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CHARACTERS

Jay Gatsby

Who is Jay Gatsby?

- A wealthy, glamorous and mysterious figure, who throws lavish parties at his mansion in Long Island, New York.
- A Midwestern youth called James Gatz, who has reinvented himself.
- A man who seems to embody idealistic love, but in fact has close connections with the criminal underworld.

Nick Carraway's neighbour

Jay Gatsby is Nick Carraway's neighbour, in West Egg village, Long Island. Nick, our **narrator**, lives in a small house; Gatsby has a huge mansion set in an enormous garden. He is attended by servants, owns expensive cars, motorboats and a hydroplane. Gatsby regularly throws lavish parties, with fine food and drink and music for dancing.

Before Nick meets Gatsby he imagines him to be 'a florid and corpulent person in his middle years' (p. 50). In fact, he is a year or two over thirty, sun-tanned and handsome with short hair, well groomed and immaculately dressed. Although he is an extravagantly generous host, he drinks very little and keeps himself apart, almost an onlooker at his own parties.

Mr Nobody from Nowhere

Gatsby's background is a mystery. Tom Buchanan calls him 'Mr Nobody from Nowhere' (p. 123). Because not much is known about Gatsby, there is a lot of gossip about him. He is said to have attended Oxford University. A common rumour suggests that he has killed a man. There is also speculation that he was a German spy, working for the enemy during the First World War, and that he is related to the German ruler Kaiser Wilhelm II. These rumours suggest, perhaps, that Gatsby's physical appearance is Germanic. Nick has discovered some details of Gatsby's actual background, and as he narrates this story he gradually discloses more and more of the facts that lie behind Gatsby's image as a man of mystery.

Study focus: Gatsby's greatness

The title *The Great Gatsby* prepares us, as readers, for the story of an exceptional man. Think carefully about elements of his story that show Gatsby to be in some sense 'great'. Pay attention too to character flaws that suggest just the opposite of 'greatness'. Remember that Nick, our narrator, is the lens through which we see Gatsby. Is it a distorting lens or can we trust the image of Gatsby that eventually appears within Nick's account? What are we to make of Nick's assessment that 'Gatsby turned out all right at the end' (p. 8)?

From Gatz to Gatsby

James Gatz grew up in North Dakota, in America's Midwest, the son of unsuccessful farm people. At seventeen he changed his name to Jay Gatsby. As a boy he explored the shores of Lake Superior, becoming physically fit and getting to know the natural world in that area. This

enabled him to warn Dan Cody that his yacht was moored in a potentially dangerous place. Cody, who had grown rich prospecting for precious metals, became a kind of surrogate father for Gatsby. Following Cody's death, Gatsby became involved with the gambler Meyer Wolfshiem, a shady and sinister figure from the underworld of organised crime. Wolfshiem not only describes Gatsby as 'a perfect gentleman' and 'a man of fine breeding', but he suggests that he is 'the kind of man you'd like to take home and introduce to your mother and sister' (p. 70). Gatsby clearly has charm, an element of charisma. Nick notices especially that he has 'one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it' (p. 49).

Making Gatsby great

Gatsby takes great pains to present himself as a gentleman and a man of breeding. He owns a Rolls-Royce car and has his clothes bought at expensive shops in London. He habitually uses the term 'old sport', a phrase intended to make him seem upper class. Gatsby is acting out a role, and Nick indicates that he is trying a little too hard, that his 'elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd' (p. 49). In his mansion, Gatsby has a library with English oak panelling, designed to resemble one you might find in an Oxford college. The character Owl Eyes, who doesn't really know Gatsby at all, is hugely impressed by the **realistic** appearance of the library, although he notes that the pages of the books remain uncut, and are unread. Gatsby aims to project the image of an Old World aristocrat. He actually comes across as an extravagant, yet very thorough, New World showman.

The war

We are told that Gatsby 'did extraordinarily well in the war' (p. 143). His brave conduct during the conflict resulted in promotion to the rank of major. This enhanced his social status, and seems to have made it easier for him to make useful connections. A scheme that enabled American officers to attend European universities also led to him spending five months at Oxford.

Seen from another angle, however, the war was disastrous for Gatsby. As a young lieutenant, before leaving to fight in France, he met Daisy Fay in Louisville, Kentucky and fell head over heels in love. During his absence overseas Daisy met and married Tom Buchanan. The conduct of Gatsby's life from that moment had a single goal – to win back Daisy's love and to take her away from her husband. The intensity of that obsession separates Gatsby from the crowd; he is a man driven by desire, and his life has purpose. But that obsession leads to his downfall.

Image and reality

Gatsby presents himself as a wealthy American who doesn't need to work. But, as Nick remarks, young men didn't just 'drift coolly out of nowhere and buy a palace on Long Island Sound' (p. 50). In three years, Gatsby had made the money to buy this luxurious mansion. He did so through the criminal activity of bootlegging, supplying alcoholic drink illegally. His close involvement with Wolfshiem suggests that he has taken part in other illicit activities. Gatsby acts out the role of a sophisticated man of the world, yet when he meets Daisy again after five years apart he is overcome with embarrassment and nervousness; Nick actually tells him, 'You're acting like a little boy' (p. 85). The fact is, when James Gatz changed his name 'he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end' (p. 95).

A03 KEY CONTEXT

Owl Eyes compares Gatsby to David Belasco (1853–1931), a New York theatre producer renowned for paying close attention to realistic details on the stage. Belasco is said to have been so painstaking that once when he needed a restaurant setting he bought a real one and had it moved to the theatre and reassembled on stage. He was also renowned for his spectacular use of new lighting techniques.

A02 KEY QUOTATION

On page 95, Nick says: 'So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent.'

James Gatz transformed himself into Jay Gatsby at a time in his life when experience of the world had not yet placed limits on his imagination. But the energy of his youthful vision lacked clarity of purpose. It remained a wild dream, attaching itself to Daisy as an object of desire. Nick admires the fact that 'to this conception he was faithful to the end' (p. 95), yet he is aware of the tragic consequences.

KEY CONNECTION

A03

There is a historical foundation for speculation that Gatsby's family have northern European roots. Today, nearly a fifth of the American population can claim German ancestry, with a particularly high concentration in Midwestern states. Willa Cather's novel *My Antonia* (1918) depicts the settlement of Nebraska by immigrants from Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic), Austria and Scandinavia.

A01

HOW TO WRITE HIGH-QUALITY RESPONSES

The quality of your writing – how you express your ideas – is vital for getting a higher grade, and **AO1** and **AO2** are specifically about **how** you respond.

Five key areas

The quality of your responses can be broken down into **five** key areas.

1. The structure of your answer/essay

- First, get **straight to the point in your opening paragraph**. Use a sharp, direct first sentence that deals with a key aspect and then follow up with evidence or detailed reference.
- **Put forward an argument or point of view** (you won't **always** be able to challenge or take issue with the essay question, but generally, where you can, you are more likely to write in an interesting way).
- **Signpost your ideas** with connectives and references which help the essay flow. Aim to present an overall argument or conceptual response to the task, not a series of unconnected points.
- **Don't repeat points already made**, not even in the conclusion, unless you have something new to add.

EXAMINER'S TIP

AO1 and AO2 are equally important in AS and A Level responses.

Aiming high: Effective opening paragraphs

Let's imagine you have been asked about the role of **narrators** in tragedies. Here's an example of a successful opening paragraph:

Gets straight to the point

The extent to which the reader can empathise with the tragic heart of the story is partly dependent on Nick's reliability as a narrator. When he remarks that Gatsby 'represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn', he not only sets up a critical tension between his judgement and the novel's title, but in making that remark he calls into question his opening assertion that he tends to reserve judgement. How then are we to view his later statements about Gatsby? Does Nick's involvement in the story heighten or diminish our sense of its tragic qualities?

Sets up some interesting ideas that will be tackled in subsequent paragraphs

2. Use of titles, names, etc.

This is a simple, but important, tip to stay on the right side of the examiners.

- Make sure that you spell correctly the titles of the texts, chapters, authors and so on. Present them correctly too, with inverted commas and capitals as appropriate. For example, 'The Great Gatsby'.
- Use the **full title**, unless there is a good reason not to (e.g. it's very long).
- Use the term 'text' rather than 'book' or 'story'. If you use the word 'story', the examiner may think you mean the plot/action rather than the 'text' as a whole.

3. Effective quotations

Do not 'bolt on' quotations to the points you make. You will get some marks for including them, but examiners will not find your writing very fluent.

The best quotations are:

- Relevant and not too long (you are going to have to memorise them, so that will help you select shorter ones!)
- Integrated into your argument/sentence
- Linked to effect and implications

Aiming high: Effective use of quotations

Here is an example of an effective use of a quotation about social class in the novel:

clear initial point

detailed explanation

When Tom Buchanan calls Gatsby 'Mr Nobody from Nowhere', it is more than just an aimless insult. It is a key reminder of Gatsby's lowly origins but also conveys Tom's own value and the authority of his background, built on inherited money and position. Finally, it implies something deeper in the use of the word 'nobody': that Gatsby lacks substance, is literally a 'no body'.

short embedded quotation

further inference, focusing in on a specific word

Remember – quotations can also be one or two single words or phrases embedded in a sentence to build a picture or explanation, or they can be longer ones that are explored and picked apart.

4. Techniques and terminology

By all means mention literary terms, techniques, conventions, critical theories or people (for example, 'paradox', 'archetype', 'feminism' or 'Plato') **but** make sure that you:

- Understand what they mean
- Are able to link them to what you're saying
- Spell them correctly

5. General writing skills

Try to write in a way that sounds professional and uses standard English. This does not mean that your writing will lack personality – just that it will be authoritative.

- Avoid colloquial or everyday expressions such as 'got', 'alright', 'ok' and so on.
- Use terms such as 'convey', 'suggest', 'imply', 'infer' to explain the writer's methods.
- Refer to 'we' when discussing the audience/reader.
- Avoid assertions and generalisations; don't just state a general point of view ('Nick Carraway's narration cannot be taken at face value because it is flawed'), but analyse closely with clear evidence and textual detail.

Note the professional approach here in the choice of vocabulary and awareness of the effect on the reader:

Fitzgerald **conveys** the sense of a society struck by a malaise, drifting towards its ruin while the party still goes on. As readers **we** feel a sense of decay and decadence as the chapter progresses.

EXAMINER'S TIP

Something examiners pick up is that students confuse 'narrator' and 'author'. Remember that Nick is a character as well as the narrator and don't confuse him with the novel's author, F. Scott Fitzgerald.