

# AQA English Literature A-level

## The Great Gatsby: Character Profiles George Wilson

This work by [PMT Education](https://www.pmt.education) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



## GEORGE WILSON - DEFEATED VALLEY OF ASHES RESIDENT

### OVERVIEW

George Wilson is a **car mechanic** and the husband of Myrtle Wilson. He owns a garage in the Valley of Ashes and lives above it. He is a **lower-class, blue-collar worker** who is depicted as **downtrodden and lifeless**. He is a minor character in the novel, appearing infrequently, but his presence has **major ramifications**.

Wilson is a **passive player** in his own life, having seemingly resigned himself to life in the Valley of Ashes. The reader is first introduced to Wilson when Tom goes to his garage with the intention of introducing Nick to his mistress, Myrtle. Wilson and Tom are in **direct contrast** to one another: Tom is powerful, privileged and in control of everything in his life, while Wilson is powerless and nearly invisible. Wilson, as his bland, 'everyman' name suggests, represents the working-class man. The direct contrast between Tom and Wilson marks the schism between the lower labouring class and the elite.

Despite Wilson's lack of power and spirit, he is **one of the novel's few pure characters**; he loves his wife steadfastly. In the opening chapters of the book, Wilson is unaware that Myrtle is cheating on him with Tom. It is not until he finds the dog collar in Chapter 7 that he realises that she has been having an affair, but is unsure of with whom. He physically locks Myrtle away, seemingly unable to bear the thought of losing her. However, Myrtle escapes the garage and runs to the street, flagging down who she thinks is Tom, only to be hit by Daisy driving Gatsby's car. The **death of George's wife breaks him** and he becomes enraged. George is then manipulated by Tom into killing Gatsby. After this, he kills himself. Wilson is another victim of the elite, and this is shown both through his **prosaic poverty** and his **tragic end**.

### CONTEXT

#### Poverty in the Roaring 20s:

The Great Gatsby is set during the Roaring Twenties, a time of social change, prosperity for some and poverty for many more. In fact, it is estimated that **60% of Americans** lived below the poverty line. The proximity of wealth and poverty is best expressed by W.E.B Du Bois in a **1926 essay**: **"We have today in the United States, cheek by jowl, Prosperity and Depression."**

World War I had recently ended and the national economy was booming. Many became wealthier due to business growth and stock market trading. This economic surge enabled social mobility and the rise of the "new money" social class, or the *nouveau riche*: people who were not born into wealth but obtained it through enterprise. This new social mobility **supported the ideology of the American Dream**, the belief that in America everyone has an equal chance at success through work and perseverance, regardless of family and status.



However, prosperity was limited to a few. Farmers - stuck with an oversupply of crops - found their earnings falling and workers were not able to fight for higher wages due to a movement towards the more aggressive application of labour laws. At the time, poverty was seen as a **moral failing**. Many believed in the American Dream, and the poor came to be suspected of not working hard enough. **Fitzgerald critiques this notion**. George, like his Valley of Ashes neighbours, is portrayed as exhausted, while Jordan and Daisy are portrayed as idle. It seems Fitzgerald is arguing that the American Dream is in fact a mirage and unobtainable.

### The Valley of Ashes:

The poor are represented by the inhabitants of the Valley of Ashes. The Valley of Ashes lies halfway between New York City and West Egg, and the main characters pass through it on their way to the city either by car or by train.

**“This is the valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.” (Chapter 2)**

The bleakness of the Valley of Ashes is in **direct contrast to the beauty of East and West Egg**. The inhabitants of East and West Egg live in or in proximity to ivy-covered houses, immaculate lawns, twinkling lights and of course, the bay of water that separates them. In contrast, George and Myrtle live in an industrial wasteland. While the poverty of the inhabitants is **prosaic**, the ugliness of the Valley makes it **fantastic**; it defies belief.

The Valley of Ashes serves as **a commentary on the accumulation of wealth**. It depicts the effect that industrialisation has had on some Americans. The ashes that cover and make up this area come from the surrounding factories - the same factories that have made wealthy West Egg industrialists rich. While the Valley of Ashes' inhabitants suffer the consequences of the deposited ash, they also **service the rich**: Wilson, for example, is a potential buyer for Tom's old car, and both Tom and Gatsby fill up their cars at his garage. While Wilson takes care of cars (contemporary symbols of wealth), his own seems to be a **“dust-covered wreck of a Ford”** (Chapter 2), revealing the depth of his poverty .

The Valley of Ashes shapes its inhabitants. In Fitzgerald's introduction to the Valley, he describes the ashes as **“tak[ing] the form [...] of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air”**. They seem to be grey creatures, unreal illusions whose activities are “obscure”. Their **creature-like portrayal** is reinforced by the use of the word **“swarm”** in the last sentence of the paragraph, **“the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades”**. This verb evokes **a sense of the men as insects**, perhaps ants. While Fitzgerald is clearly sympathetic to their plight, we don't get a sense the inhabitants are humans at all. This perhaps reflects the way the inhabitants of the Eggs view them as less than human.



## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

### Physical Attributes:

George is first described when Tom and Nick get off the train in the Valley of Ashes, when Tom wants to introduce Nick to **“his girl”** (Chapter 2). The reader gets an impression of Wilson that is in **almost complete juxtaposition to his wife Myrtle**. Wilson is described as **“a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome.”** Later in the passage, Nick describes Wilson as **“mingling immediately with the cement color of the walls. A white ashen dust veiled his dark suit and his pale hair as it veiled everything in the vicinity...”**. These descriptions of Wilson create the sense that he is invisible. Contrast this with Myrtle’s **comically large presence** in her New York apartment: **“as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air”** (Chapter 2).

This portrayal as Wilson being nearly **invisible** is repeated when Myrtle walks **“through her husband as if he were a ghost”** when going up to greet Tom (Chapter 2). Wilson is nearly invisible to Myrtle as well as Nick and Tom because of his lack of wealth. Tom’s indifference to and unawareness of Tom is similar to how Tom dismisses Gatsby a **“Mr. Nobody from Nowhere”** due to his humble roots (Chapter 7). To Tom, Wilson might as well not even exist.

Later in the novel, Tom is described **“Picking up Wilson like a doll, Tom carried him into the office, set him down in a chair, and came back”** (Chapter 7). This line once again emphasises how **small, downtrodden and lifeless** he is.

### Downtrodden and Passive:

The overwhelming impression we get of Wilson is that he is a **beaten man** who does not have much **tenacity**. He is the only character from the lower class who isn't actively trying to move up the social ladder. Although he does not hope for bigger things, he **struggles on a daily basis** to make money, and is often pictured just having finished some work. For example, when we meet him, he is **“wiping his hands on a piece of waste”** (Chapter 2); from this we can assume he has just finished fixing a car. When Michaelis finds him sick in Chapter 7, he advises him to go to bed, but Wilson refuses, saying he would **“miss a lot of business if he did”**. George seems to be desperately trying to make money to survive. Nevertheless, he is passive in the sense that he has resigned himself to his current social status, financial situation and his life in the Valley of Ashes. His **emptiness and apathy** is made clear the following quotes:



**“Generally he was one of these worn-out men: when he wasn’t working, he sat on a chair in the doorway and stared at the people and the cars that passed along the road.” (Chapter 7)**

**“This was a forlorn hope — he was almost sure that Wilson had no friend: there was not enough of him for his wife.” (Chapter 7)**

Another example of Wilson’s passivity is his reaction to Myrtle’s affair. When he puts the pieces together, he gets **physically ill and exhausted**. This is in **direct contrast to how Tom reacts** when he receives similar news hours earlier. This is interesting as it shows how two men from two opposite backgrounds react to the same event.

**“The relentless beating heat was beginning to confuse me and I had a bad moment there before I realized that so far his suspicions hadn’t alighted on Tom. He had discovered that Myrtle had some sort of life apart from him in another world, and the shock had made him physically sick. I stared at him and then at Tom, who had made a parallel discovery less than an hour before — and it occurred to me that there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and the well. Wilson was so sick that he looked guilty, unforgivably guilty — as if he had just got some poor girl with child.” (Chapter 7)**

Tom has a sense of **confidence and tenacity** to him that **comes from being born wealthy**. When he discovers that Daisy was having an affair with Gatsby, he instantly starts **formulating a plan** to deal with Gatsby and “win” back Daisy. Tom takes control of the situation and starts discrediting Gatsby and showing that he is not the man that Daisy thinks he is. However, for Wilson, who is not wealthy and does not have this confidence, when he finds out that his wife is having an affair **he looks inwards**. He **wonders what he has done wrong** and seems to think that he is responsible for Myrtle’s affair. He does not have a plan and simply decides to run away and **“go West”** (Chapter 7), but does not have the means to do so. While George is planning on confronting Gatsby, Wilson does not seem to care who the person his wife had an affair with.

However, George is not passive for the entirety of the novel. His **passiveness evolves into some sort of pragmatism** once he becomes aware of Myrtle’s infidelity and later her death. It is when his life with Myrtle is threatened that Wilson becomes more active and tenacious. When he realises that Myrtle might leave him, he locks Myrtle away in the hopes that she will remain with him. Then, when Myrtle is killed, Wilson sits with Michaelis and tries to understand what has happened and what he can do about it. **“Then he killed her,” said Wilson. His mouth dropped open suddenly. “Who did?” “I have a way of finding out.”** It is in this moment that he **becomes determined** to know who is responsible for who he believes killed Myrtle, **to exact revenge**.



### Powerless and Dependent:

A reason for Wilson's passivity in life could arise from the fact that he is powerless and dependent on others to survive. Wilson knows that Tom has nearly unlimited finances and tries to strike up a business deal with him. Nick describes going into Wilson's garage and how **"when he saw us a damp gleam of hope sprang into his light blue eyes"** (Chapter 2). Wilson is trying to buy Tom's car, so he can sell it and earn some much needed money. Tom offers Wilson an opportunity at having some financial security, and is therefore dependent on Tom. This is something that Myrtle and George have in common, they both see Tom as their **potential saviour**.

Tom is very much aware of this power dynamic, and **pushes Wilson around**. Tom was born with wealth and privilege and this privilege emerges as confidence.

**"Hello, Wilson, old man,"** said Tom, slapping him jovially on the shoulder. **"How's business?"**

**"I can't complain,"** answered Wilson unconvincingly. **"When are you going to sell me that car?"**

**"Next week; I've got my man working on it now."**

**"Works pretty slow, don't he?"**

**"No, he doesn't,"** said Tom coldly. **"And if you feel that way about it, maybe I'd better sell it somewhere else after all."**

**"I don't mean that,"** explained Wilson quickly. **"I just meant —"** (Chapter 2)

Tom is having an affair with Wilson's wife, yet he does not hide this from Wilson. In fact, Tom goes into Wilson's garage, Wilson's home, and tells her in his presence that he wants to see her. Tom seems to **play games with Wilson**, making him nervous that he will take his business somewhere else, well aware that Wilson needs the money. In Chapter 7, Wilson's financial dependence on Tom is reiterated when Wilson wants to take Myrtle to the West and start a new life after learning about her affair. In this situation Wilson approaches Tom and states: **"I need money pretty bad, and I was wondering what you were going to do with your old car."** (Chapter 7). Wilson's future is in the hands of the man who is having an affair with his wife.

While Wilson is dependent on Tom in his business life, Wilson is also powerless in her relationship with his wife. **"Then she wet her lips, and without turning around spoke to her husband in a soft, coarse voice: "Get some chairs, why don't you, so somebody can sit down"** (Chapter 2). Myrtle **does not even look at her husband** when she orders him around. Later Michaelis, the couple's neighbor, notes that Wilson is **"his wife's man and not his own"** (Chapter 7). However, this **power dynamic changes** in Chapter 7. Upon learning of his wife's affair, Wilson locks Myrtle up in an effort to keep her. He also declares they are moving across the country. While his behaviour is **abusive**, this is the first time that Wilson takes control. However, it is important to note that Wilson recognizes that **he has to physically restrain Myrtle** in order to gain control over her, knowing that she will leave him otherwise. Thus, he does not have true control of the situation, knowing his wife will leave him unless he physically stops her.



## Naïve:

Wilson is believed by Tom to be incredibly **unintelligent**. Tom belittles Wilson when he exclaims, **“Wilson? He thinks she goes to see her sister in New York. He’s so dumb he doesn’t know he’s alive”** (Chapter 2). However, it can be argued that Wilson is not unintelligent as Tom believes, that **instead he is naïve**. The main evidence of his naivety is not recognising that Myrtle is cheating on him with Tom, despite her overt flirting with him **“looking him flush in the eye” “she wet her lips”** (Chapter 2). Wilson truly believes that Tom’s visits are simple business visits. Additionally, he trusts his wife of 12 years that she is visiting her sister in New York City. Wilson just **believes that people tell the truth** and are honest. It is not until Myrtle comes home physically marked by Tom and George finds the dog collar that Wilson puts together the pieces.

Wilson’s **naivety is exemplified after Myrtle’s death**. Wilson is trying to understand who could have killed his wife, stating:

**“I know,” he said definitely, “I’m one of these trusting fellas and I don’t think any harm to nobody, but when I get to know a thing I know it. It was the man in that car. She ran out to speak to him and he wouldn’t stop.”** (Chapter 7)

His naivety also allows him to be manipulated by Tom. After Myrtle is killed, Daisy and Tom conspire to figure out a way to come out of the mess unscathed. It is revealed that Tom Buchanan tells George that it was Gatsby driving the car that hit Myrtle. While the specifics are not made clear to the reader, Wilson probably believes that it was Gatsby and Myrtle who were having the affair. Wilson believes this readily, going to Tom’s house and deciding to kill Gatsby over the course of the night. **Wilson’s naivety and trust in Tom allows him to be controlled**.

**GEORGE’S RELATIONSHIP WITH MYRTLE: see Myrtle Wilson’s profile**

## MYRTLE’S DEATH

After Myrtle dies, Tom’s **transformation into a broken man is complete**. His brokenness is reflected by the strangeness of his movements - his eyes **“drop”** and then **“jerk”** - and by his **“high, horrible”** wail: **“O, my Ga-od! O, my Ga-od! Oh, Ga-od! Oh, my Ga-od!”** (Chapter 7). He becomes a passive, inanimate-seeming object, a **“doll”** that Tom picks up. George seems particularly feminine in this scene through the references to his **“doll”**-like body and his **“high”** wail.

Wilson has **no hope in earthly justice**, but looks to God for comfort, saying **“God sees everything”** (Chapter 8). However, this moment is **marked by pathos** when Michaelis, realising he is mistaking T.J.Eckleberg for God, tells him that it is not God he is looking at but an advertisement. Wilson does not find an appropriate divine power to put his faith in (also reflected in his **distortion of the word “God”** earlier in the chapter) and it seems unlikely that he will find either divine or earthly justice.





**TOM AND OTHER CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL**

	PARALLELS	CONTRASTS
<b>Tom</b>	Tom and Wilson are perhaps the two characters furthest removed from one another, with <b>almost no parallels to be drawn</b> between the two.	Description-wise, Wilson is the <b>foil character</b> to Tom in the novel. They share virtually no similarities, as Tom is a <b>hulking, strong, rich</b> man whilst Wilson is <b>pale-faced, weak</b> and <b>anaemic</b> . Wilson is <b>defeated by life</b> and resigned to his fate in the limbo-like Valley of Ashes. The <b>contrast</b> between the two characters marks a <b>schism</b> between the lower <b>labouring</b> class and the <b>elite</b> . Wilson's lifelong <b>passivity</b> ends when he tries to lock up Myrtle - which fails, resulting in her death - and later kills Gatsby. Note that Tom is literally <b>responsible</b> for both acts as he conducts an affair with Myrtle, making her commit <b>adultery</b> , and convinces George that Gatsby drives the yellow car and is therefore Myrtle's lover and killer. Tom <b>exploits</b> both Myrtle and George, and <b>wrecks</b> their marriage, only to save his own. One similarity to be drawn between both characters is their use of <b>domestic violence</b> when they deem it necessary to keep Myrtle <b>in check</b> .







<b>Gatsby</b>	<p>While Wilson and Gatsby, do not have much in common, <b>their beginnings and their ends echo one another</b>. Both men come from humble roots, however the reader is not given information on George's past. However, similar to Gatsby, neither of the men could afford clothes at one point – with George borrowing a suit for his wedding and Gatsby wearing exclusively his military uniform because he had nothing else. However, once Gatsby becomes wealthy, the two men's paths diverge, and they have few parallels until their deaths. What is interesting is how Fitzgerald chooses to end the novel with <b>a character from the lower class killing another character from the lower class</b>. This could be representative of how often those in positions of power will try to keep those without power fighting with each other to not notice that it is those at the top that need to be held accountable</p>	<p>Wilson and Gatsby do not share much in common in the novel: in fact, they have little overlap, only <b>meeting once</b> when Wilson kills Gatsby. The characters represent opposites of the American Dream. While it appears that Wilson is a hard worker, owning his business and attempting to be a good business man, he never moves up the social ladder. The post-war era did not assure an economic boom for everyone across and contrary to the American Dream's promise, hard work does not always equal prosperity. Meanwhile, for Gatsby, who also started from nothing, hard (yet dubious) work did turn into prosperity.</p>
---------------	--	---

## KEY QUOTES

2	<p><b>“He was a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome. When he saw us a damp gleam of hope sprang into his light blue eyes.”</b></p> <p>This is the reader's introduction to Wilson. Wilson's description is in stark contrast to the description of his wife, Myrtle. Despite occupying the <b>same socio-economic location</b>, Myrtle is described as having a vitality about her, while Wilson is characterised as being tired and downtrodden. Wilson has seemed to accept his lot in life, and has very little tenacity to move forward in the world, seeing no hope in the Valley of Ashes.</p>
---	---



2	<p>“Hello, Wilson, old man,” said Tom, slapping him jovially on the shoulder. “How’s business?”</p> <p>“I can’t complain,” answered Wilson unconvincingly. “When are you going to sell me that car?”</p> <p>“Next week; I’ve got my man working on it now.”</p> <p>“Works pretty slow, don’t he?”</p> <p>“No, he doesn’t,” said Tom coldly. “And if you feel that way about it, maybe I’d better sell it somewhere else after all.”</p> <p>“I don’t mean that,” explained Wilson quickly. “I just meant ——”</p> <p>This quote exemplifies the <b>power dynamic</b> between Wilson and Tom. Wilson and Tom seem to have a deal where Tom is going to sell Wilson his car, presumably so Wilson can sell it on at a profit. Business is not going well for Wilson, and the reader understands that Wilson needs something from Tom in order to earn some much needed money. Tom is very aware of the power imbalance between the two. Wilson knows that socially, his place is beneath Tom, and since he needs something from Tom, he cannot afford to make him angry or upset. This division represents the rift and the overarching power imbalance between the working class and the elite across society.</p>
7	<p>“The relentless beating heat was beginning to confuse me and I had a bad moment there before I realized that so far his suspicions hadn’t alighted on Tom. He had discovered that Myrtle had some sort of life apart from him in another world, and the shock had made him physically sick. I stared at him and then at Tom, who had made a parallel discovery less than an hour before — and it occurred to me that there was no difference between men, in intelligence or race, so profound as the difference between the sick and the well. Wilson was so sick that he looked guilty, unforgivably guilty — as if he had just got some poor girl with child. (chapter 7)”</p> <p>This situation details Nick’s analysis of two men from different class backgrounds dealing with the same news that their wives have been cheating on them. For Tom, who is wealthy and has a confidence because of it, he instantly starts <b>formulating a plan</b> to deal with Gatsby and “win” back Daisy. However, for Wilson, he plans to run away and try to save his marriage by simply moving away from the man that cheated with his wife. Wilson does not seem to care who the person was his wife had an affair with.</p>



8	<p><b>“I spoke to her,” he muttered, after a long silence. “I told her she might fool me but she couldn’t fool God. I took her to the window.”— with an effort he got up and walked to the rear window and leaned with his face pressed against it —” and I said ‘God knows what you’ve been doing, everything you’ve been doing. You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!’” Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night. “God sees everything,” repeated Wilson. “That’s an advertisement,” Michaelis assured him.</b></p> <p>After Myrtle’s death, Wilson appears to have a <b>crisis of faith</b>. In his darkest moment, there is nothing to comfort him but an advertisement, which he mistakes for God. It is in this moment that Wilson decides he must be pragmatic, fight his powerlessness and seek revenge for Myrtle.</p> <p>While Wilson is <b>shaken and reeling</b>, Tom approaches the situation calmly and coolly. Tom is not rocked by this information because he knows that he is safe, he <b>retains his faith in the social strata</b> that keeps him holding the power. In fact, in the moments after the accident, Tom is authoritative, similar to when he formulates a plan to win Daisy back. Tom is aware that he can come out on top, because his life has confirmed that so far.</p>
9	<p><b>“So Wilson was reduced to a man “deranged by grief” in order that the case might remain in its simplest form. And it rested there.”</b></p> <p>The court makes no mention of Myrtle’s infidelity as a factor in Wilson’s murder of Gatsby. The assessment that Wilson was “deranged by grief” is indeed correct, and while his killing of Gatsby was wrong, to an extent the readers may be able to understand.</p>

