the whole damn bunch put together." Tom, however, who sees Gatsby for who he really is "a fraud", tells Nick that "he threw dust into your eyes, just like he did in Daisy's", which makes us wonder if Tom's got a point. This links with another of *The Great Gatsby's* key themes – that of reality versus illusion. Gatsby was desperate to put on a façade throughout most of his adult life, not a trait we normally find admirable. And yet, despite all this, we still find ourselves rooting for him.

Again we feel pity for Gatsby in the turning point of the novel, during a heated exchange between him and Tom when Gatsby is rejected by Daisy. She tells him: "you want too much". It becomes clear that there is in fact some affection between her and Tom despite all appearances. However, Gatsby's refusal to accept his rejection led him to take the blame for Myrtle's death in order to protect Daisy, who was responsible, which then led to George killing him. Gatsby's continuous optimism is a quality that Nick admires. He describes it as "an extraordinary gift for hope" and is perhaps his greatest attribute, but it is clearly also his greatest flaw. He lived his life full of hope, but his refusal to live in the real world, ultimately led to his death. Despite Gatsby's lavish parties, there were only a handful of people who attended his funeral, which makes us realise the complete superficiality of the society Gatsby was living in. At this point we feel immense sympathy for Gatsby. He was clearly a flawed character but despite most of his adult life being a lie, he never actually intended to hurt anyone. His lies were self-preservation and unlike Tom and in fact Daisy too, Gatsby never seemed to act out of malice or cruelty.

F Scott Fitzgerald's characterisation of Jay Gatsby was incredibly effective. He managed to create a character that behaved in a way that was contrary to many of our own personal values, such as honesty, but despite this we couldn't help but root for him throughout the novel. We are left feeling shocked at his death and we even feel grief. When we learn that few people seem to mourn him, we cannot understand and we are left feeling anger. For a writer to make us feel a whole range of emotions about an entirely fictional character takes incredible skill.