

CONTENTS

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

How to study a novel	5
Reading <i>The Great Gatsby</i>	6
What is 'great' about Jay Gatsby?	6
What kind of book is <i>The Great Gatsby</i> ?	8

PART TWO

THE TEXT

Note on the text	13
Synopsis	14
Detailed summaries	16
Chapter 1	16
Chapter 2	22
Chapter 3	25
Chapter 4	28
Chapter 5	34
Chapter 6	36
Chapter 7	40
Chapter 8	45
Chapter 9	49
Extended commentaries	53
Text 1 – pp. 17–18 (Chapter 1)	53
Text 2 – pp. 56–8 (Chapter 3)	59
Text 3 – pp. 88–9 (Chapter 5)	63
Text 4 – pp. 94–6 (Chapter 6)	67
Text 5 – pp. 170–2 (Chapter 9)	72

PART THREE

CRITICAL APPROACHES

Themes	77
American ideals	77
The American Dream	79
The Frontier	80
Desire and the sense of purpose	81
Vision and insight	82
Codes of conduct	84

Techniques	85
The narrator	85
Dialogue and the scenic method	87
Cinematic techniques	88
Symbolism	88
Intricate patterning	90
Characterisation	91

PART FOUR

CRITICAL HISTORY

Reactions on publication	93
Recent approaches	94

PART FIVE

BACKGROUND

F. Scott Fitzgerald	95
His other works	97
Historical background	98
The Jazz Age and the Lost Generation	98
Advertising and the mass market	99
Conspicuous consumption	100
Prohibition and organised crime	101
Mass culture	102
Photographs	103
Literary background	104
Chronology	108

FURTHER READING	110
-----------------------	-----

LITERARY TERMS	113
----------------------	-----

AUTHOR OF THESE NOTES	115
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER 5

- Nick organises a meeting at his house between Gatsby and Daisy.
- Gatsby then gives them a guided tour of his house, displaying his possessions, especially his expensive, imported clothes.

CONTEXT

In 1878, from his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey, Thomas Alva Edison (1847–1931), inventor of the incandescent light bulb, announced to a world then lit by gas that domestic electric lighting was a viable proposition. This was the same year that he invented the phonograph. A scientist known popularly as ‘the wizard of Menlo Park’, Edison also made substantial contributions to development of telephone transmission and motion pictures and was a major contributor to that modern environment depicted in *The Great Gatsby*.

Late at night, Gatsby’s house is brightly lit. He and Nick discuss the planned meeting with Daisy. On the agreed day, it is raining heavily. Leaving Gatsby and Daisy to renew acquaintance, Nick wanders into his garden and for half an hour contemplates Gatsby’s mansion. He recalls that the house was built by a brewer, who aspired to be a kind of feudal lord, with his workers housed in thatched cottages. He returns to the room to find that Daisy has been crying.

Alone with Nick, Gatsby discloses that the money which bought his mansion was made in just three years. Then, with Daisy, they go to look at the house. The interior contains a range of items imported from Europe. Gatsby has clothes sent from England. Daisy is overwhelmed by his ‘beautiful shirts’ (p. 89).

Nick muses on the nature of Gatsby’s desire for this woman, and remarks on the intensity of their relationship. Eventually, he leaves them alone together.

COMMENTARY

It should not escape our attention that as the encounter between the former lovers takes place, Nick says that he is ‘Aware of the loud beating of my own heart’ (p. 83). He evidently shares Gatsby’s nervousness. We might ask why this should be so. It seems to illuminate the kind of identification Nick is making with Gatsby. Portraying himself as rather dull, starting to lose his hair, his head full of matters derived from the world of finance, Nick seems to take vicarious pleasure in Gatsby’s doomed life as romantic hero.

Nick is transforming the man into a larger than life **mythic** figure when he describes Gatsby as being ‘like an ecstatic patron of

recurrent light’ (p. 86). But in spite of the heightened style of his account there are moments that reveal a close personal identification, when he seems to share in Gatsby’s pleasure and pain.

American nostalgia for the hierarchic society of Europe is evident in Gatsby’s mansion, and its history. It has a ‘feudal silhouette’ (p. 88), outlined **ironically** by up-to-date electric lighting. The brewer who had it built aspired to be a feudal lord. Feudal society seems unjust to modern democratic sensibilities, yet it is evident that in early twentieth-century America, wealthy individuals were keen to assert their superiority, to proclaim their status in ways at odds with the egalitarian ideal. The characteristic quality of feudal life was stability. Relationships between the ruling class of lords and the peasantry remained unchanged through generations. It is ironic then that a citizen in a modern capitalist state, whose characteristic quality is change, dynamism, the creation of new markets and new modes of production, should desire to imitate the feudal set-up.

Nick observes, ‘Americans, while willing, even eager, to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry’ (p. 86). The distinction between a serf and a peasant is a fine one, as both terms imply a condition of servitude, enforced labour and obedience to a master. Nick may be suggesting that while Americans might in effect be drudges at work, they would resist being openly cast in a peasant role, which immediately suggests the stark inequalities of medieval European society.

Nick works professionally as a bondsman, managing financial bonds. An older meaning of bondsman was a labourer bound to a master, in other words a ‘serf’. Through this simple wordplay E. Scott Fitzgerald casts further ironic light upon America’s purported clean break from the European past.

Discussing the impact that Daisy has made upon Gatsby during their reunion, Nick comments, ‘After his embarrassment and his unreasoning joy he was consumed with wonder at her presence’ (p. 89). ‘Wonder’ is a key word in the novel, and it recurs with amplified significance at the end, where it is inspired by a dramatic first encounter with the American continent.



CHECK THE BOOK

Tony Tanner’s *The Reign of Wonder* (CUP, 1965) offers a broad consideration of ‘wonder’, blending innocence and vision, as an important and recurrent quality in American literature.

World events

1918 First World War ends

1919 Baseball World Series is fixed

1920 Prohibition of alcohol commences in the USA (and continues until 1933)

US women are given the right to vote

1921 Silent movie *The Kid*, starring Charlie Chaplin

F. Scott Fitzgerald's life

1918 Stationed at Camp Sheridan in Montgomery, Alabama

1919 Discharged from the army and starts working for an advertising agency

1920 Marries Zelda Sayre
Publication of F. Scott Fitzgerald's first novel *This Side of Paradise*

Publication of the short-story collection *Flappers and Philosophers*

1921 Visits Europe

1922 Publication of the novel *The Beautiful and Damned*

Publication of the short-story collection *Tales of the Jazz Age*

1923 Performance of the play *The Vegetable* is not a success

Starts work on **The Great Gatsby**

Literary events

1920 Publication of the novel *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton

1922 Publication of the poem *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot

1923 Publication of the novel *The Rover* by Joseph Conrad

World events

1926 Death of the matinee idol Rudolph Valentino

1927 Charles Lindbergh makes the first solo transatlantic flight

1929 The Wall Street Crash – the collapse of the New York stock exchange heralds world economic depression

1930 Work starts on the Empire State Building in New York

Little Caesar, a gangster movie, appears

F. Scott Fitzgerald's life

1924 Moves to the French Riviera

1925 Publication of **The Great Gatsby**

1926 Publication of the short-story collection *All the Sad Young Men*

Literary events

1924 Publication of the novel *Some Do Not* by Ford Madox Ford

1925 Publication of the novel *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser

Publication of the novel *Manhattan Transfer* by John Dos Passos

1926 Publication of the novel *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway

1927 Publication of the novel *Elmer Gantry* by Sinclair Lewis

1929 Publication of the novel *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway