

# AQA English Literature A-level

## The Great Gatsby: Character Profiles Jay Gatsby

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## GATSBY - THE PROTAGONIST

### OVERVIEW

Gatsby is the **protagonist** of the novel. He is a **self-made**, wealthy man who lives in West Egg. He is **enigmatic**, hosting flashy parties for guests who don't really know much about him. As the novel progresses, we learn that he was born James Gatz in North Dakota. He met a girl called Daisy during his officer training in Louisville. After falling in love with her, he realises that he needs to climb the **social ladder** in order to be with her. Then he sets out the journey to his economic success, made possible by his involvement in **organised crime**. For him, attaining this financial status is solely to attain Daisy's **acceptance**. His pursuit of the **American Dream** is one that is driven by love. Through Gatsby, we learn of the exhilarating post-war **materialism** and **consumer culture** as well as the dark **moral** and financial **bankruptcy** that follows it.

Gatsby is the **eponymous** character.  
This means that the title of the book and Gatsby share the **same name**.

### CONTEXT

#### World War One

The novel is set in 1922, four years after the end of World War 1 (1914-1918). The war devastated Europe and led to the economic ascension of the United States. Gatsby participates in the new economic boom, enabling his own massive financial success. He is part of the growing class of **nouveau riche** who do not rely on inheritances for financial stability, but pave their own way in the world.

The economic glory of the war was lost to the trauma of the individuals and society impacted by it. Labelled the **Lost Generation**, Gatsby and other characters in the novel are deeply **impacted** by its effects. Gatsby fell in love with Daisy while serving as an officer in Louisville and clinging onto the promise that she would wait for him - he **“did extraordinarily well in the war” [chapter 8]**. In Chapter 4, when Gatsby takes Nick for a ride in his car, and decides to tell him **“the truth about his life” [chapter 4]**, he says **“every Allied government gave me a decoration [a medal] -- even Montenegro” [chapter 4]**. This **ambitious** attitude is one that he continues to hold, even after Daisy's marriage to Tom when Gatsby is away at war. When Gatsby returned to Louisville after the war, he learns that Daisy is on her honeymoon with Tom that left Gatsby with a



"**melancholy beauty [chapter 8]**". Very aware of his **inferior social position** in relation to Daisy, Gatsby tells Tom: "**She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me**" [chapter 7]. Though this is only the **perception** of Gatsby and not the **truth** of Daisy's feelings, it is Gatsby's willingness to meet Daisy's social status that propels his actions throughout the novel. Though Gatsby's involvement in the war separated him from Daisy, it is also his war service that **catalyses** his journey from **rags to riches**.

## 1920s and the Prohibition

In the early 1920s, the US government began enforcing the **18th amendment**. This banned the sale of and manufacture of alcohol. Instead of curbing alcohol consumption, this law forced the alcohol business to go **underground**. In *The Great Gatsby* the rebellion against Prohibition emerges in two ways:

Firstly, it shows how the **leisurely** lifestyle of the wealthy class was centred around alcohol consumption. Gatsby's parties were full of this: "**stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another**" [chapter 3]. The law did not **explicitly** outlaw alcohol consumption and only prohibited the **sale** and **manufacture** of it. Thus, consumption **excessively** continued, and characterised 1920s society as one of **risk, danger** and **wild, rakish** behaviour. The **thrill** of acquiring **illegal** goods, and moving amongst organised criminals went hand in hand with the **racy** feeling of living in New York.

Secondly, Gatsby's **mysterious acquisition of wealth** happens through his own involvement in the **illicit** alcohol sale. Though many people enjoy his wealthy status, they are also **complicit** in spreading the **sinister rumours** about him, which form part of the **excitement** of attending his parties. Nick is the **receptor** of some of these rumours, of which **criminality** and **murder** dominate. In Chapter 3, he is accused of being a German spy, a relative of a Kaiser, a bootlegger, an Oxford man, a war hero and a murderer "**Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once**" [chapter 4]. Gatsby works hard to dismiss these allegations. Further on, when Gatsby takes Nick for a ride in his car, he attempts to **convince** Nick of his **constructed identity**. He tells Nick that his parents were wealthy and deceased, then proceeds to produce photographic **evidence** of him playing cricket at Oxford and a war medal from Montenegro. Nick remains **suspicious** of him and, later on in the novel, Tom accuses Gatsby of being a "**bootlegger**" [chapter 6]. Given the **suspicious** of Gatsby that arise throughout the novel, this is not difficult to believe the **rumours** which surround him. He



certainly does not turn them down and prove them wrong as he paints a **mysteriously unbelievable** picture of himself, playing the part.

Gatsby's **illicit economic engagements** were only a response to his meeting with Daisy in Louisville in 1917, as he tells Nick after the car accident. He was smitten with her beauty, charm and wealth and realised that if she knew his truth, she would not be impressed by his **poverty**. This points to the importance of **social class** in love and relationships during the period. For Gatsby, the attainment of wealth through organized crime is to improve his social standing with Daisy, not for its own sake. Though Gatsby's wealth is **aesthetically pleasing** to Daisy (as we see in Chapter Five when Daisy sobs into Gatsby's "**beautiful shirts**") she is unable to accept its illegal provenance and is possibly snobbish about the fact that it is newly acquired. She herself comes from "**old money**".

### The American Dream

The economic **surge** of the Roaring Twenties and the rise of a class of individuals with **new money**, supported the notion of the American Dream. The promise of **upwards social mobility** is one that is achieved by Gatsby. However, though his dream realises **economic success** it fails in granting him **social acceptance**. Gatsby attempts to match Daisy's voice which is "**full of money**" [chapter 7] but there still remains a **class gulf** between them. The limited economic opportunities of the **nouveau riche**, through illegal means specifically, and the irresponsible **expenditure** on **consumerist** goods, foreshadow the **financial gloom** that emerged in 1929 as **The Great Depression**. Gatsby represents both The American Dream in all its **glory** and **promise** as well as **The American Nightmare** with all its **doom** and **decay** that follows after.

### "The Single Green Light"

This symbolizes Gatsby's love for Daisy as well as the American Dream. Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy can be likened to the **promise** and **downfall** of the American Dream. Early on in Chapter 1, the light is revealed as being **significant**. The green light is found at the end of Daisy's dock in East Egg, very visible to Gatsby from his own mansion in West Egg. It represents Gatsby's **unwavering love** for Daisy. During the reunion with Daisy he mentions the green light as Nick reflects: "**Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever...His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one**" [chapter 5]. The **visibility** of the green light is like the **illusion** that Gatsby exists in the same world as Daisy. But the fact that it is some **distance** across the bay, it's not physically **proximate**, and represents an **inevitable gulf** that lies between Gatsby and Daisy.



Though the novel progresses with a **hope** of them eventually being together, they are also **perpetually pulled apart** by the **realities** of their two **separate** worlds: East Egg (Old Money) and West Egg (New Money). Though **"Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us"** [chapter 9], he eventually was left **"watching over nothing"** [chapter 7]. The American Dream as a facade and false reality is zoomed in through the metaphor of the green light. The light being the promise and vitality is equally matched by it being **small** and **distant**; an important **symbolic representation** of Gatsby's **unattainable** love for Daisy as well as the **difficulty** of realising the American Dream

## Mechanisation and the Age of the Automobile

In the 1920s cars became more **accessible** as their prices dropped and **consumer credit** became an option for people to own them. In Chapter 3, we learn that Gatsby has a station wagon and Rolls Royce. Gatsby's cars are quite a **spectacular sight** and receive **elaborate** descriptions throughout the novel - **"circus wagon"** [chapter 7]. When they drive through the Valley of Ashes, Nick remarks: **"With fenders spread like wings, we scattered light through half Astoria"** [chapter 4] suggesting the powerful **presence** of the car as a **consumer good** that represents **economic prosperity**. However, Gatsby's car in Chapter 7 becomes the **"death car"** [chapter 7] and is the cause of Myrtle's death. It becomes easy for George Wilson to track Gatsby down after this as his **identity** is very much **tied** to the fact that he is the driver of the **distinct yellow/cream car**. Despite the fact that Daisy was the driver when Myrtle was killed, George Wilson assumes it is Gatsby. The car which used to symbolize Gatsby's rise to riches comes to symbolize his **fall**. Gatsby accepts the **responsibility** of Myrtle's death, a **tragic** but final romantic attempt to save Daisy.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

### Enigmatic/Mysterious

Gatsby is initially presented as a very **enigmatic** and **mysterious** character. We initially learn about him through other people's conceptions and **perceptions** of him and the widespread **gossip** and **rumours** about him. His greatness is There are more details about his possessions as opposed to his character. The mystery that surrounds him **depersonalizes** the wealth that comes from him. In this way, Gatsby is somewhat **separate** from the **leisurely** and **luxurious** life that he provides for his guests. The mystery that surrounds him also contributes to his **charisma** and **charm**. Nick says of Gatsby: **"If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there**



was something **gorgeous** about him, some **heightened sensitivity** to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those **intricate machines** that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" [chapter 1].

As the novel progresses, the mystery of Gatsby **unfolds**. Some unveilings of his history and character are **positive** while some are **revolting**. Ultimately, his mysterious nature receives some **sympathy** as we realise it's a **necessity** for him to realise his dream. By the end of the novel, Nick too empathises with Gatsby and the **enigmatic persona** he procures. Nick says of everyone else **"they're a rotten crowd"** and of Gatsby that he is **"worth the whole damn bunch put together"** [chapter 8].

### Resolute/ Determined

Gatsby's **resolve** is apparent in his determined will to climb the **social ladder** and attain the **acceptance** of Daisy. Though his **economic pursuits** are **propelled** by a romantic idea, he does not lose sight of his **end goal** and though his engagement in organized crime is **questionable**, it is also **testament** of the **drastic lengths** he is willing to go in order to realize his **ultimate ambition**. Nick describes this as **"an extraordinary gift for hope"** and a **"romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again"** [chapter 1]. Gatsby matches his towering **romanticism** with an equal **realism** and in this way does not only adopt the ideals of the American Dream, but adopts the **work ethic** and **determination** of it too, that practically takes him **closer** to his dreams.

### Aloof/ Isolated

In many instances in the novel, we find Gatsby **alone**. One of the first visual images we have of Gatsby is through Nick's **portrayal** of him in Chapter 1: **"I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone"**. Gatsby's preference of **solitude** is in line with his **devotion** to Daisy, his **"single green light"** [chapter 1]. In some ways, his sole focus on her is **myopic**, as he becomes increasingly **unaware** of the societal **constraints** that surround him. In this way, his solitude is also representative of his **ostracisation** from society. The many people who attend Gatsby's parties **"come and [go] without [meeting] Gatsby at all"** [chapter 3] and at the end of the novel when he dies Nick finds himself at his funeral, accompanied only by Gatsby's father, the servants, the minister, the postman and Owl Eyes. Ultimately, Gatsby's **lonely pursuit** for Daisy's love is **unrequited** and his dream is one that only existed with him **alone**. In the realm of love and relationships, a **lonely one-sided pursuit** invited probable **doom** and his **unwavering devotion** to Daisy is met with an overwhelming **"carelessness"** from her [chapter 9], suggesting that the trials of



unrequited love are ones that are very much **experienced alone**. For **Gatsby**, love is **commitment, obsession and conquers all**.

## GATSBY AND DAISY

The central and most **tragic** relationship in the novel is the one between Gatsby and Daisy. Daisy and Gatsby's story begins 5 years before the present events of the novel. Gatsby was stationed in Louisville before going off to fight in WW1. Here he meets Daisy, while **pretending** to be one of her social class. When he returns from the war in 1919, he learns she has married Tom Buchanan while he was away, **despite promising** to wait for Gatsby.

Daisy's first indication of Gatsby's return is in Chapter 1 when Jordan asks Nick about his neighbour who throws parties. On hearing this, Daisy asks, "**Gatsby... What Gatsby?**" [**chapter 1**]. Daisy is quite surprised which indicates that Gatsby is merely a **figment** of her past. Gatsby, on the other hand, is **unwaveringly** devoted to her and at the end of Chapter 1 we learn that Daisy is very much his focus in the present when he "**stretches his arms toward**" a "**single green light**" which we later learn is Daisy's dock. While Gatsby does so he is "**trembling**" [**chapter 1**] which could be an **indicator** of the **instability** of his dream to reunite with Daisy and later is confirmed to **foreshadow** his tragic loss of her.

In Chapter 4, Jordan reveals details of Gatsby and Daisy's previous relationship to Nick. This is after Gatsby requests Jordan to organize a meeting with Daisy at Nick's house. Jordan tells Nick that although Daisy was **hesitant** to follow through with her relationship with Tom after receiving a letter from Gatsby, she did it **anyway**. In the organisation of the meeting between Gatsby and Daisy by Nick and Jordan, Daisy lacks **agency** in many ways and the notion that Gatsby is committed to Daisy more than she is to him is **solidified**. This is further apparent when Daisy says: "**We haven't met for many years**" [**chapter 5**] and Gatsby replies, revealing his obsession with her: "**Five years next November**" [**chapter 5**]. To Daisy, Gatsby was a **passing phase** in her young **maturing** life but to Gatsby, Daisy is his **singular drive**.

When Daisy and Gatsby meet in Chapter 5, Gatsby is **glowing** and Daisy in **tears**. The contrast of how they feel for each other grows. Eventually, Gatsby takes Daisy to visit his mansion; a creation that he has hoped would receive **grand approval** in her eyes. Daisy is enchanted by the aesthetics and when they tour his room, "the simplest room of them all", Daisy exclaims: "**They're such beautiful shirts,**" she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "**It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before**" [**chapter 5**].



Daisy is **overwhelmed** by this **physical** display of Gatsby's **wealth** more than she is **charmed** by Gatsby's **consistent devotion** to her. Her own name, Daisy, a common flower, suggests this **fickleness** too and makes her **undeserving** of the **deep enduring love** that **emanates** from Gatsby. However, even though there are hints of Daisy's **indifference** to Gatsby's love, her grand **emotional** displays make it difficult to decide if she is in fact **distant** from him or if she is simply **overwhelmed**.

Unlike Daisy, Gatsby does not find **materialism pleasurable**. The **lavish** parties he hosted were not for himself but a **means** to reach Daisy. Gatsby's **glittering** life of luxury does not represent his own **inclinations**. His pursuit of **wealth** was to impress Daisy rather than satisfy his internal drive. His aloofness at his own parties and tendency to not mingle in the crowds also attest to this.

Gatsby's entire life is built around his **vision** to be with Daisy whose voice is "**full of money**". She has been his "**incorruptible dream**" [chapter 8]. Daisy is completely **idealized** in Gatsby's eyes and as the book progresses we learn that she cannot live up to Gatsby's **inflated view** of her. She says: "**Oh, you want too much!**" [chapter 7] and when Gatsby asks her to admit that she never loved Tom he says: "**I did love him once—but I loved you too**" [chapter 7]. This response, "**I loved you too**" shows how Daisy does not treat Gatsby as the **single symbol** of love in her life, as he does. For her, Gatsby and Tom both represent **different loves** in different **contexts**.

However, despite the revelation that Daisy will not **terminate** her relationship with Tom, Gatsby does make the decision to take **responsibility** for Daisy's **reckless** driving that killed Myrtle. When Tom asks Gatsby, "**Was Daisy driving?**", Gatsby responds: "**Yes... but of course I'll say I was**" [chapter 7]. Either he is still **deluded** by Daisy's lack of devotion to him or he is still **committed** to his own devotion to her. The **intensity** of his dream and devotion is revealed here.

However, rather than his **devotion** paving the way to his dreams, it paves the way to his **fall**. Gatsby's **nostalgic longing** for a past is at odds with the **present realities**. He is so occupied with his dream he **loses sight** of the fact that Daisy is married and almost **demand**s the same devotion from her. The fact that Gatsby's dream **dies** not when Daisy does not **reciprocate** his love, but only at his funeral shows that Gatsby was committed to something **more** than his love for Daisy: an **idealistic** and **romanticised perception** of love. This is how Gatsby emerges as a **tragic hero**: he does not abandon his **quest** for the **romantic ideals** of love.





## CHARACTER PARALLELS

GATSBY	MYRTLE
Gatsby is engaged in the idealism of the American Dream by seeking financial <b>success</b> and material <b>comforts</b> to be worthy of Daisy's love. He endeavours to climb the <b>social ladder</b> from his humble beginnings to be socially <b>accepted</b> by Daisy.	Myrtle is also engaged in the idealism of the American Dream. She does this <b>inversely</b> to Gatsby. Through her affair with Tom she acquires the material <b>possessions</b> that she associates with good financial <b>status</b> . For her, the affair is a <b>means</b> while for Gatsby the love affair is his <b>desired end</b> .
GATSBY	GEORGE WILSON
Gatsby's devoted love for Daisy is not <b>reciprocated</b> in the way that he desires. Despite his efforts to improve his social <b>standing</b> , he is reduced to his history of poverty that he could only escape through his involvement in <b>organised crime</b> . In this way, he represents the <b>limits</b> of the American Dream for financial <b>prosperity</b> .	Wilson displays the <b>limits</b> of the American Dream too, because the post-war period did not assure an economic boom for everyone. Wilson's poverty is what causes his love for his wife to also be <b>unreciprocated</b> as she begins to be romantically interested in Tom, who holds a better and <b>secure</b> financial standing.

## CHARACTER CONTRASTS

GATSBY	TOM
Gatsby is a charming, <b>charismatic</b> gentleman of a man. He embodies the masculinity of <b>chivalry</b> . Unlike Tom he is from the <b>new money</b> class and had to attain <b>financial success</b> through his own efforts. He lives in West Egg. Gatsby enjoys cars and the material <b>offerings</b> of the new economic and <b>technological booms</b> .	Tom is a rude, <b>entitled, self-righteous</b> and violent man. He embodies the toxic masculinity of strength and <b>domination</b> . Tom lives in East Egg and has inherited his wealth. Tom prefers horses and Polo which represent <b>traditions</b> of a wealthy <b>lineage</b> and match his <b>conceptions</b> of class.



## KEY CHAPTER QUOTES

1	<p><b>"If personality is an unbroken series of <b>successful gestures</b>, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" [chapter 1]</b></p> <p>This is one of the first descriptions of Gatsby. The "<b>gorgeous[ness]</b>" of Gatsby refers to either his <b>wealth</b> as the outside world sees it or his <b>character</b>, as those, like Nick, who know him more <b>intimately</b> see him. Early on we are made to believe that he has <b>redeeming</b> factors. However, his "<b>personality is an unbroken series of gestures</b>" makes us question the <b>authenticity</b> of his actions which appear <b>rehearsed</b> and asserts that the life he <b>showcases</b> is a <b>facade</b>. Moreover, his <b>hopeful</b> commitment to "<b>the promises of life</b>" is highlighted as a character with a lot of <b>romantic optimism</b>. He is also compared to a <b>seismograph</b>, indicating his relationship with the <b>technological world</b> as well as his own role as a <b>cog</b> in the economic machine.</p>
5	<p><b>"There must have been <b>moments</b> even that afternoon when Daisy <b>tumbled short</b> of his dreams—not through her own <b>fault</b>, but because of the <b>colossal vitality</b> of his <b>illusion</b>." [chapter 5]</b></p> <p>This encompasses the magnanimity of Gatsby's dream. Though it possessed a "<b>vitality</b>" and spurred him forward it was also "<b>colossal</b>". Daisy's inability to reciprocate the love is not blameworthy. Rather, it is the far reaching dream of Gatsby that affords him disappointment.</p>
8	<p><b>"[Gatsby] must have felt that he had lost the <b>old warm world</b>, paid a high price for living too long with a <b>single</b> dream. He must have looked up at an <b>unfamiliar</b> sky through <b>frightening</b> leaves and shivered as he found what a <b>grotesque</b> thing a rose is and how <b>raw</b> the sunlight was upon the <b>scarcely</b> created grass." [chapter 8]</b></p> <p>With this quote, Nick reflects on Gatsby's <b>last</b> moments of his life. The "<b>old warm world</b>" is the hopefulness of winning Daisy which previously</p>



**drove** his life's journey and **sustained** his rise to riches. The idea of a **"single dream"** shows how **devoted** and **genuine** his commitment was to Daisy, which more or less meant all his eggs were in one basket, **risking** it all. Though it shows that he had many blind spots, it is somewhat **admirable** that he was able to **sustain** his commitment to her so **strongly**. The way he **shivers** here is similar to a moment in Chapter 1 when he **trembles**. This **instability**, akin to the **"flickering light[s]"** that appear consistently in the novel, show the instability of Gatsby's dream. The **"warm"** world is replaced with a **"grotesque"** and **"raw"** world which symbolises the **collapse** of Gatsby's dream.

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**"Gatsby believed in the green light, the **orgastic future** that year by year recedes before us. It **eluded** us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . And then one fine morning— So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."** [chapter 9]

These words are at the end of the novel. There is a clear distinction between **past** and **future**. The **"green light"** brings the novel around a full circle after its first appearance in Chapter 1, when Gatsby was seen to reach out towards it. The quote emphasizes the difficulties of moving beyond the **burdens** of the past. The past is like the **"current"** that moves against the **direction** we desire to walk in. This **metaphor** encompasses Gatsby's **dream** and the idea of the American Dream. It **elucidates** that both dreams are limited and that the past has a way of defining **identity** more powerfully than our actions in the present. The effects of **poverty** and **wars** linger for a long time after they are **present realities**. However, this quote also shows that despite this, people continue **striving** for better lives. The **struggle** between reaching for the future and being **anchored** down by the past is what defines Gatsby's character: a **vessel** of the American Dream but unable to let go of his love for Daisy, as well as his **roots** of poverty.

