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“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:21)

**F**. Scott Fitzgerald’s most famous novel is well-known for its commentary criticizing the growing materialism in America after the Great War. Literature from the Modernist period is all about adjustment: after a war that killed almost 20 million people and wounded even more, what was there to life anymore? Where did people find their meaning? Enter the Jazz Age of the Roaring 1920s and humanity’s violent attempt at suppression through alcohol, partying, and consumerism. Imagine flappers with fringed sequin dresses, headbands and bobbed hair, feathers, long cigarette holders, bootlegged liquor from Prohibition, and more martini glasses than anyone could possibly need. This “Lost Generation” of partiers doesn’t seem dangerous at first—if only irresponsible. But Fitzgerald, a veteran of the Great War, channeled the meaninglessness of life and people’s twisted search for it into the novel that remains popular today.

**Nick’s Narration: “I am one of the few honest people  
that I have ever known.”**

Nick Carraway is the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, and it is through his eyes we see the tragic love story of Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan. Nick, a Great War veteran, moves to New York after the war and settles into West Egg village next to a mansion he would later learn belonged to Gatsby.

Across the river, in East Egg, lives his cousin Daisy, who is married to Tom Buchanan, a friend of Nick’s from college. Nick observes the two of them, along with their friend, Miss Jordan Baker, as they exchange conversations in which nothing is really said. Uncomfortable truths, such as Tom’s affair with a mechanic’s wife, are known but ignored by everyone, even when she calls the house during dinner. People are as fake as the smiles they give everyone. Real relationships are hollow, and true joy is abandoned for monetary indulgence.

Between these two gloriously fake communities of West Egg and East Egg is the true picture of existence, a place Fitzgerald terms the valley of ashes: “a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.” A billboard stands above the valley, advertising the business of eye doctor T. J. Eckleburg. A giant pair of yellow glasses fills the billboard and effectively watches over the valley, seeing past the façade of East and West Egg. This image is the common cover for *The Great Gatsby* novel, and symbolic in demonstrating people’s inability to truly see each other or their own lives.

### **Gatsby’s Grandeur: “I didn’t want you to think that I was just some nobody.”**

When Nick attends his first party at Gatsby’s mansion, he realizes he is one of the few who were actually invited. Everyone else just came: “Once there they were introduced by somebody who knew Gatsby, and after that they conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with an amusement park. Sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all.” As Nick meets Gatsby and gets to learn about him over that summer, he discovers that he is trying to get back into the life of his former love, Daisy Buchanan. All the parties he throws are in a hope that she will attend one of them. Gatsby had met Daisy before the war and they fell in love, but while Gatsby was away, Daisy thought him dead and decided to marry wealthy Tom Buchanan. Now, Gatsby seeks to win her back.

Gatsby eventually tells Nick the truth about himself, that he was originally James Gatz, the son of poor farmers in North Dakota. But he had grand ambitions for life and fanciful imaginations to be someone important. One day, Gatz rescued rich sailor, Dan Cody, and Cody took him on as a protégé, teaching him how to be someone completely new: Jay Gatsby. Gatsby's entire life is a façade of his own determination to make something of himself. And what Gatsby wants now more than anything is for Daisy to tell Tom that she never loved him. She is ultimately unable to do this. She's unable to trade stability with Tom and their daughter for her passionate love with Gatsby, even though she had led him along that she would. Daisy, who had come from a rich family and had dozens of suitors throughout her life before marriage, is even more superficial than Gatsby, a man who had made up his entire life: "She vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving Gatsby—nothing. He felt married to her, that was all."

In the events that follow, Tom's mistress is killed in a hit and run, Tom frames Gatsby even though Daisy was driving, and Gatsby is murdered in his home, all while thinking that Daisy is going to change her mind and call him. After his death, Nick is left to handle all the reporter phone calls and arrangements because he can't stand to leave Gatsby's side. "I wanted to get somebody for him," he recalls. "I wanted to go into the room where he lay and reassure him: 'I'll get somebody for you, Gatsby. Don't worry. Just trust me and I'll get somebody for you—'" No one comes.

### **The Green Light: The Lie of Prosperity and Promise**

Until the very end, Gatsby continues watching the green light at the end of the Buchanan's dock across the water, watching for Daisy. He never stops believing that he can make his own future, that anything is possible if he works hard enough: "He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him." And it is all for naught at the end, and Nick is the one who deals with the fallout of losing his friend. "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy," he says. "—they smashed up

things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their cast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...” Gatsby had been a mountainous figure in life, but it didn’t matter to anyone except Nick, who wasn’t swayed by money. Instead, it was Gatsby’s positivity and possibility he exuded that attracted and inspired his friendship with the man. Gatsby believed he could make his own fate and get what he wanted out of a life that everyone around him thought was meaningless. He “believed in the green light,” the color possibly alluding to envy and/or money itself.

While Gatsby is kind and confident and full of life, he is woefully ignorant of how cruel most people are and of the pointlessness in trying to control every outcome in life. Just as Gatsby “stretched out his hand desperately as if to snatch only a wisp of air, to save a fragment of the spot that she [Daisy] had made lovely for him...and he knew that he had lost that part of it,” so too are our lives, as Scripture reminds us: “yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes” (James 4:14). Gatsby tells Nick that Daisy’s voice is “full of money,” but he refuses to see its corruption the way Nick can. The Modernist movement saw the greatest economic boom in American history up to that time after the war, and consumerism has only become more and more frivolous and corrupting in the century since.

Scripture has numerous warnings about the worship of money, which is “a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10). There are over 2,000 verses about money in the Bible, and almost half of Jesus’ parables deal with money, including wealth and giving. In one of Jesus’ angriest moments, he trashes the business tables men had set up in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). Multiple times, Scripture instructs people to “sell your possessions and give to the poor” (Luke 12:33). While the Modernists thought life was pointless, Scripture says that it is rather the search for wealth that is pointless: “Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Just as pointless is the attempt to try and control our fates or desti-

nies at all. We can either build up treasures for ourselves in this life, where life itself will destroy them, like Gatsby and Daisy, or we can store up eternal treasures in heaven (Mathew 6:19-20).