

AQA English Literature A-level

The Great Gatsby: Character Profiles Myrtle Wilson

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MYRTLE WILSON – WIFE, MISTRESS AND SOCIAL CLIMBER

OVERVIEW

Myrtle Wilson is a **loud, naive, social climber**, the wife of George Wilson and mistress of Tom Buchanan. Myrtle is lower class and lives with her husband above their garage in the “Valley of Ashes”, a depressing industrial area halfway between New York City and the glamorous East and West Egg. Myrtle has **grown to dislike her husband**, finding him unsophisticated, poor, and lacking social status. She states that she only married him because she **“thought he was a gentleman”**, but soon after the wedding realised she was mistaken and that he had little money or status (Chapter 2). Myrtle, like Jay Gatsby, **wants to rise above her station** and lead a more sophisticated, elite and exciting life. She believes she can achieve **upward mobility** through her relationship with Tom, who showers her with gifts and takes her into Manhattan, where she is able to pretend at being upper class. Myrtle is foolish, and believes Tom when he says he loves her and would be with her instead of Daisy if he could. However, **Tom sees Myrtle as simply another possession**. This becomes evident after Myrtle’s death after being hit by Daisy driving the **“death car”** and Tom and Daisy run away together, with neither facing any consequences.

The reader first learns about Myrtle in Chapter 1, when Tom leaves the table to take a phone call. Jordan says to Nick **“Why—Tom’s got some woman in New York” (Chapter 1)**. This introduction of Myrtle, not by name, but as **“some woman”**, highlights her ‘nobody’ status. Myrtle dreams of leaving the class she was born into and joining the upper class. Her **oft-mentioned vitality** allows her to do that, albeit partially and temporarily. Myrtle’s dream is one iteration of the American Dream, the theme that is at the centre of this novel. **Myrtle’s death is the climax of the novel** and is **symbolic of how the upper class will always take advantage of the lower class** without feeling remorse or suffering repercussions.

CONTEXT

Gender and the 1920s:

In 1920, the 19th Amendment was passed. This gave white women the right to vote. Though this legally afforded more opportunities for women, their role remained relatively unchanged. Women were still **expected** to get married, have children and remain in the domestic sphere. 1920s America was also referred to as the **‘Roaring Twenties’**: the age of jazz, of Prohibition but liquor in great quantities regardless, and of the flapper: a woman with a bob and painted lips, found on the dance floor doing the Charleston. Flappers **flouted the rules of respectable womanhood** - they drank, smoked and ‘petted’ with multiple men. Their bob, short skirts and sheer stockings signaled their **emancipation**.

The emancipated behaviour of the flappers was a **direct reaction** to biologically deterministic ideas around femininity and motherhood, expectations of chastity and purity, and ideas about the private sphere being women’s natural sphere. According to historian Gordon A. Craig, the



First World War [had] weakened old orthodoxies and authorities [...] One result of this was a profound change in manners and morals that made a freer and less restrained society". While the First World War may have enabled the figure of the flapper to emerge, conservative gendered ideas still persisted. Jordan, Daisy and Myrtle exist in this very contradictory time.

Due to the lack of freedom women had, it was **difficult for women to move up the social ladder independently**. While men were able to work and earn money independently through employment and enterprise (exemplified by Gatsby, who is able to quickly become very rich), women generally had to inherit their wealth (which was often impossible as wealth often went solely to male heirs) or marry into a wealthy family in order to achieve social mobility. This is the **main difference between Gatsby and Myrtle**. While both chase the American Dream, (however **flawed and inaccessible** the dream turns out to be) they attempt to achieve social mobility in different ways. Gatsby relies on his **entrepreneurial abilities** and Myrtle on her **sexual allure**.

Myrtle's reliance on Tom means that she is **at Tom's mercy** – this is made explicit in Chapter 2. Myrtle continues to yell Daisy's name in front of Tom, which Tom disapproves of. In response, he breaks Myrtle's nose with a **"short deft movement [of] his open hand"** (Chapter 2). Tom is aware that Myrtle will not end their relationship despite the domestic violence and he is correct. **While Myrtle has tenacity to try to move up in life** (as opposed to her deflated husband), the success of her endeavour depends on Tom.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

Physical Attributes:

Throughout the novel, Nick's descriptions of Myrtle are almost purely **centered on her physical appearance**. The first description of Myrtle is in Chapter 2 when Nick and Tom come to Wilson's garage so Tom can introduce Nick to **"his girl"**.

"Then I heard footsteps on a stairs, and in a moment the thickish figure of a woman blocked out the light from the office door. She 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." (Chapter 2)

Perhaps Nick emphasises Myrtle's physique because he has no particular regard for her intelligence or personality - or perhaps he does do because it is the reason for her affair with Tom and therefore their acquaintance. This earthy description of Myrtle is a stark contrast to descriptions of Daisy, **Myrtle's foil**, who is portrayed as more **ethereal**. Nick makes almost **no reference to Daisy's physique**; her charm lies in her laugh, her **"bright"** eyes and her **"passionate"** mouth (her attractiveness is attached to her emotions rather than



her concrete physical form alone, Chapter 1). Unlike Myrtle, who wears dark blue and later brown, Daisy is often pictured in white, conveying her privilege and her supposed purity and innocence. Myrtle's attractiveness is **paradoxical**, as reflected by the passage's turn - "but". While she is not beautiful she is vital, **sensuously smouldering**.

The word "**smouldering**" is an interesting one; it both separates her from and ties her to the Valley of Ashes, the industrial wasteland where she resides. The Valley of Ashes is described as a kind of **underworld** or **purgatory** whose residents move "**dimly and already crumbling**" (Chapter 2). The residents are "**ash-grey**" and inseparable from the "**powdery air**", and George Wilson "**blonde, anaemic and faintly handsome**" is their best representative (Chapter 2). Nick's initial description metaphorically ties her to ashes at the same time as it differentiates her from her neighbours; while they are cold, grey ashes, she is like a "**smouldering**" ember - but an ember nevertheless.

Later in the novel, the group goes to New York City and Myrtle changes into a different outfit that Tom has purchased. This outfit is slightly more sophisticated and elaborate, showing Myrtle's desire to be wealthy and of a higher social standing. "**Mrs. Wilson had changed her costume some time before, and was now attired in an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-colored chiffon, which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room.**" (Chapter 2) The dress is notably cream, not white like Daisy and Jordan's garments, thus representing through colour symbolism that while she is **trying to impersonate the dress of the upper class**, she is not quite pure enough and cannot imitate them.

Myrtle is the **only major female character who is not described as being particularly attractive**. While Tom is already married to Daisy, who is classically beautiful, he is having an affair with Myrtle who is not. It seems Tom finds Myrtle's vitality and sensuality attractive but more than this, Tom pursues an affair with Myrtle because it provides a way for him to **assert control** and **exercise his dominance**.

Social Climber and Materialistic:

In 1920s **patriarchal** society, Myrtle appears to be very **aware** of the **dominance** of men. She understands that she cannot advance in society independently as a woman, and thus attempts upward social mobility through the seduction of Tom. As Tom comes from old money, Myrtle sees him and their relationship as a ticket out of her current social standing, leading her to cheat on her husband. She is **cynical** in this way, as she is purely **motivated by self-interest**, disregarding her husband's devotion to her.

Throughout the novel, Myrtle **expresses her desire for upward mobility through materialism and consumption**. For Myrtle, who is not wealthy, buying expensive consumer goods and participating in the latest fashions are a way for her to pretend she has status. We see her compulsion to consume in the listing of the things she buys and wants to buy:



“At the news-stand she **bought** a copy of **TOWN TATTLE**, and a **moving-picture magazine**, and in the station drug-store some **cold cream** and a small **flask of perfume**. Up-stairs, in the solemn echoing drive she let four taxicabs drive away before she **selected a new one**, lavender colored with gray upholstery, and in this we slid out from the mass of the station into the glowing sunshine.” (Chapter 2)

“I **want** to get one of those dogs,” she said earnestly. “I want to get one for the **apartment**. They’re nice to have — a dog.” (Chapter 2)

Here, Myrtle describes a dog as a kind of apartment accessory; she doesn’t want the dog as a companion but as something that will make the apartment look better. This quote reveals how **materialism has made Myrtle insensitive**; to her a dog is no longer a living being but an object.

“The living room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture **entirely too large for it**, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles.” (Chapter 2)

“I’ve got to **get** another one to-morrow. I’m going to make a list of all the things I’ve got to get. A **massage** and a **wave**, and a **collar** for the dog, and one of those cute little **ash-trays** where you touch a spring, and a **wreath** with a black silk bow for mother’s grave that’ll last all summer. I got to write down a list so I won’t forget all the things I got to do.” (Chapter 2)

While Myrtle wants to have nice and expensive things and show them off, she also doesn’t want people in her life to think that it is special. This is exemplified in the quote below after Myrtle has changed into a dress that Tom has bought her in Chapter 2 when Nick, Tom, Daisy and some neighbors are at the apartment in Manhattan.

“I like your dress,” remarked Mrs. McKee, “I think it’s adorable.”

Mrs. Wilson rejected the compliment by raising her eyebrow in disdain.

“It’s just a crazy old thing,” she said. “I just slip it on sometimes when I don’t care what I look like.” (Chapter 2)

Even though it is obvious that it is a new dress that Tom bought for her, Myrtle **wants to seem like she is naturally glamorous** and that her expensive belongings, which she only has because of Tom, are not a big deal. Thus, she rejects her true social and economic position and tries to pass herself off as wealthy.

While Myrtle has access to money, she is not allowed the freedom that comes with true, inherited wealth. Tom uses his finances to control her; he chooses her apartment, gives her a stipend, and essentially **uses his financial status to buy her**, similar to how Myrtle purchases a dog. This is hinted at **through analogy** when Tom decides the dog is female,



announcing **“It’s a bitch [...] Here’s your money. Go and buy 10 more dogs with it” (Chapter 2)**. Tom allows Myrtle to buy the **“bitch”**, just as Tom himself has bought Myrtle. Myrtle’s **access to money comes at the cost of Tom’s derision and abuse**.

Fitzgerald makes it clear throughout the novel that **wealth is not simply money and material goods**, it is the privilege that allows a person to be **“careless”**: to act recklessly knowing you won’t suffer the consequences. While Myrtle’s materialism allows her to believe herself upper class, she cannot access the true freedom and carelessness that comes with being one of the elite. Myrtle must still return to the Valley of Ashes and home to George above the garage and will never move up the social ladder, no matter how much money Tom spends on her. Ultimately she dies at the hands of the upper class, and this is Fitzgerald’s final way of concretising her lower-class status. Despite her ambition, **she will never be one of them**, and **therefore she will be their victim**.

Loud and Brash:

While Daisy and Jordan are well-groomed, charming and intuitively understand the social cues of their set, Myrtle is described as **loud and obscene**. While Daisy and Jordan are never described as speaking loudly or swearing, Myrtle does both.

“The answer to this was unexpected. It came from Myrtle, who had overheard the question, and it was violent and obscene.” (Chapter 2)

“Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and 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)

These **gestures** and **outbursts** once again make it clear that Myrtle is an outsider. Like Gatsby, she **does not embody an upper-class habitus** (see Pierre Bourdieu’s [theory of the habitus](#)); her tastes and mannerisms differ. A **contrast can be drawn between Myrtle’s form of speech and Gatsby’s**. While both come from humble beginnings, Myrtle has not changed her way of speaking. Although she momentarily speaks in a **“mincing”** tone, her language **“most of these fellas” “you’d of thought”** is reminiscent of working-class speech (Chapter 2). Gatsby makes more of an effort to sound what he thinks is more upper class, specifically by using the phrase **“old sport”**. However, **“old sport”** sounds affected and Tom sees through it: **“All this ‘old sport’ business. Where’d you pick that up?” (Chapter 7)**. Thus, it reveals Gatsby’s attempt to hide his class background. While **Gatsby tries to mask his background through his speech, Myrtle does not**. Nevertheless, their speech reveals the outsider status of both.

Despite being loud and confident, Myrtle is **presented as unintelligent**. This is mainly indicated through her foolishness at believing Tom when he says that he will leave Daisy if he could. It appears that Myrtle believes Tom wants to marry her, and not that she is just one of Tom’s many mistresses. Myrtle believes that it is because Daisy is a Catholic that they cannot divorce. This



is amusing because it is very well known that the rich, elite on the East Coast are mainly Protestant, with the acronym WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) being a common name used to describe this demographic.

However, **it is debatable whether Myrtle is actually unintelligent** or is simply foolish in the way that Daisy is. Daisy wishes that her daughter would be a “**beautiful little fool**”, so she does not have to understand the injustice that women experience. Similarly, it is **possible that Myrtle acts a fool** and lies to herself in order **to remain ignorant** of the fact that she will never marry Tom nor fully join the East Egg elite.

Trapped:

Myrtle is constantly at the will of others, particularly men. She is trapped, being stuck in her marriage with George, even though she cannot stand him. In the first part of the novel, George’s control over Myrtle is not overtly stated, with Myrtle seemingly living an independent life with her husband unaware that she is cheating on him. It **seems that Myrtle actually has control over her husband**, revealed when she orders him around: “**Get some chairs, why don’t you**” (Chapter 2). Nevertheless, in Chapter 7, she is **literally imprisoned by him** when he discovers she has been cheating and locks her away above the garage and tries to move her West, “**whether she wants to or not**” (Chapter 7). Myrtle is also controlled by Tom due to her reliance on his financial generosity. This is overtly shown when he breaks her nose and she does not do or say anything about it.

Finally, Myrtle is **imprisoned by her social status** and inability to move up in the social strata of the 1920s American society. Despite the branding of the “American Dream” as the possibility for anyone to achieve social mobility through hard work and determination, **Myrtle’s story reveals the truth behind this dream**: that it is an **illusion**, and inaccessible to the vast majority of 1920s working-class Americans.

RELATIONSHIP WITH TOM: See character profile Tom Buchanan

RELATIONSHIP WITH GEORGE

Myrtle and George Wilson are the only two characters from the lower class represented in the novel who are in an unhappy marriage. While they share a class background, they have **opposite personalities**. Myrtle has a relentless drive to move up in the world, while George has accepted his purgatory-like existence.

Myrtle and George have been married 12 years, however it is unclear where they met. They have been living in the Valley of Ashes, above the garage that George owns. Myrtle makes it clear that **she only married George because she thought he had some wealth** or social standing, and soon understood her mistake when she found out he had borrowed the suit her wore to their wedding. When the reader is introduced to Myrtle, she has grown to detest George, exclaiming that he “**wasn’t fit to lick my shoe**” (Chapter 2).



However, due to 1920s legal restrictions, it was very challenging to end a marriage, especially if the desire to end the relationship was the woman's choice. Additionally, Myrtle presumably does not have access to money or a chance at living independently, leaving her stuck with George.

Myrtle finds George **weak and cowardly**, in contrast to how Myrtle views Tom. When Myrtle is locked away by George in Chapter 7, the neighbor Michaelis over hears Myrtle yelling at George, **“Beat me!...Throw me down and beat me, you dirty little coward!” (Chapter 7)**. This is an interesting parallel to early in the novel where Tom breaks Myrtle's nose after she says something he does not approve of. It appears that Myrtle **equates violence with masculinity** and bravery (hence she challenges George to beat her), and therefore finds Tom to be more masculine, and a fitter companion than George. This theme of power and dominance as attractive is echoed again when Myrtle tells Nick how she and Tom met. Tom essentially forces himself into Myrtle's personal space on the subway, and Myrtle likes this. She enjoys his confidence and probably finds it charming that she is able to gather the attention of such a wealthy and prominent man. This confidence and dominance prevalent in Tom is in almost direct contrast to George.

“When we came into the station he was next to me, and his white shirt-front pressed against my arm, and so I told him I'd have to call a policeman, but he knew I lied. I was so excited that when I got into a taxi with him I didn't hardly know I wasn't getting into a subway train. All I kept thinking about, over and over, was ‘You can't live forever; you can't live forever’ (Chapter 2)

George is described as a downtrodden, spiritless man, being characterised as grey and hopeless. This description is very different from the depiction of his wife, who is described as having a **“vitality”** about her. While both Myrtle and George live in the same desolate place and same social standing, **Myrtle is alive and tenacious**. It is possible that this **vitality comes from her affair with Tom**; through Tom, Myrtle sees a way out. George does not have this hope.

It can be argued that Myrtle is **frustrated by George's resignation**. Myrtle thinks he is worthless, and this could be because George is not trying to advance in society. He is not playing the materialistic game that the other characters play; he is simply trying to survive, trying to make his business work. It is possible that Myrtle, who desires to climb the social ladder and is propelled by materialism, **finds George's disinterest in raising their station unfathomable**.

George and Myrtle both are dead by the end of the novel – **the only couple where both die**. Myrtle is hit by Daisy and George kills himself after murdering Gatsby. Both Myrtle and George are both **taken advantage of by the elite** and that ultimately leads to their death. Myrtle was lied to by Tom and believed if she ran out to the car he would stop and help her, Daisy chose to hit Myrtle instead of getting in an accident, and after her death, Tom, Daisy and Nick withheld information that meant that Myrtle's death went unsolved. Meanwhile, George was manipulated by Tom into believing that Gatsby killed Myrtle, which led to George murdering Gatsby. It is important to recognise that it is just those who were born into the lower class that die in the



novel because of their association with the wealthy elites, while Tom, Daisy and Jordan (and Nick to an extent) all get to skip town and avoid any consequences. This drives home Fitzgerald's main theme that **old money equates to privilege**, and even though the possibility of social mobility exists, the rich who historically held the power will maintain it. This is neatly encapsulated by the song 'Ain't We Got Fun?', which Klipspringer plays in Chapter 5. The lyrics read "**The rich get richer and the poor get poorer**", although they lightheartedly change "**poorer**" to "**children**".

MYRTLE'S DEATH

In Chapter 7, Myrtle runs out of her house into the road, trying to escape her husband and flag down who she thinks is Tom. She is hit by Daisy driving Gatsby's car. Gatsby's car, elaborately described and admired by many, becomes the "**death car**" after killing Myrtle. This incident is the **novel's climax**.

When Myrtle is first mentioned by Nick, she is described as having a certain "**vitality**". When she is killed her vitality is ripped from her, "**her life violently extinguished**" (Chapter 7). The use of the word "**extinguished**" is **extends the metaphor of life force as ashes/coins**: to extinguish is to cause something to cease to burn or shine; with her death, her vitality, which "**smoulder[s]**" like coal in the Valley of Ashes, is put out.

While Gatsby's death scene is written very relaxed and removed (his corpse is not directly referred to, just a "**laden mattress**"), Myrtle's death is graphically described. Notably, her "**left breast swing[s] loose**". Her **sexuality is her most prominent characteristic** when she is alive and is also highlighted by her death.

"Michaelis and this man reached her first, but when they had torn open her shirtwaist, still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long."

One of Fitzgerald's key themes throughout the novel is the unprecedented prosperity and **material excess** that arose during the 'Roaring Twenties'. To Myrtle, expensive and lavish things are a source of joy and an important marker of her social ascension. Like Myrtle, Gatsby **strives to ascend the class ladder**, although material things are simply a means to an end: a way of winning over Daisy. Both characters die by the end of the novel, and their deaths can be read as a **statement about the illusory nature of the American Dream**.

It could also be argued that Myrtle's death can be **symbolic of the fate of women who attempt to shape their own lives**. Many of the female characters in *The Great Gatsby* are depicted as trapped and unhappy in their lives but unable or unwilling to forge an independent path. Myrtle's death has significant symbolism when read through this lens. Her death is **violent and grotesque** and femininity is disfigured: her left breast "**swing[s] loose**" and her



mouth is “**ripped**”. Perhaps her end is a comment on the consequences of trying to make one’s own way as a woman in 1920s America. Read this way, the novel appears rather **fatalistic**.

MYRTLE AS GATSBY’S “DOUBLE”

A **prominent theory** in the literature surrounding Myrtle is that **she serves as Jay Gatsby’s “double”**¹. In this sense, the term “double” refers to a minor character who mirrors another character’s experience, particularly a traumatic one. [E.C. Bufkin](#) argues that Myrtle and Gatsby share many features, above all **determination to attach themselves to their lovers** and to ascend socially and economically. Fitzgerald **uses this doubling to highlight the widespread nature of this desire** in 1920s America.

Both characters strive to attain the American Dream. Gatsby makes lists in his youth as a method of self-improvement, while Myrtle makes lists of things she wants to buy. Nevertheless, both strive and attempt to make themselves more attractive, either through consumption or through instilling in themselves good habits. Furthermore, both **Myrtle and Gatsby pretend to be upper class**, though neither successfully convince anyone. Gatsby’s garish pink suit and flashy cars mark him as one of the *nouveau riche* (the **old money** set dress and consume more subtly, for example **favouring white over gold and pink**). Myrtle’s apartment, “**crowded**” with outsized furniture (Chapter 2), mark her as someone trying desperately to enjoy an unexpected windfall, and her “**violent**” speech and mannerisms lack upper-class delicateness. Finally, the character’s deaths are **parallel**; as both are killed through their association with the careless Buchanans. The parallel is continued when passerbys gawk at Myrtle’s body, and journalists crowd Gatsby’s lawn in the wake of his death. Gatsby integrates himself into upper class society more successfully than Myrtle. However, they both come to the same end, because at their core they are both “**Nobod[ies] from Nowhere**” (Chapter 7). More can be read about this argument [here](#).



MYRTLE AND OTHER CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL

	PARALLELS	CONTRASTS
Daisy	Both Myrtle and Daisy are trapped in unhappy relationships. They escape this through engaging in extramarital affairs . Daisy is held captive by her traditions and status and Myrtle is held captive by her poverty.	Daisy passively accepts her conditions and is cynical about changing her immediate situations. Myrtle is more optimistic and actively pursues Tom to taste economic freedom . Note the vitality of Myrtle vs. the stationary and unmoving nature of Daisy in many scenes. Daisy is in some ways Myrtle's foil - Myrtle is overtly sexual whereas Daisy appears pure and almost childlike (e.g. the incident where she hurts her finger, Chapter 1), dressed in ethereal white and seemingly devoid of any sexuality. While Myrtle threatens social norms, sexual mores and patriarchal values , Daisy conforms to them. On the outside, therefore, Daisy is the typical 'good girl' and Myrtle the 'bad girl' (see Linn Karlsson's thesis for a more developed discussion of this).
Gatsby	Myrtle and Gatsby both come from humble roots . Gatsby and Myrtle are both engaged in the idealism of the American Dream by seeking financial success and material comforts.	While both in pursuit of bettering their status, they do so with different end goals . Gatsby wants to be accepted by Daisy. Myrtle wants comfort and wealth. While Myrtle is a realist - obsessed with petty material objects and involved in a grubby affair , Gatsby is a romantic , a dreamer.



KEY QUOTES

2	<p>“Then I heard footsteps on a stairs, and in a moment the thickish figure of a woman blocked out the light from the office door. She 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.”</p> <p>This is the first description of Myrtle. While Jordan and Daisy are described as being ethereal, beautiful, and light/jaunty, Myrtle is described as not being very beautiful at all. However, unlike Jordan and Daisy, who are frequently described as being bored and unexcited, Myrtle has a vitality about her. This vitality attracts Tom.</p>
2	<p>“I married him because I thought he was a gentleman,” she said finally. “I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn’t fit to lick my shoe...”</p> <p>“The only crazy I was when I married him. I knew right away I made a mistake. He borrowed somebody’s best suit to get married in and never even told me about it, and the man came after it one day when he was out. She looked around to see who was listening: “ ‘Oh, is that your suit?’ I said. ‘This is the first I ever heard about it.’ But I gave it to him and then I lay down and cried to beat the band all afternoon.</p> <p>She really ought to get away from him,” resumed Catherine to me. “They’ve been living over that garage for eleven years. And Tom’s the first sweetie she ever had.”</p> <p>These quotes is telling of Myrtle’s materialism and desire to climb the social ladder. She married her husband thinking that would improve her station in society. However, once it became clear that he was not wealthy she began to detest him. This quote also exemplifies the plight of women in the 1920s, only able to move up in society by association with men.</p> <p>Myrtle’s desire for upward mobility, and knowing that she will not achieve it through her marriage with George, is what makes an affair with Tom so enticing. Ironically, while Tom offers the status of a “gentleman” that Myrtle desires, Tom is unequivocally un-gentlemanly. He is loud, abusive, rude, and racist, but Myrtle simply sees the connection of wealth with good values.</p>



2	<p>“Mrs. Wilson had changed her costume some time before and was now attired in an elaborate afternoon dress of cream colored chiffon, which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room. With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air.”</p> <p>This quote exemplifies how Myrtle’s desire to be part of the upper-crust of society, using material goods to try to blend into the elite world. The superficiality of her personality is revealed by the profound change in her character that is accompanied by her change of clothes. Despite dressing the part, her mannerisms give her away as lower-class. She appears almost as a caricature - a strange, inflated, revolving mechanical figure - who, Alice-in-Wonderland-esque, grows as the room shrinks. The repetition of the word “violent” in connection with Myrtle in this scene foreshadows the violence of her death.</p>
2	<p>“It was on the two little seats facing each other that are always the last ones left on the train. I was going up to New York to see my sister and spend the night. He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes, and I couldn’t keep my eyes off him, but every time he looked at me I had to pretend to be looking at the advertisement over his head. When we came into the station he was next to me, and his white shirt-front pressed against my arm, and so I told him I’d have to call a policeman, but he knew I lied. I was so excited that when I got into a taxi with him I didn’t hardly know I wasn’t getting into a subway train. All I kept thinking about, over and over, was ‘You can’t live forever; you can’t live forever.’”</p> <p>When Myrtle is explaining to Nick how she and Tom met, Myrtle’s character is revealed. Myrtle seems so happy that Tom is interested in her that she allows him to aggressively pursue her, simply pushing up against her and barely saying any words before she decides to go in a taxi with him. She lets Tom be in charge in the relationship because she understands this is her one ticket out of the Valley. Note the focus on his suit and leather shoes here; they “excite” her, rather than his face or body. This is because they are class markers and reveal his wealth.</p>





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“Michaelis and this man reached her first, but when they had torn open her shirtwaist, still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored for so long.”

Myrtle is **sexualised even in death**. It is interesting to note the use of the impersonal article “**the**” rather than “**her**” when referring to her mouth. This creates distance between her body and her character whilst alive. The gruesomeness of her death makes this one of the book’s most **memorable** scenes.

