

2–3 Scenes from the 2013 film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, directed by Baz Luhrmann, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Gatsby, Tobey Maguire as Nick and Carey Mulligan as Daisy.



The decay of the American Dream

The Great Gatsby contains many enlightening descriptions and criticisms of American life in the Jazz Age. The 'American-ness' of the novel is emphasised by such themes as the move from West to East; the confrontation between the romantic ideals of courage, honour and beauty, and the corrupted world of greed and money; the relationship of Gatsby's material achievements to the myth of going from 'rags to riches'; the tremendous growth of the car industry; the corrupting effects of Prohibition; the poverty of spiritual life in America during its most hedonistic decade.

Blindness is another central theme: the characters in the novel do not wish to see. They seek out blindness: they use drunkenness, like Daisy and the guests at Gatsby's parties; Jordan, Daisy, Tom and many others drive carelessly; they remain blind to danger, so caught up are they with the selfish pursuit of pleasure. Only Nick truly sees. He is Fitzgerald's spokesman in his representation of the decay of his generation.

Jay Gatsby and Nick Carraway

Jay Gatsby is presented as a mysterious character, since he seldom takes part in the lavish parties he organises. Rich and attractive, with some secret hidden in his past, he has the stature of a romantic hero who dies for his dream; yet he also embodies the 'self-made man' who tries to recreate the past through the power of money, and is destroyed in the end. Fitzgerald puts forth the idea that the American dream has been corrupted by the desire for materialism. We see that Gatsby had a pure dream, but became corrupt in his quest towards that dream.

Nick Carraway is both observer and participant in the novel. He is the only character in the novel to show and hold on to a sense of morals and decency. Nick can be seen as representing the

outsider that Fitzgerald felt himself to be. Both Fitzgerald and Carraway found themselves surrounded by high society and dishonest people, and neither fit in with that kind of lifestyle. Nick is also linked to one of the major themes in the novel: the opposition between East and West. He comes from the West, and returns to it at the novel's end. Through Carraway, Fitzgerald shows his fondness for the West, which he idealised as being more moral than the East.

Retrospective narration

Nick Carraway is the narrator from whose point of view all the events and characters of the story are presented. Nick is a retrospective narrator who, after going through an experience, looks back on it with a better understanding. Fitzgerald rejects chronological order and uses the fragmentation of time and frequent flashbacks to represent the inner world of his characters and the way knowledge is normally acquired in real life. Gatsby's personality, therefore, is not developed through explicit statements but rather through implication, in the footsteps of Nick's own experience.

Symbolic images

Fitzgerald's style is characterised by frequent appeals to the senses, by the suggestive use of colours, and poetic devices such as repetition, simile and metaphor. The language blends realism and symbolism. The description of the society of the Jazz Age is extremely detailed and it is scattered with symbolic images, like the car, which stands for the destructive power of modern society and money. The most impressive description is perhaps that of the 'valley of ashes', a stretch of land full of rubbish, waste and ashes, lying between the city and the suburb where Gatsby lives. It stands for the emotional and spiritual sterility which is a counterpart to the bright lights of the modern metropolis. Gatsby's house too is at the same time real and symbolic: carefully described in its various rooms and acres of garden, it celebrates Gatsby's luck and success during the parties, but embodies his melancholy and loneliness when it is empty.



2 REVISE your knowledge about *The Great Gatsby* by answering the following questions.

- 1 How does the character of Gatsby develop throughout the story?
- 2 What is his relationship with Daisy?
- 3 How is American life described in the novel?
- 4 What is the role of Nick Carraway?
- 5 What is Fitzgerald's narrative technique?
- 6 What are the most important symbols in the novel?