

AQA English Literature A-level

The Great Gatsby: Themes Love

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LOVE

In *The Great Gatsby*, love plays a vital role in the play. It is a theme that colours and permeates all the relationships in one way or another. Many have misunderstood the novel as a **simple tragic romance**, which ends with the main character's **death** - an outcome of many romantic tragedies. This is a traditional, flawed reading of *The Great Gatsby*, a novel characterised by the importance of **idealism vs. reality**, the American Dream and the loss of **moral values**. The theme of **class** and **wealth** plays a key role in Gatsby's ability to win Daisy, and it is the difference in their **social status** which means the relationship fails. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to describe the different relationships in the novel as solely driven or **sustained** by 'love' is.

Gatsby's romantic attachment is an **idealised unrequited love**, the fruition of which is thwarted by social norms and class expectations. Daisy is from 'old money' stock; Gatsby is the nouveau riche and his tastes and habits - memorably, the pink suit he wears in Chapter 8, which Tom considers vulgar - give away his working class origins. Gatsby and Daisy's relationship acts as a metaphor for the incompatibility of inter-class love and marriages. But while Tom and Daisy are matched in terms of class, their marriage is nevertheless far from characterised by love. Instead, it is a marriage of **mutual social advantage** and is dominated by Tom's **controlling** nature, and Daisy's desire to live comfortably and act on her **immediate** desires.

Myrtle's relationship with Wilson is based on the same **search** for a **traditional** form of **security**. She admits to the characters in Chapter 2 that she only married Wilson because she thought he was a man of **good breeding** ("I thought he was a gentleman [...] I thought he knew something about breeding"), but later discovers he cannot provide for her the way she imagined and the illusion shatters ("[H]e wasn't fit to lick my shoe"). Tom seems to be the ticket out of her marriage and into the world of the elite and a means by which she can satisfy her materialistic desires. It is through his financial support that she is able to purchase, in Chapter 2, in quick succession and without thinking, a copy of 'Town Tattle', a moving-picture magazine, cold cream, perfume and a dog.

Nevertheless, Myrtle does not use Tom solely **instrumentally**. She is also **infatuated** with Tom and believes him likewise; through Myrtle's sister Catherine we find out that Myrtle believes the only thing preventing Tom from marrying her is Daisy's faith: "**She's a Catholic and they don't believe in divorce**" (Chapter 2). However, Tom's feelings are not so deep-seated. Tom **lusts after** Myrtle and her "**smouldering**" sexuality (Chapter 2) and uses her to gain a sense of power. He is also not afraid to be violent with her, casually breaking her nose when Myrtle repeats Daisy's name (Chapter 2). While the **asymmetry** of the relationship may make the reader more sympathetic towards Myrtle, they might also feel **disgusted** by the way she **submits** herself to his abuse in exchange for insignificant consumer items. In the process of Myrtle buying a dog, she asks "**delicately**" "**Is it a boy or a girl?**". Tom answers, "**It's a bitch [...] Here's your money. Go and buy ten more dogs with it.**" This incident is an **analogy** for Tom and Myrtle relationship. Which she may **delicately construe it as romantic**, Tom sees her as just another "**bitch**" to be bought.



The last romantic relationship in the novel is Nick Carraway's short-lived **courting** of Jordan Baker, driven by a **mere sort of curiosity** and ultimately ending with a **fading** of **mutual interest**. That curiosity is the basis of their relationship is indicated by the repetition of the word in relation to Jordan: **"Her grey sun-strained eyes looked back at me with polite reciprocal curiosity"** (Chapter 1), **"Something in her tone [...] had the effect of stimulating my curiosity"** **"I felt a sort of tender curiosity"** (Chapter 3). Modern critics frequently point to this relationship as the only **realistically** normal or **healthy** attachment initiated throughout the novel. However, the relationship does not last due to the absence of **real** romance or attraction, which is substituted for a time by Nick's focus on Jordan's **careless** attitude and her physical appearance: her **"pleasing contemptuous expression"**, her **"golden shoulder"** (Chapter 4) and her **"slender golden arm"** (Chapter 3). Nick's summer romance with Jordan allows him to forget more existential anxieties; the **"the formidable stroke of thirty"**, which represents, for Nick, **"a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair"**, **die[s] away with the reassuring pressure of her hand"** (Chapter 7). Nevertheless, the superficiality of their relationship allows him to impetuously decide, in the aftermath of Myrtle's death, that he is **"sick of"** her and their relationship ends as **"abruptly"** as their final phone conversation (Chapter 8). Nick and Jordan's relationship is devoid of any illusions, for Jordan is **"too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age"**. It serves as a **counterpoint** to Daisy and Gatsby's tragic romance and Gatsby's lovesickness, but is ultimately as empty.

All the relationships but one **fail** by the end of the novel. Only the Buchanans' marriage survives the deaths and infidelities. One could even argue that **Myrtle's death brings them together** - after this, we witness a **moment of intimacy** between them, the only one we are privy to:

"Daisy and Tom were sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table with a plate of cold fried chicken between them and two bottles of ale. He was talking intently across the table at her and in his earnestness his hand had fallen upon and covered her own. Once in a while she looked up at him and nodded in agreement.

They weren't happy, and neither of them had touched the chicken or the ale—and yet they weren't unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together" (Chapter 7)

Their interest in protecting their good name and their place in the upper echelons of society **unites** them and they **"retrea[t] back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together"** (Chapter 9) and we realise that their money and social interest and status count for more than anything else.



SELFISH AND SELFLESS LOVE IN THE GREAT GATSBY:

All of the novels' characters display some sort of **selfish tendency** in their romantic relationships and the way they conduct themselves with their partners or lovers. Selfish love includes **staying** with the romantic counterpart for a sort of **gain**, be it the satisfaction of sexual desire, social **status** or materialistic **acquisition**, or even just basic **stability** or maintaining one's social **position**. Selfless love, on the other hand, involves **sacrificing** one's **interest** to accommodate or please one lover or partner, even after their relationship **breaks** down or **ends**. While selfish love characterises most of the novel's romantic relationships, Gatsby's selfless - albeit **misdirected** - love ultimately redeems this portrait of a '**Lost Generation**'.

By refusing to give Daisy away as the killer, Gatsby incriminates himself instead, which leads to his tragic death at the hands of Wilson. His final **altruistic** act has led to critics such as **Dilworth** drawing **parallels** between **himself and Jesus**. It also represents a deepening of his love for Daisy. The majority of the novel shows Gatsby as a money-driven businessman who attempts to win Daisy as a **prize**.

“Just tell him the truth – that you never loved him – and it's all wiped out forever”
(Chapter 7)

The command - phrased using the **imperative** - highlights the demanding nature of Gatsby's love for Daisy. In response to his command, she points out he is asking **“too much”** from her and neglecting to consider her feelings for Tom or her **social position**. Gatsby's desperation prompts him to go out of his way to almost force his relationship with Daisy, forgetting her marriage of five years to Tom has borne fruit.

“Her voice is full of money” (Chapter 7)

The metaphoric use of money enables the reader to understand Gatsby and Daisy's relationship in a new, **materialistic** light. According to **Roger Lewis**: **“This insight...shows Gatsby's understanding of the link between love and money. Daisy's voice has been described as the seductive, thrilling aspect of her. What Gatsby, with surprising consciousness, states is that Daisy's charm is allied to the attraction of wealth; money and love hold similar attractions...Gatsby, with his boundless capacity for love, a capacity unique in the sterile world he inhabits, sees that the pursuit of money is a substitute for love.”** Here, Lewis suggests that Gatsby has seen through consumerism and decide to pursue love alone; nevertheless, money and Daisy are inextricable, and it is Daisy's association with money that - as Nick in Chapter 7 comments - is the source of her **“inexhaustible charm”**.

“...it increased her value in his eyes” (Chapter 8)

Gatsby's love for Daisy mingles with his love for money. Selfish aspects come into play, therefore, as he seeks to win her love through **deceptive pretence**. He attempts to reshape his identity to something which he is not: an Oxford man, of European descent, and his money



grants him a kind of “**uniform**” which more or less successfully allows him to blend in with the ‘Old Money’ crowd [see Themes: Class and Wealth]. This form of **deception** is selfish:

“However glorious might be his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present a penniless young man without a past...the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders...he took what he could get, **ravenously and **unscrupulously**”** (Chapter 8)

Gatsby may believe his pursuit of money is necessary to win Daisy over, but it leads to his involvement in organised crime, without any apparent regard for his victims. Nevertheless, as an **unreliable narrator**, Nick does not explicitly expose the **dark** aspects of American society easily. He finds himself complicit in the immorality of 1920s American society, so much so that he **glamourises** and **romanticises** the settings around him, yet he critiques the characters as well. This gives his character a hypocritical dimension.

Nick’s expressions when describing wealth vary and our view of Gatsby and Daisy change throughout. At first, Daisy is described as this **thrilling beauty**, a **femme fatale** which captures the hearts of many, but by the end of the novel, it is clear that Daisy’s main **source of attraction** is her wealth and status, symbolised by her voice, which others, like Gatsby, **prey** on and **dream** of. The way Nick describes Gatsby here is a desperate young man struggling to fit in with the rich upper-class men of his age, and he took whatever Daisy offered him or allowed him to take. This subtle yet pretty **predatory** description, with the adverbs “**ravenously and unscrupulously**” to describe his actions at Oxford paints Gatsby in a different light to his romantic image as the ‘Great’ Gatsby with a glorious name, as he is simply presented as a poor **social-climber**.

Deception as a means of acquiring love:

The recurring sub-theme of deception stems from the characters’ **insecurities** and their attempt to make gains previously **inaccessible** to them or **fake** their social status as a means to appear **affluent** or to win over their lover. This is selfish as they do not present their partner, lover or the person they pursue with an **honest** form of themselves, as they **tailor** their **appearances** to suit the **image** they hope to convey of themselves.

Gatsby’s way of presenting himself is **deceptive**. He creates a fake persona for himself. He attempts to woo Daisy, and the rest of East Egg by portraying himself as this upper-crusty wealthy man, from an elitist background. This forms the basis of people’s **doubts** as they circulate **rumours**, notably at his own parties, to question his social class and background:

“I’ll tell you God’s **truth...”** (Chapter 4)

“Then it was all **true”** (Chapter 4)

“We hadn’t reached West Egg village before Gatsby began leaving his **elegant sentences unfinished...”** (Chapter 4)

“And with this **doubt, his whole statement fell to pieces”** (Chapter 4)

“With an effort, I [Nick] managed to restrain my **incredulous laughter.”** (Chapter 4)



Here, the reader can see how Gatsby goes to pains to make his **lies** believable, but all this manages to do is unsuccessfully leaves behind him a trail of **deceit** and **rumours**. This is ironic because Gatsby himself **fabricates** his image through a collection of **fragmented** ideas and facts. By doing this, he hopes to deceive society, Daisy, in particular, to be accepted into higher society and ultimately win her love. The true deception is that Gatsby's love for Daisy is therefore selfishly **dominated** or **coloured** by his **ambitions** for a higher social status [see Themes: Class and Wealth], which damages the **authenticity** of his character and as a result, the **purity** of his love. Even when he sleeps with Daisy five years ago when his regiment was camping out in Oxford, he **"took her under false pretences"** which builds an image of a **predatory**, money-driven young man, instead of an **honest** lover.

"Of course I'll say I was [driving]" (Chapter 7)

Gatsby's act of **selfless** love, with the reassuring guarantee of **"of course"** reveals that Daisy's happiness is Gatsby's main priority, despite losing her to Tom. All temporary facades of **materialism** and **superficiality evaporate** after he loses Daisy, in the presence of his final act of true love which **redeems** his entire **deceptive, glamorous** lifestyle. Although Gatsby dies for a worthless cause - and the **"pneumatic mattress"** on which he dies symbolises the airy, inflated or spiritual romanticism which is his fatal flaw - the act redeems him, and cements the parallels between himself and Jesus which critic **Thomas Dilworth** brings to light.

Throughout the novel, it is clear that there is a myriad of actions and decisions shaped by characters' **greed** and **self-love** as they attempt to reach their goals despite the **implications** or consequences on other characters.

Tom and Myrtle's relationship is selfish because of their **mutual gains**: through the sexual affair, Tom can assert his **masculinity** and dominance, and ultimately 'exploit' the working-class Myrtle who in turn gains **materialistically** from Tom. Myrtle's ambitions are explored through her own version of the American Dream, as well as her active **decision** to abandon her Valley of Ashes lower-class roots [see Theme: Class and Wealth, Idealism]. Tom and Daisy's marriage is also mutually beneficial: Tom's title, affluence and background provide Daisy with financial and social stability and Daisy's pale beauty and submission allow Tom to exercise his dominant nature and cement his social status.

[Gatsby speaking]: **"She [Daisy] only married you [Tom] because I was poor, and she was tired of waiting for me...in her heart, she never loved any one except me!"** (Chapter 7)

Gatsby's assured tone here shows how Daisy perceives marriage – **"a force – of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality"** (Chapter 8) - with the tricolon emphasising Daisy's selfishness as she marries Tom intending to acquire social security and abide by social convention - **"There was a wholesome bulkiness about his person and his position, and Daisy was flattered."** (Chapter 8) - instead of waiting for the penniless Gatsby.



“They weren’t happy...and they weren’t unhappy either” (Chapter 7)

The contrast and negation of the words ‘happy’ and ‘unhappy’ shows how **social security**, is a **selfish middle-way** that provides **sustainability** and endurance to Buchanan’s marriage and successfully destroys Daisy and Gatsby’s relationship. Money and social status does not guarantee both the Buchanans happiness, as they both search for love or pleasure in their extra-marital affairs, but provides an **anchor** which they “**retreat**” to after acquiring or temporarily **indulging** in their desires.

Historical context (AO3):

American society in the 1920s was centred on money, sex and

consumerism: this makes true love difficult as relationships are **sustained** by the individual’s financial status. We see this in many of the novel’s relationships; Myrtle, for example, tells her audience in Chapter 2 that she “**lay down and cried [...] all afternoon**” when she found out that George had borrowed the suit he wore to their wedding (a discovery that likely prompted a realisation that he would not be able to indulge her materialistic desires). At the same time, the

emancipation of women had taken great strides - women had taken over the jobs of the men who had left to fight in WW1, and after the war ended pursued financial independence and freer lifestyles. This **new woman** was **emblematised by the ‘flapper’**, and Jordan is the flapper’s representative in this novel. Unlike Daisy, whose union with Tom is a social and financial one (although she herself comes from a moneyed background), Jordan’s relationship with Nick is free of financial considerations - they are drawn to each other out of “**curiosity**”, no more. In this way, we can see how the social and historical context - one of consumerism and new freedom for women - both **enabled and stunted** the possibility of real love.



The importance of class within the theme of love:

There are several barriers to love in The Great Gatsby. The class **makes or breaks** each of the relationships. Although this is technically out of the couples’ control, it definitely shows how each character chooses their lover and why. This contributes directly towards the ends of **self-love** as each character picks their lover from the class they want to mingle with (marrying up) or **exploit**



(an affair with working-class women because of their needs). This presents the **dichotomy of exploitation vs aspiration**, both of which sully the purity of love. Gatsby's quest for love inevitably fails, and this failure is due to an inability to transcend the class barriers. His *habitus* (see Bourdieu) is different to that of the 'Old Money' set, and his consumer tastes - his flashy cars and pink suits - mark him as an outsider, and this outsider status keeps Daisy at bay, like the green light blinking in the distance.

Capitalism and **consumerism** are inherent throughout *The Great Gatsby* and each of the relationships demonstrates this, allowing Fitzgerald to utilise the societal practices of the period to explore the complex definitions of **selfish** love and the unbalanced dynamic with **selflessness** which leads to **tragic endings** for characters stepping outside of their social circles and aiming to love higher than they could afford to. A romantic attachment or relationship only **prevails** if both characters are of high social standing (such as Daisy and Tom), instead of those who aim to climb the social class **hierarchy**. This characteristic of the Roaring Twenties is a destructive harsh reality, and selfishness has its consequences.

Daisy is selfish because of her inherent carelessness:

Gatsby and Myrtle are both **collateral damage** who pay the price of Daisy's and Tom's **careless** and **selfish** love.

"She vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving Gatsby - nothing. He felt married to her, that was all." (Chapter 8)

Nick addresses the issue of Daisy's **selfishness** towards Gatsby when they made love for the first time. Whilst Gatsby felt their bond to be **unbreakable**, she immediately vanished from his life and refused to wait for his return from the war as she rushed to marry Tom, who offered her the **stability of an aristocratic future**. Instead of forgetting about her, and criticising her for refusing to wait for him – therefore **betraying** their 'love' – Gatsby's **illusion** and **entrancement** with the **"rich, full life"** Daisy represents, pursues Daisy and her **fantasy religiously**, dedicating his **time** and life to acquiring her love once again.

After letting Gatsby take the fall for Myrtle's death, Daisy leaves with Tom without leaving Nick a forwarding address and does not even attend Gatsby's funeral. Tom himself leaves Myrtle and convinces Wilson that Gatsby is Myrtle's lover and murderer. This sparks Nick's **bitterness** towards both characters' as they enter the lives of other characters only to **smash** them up and then **"retreat"** to their own **privileged, untouchable** lives.

Infidelity:

There are several affairs in the novel, making almost all the characters **unsympathetic** as they are not **loyal** to their partners (Tom, Myrtle and Daisy), or go after other married partners (Gatsby for Daisy). The lack of respect for the institution of marriage, or the bonding of love means that there is a breakdown of a genuine connection between the characters in the



different relationships. The novel presents a **modernist** view of relationships, one diverging from the traditional expectation of marriage and stable lifelong relationships. This also impacts the **morality** of the characters as they engage in **infidelity** and extramarital affairs.

Exam Tip:

When writing about the stems of selfish and/or selfless love, always pay particular attention to the **language** and **actions** of the characters. To what lengths do they go to achieve their own ambitious aims, sometimes at the expense of other characters' **benefit**, **safety** and **happiness**? Which characters transition from selfish to selfless (vice versa) over the course of the novel and why? Can you draw links between certain characters and their aims/actions and what makes them parallel to each other? Which characters can be described as **foils** to each other. A foil is a character that exhibits **confliction** or opposite traits to another character, sometimes presenting themselves as the antagonist. In this case, to what extent can Wilson be seen as Tom's foil or Gatsby's? What about Myrtle and Daisy? What contrasts and connections can be drawn between them and their position in society? Do not forget to explore the significance of infidelity to the messages of the author, as well as the status of society.

PROXIMITY AND DISTANCE:

This sub-theme under the branch of love concerns the **physical closeness** between characters and how it impacts their relationships. It is of significance to the novel how Gatsby tries his best to be within close proximity to Daisy to the extent he goes to buy the mansion **directly** across from her home in hope of someday bumping into her **casually**. This shows that proximity represents the **desperation** or **eagerness** to acquire one's love.

Proximity as a representation of hope for love:

“Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her.” (Chapter 5)

The green light on the other edge of the bay represents the physical and mental **distance** between Gatsby and Daisy. The green light carries much imagery of **idealism** and hope [see Themes: Idealism], yet it also serves as a **metaphor** for the **proximity** between Gatsby and Daisy as he looks to it constantly when pondering on his future and his past. The fact the green light was in East Egg, on Daisy's **territory** and therefore much closer to her than Gatsby makes it a **vessel** for his love as he feels **directed** by the **power** of the green light. The **spatial positioning** of Gatsby and Daisy's houses predicts the outcome of the novel. While Daisy's house seems so close, it is separated by an expanse of water. Likewise, Daisy will for a time seem close to Gatsby but nevertheless remain wedded to Nick, before **“retreat[ing] back”** into the distance.



“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)

This image contains a **paradox**: hope for the future is matched by the impossibility of realising this orgastic, hoped-for future. **Water** is an important symbol or tool in The Great Gatsby, representing hope in itself and the past, as Gatsby repeatedly looks towards the water which separates him from Daisy, therefore from his past, as well as looking at the water as a symbol of **proximity** and hope. The reference to running is an attempt to **outrun** the future, which of course is impossible but Nick pays particular attention to the importance of the green light to Gatsby, so much so that he “**believed**” in it and the almost **supernatural** symbolism tied to it.

The significance of the location of Gatsby’s mansion from Daisy’s home:

“If it wasn’t for the **mist** we could see your home across the bay.” [chapter 5, p.60]

This quote explores Gatsby’s **obsession** with being as close as possible to Daisy. The importance of the mist serves as a pathetic fallacy as it casts a **shadow** over East Egg: Gatsby has Daisy by his side but he still cannot access the privileges of elite East Egg society and will never achieve such status. This shows the failure of his American Dream. Nevertheless, there is a **romanticism** in this gesture.

Proximity as a way of achieving Gatsby’s idealised romantic dream of Daisy:

“He knew that when he kissed the girl and **forever** wed his **unutterable** visions to her **perishable** breath, his mind would never **romp** again like the mind of **God**...At his lips’ touch, she **blossomed** for him like a flower and the **incarnation** was complete” [chapter x, p.x]

This quote is highly significant to exploring the theme of idealised love, [see Themes: Idealism], but here it is also important to look at this section from the lens of proximity and distance in **shaping** the love story of a character. Through holding and kissing Daisy in his arms, a moment he had been craving for almost five years, Gatsby temporarily accomplishes his well-crafted **romance** and **ultimate pursuit**. Whilst he himself binds himself to Daisy forever, wedding his **desire** for Daisy and the wealth and elitism she represents, whilst there is no clear indication of what she feels. She appears **passive** in this extract, and almost non-human as she is used as a means to acquire a concept of the dream instead of a person sharing the same passion. Gatsby’s kiss with Daisy enables him to complete his **incarnation**, to become this flawed but ultimately god-like figure. Daisy is a **vessel** for his character development.

Gatsby and Daisy’s relationship contains a paradox. Gatsby’s dedication to Daisy is **permanent** and life-changing. In contrast, Daisy is similar to Tom who pursues an affair (with Myrtle) because it allows her to feed her **immediate** happiness. She can afford to do so, without



completely binding herself to Gatsby in any shape or form whilst his **desperation** for her **consumes** him.

Despite the **vulnerability** of Gatsby, it is important to also consider the **feminist** reading of such a scene in the novel. According to [Leland S. Person Jr.](#), **“Daisy in fact, is more victim than victimizer; she is a victim first of Tom’s ‘cruel’ power, but then of Gatsby’s increasingly depersonalised vision of her”**.

This gives weight to the fact that Daisy remains torn between the two characters and she herself does not freely choose Tom twice. Even though she appears sometimes assured and **certain** of her choice, she easily changes her mind whenever it appears **suitable** and convenient, mainly driven by the **proximity** of each character to her: the physical closeness of Tom in Louisville whilst Gatsby was at war, and again holding her hand in New York (Chapter 7) has a great impact on her decision. This portrays the **weakness** of her character as she is **pressured** by the different men and **objectified** as this prize possession. Tom longs to **control**, whilst Gatsby obsesses over her as a **symbol**.

The importance of proximity in **encouraging love - Nick and Jordan:**

Jordan’s countenance attracts Nick, and he describes her in a less romanticised way than he describes Daisy as **“king’s daughter, the golden girl”** (Chapter 7) or her **thrilling** voice. Instead, he chooses the simplistic language to convey his most honest opinion of Jordan:

“I put my arm around Jordan’s golden shoulder and drew her towards me and asked her to dinner. Suddenly I wasn’t thinking of Daisy and Gatsby any more, but of this clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal scepticism, and who leaned back jauntily just within the circle of my arm” (Chapter 4)

“Her chin raised little as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall” (Chapter 1) - Nick is clearly aware and attracted to Jordan’s pride and is attracted to it.

Nick manages to distinguish between the relationship Tom or Gatsby have with Daisy and the one he has with Jordan. Gatsby **idealises** Daisy to the extent he no longer sees her as an actual, fallible person but an **object of fantasy** with a **“disembodied face”**. This idealism damages the perception of the real Daisy and places her on a **pedestal**, only for her to fall:

“Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs, and so I drew up the girl beside me, tightening my arms. Her wan, scornful mouth smiled, and so I drew her up again closer, this time to my face.” (Chapter 4)

The references to distances and closeness suggest that Nick initiates a romantic relationship with Jordan because she is the closest female within **proximity**, making it easy to **pursue** her. The fact he does not idealise Jordan, viewing her as this **“limited person”**, and pursuing her largely because of the society he inhabits, manages to strain their relationship as they lack the



same **consuming passion** both Gatsby and Tom Buchanan have for Daisy. Their relationship is **short-lived** but ends differently to Gatsby and Daisy's or Tom and Myrtle's as they reach a standard **mutual** form of closure. Furthermore, Nick's **awareness of Jordan's character flaws** - her pride, her contempt and her scepticism - mean his relationship with her can be seen as **healthier** - Jordan is a **real person** to him, not simply a vessel onto which he **projects** his desires and fantasies.

“A phrase began to beat in my ears with a sort of heady excitement: ‘There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired.’” [chapter 4, p.52]

Nick's **cynicism** is brought to the fore here. He divides romance in society as inhabiting four different categories: either the pursued (the person of interest) or those pursuing romance with their target person. However, he also highlights those who are too busy to be involved with romantic affairs, and also those who have **resigned** themselves to a quieter life as they are weary of society of romance. By the end of the novel, it is clear that Nick is **tired** of the society he is part of, and he had also stopped pursuing Jordan which makes it easy for him to disconnect himself from the **corruption** and **immorality** that dominates America's Roaring Twenties.

TIME-ENDURING (LASTING) LOVE:

This explores how a certain relationship can flourish and how long it can last. Whilst it can be argued that Gatsby's love for Daisy has transcended itself until it became a whole dream-like concept and quest, she herself is indifferent to him during the years she marries Tom, where she accepts her new relationship and

Socially acceptable love prevails - social conventions in romantic relationships:

Class plays a key role in *The Great Gatsby's* America despite the absence of a proper class hierarchy like in Europe. This strains the romantic relationships between the different characters:

It appears the only relationship which remained by the end of the novel was the Buchanans. Gatsby is unable to win Daisy over because of his association with **'New Money' (nouveau riche)** and the **“less fashionable”** (Chapter 1) aspects of West Egg. Tom and Myrtle's affair fails accordingly even before her death, but parallels can be drawn between Myrtle and Gatsby who both aim and **aspire**, to the point of **self-sacrifice** and meet their death, to win over the love of Tom and Daisy who do not show the same **sacrificial selflessness** in romantic relationships. Their deaths can be seen as a critique of the American Dream, an exposé of its limitations and of the **dramatic consequences of over-reaching**.





“They were **careless people - Tom and Daisy - they smashed up things and creatures and then **retreated** into their money or their vast carelessness.”** (Chapter 9)

This quote clearly points how Tom and Daisy, representing the American elite, who do not abide by social conventions and still partake in their infidelity but are the only ones **untouched** by the tragedy of death. Since they do not aim for the American Dream they do not see it **crumble** before their eyes.

“Mr Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife...Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white.” (Chapter 8)

Though this quote highlights the importance of class in the novel with more important implications [see Themes: Class and Wealth], it also highlights how love is **dictated** by social conventions and restricted by ideas and prejudices concerning **class**, **race** and **conservative** family institutions. Tom seems more insulted by Gatsby’s social **status** than his pursuing an affair with Daisy, revealing his disinterest in Daisy relative to his primary interest in maintaining his social status and the class system which affords him privilege.

Gatsby’s **obsession with **time** in all its forms:**

Gatsby attempts to change his **past** or his background so dramatically to mimic the East Egg fashionable upper-class lifestyle. His signature phrase “**old sport**” signals his **obsession** with ‘old money’ and becoming a part of the de facto aristocracy.

“I’m going to **fix everything just the way it was before”** (Chapter 9)

Gatsby appears obsessed with the idea of perfection. He attempts to recover the past, and by doing this he constructs a **false** image of himself. The verb “**fix**” suggests that he feels like he is in control of his fate and future when really he is just stuck in a the memory of his brief summer romance with Daisy, who has since moved on. This motif of time presents itself in an **entrapping desire** to **simultaneously** relive the past (Daisy) whilst also achieving his American Dream. Gatsby’s failure to do both **simultaneously** is Fitzgerald’s message to the readers, as Gatsby’s life goal remains **unfulfilled** but he does not even live his life, but in a dream which drains him [see below].



“He was running down like an **overwound clock”** (Chapter 5)

This quote is a direct reference to Gatsby’s close association and obsession with time to the extent he becomes a clock. His overreliance on time is personified through his physical leaning on the mantel clock for support:

“Luckily the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head, whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers and set it back in place.” (Chapter 5)

Here the reader can associate Gatsby’s nervous state around Daisy with his **fear** of failing in his **mission**. He physically leans back on time, his **ally**, to maintain his **luck** from the **past**. His **“trembling fingers”** signify the **fear** which inhabits him as he is unable to formulate the words and actions he imagined and remembered from the past encounters with Daisy.

“‘You can’t repeat the past.’ ‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried **incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’ He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just **out of reach** of his hand.”** (Chapter 6)

Gatsby’s **delusion** stems from his inability to move beyond his young self’s love for Daisy. He is frustrated by this and is repeatedly reported by Nick to stare at a variety of objects to attempt to **connect** with the notion of reuniting with Daisy.

Nick contrasts Daisy’s unspecific **“we haven’t met for many years”** regarding Gatsby with the **“automatic quality of gatsby’s answer”** of **“five years next november”** [chapter 5, p.56]. The **time-specific** response suggests Gatsby’s obsession with time and the time he spent apart from Daisy, so much so that Nick realises how climactic it felt for Gatsby to finally pursue his affair with Daisy.

Daisy’s relationship with time differs completely from Gatsby’s:

“She wanted her life shaped now, **immediately...by some force...that was close at hand.”** (Chapter 8)

This showcases Daisy’s similarity to Myrtle as they both pursue their relationships with Tom on **impulses**, and Tom appears to be this **magnetising object** of wealth and of status which attracts both these women in different ways. Daisy’s marriage to Tom is primarily of **convenience** as she prioritises her present and future over her **romantic past** with Gatsby. She lives by the concept of acquiring immediate satisfaction and her impulse to marry Tom stems from her upper-class **hedonism**, unlike Gatsby who lives a **conflicted** life because of his dwellings in the past. The bathtub scene of Daisy **“drunk as a monkey”** [chapter 4, p.49] where she tells Jordan **“Daisy’s change’ her mine!”** only goes to show Daisy’s ability to



change her decision easily, yet she still married Tom “**without so much as a shiver**” and does not glance back at her past with Gatsby.

“**I love you now - isn’t that enough? I can’t help what’s past**” (Chapter 7)

Again, Daisy simply pays no attention to the importance of the past. Her actions are **unpredictable** and Gatsby himself admits that she was “**all excited**” when she chooses Tom. Daisy’s ability to face her present **reality** is what allows her to pursue the **opportunistic** affair with Gatsby, providing her with **temporary satisfaction** as she knows she is not bound by her actions. This contrasts with Myrtle’s **impulsive pursuit** of an affair with Tom, as time for Myrtle acts as an **object of fear**, as she is afraid of living a **wasted** life like her husband, trapped in the Valley of Ashes and its **decaying effect** on her **dreams** and **aspirations** [see Themes: Idealism].

LOSS OF LOVE:

Fitzgerald portrays love in *The Great Gatsby* cynically, as no love relationship lasts or survives. Love appears to be an **unattainable** concept which cannot be fully grasped or brought to maturity or fruition. Nick’s piece of wisdom about the world being divided into four types of lovers (or non-lovers) - “**the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired**” - seems to ring true by the novel’s denouement. The one relationship that survives is the **loveless** marriage of the Buchanans, driven and **sustained** by the social demands and a mere “**practicality**”, according to Nick. Nick and Jordan’s relationship evaporates, Gatsby’s love of Daisy is unreciprocal and eventually shatters, leaving him with a new vision of the world, a “**raw**”, “**frightening**” one in which a rose is “**grotesque**” (Chapter 8). Finally, Myrtle cheats on her husband yet still does not have a happy ending with Tom who is using her.

“**He 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. But it was all going by too fast...he had lost that part of it...forever.**” (Chapter 8)

Gatsby goes back to Louisville and reminisces over his “**month of love**” with Daisy as he constantly fails to **savour** the moment, and Nick states Gatsby’s physical loss of love ever so naturally, and his inability to recover it that moment in Louisville should have prevented Gatsby from **losing himself** in his dream, which builds his circumstances as a **tragic**, romantic hero.

“**he kept looking at the child with surprise. I don’t think he had ever really believed in its existence before**” (Chapter 7)

Gatsby wants to wipe away the past five years that he does not realise this becomes his **fatal flaw**. He fails to comprehend the depth of Daisy and Tom’s history: that they have been married and have a child. Gatsby’s surprise shows his inability to digest the fact that Daisy had formed a life **separate** from him instead of spending her whole time **crafting** her dream of their **reunion** as Gatsby had done.



“He [Wilson] had discovered that Myrtle had some sort of life **apart** from him in **another world**, and the shock had made him physically **sick**.” (Chapter 7)

Similarly, George Wilson also cannot bear the fact Myrtle leads a **double life** with her apartment in New York and her affair with another man, and it makes him physically “**green**” - with both sickness and **jealousy**. The colour green here symbolises the opposite of the notions of **hope** with Gatsby derives from the green light. This discovery contributes to Myrtle’s death as well as Gatsby’s and Wilson’s death.

“His wife and his mistress, until an hour ago secure and **inviolable**, were slipping precipitately from his **control**.” (Chapter 7)

Nick draws parallels between Wilson’s **sickness** after discovering Myrtle’s infidelity with Tom Buchanan, after confirming Daisy loves Gatsby. However, the reference to **control** here is of particular significance to Tom’s **status** and his constant need to assert his dominance over those around him. Tom makes a point of **buying** Myrtle the apartment so that she feels **indebted** to him, whilst his marriage to Daisy is **founded** on the social expectations of elites: to marry and **preserve** their status.

This shows how all three men - Gatsby, Tom Buchanan and George Wilson - cannot accept their wives or lovers are not **loyal** to them. Tom’s repeated **infidelity** sets the stage for Gatsby’s **pursuit** of Daisy, Tom’s wife, which leads to her infidelity too.

Historical Context - AO3:

During Fitzgerald’s writing career, he was exposed to his **cyclical moods** of **depression** and **seclusion**, which included periods of **celibacy**. This was the main driving factor behind his wife Zelda’s affair with Edouard Jozan, a French aviator. Nonetheless, this made Fitzgerald doubt the **certainty** of his romantic relationship and marriage to Zelda, which corresponded to the same time he was writing *The Great Gatsby*, so much so that there appear to be remnants of his experience in Gatsby’s experience of **loss** of love.



ATTRACTION AND LUST:

Lust **captivates** most of the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, taking on not just the form of **sexual** desire but also the craving for money and for climbing the social ladder. All the characters seek **pleasure**, **gratification** or wealth in order to achieve their **personal happiness**. Attraction and lust, on the



other hand, are the driving forces towards infidelity or pursuing a pre-marital romance, alongside achieving **monetary** gains or **rising** in social class. Lust drives Tom and Myrtle's extramarital affair, a relationship that **satisfies** Tom's **carnal desires** in exchange for the **financial minimal luxuries** he offers Myrtle. She attempts to achieve social **acceptance** through her relationship with Tom, the dream which she chases in **vain** as Tom continues to barely **string** her along with gifts and a small apartment and rash promises to renew her hopes.

Myrtle exudes raw sexuality, or sensuality - a "**vitality**" that "**smoulder[s]**" in the Valley of Ashes (Chapter 2). Tom's attraction to her is based on this, rather than on any characteristic of hers or any beauty, for Myrtle "**contained no facet or gleam of beauty**" (Chapter 2). Their sordid relationship is physical from the outset; on the commuter train where they meet his "**white shirt-front [ends] pressed against her arm**" and she follows him into his taxi. In contrast, Gatsby's relationship with the **ethereal** Daisy is more **spiritual** than sexual, such that her presence, her "**perishable breath**" sparks "**unutterable visions**" (Chapter 6). As [Edward Wasiolek](#) writes, Gatsby "**wants nothing to do with the valley of ashes or the sexual woman [Myrtle] who lives there**". Instead he wants to "**suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder**" (Chapter 6). This image (pap meaning soft food for babies or invalids) evokes an image of a child serenely drinking from its mother's breast, and has been called "**prepubescent and infantile**". Indeed, Gatsby remains infatuated by Daisy, a woman dressed in white, the counterpoint of lustful, degraded Myrtle Wilson, and a person who evokes the "**idealized, unreachable mother**". Gatsby's **attachment to the madonna/ mother figure** (rather than her polar opposite, the whore (see the Madonna-Whore Complex)) and his absorption in his fantasies mean that he is a foil to Myrtle, and while carnal lust is present in the novel, we cannot say that it dominates it.

Nick and Jordan's relationship occupies a middle ground between Tom and Myrtle's lust-filled relationship and Gatsby and Daisy's immaterial one. While Nick does not reveal any sexual desire towards Jordan, he admits:

"I enjoyed looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet. Her grey sun-strained eyes looked back at me with polite reciprocal curiosity out of a wan, charming discontented face." (Chapter 1)

Nick is attracted to Jordan Baker's **boyish** physique but also towards her attitude, which prompts their decision to start dating. Nick is intrigued by Jordan's "**incurabl[e] dishonest[y]**" (Chapter 1), whilst he narrates that "**I am one of the few honest people I have ever known**" (Chapter 3), signifying their liaison is built on a contradiction. Nick is also attracted to Jordan's androgynous appearance, with numerous masculine references to her "**moustache of perspiration**" [chapter 3, p.39], as well as the male-coded words 'cadet', 'erect'. Jordan also resists social conventions by pursuing a (male-dominated) career, and in this way **epitomises** the '[New Woman](#)' of the 1920s.



The relationship fades with the fading of the **mutual** 'curious' attraction or even friendship between the pair, as they end up finding each other quite **intolerable**:

“On Sunday morning while church bells rang in the villages alongshore, the world and its mistress returned to Gatsby’s house and twinkled hilariously on his lawn.” (Chapter 4)

The use of juxtaposition of the presence of **religion** and **sin** acknowledges the state of American society in the twenties: characterised by wild parties, **infidelity** (despite the socio-religious **taboo**) as well as drinking, despite the legal prohibition banning alcohol. Nick aims to persuade the reader that the entirety of West Egg and East Egg was present on Gatsby’s lawn, ready for the parties in his mansion. The verbal phrase **“twinkled hilariously”** suggests an unsober crowd unable to walk straight, characterised by **temporary thrills** of **happiness** and **wildness**.

Historical Context - AO3:

The Great Gatsby is set in 1922, only a few years after the Prohibition Act (ratified 1919) was passed. The Eighteenth Amendment of the US Constitution prohibited the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of **intoxicating** liquors for beverage purposes”, which showcases Gatsby’s mansion as a venue for the illegal activities which characterised the period.



Myrtle and Tom Buchanan’s affair starts because of sexual attraction:

This affair is clearly pursued by the sexual attraction which drives both characters to act on **impulse**. Nick’s narration of Tom focuses on his upper-class way of dress, as well as his **dominant** characteristics instead of a sexualised **body-focused** image. This is what drives Myrtle to act on impulse and allow Tom to pursue an extramarital affair with her. On the other hand, Myrtle is mainly described by her **sensual** bodily characteristics and she uses that to maintain Tom’s attention focused on her.

“He had on a dress suit and patent-leather shoes, and I couldn’t keep my eyes off him...I was so excited that when I got into a taxi with him I hardly knew I wasn’t getting into a subway train” (Chapter 2)

Myrtle acknowledges Tom’s **appearance** which prompted her to get into the taxi - note how she focuses on his formal way of dress, signifying his upper-class **status**, which appeals to her more than his face - which she does not describe.



“She [Myrtle] was in the middle thirties, and faintly **stout**, but she carried her surplus **flesh sensuously** as some women can. Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine, contained **no facet or gleam of beauty**, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually **smouldering** [...] looking at him flush in the eye. Then she wet her lips..” (Chapter 2)

Nick describes Myrtle as a **consciously seductive** and **confident** character. She appears to be the **antithesis** of Daisy’s character (note the contrasting descriptions of Daisy’s ethereal beauty and Myrtle’s **sexual** appearance), and Nick focuses mainly on her **body** as soon as he introduces her character.

Sexual attraction is not enough to sustain relationships:

By the end of the novel, the reader’s **understanding** of love and relationships changes. Instead of **idealistic** love, it is clear that the characters of the novel are mainly driven to love each other through **lust** and money, or social **ambition**. Myrtle’s relationship with Tom ends with her death, and Gatsby’s relationship with Daisy ends with his death. Fitzgerald reveals that 1920s America is harsh, and that emotions hold no place in a society driven by **consumerism**, money and **carpe diem tendencies**.

Overall, it is quite clear that the relationships in the novel are characterised by different **demands**, **drives** and **goals**, yet all lead to the same ending. Fitzgerald proves to the reader that pursuing **inter-class** relationships are **futile** as the impact of society is equally important if not able to override **individualistic** desires. This stands in stark **opposition** to the American Dream which encourages freedom to **love who one wants**, freedom to **achieve happiness**, **wealth** and higher social **standing**, yet the failures of the characters is a provoking statement. Fitzgerald explores the American Dream and the **limits** of idealism [see Themes: Idealism] and the failure of the characters to obtain love and romance - instead, they are returned to their original roots and prevented from permanently transcending the class-wealth borders.

Instead of formulating a **cathartic** experience for the readers through the journeys of the characters, the **death** of Myrtle and Gatsby, the **breakup** of Jordan and Nick and the **retreat** of the Buchanans back into their world pose a **complex** understanding of 1920s romance and love, as linked directly to **ambition**, **desire** and idealistic devices like the American Dream. The setting, the social atmosphere and the period boast an abundance of love, freedom and desire, yet the explicit loss of love as an end to this romantic journey leaves the readers at a **stalemate**; neverending chaos.

