

AQA English Literature A-level

The Great Gatsby: Context

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F. Scott Fitzgerald

Born on September 24, **1896**, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was named after his ancestor, Francis Scott Key, the author of the poem 'Defence of Fort M'Henry', the verse of which forms the lyrics of the US national anthem.

Fitzgerald was raised in **St Paul, Minnesota** and went to a New Jersey boarding school in **1911**. He was not very academic, but still managed to get enrolled at **Princeton University in 1913**. He soon dropped out and joined the **army** towards the end of World War I in 1917.

In the war, Fitzgerald was promoted to the **second lieutenant** and met **17-year-old Zelda Sayre**. He fell in love with her and asked her to marry him. She agreed, but her desire for wealth, leisure and luxury made her delay their wedding until he was **successful**. Fitzgerald published *This Side of Paradise* in 1920 and became an **overnight literary sensation**. This gave him enough money and fame to persuade Zelda to marry him that year.



F. Scott Fitzgerald at 25
Image source:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/F._Scott_Fitzgerald#/media/File:F._Scott_Fitzgerald_1921.jpg

Fitzgerald was known for his love for his wife, Zelda; his **alcoholism** and his extravagant lifestyle. With all the riches and fame, the Fitzgeralds fell into a reckless wild lifestyle of parties and hedonism. His desperation to please Zelda by writing to earn more money drove him to **alcoholism**. But his relationship with Zelda was very **turbulent**. Whilst Fitzgerald was working himself out of debt, Zelda had an affair which was described in his novel *Tender is the Night* and her novel *Save Me the Waltz*. The full details are not clear. Fitzgerald's romantic dreams were crushed. They continued to be together.

In 1925, he published *The Great Gatsby* which garnered him more **wealth** and **fame**. That year was when their relationship was the most turbulent. Zelda returned to her ballet dancing. After seeing a famous dancer flirt with Fitzgerald at a party, she threw herself down some stairs. Most of their social outings resulted in **violence**. They argued in the hotel room one time in Hollywood, and Zelda burnt her clothes in the bathtub. But even with this **scandal**, they were making more money than ever and they were drinking a lot too.

In 1930, Zelda suffered her first **nervous breakdown**. Two years later, she suffered another breakdown. After she recovered, the couple ended their relationship. He continued to write throughout the thirties despite his alcoholism impeding his writing. In 1937, he left for Hollywood to write **screenplays** and he began a new relationship with a woman called Sheilah Graham who worked as a successful Hollywood gossip journalist. In 1940, while working on a novel, he died of a **heart attack** at forty-four. It is believed that his alcoholism triggered this heart attack.



The Real Gatsby

A lot of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is **auto-biographical**. Like Fitzgerald, Nick Carraway was born in **Minnesota**, attended an **Ivy League university** and moved to New York after the war. Gatsby's character is heavily influenced by Fitzgerald's life. Like Gatsby, Fitzgerald **idolises** wealth and luxury. He falls in love and marries a woman **out of his social class**. When Zelda gave birth to their daughter, she said, "I hope it's beautiful and a fool - a beautiful little fool", recalling Daisy saying of her daughter Pammy "All right... I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool -- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool" (Chapter 7). **Fitzgerald tries very hard to prove his social standing** and secure her love. However, unlike Fitzgerald, Gatsby didn't indulge in alcohol nor did he get involved in his parties. Fitzgerald loved his booze so much he suffered from **alcoholism**. He and his wife, Zelda, indulged in the hedonistic decadence of the decade. Much like Gatsby's life, Fitzgerald suffered a lot of **sadness** in his endless pursuit of happiness.



F. Scott Fitzgerald with his wife, Zelda
 Image source:
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/F-Scott-Fitzgerald>

Perhaps Fitzgerald saw himself in Gatsby. But this poses the question of why Gatsby was killed off. Perhaps this was Fitzgerald's prophetic foresight that his marriage to **Zelda, his 'Daisy'**, would suffer an irreparable break. In killing off Gatsby and keeping the wealthy Buchanans alive and together, Fitzgerald reveals his partialness to the upper class. Fitzgerald never felt enough for Zelda; he believed he did not deserve her. This reminds us of Gatsby's love for Daisy. In *Tender Is the Night* (1934), Fitzgerald writes about a couple where the woman is a mental patient and the man a psychiatrist. As the woman recovers, the man deteriorates. It is this same novel where Fitzgerald alludes to Zelda's affair. As you can see, Fitzgerald's stories are autobiographical and this adds to their sensitive romance.

If we look at the structure of the novel, the autobiographical element is told through the prism of Nick's **memories**. Fitzgerald creates a distance as he tells his story. Another of his novels is also interesting. Fitzgerald is both Nick and Gatsby, simultaneously. He, like Nick, lives "**within and without**" the story (Chapter 1).

First World War and The Jazz Age

The war shook a lot of people because it was the first war of its kind. So politically speaking, the twenties was a time of **growth** and **prosperity** with a lot of cynicism and corruption. This gave birth to the **Jazz Age**. This was a glamorous decade noted for its cultural, artistic and social developments. But this dissolved into the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and in turn, triggered the **Great Depression of the 1930s**.



Both Gatsby and Nick served in the First World War. The **extravagance** of Gatsby's parties reflects the lavish and golden decade. But even with all this decadence, there was a clear **status quo**. 'Old money' ruled whilst 'new money' tried to climb the social ladder and 'no money' were excluded. It is ultimately the 'no money' that bear the brunt of the ruthlessness of the 'old money'. It is Myrtle who is killed, George kills Gatsby (originally part of the 'no money' social class) before killing himself.

The Lost Generation

Gertrude Stein, an American writer, referred to the Lost Generation of the post-First World War world. This is the generation that felt powerless and saw life as pointless in the aftermath of the Great War. These feelings of **loss** and **emptiness** are filled with **alcohol** and **indulgence**. Fitzgerald wrote that this new generation found **"all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken"** (*This Side of Paradise*). We can see this in *The Great Gatsby* where Gatsby stands out from the faithless society of East and West Eggs for his **"extraordinary gift for hope"** (Chapter 1).

Flappers and Freedom

Many of Fitzgerald's short stories give an insight into the world of **youthful hedonism** and the antics of the liberated young women known as **'flappers'**. They subverted social and gender norms with their short skirts, short hair and makeup. In addition, the **19th Amendment**, enacted in 1920, gave women the right to vote and thus their **independence** proved necessary. In a symbolic show of **emancipation**, these young women cut their hair in bobs. According to their own rules, they gave up wearing corsets (to look more **masculine**) and **reinvented** themselves.



A photo of 1920s flappers

Image source:

<https://midcenturymodernmag.com/a-history-of-posing-for-photos-3d37c38b13a8>

Jordan Baker demonstrates this in her name. Both Jordan and Baker were makes of cars, which suggests her lack of **femininity**. She subverts all traditions of femininity in her job as a professional golfer. She is **unmarried** and **childless**. Parkinson (1987) writes that Jordan's status in the 'in the narrative is never quite clear, other than as a **foil** and a **contrast** to Daisy.' Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today* suggests that Jordan Baker 'is associated with **numerous lesbian** signs'. He writes that "even when dressed in her most feminine attire, she is described in rather **masculine** terms'. Fitzgerald describes Jordan as wearing her **"evening dress, all her dresses, like sports clothes—there was a jauntness about her movements as if she had first learned to walk upon golf courses on clean, crisp mornings"** (Chapter 3). Jordan Baker assumes a **subversive** role as a woman. Even in her relationships with men, Fitzgerald paints a **lesbian**



subtext. Nick observes that Jordan “**instinctively avoided clever shrewd men . . . because she felt safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible**” (Chapter 3). Perhaps, Jordan doesn’t want to be outed as a woman who strays from the **heterosexual** code of society. Tyson concludes that Jordan ‘dates men she can **manipulate**’ in order to avoid criticism.

Jordan’s non-traditional gender presentation contrasts greatly with Myrtle who conforms to ideas of femininity and **female sexuality** to climb the social ladder. She “**carried her flesh sensuously as some women can**” and when she sees Tom Buchanan, despite being in her husband’s presence, she seductively smiles “**slowly and walking through her husband as if he were a ghost, shook hands with Tom, looking him flush in the eye. Then she wet her lips**” (Chapter 2).

Here, Myrtle uses her sexuality to **seductively** catch Tom’s attention and thus utilises her femininity to her advantage. Myrtle proves that **sexuality** is connected to the stubborn **desire** to change a woman’s social class. Indeed, Myrtle is killed and “**her left breast was swinging loose like a flap**” (Chapter 7). She is killed by a car bought with new money. It violently **extinguishes** her and her **sexuality**. Perhaps this is symbolic - the American dream kills her in a brutal demonstration of the way it is an impossibility for women of her social class to achieve it. Parkinson notes that ‘the impersonal death machine **violates** Myrtle’s female identity and ravages her: it is a symbolic **rape**’ (1988: 72). In this sense, Myrtle doesn’t have **agency**. But she does have the burning desire to transcend the gatekeepers of social status. Both Jordan and Myrtle show that **emancipation** is the common desire for women in 1920s America.

The American Dream

When America was **discovered** by the settlers, the American Dream was advertised as the ‘land of opportunity’: a place where if you worked hard enough, you would be successful and wealthy, regardless of **social background**. A lot of people that **migrated** to America were escaping something. Take, for example, the Irish who escaped the potato famine. The ideology of the American Dream took hold after the Great Depression and the term was coined its depths, by the historian James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America*.

Nevertheless, many people, including Fitzgerald, challenged this nascent idea and question its possibility. He and a group of other writers believed that the American Dream boiled down to the pursuit of wealth. He, ironically, wrote about **widespread materialism**. This is ironic because Fitzgerald was very indulgent in this decadence. Throughout the text, Jay Gatsby **personifies** the American Dream. He **personifies** the verve that the American Dream inspires in American society. Interestingly, Jay Gatsby does not achieve the American Dream despite being more invested in its promise than the other characters. Whilst Gatsby’s wealth is a means of getting Daisy, Daisy is a **proxy** for **wealth** and the **American Dream**.

Myrtle is another example of the **failed** American Dream. She showcases the lower class desire and ‘**frenetic** quest for wealth’ (Åkesson 2017: 7). She clings to the American Dream whose cold and hard metal kills her. Gatsby’s car is a symbol of this American Dream as it is



associated with **'restlessness'** and **'power'** (Parkinson 1988: 72). Kathleen Parkinson continues to note that 'the impersonal death machine violates Myrtle's female identity and ravages her: it is a symbolic rape'. In this sense, Myrtle's death is a **product** of the American Dream.

Media and the Mass Market

The Great Gatsby is written against the **backdrop** of exponential growth in commodities available for purchase. This opened the world of possibilities for **advertising**. Advertising billboards were introduced in the mid-19th century, and by the 1920s advertising was everywhere. Some of these advertisements included **jingles** on commercial radio after 1923 and some companies put up funny rhyming slogans on roadside signs in 1925.

One major symbol of advertising in the novel is the **eyes of Doctor T.J Eckleburg**. He symbolises the **power** of advertising in 1920s America and the tensions between reality and appearance. The old billboard becomes a **symbol** of **religion** too. When Myrtle dies, George Wilson remarks that "**God sees everything**" whilst "**looking at the eyes of Doctor T.J Eckleburg**" (Chapter 8). Perhaps if God is advertising, then **capitalism** is religion for Gatsby and his friends.

Fitzgerald characterizes this advert as a **'voyeur of the valley'** as its "**retinas are one yard high**" and they "**brood on over the solemn dumping ground**" (Chapter 2). Here, Fitzgerald highlights that the eyes look over the valley of ashes, perhaps judging its people as God may do. Doctor T.J Eckleburg represents the **ills** that capitalism gave birth to in American society. Fitzgerald's use of the advertisement as a **proxy** for God exposes America's diminished faith in conventional religion and divinity. Note that George Wilson doesn't "**belong to any**" church (Chapter 8), but he finds **solace** in the eyes of the placid billboard.

Products had brand names that voiced **reliability** when the products were on the shelves. **Advertising** techniques created a desire for **commodities**. This reflected the tastes of the nation and the lifestyles that the 1920s created. Finance companies **loaned** people money to buy the **attractive** products that advertising demonstrated. Many people fell into **debt** but the **high consumption levels** kept the American **economy healthy**. When George wishes to move "west", it is so he can start afresh with his wife, perhaps away from debt and the **destruction** of it. Unlike George, Myrtle does not see debt as a constricting factor in her social life and her affair. She buys a "**small, expensive dog-leash, made of leather and braided silver**" without thinking about debt. Fitzgerald highlights the **penalties** of a lower-class woman who dares to ascend the social ladder; Myrtle is crushed by the **ostentatious** car that "**everybody had seen**" (Chapter 4).

This decade was also known for its **mass culture**. For the first time, the 1920 American census demonstrated that America was moving to be a more urban nation. This flocking towards cities meant **solidarity** in the masses. People read **mass-circulation newspapers** and read magazines like the *Town Tattle* that Myrtle Wilson reads. Also with media like the fast-moving film industry, photography saw a **renaissance** in the 1920s.



Photography is a **leitmotif** throughout *The Great Gatsby*. Photographs capture a moment and freeze it in time and space. It frames the experience and preserves it. Gatsby has a **photograph of Dan Cody** upon his wall and Henry Gatz carries a picture of **Gatsby's mansion**. These photographs suggest **importance**. They are also metaphors of Gatsby's **reputation**. When he shows Nick the photograph of him in **Oxford**, he proves his **position** in the world. Gatsby wishes to **transcend** the frame of the present moment and **recapture** his past with **Daisy**.

Fitzgerald created Jay Gatsby as a figure who transcends time and entrepreneurial efficiency that the **economy** was built on. Jay Gatsby **rebranded** himself from Gatz to Gatsby and **marketed** himself through his parties in the hopes of winning Daisy and he is a brand even today. We use the word **Gatsbyesque** to describe the Jazz Age and the **hopefulness** the **eponymous** character resembles.

Conspicuous Consumption

The post-war wealth of the 1920s combined with the wartime advances in science and technology gave birth to **cars**, **refrigerators** and **radios**. As people gained more and bought more, America's economy thrived. America became a nation of early **consumerism**. The term 'conspicuous **consumption**' was coined by Thorstein Veblen, a social scientist (1857-1929). He used this term to critique the **rise** of **power** in America of wealthy businessmen who displayed their wealth through **pretentious** mansions and behaviour. Veblen believed that this was **wasteful** as it implied increasing **poverty** amongst the **lower classes**.

The **billboard** of the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg portrays the significance of advertising and the consumption of 1920s American society, including the lower classes of the valley of ashes. The products advertised throughout New York are **marketed** to all classes with **indifference** towards **individual** financial status. The people of the valley of ashes, like Myrtle and George, cannot afford to participate in the **consumer** culture that is inevitable to spiral them into big **debt**.

Myrtle and George Wilson are these lower classes that are '**no money**' and excluded from the extravagance of the **decadent** twenties. Fitzgerald creates a world where **conspicuous** consumption is a **litmus test** for wealth and social status. Tom Wilson's polo ponies highlight his social status to others. Jay Gatsby's **extravagant** parties and **flamboyant** lifestyle demonstrates his status in West Egg. Fitzgerald critiques this as Gatsby's **car** kills Myrtle and drives George to commit his murder-suicide as vengeance. It is the same vessel that "**everybody ha[s] seen**" (Chapter 4) that becomes enough to link and convict Gatsby to the **murder** weapon.

Prohibition and Organised Crime

Not everyone made their money in industry or **legally** at that. Fitzgerald's novel is set at the time of the **Prohibition Act** of **1919**. This law, passed in America, made it **illegal** to manufacture, **sell** or **transport** alcohol. But some people, including gangsters (like the famous Al '**Scarface**'



Capone) sold alcohol to secret bars called **'speakeasies'** for a great profit. This was called **bootlegging** because they originally hid the bottles in their boots. In **1925** there were apparently **one hundred thousand speakeasies** in New York alone. The Prohibition Act was repealed in **1933**.

The illegal economy was organised by **notorious** and powerful gangs of **criminals** who also **gambled**. American gangsters like Al Capone (1899-1947), Lucky Luciano (1897-1962) and Meyer Lansky (1902-1983) were famous and legendary for their criminal behaviours. Their legendary reputations depicted them as **ruthless** and **dangerous**.

Fitzgerald weaves real news stories into the novel. Gatsby is involved with **Meyer Wolfsheim** which places him in the underworld of gangs and gambling. Wolfsheim talks about **'Rosy' Rosenthal** who was shot by gangsters. This was a real event where the gambler Herman Rosenthal was shot in **1912** at the request of **corrupt** police officers. Wolfsheim is based on the real-life gambler, **Arnold Rothstein** who allegedly fixed the **1919 World Series** and gained great profit.

Race and Prejudice

Thousands of **immigrants** arrived in the 19th century to follow the American Dream. A lot of these immigrants lived in New York as they arrived in **Ellis Island**, New York. This high concentration of immigration led to **tension** and **prejudice** between the different groups. The older, established immigrants came from **Northern** Europe and identified themselves as **American**. This group felt **uncomfortable** with the arrival of **new immigrants** from **Southern** and **Eastern** Europe.

In **1924**, the **Immigration Act** was passed. This restricted the number of **southern** and **eastern Europeans** moving to the USA. It also prohibited any **Asian** to come to the US. There was a lot of prejudice against **ethnic minorities**. Racism was also widespread. Despite the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, African Americans were still treated as **second-class** citizens.

The prejudice against 'new' immigrants is reflected in Nick's **antisemitic representation** of **Wolfsheim**, a Jewish character. His Jewishness is emphasised by the multiple references to his nose, a feature supposed to be prominent amongst Jews, according to old racial stereotypes: **"Mr Wolfsheim's nose flashed at me indignantly"** **"... his tragic nose was trembling"**. Wolfsheim is even metonymically reduced to his nose **"Mr. Wolfsheim's nose flashed at me indignantly."** **"His nostrils turned to me in an interested way"** (Chapter 4).

Wolfsheim is cast as a shady - as well as comic - character, one involved in organised crime. Through Wolfsheim, Fitzgerald is perhaps indicating that **legitimate** power in America belongs to the 'Nordics' that Tom Buchanan identifies with. Fitzgerald highlights that the route to **prosperity** and wealth is open to other **racial** and **ethnic** groups, although whether this is through legitimate or **illegitimate** means is unclear. Nick's racism is also shown when he refers to an African-American couple in the limousine as **"bucks"** in chapter 4. He is surprised and doesn't believe they got their wealth **legitimately**, as assessment that is based on their **race**.



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