**Themes**

*Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.*

**The Decline of the American Dream in the 1920s**

On the surface, *The Great Gatsby* is a story of the thwarted love between a man and a woman. The main theme of the novel, however, encompasses a much larger, less romantic scope. Though all of its action takes place over a mere few months during the summer of 1922 and is set in a circumscribed geographical area in the vicinity of Long Island, New York, *The Great Gatsby* is a highly symbolic meditation on 1920s America as a whole, in particular the disintegration of the American dream in an era of unprecedented prosperity and material excess.

Fitzgerald portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed, and empty pursuit of pleasure. The reckless jubilance that led to decadent parties and wild jazz music—epitomized in *The Great Gatsby* by the opulent parties that Gatsby throws every Saturday night—resulted ultimately in the corruption of the American dream, as the unrestrained desire for money and pleasure surpassed more noble goals. When World War I ended in 1918, the generation of young Americans who had fought the war became intensely disillusioned, as the brutal carnage that they had just faced made the Victorian social morality of early-twentieth-century America seem like stuffy, empty hypocrisy. The dizzying rise of the stock market in the aftermath of the war led to a sudden, sustained increase in the national wealth and a newfound materialism, as people began to spend and consume at unprecedented levels. A person from any social background could, potentially, make a fortune, but the American aristocracy—families with old wealth—scorned the newly rich industrialists and speculators. Additionally, the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, which banned the sale of alcohol, created a thriving underworld designed to satisfy the massive demand for bootleg liquor among rich and poor alike.

Fitzgerald positions the characters of *The Great Gatsby* as emblems of these social trends. Nick and Gatsby, both of whom fought in World War I, exhibit the newfound cosmopolitanism and cynicism that resulted from the war. The various social climbers and ambitious speculators who attend Gatsby’s parties evidence the greedy scramble for wealth. The clash between “old money” and “new money” manifests itself in the novel’s symbolic geography: East Egg represents the established aristocracy, West Egg the self-made rich. Meyer Wolfshiem and Gatsby’s fortune symbolize the rise of organized crime and bootlegging.

As Fitzgerald saw it (and as Nick explains in Chapter 9), the American dream was originally about discovery, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness. In the 1920s depicted in the novel, however, easy money and relaxed social values have corrupted this dream, especially on the East Coast. The main plotline of the novel reflects this assessment, as Gatsby’s dream of loving Daisy is ruined by the difference in their respective social statuses, his resorting to crime to make enough money to impress her, and the rampant materialism that characterizes her lifestyle. Additionally, places and objects in *The Great Gatsby* have meaning only because characters instill them with meaning: the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg best exemplify this idea. In Nick’s mind, the ability to create meaningful symbols constitutes a central component of the American dream, as early Americans invested their new nation with their own ideals and values.

Nick compares the green bulk of America rising from the ocean to the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. Just as Americans have given America meaning through their dreams for their own lives, Gatsby instills Daisy with a kind of idealized perfection that she neither deserves nor possesses. Gatsby’s dream is ruined by the unworthiness of its object, just as the American dream in the 1920s is ruined by the unworthiness of its object—money and pleasure. Like 1920s Americans in general, fruitlessly seeking a bygone era in which their dreams had value, Gatsby longs to re-create a vanished past—his time in Louisville with Daisy—but is incapable of doing so. When his dream crumbles, all that is left for Gatsby to do is die; all Nick can do is move back to Minnesota, where American values have not decayed.

##### The Hollowness of the Upper Class

One of the major topics explored in *The Great Gatsby* is the sociology of wealth, specifically, how the newly minted millionaires of the 1920s differ from and relate to the old aristocracy of the country’s richest families. In the novel, West Egg and its denizens represent the newly rich, while East Egg and its denizens, especially Daisy and Tom, represent the old aristocracy. Fitzgerald portrays the newly rich as being vulgar, gaudy, ostentatious, and lacking in social graces and taste. Gatsby, for example, lives in a monstrously ornate mansion, wears a pink suit, drives a Rolls-Royce, and does not pick up on subtle social signals, such as the insincerity of the Sloanes’ invitation to lunch. In contrast, the old aristocracy possesses grace, taste, subtlety, and elegance, epitomized by the Buchanans’ tasteful home and the flowing white dresses of Daisy and Jordan Baker.

What the old aristocracy possesses in taste, however, it seems to lack in heart, as the East Eggers prove themselves careless, inconsiderate bullies who are so used to money’s ability to ease their minds that they never worry about hurting others. The Buchanans exemplify this stereotype when, at the end of the novel, they simply move to a new house far away rather than condescend to attend Gatsby’s funeral. Gatsby, on the other hand, whose recent wealth derives from criminal activity, has a sincere and loyal heart, remaining outside Daisy’s window until four in the morning in Chapter 7 simply to make sure that Tom does not hurt her. Ironically, Gatsby’s good qualities (loyalty and love) lead to his death, as he takes the blame for killing Myrtle rather than letting Daisy be punished, and the Buchanans’ bad qualities (fickleness and selfishness) allow them to remove themselves from the tragedy not only physically but psychologically.

**Motifs**

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes.*

**Geography**

Throughout the novel, places and settings epitomize the various aspects of the 1920s American society that Fitzgerald depicts. East Egg represents the old aristocracy, West Egg the newly rich, the valley of ashes the moral and social decay of America, and New York City the uninhibited, amoral quest for money and pleasure. Additionally, the East is connected to the moral decay and social cynicism of New York, while the West (including Midwestern and northern areas such as Minnesota) is connected to more traditional social values and ideals. Nick’s analysis in Chapter 9 of the story he has related reveals his sensitivity to this dichotomy: though it is set in the East, the story is really one of the West, as it tells how people originally from west of the Appalachians (as all of the main characters are) react to the pace and style of life on the East Coast.

**Weather**

As in much of Shakespeare’s work, the weather in *The Great Gatsby* unfailingly matches the emotional and narrative tone of the story. Gatsby and Daisy’s reunion begins amid a pouring rain, proving awkward and melancholy; their love reawakens just as the sun begins to come out. Gatsby’s climactic confrontation with Tom occurs on the hottest day of the summer, under the scorching sun (like the fatal encounter between Mercutio and Tybalt in Romeo and Juliet). Wilson kills Gatsby on the first day of autumn, as Gatsby floats in his pool despite a palpable chill in the air—a symbolic attempt to stop time and restore his relationship with Daisy to the way it was five years before, in 1917.

**Symbols**

*Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.*

**The Green Light**

Situated at the end of Daisy’s East Egg dock and barely visible from Gatsby’s West Egg lawn, the green light represents Gatsby’s hopes and dreams for the future. Gatsby associates it with Daisy, and in Chapter 1 he reaches toward it in the darkness as a guiding light to lead him to his goal. Because Gatsby’s quest for Daisy is broadly associated with the American dream, the green light also symbolizes that more generalized ideal. In Chapter 9, Nick compares the green light to how America, rising out of the ocean, must have looked to early settlers of the new nation.

**The Valley of Ashes**

First introduced in Chapter 2, the valley of ashes between West Egg and New York City consists of a long stretch of desolate land created by the dumping of industrial ashes. It represents the moral and social decay that results from the uninhibited pursuit of wealth, as the rich indulge themselves with regard for nothing but their own pleasure. The valley of ashes also symbolizes the plight of the poor, like George Wilson, who live among the dirty ashes and lose their vitality as a result.

**The Eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg**

The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are a pair of fading, bespectacled eyes painted on an old advertising billboard over the valley of ashes. They may represent God staring down upon and judging American society as a moral wasteland, though the novel never makes this point explicitly. Instead, throughout the novel, Fitzgerald suggests that symbols only have meaning because characters instill them with meaning. The connection between the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg and God exists only in George Wilson’s grief-stricken mind. This lack of concrete significance contributes to the unsettling nature of the image. Thus, the eyes also come to represent the essential meaninglessness of the world and the arbitrariness of the mental process by which people invest objects with meaning. Nick explores these ideas in Chapter 8, when he imagines Gatsby’s final thoughts as a depressed consideration of the emptiness of symbols and dreams.