

# AQA English Literature A-level

## The Great Gatsby: Literary Form

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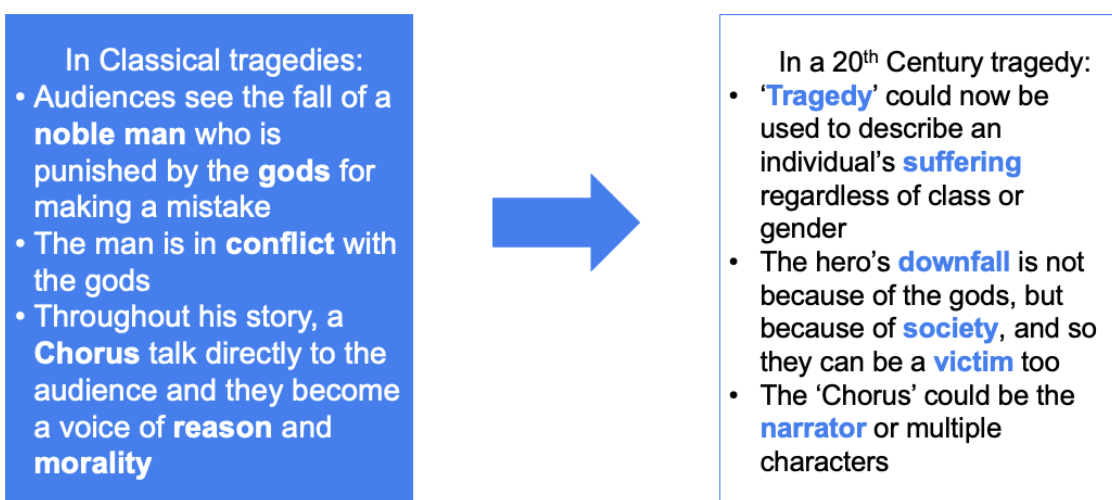


## Genre and Structure

### Genre, Narrative Style and Literary Influences

**Genre** is defined as a 'category of **artistic**, musical, or **literary** composition characterised by a particular **style**, **form**, or **content**' (**Merriam-Webster** dictionary). F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* contains elements of multiple genres: **tragedy**, **realism**, **modernism**, and **social satire**.

*The Great Gatsby* is a novel about 1920s **America**. Many readers consider *The Great Gatsby* as a 20th-century **tragedy**. If we can understand what a **classical** tragedy entails, then we can extrapolate this into its modern equivalent.



*The Great Gatsby* is sometimes considered a **Realist** novel due to its realistic depiction of the world a banknotes Fitzgerald sets his novel in a **New York** that readers recognise: **landmarks** such as the **Plaza Hotel** and **Central Park** are familiar to readers. However, Fitzgerald alters Great Neck and Manhasset Neck to **East** and **West Eggs**. The large landfill site at Flushing is renamed "the **Valley of Ashes**". Nonetheless, Fitzgerald's use of **factual figures** and **historical dates**, like the 1919 World Series, places the novel under the genre of **realism**. The exploration of the themes of **sex** and **adultery** also add to the novel's realism. The novel is also considered a **social satire**. Fitzgerald's use of **irony**, **exaggeration** and **ridicule** mocks and exposes the **hedonism** of 1920s America. Think about Nick's long list of Gatsby's guests: none of them knew who Gatsby really was and the readers didn't know who they were. Even though most social satire is superficial, Fitzgerald exposes the **tragic** human tendency to be **fallible**. The readers see this through Myrtle Wilson's attempt to transcend the **status quo** but fate decrees she must die. With her death, Gatsby and George Wilson die too. Only those from the **lower class** die in this novel. Fitzgerald demonstrates how the lower classes are the **victims** of 1920s American society. Beneath all the **extravagance** is a **deep callousness** and **shallowness**.



The readers understand the **greatness** of *Gatsby* through the **unreliable** voice of Nick Carraway. Nick's voice is not the same as Fitzgerald's but sometimes Nick assumes the role of Fitzgerald's **mouthpiece**. Interestingly, Fitzgerald doesn't use an **omniscient** narrator, especially since Nick doesn't know all the facts. And yet, the reader is expected to believe Nick. Nick's **subjective** point of view places *Gatsby* on a **pedestal** and the real **victim** of the novel. Nick is **dishonest** about his own shortcomings: he dismisses his **affairs** with other women and his **alcohol** use. He doesn't tell the reader the truth about *Gatsby's* **past** until chapter six. Thus, in many ways, Nick **outlines** *Gatsby* through his **retrospective** viewpoint and leaves the reader to colour him in. *Gatsby's* backstory and tragedy are mainly told by Nick but are also narrated by the gossiping party guests, Jordan Baker and Meyer Wolfsheim. This means that the novel is not in the **chronological order** of *Gatsby's* life but the chronological order of Nick's **memories**.

As well as a realist novel and a satire, *The Great Gatsby* can also to some extent be considered a **modernist** novel. Modernism does not have one specific definition, but is **understood in a variety of ways** by different critics. Nevertheless, modernism in the arts is generally seen as a movement or set of movements occurring in the **first half of the twentieth century**. According to Hugh Holman, modernism is a “**strong and conscious break with tradition [...] impl[ying] historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, of loss, and of despair**”. This sense of alienation, loss and despair can be attributed to various factors, such as the devastation of the First World War, the breakdown of traditional frameworks used to make sense of the world (e.g. Christianity) and the rise of consumer culture and its attendant values. Alienation and a sense of meaninglessness are particularly **present** in *The Great Gatsby*; *Gatsby* feels them when the dream of Daisy has ended, Daisy feels it when she laughs hollowly about her worldliness in chapter one, crying “**Sophisticated -- God, I'm sophisticated!**”. They also manifest in Tom through his restlessness, which is repeatedly referred to when he is introduced to the reader. The novel paints a picture of a ‘**lost generation**’, one in which the eyes of an advertising billboard stand in for the eyes of God: a world where people live without values or principles, committed only to illusions or consumerism. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* can be considered modernist in **tone** and explores modernist **thematics**. Furthermore, the novel displays various other modernist characteristics, such as a **limited and imperfect narrator**. In making Nick flawed, biased and having only partial access to *Gatsby* (his knowledge of *Gatsby* is based on gossip as well as on first-hand contact with him), Fitzgerald breaks with the **Victorian tradition** of **omniscient narrators** who often pronounce some kind of judgment on the events that they are narrating.

Fitzgerald's poetic language also suggests that he took **inspiration** from the **Romantic** age. Some critics argue that Fitzgerald was influenced by the English Romantic poet, **John Keats**. In his ‘**Ode to a Nightingale**’, Keats's speaker is torn between the **enchancing** nature of death and the **uncertainty** of life. Perhaps Fitzgerald alludes to this through **Daisy**. When Daisy sees a nightingale in *The Great Gatsby*, she says “**It's romantic, isn't it, Tom?**”. Perhaps Daisy is enchanted by its **poetic symbol**. This moment ends with the “**shrill**” of the telephone. This shows how modernity **kills** the beauty of nature, it cuts it off and thus, the conflict between **science** and **nature** arises. Fitzgerald was also **influenced** by the great Modernist poet, **T. S. Eliot** (he called himself a “**worshipper**” of Eliot's poetry). We see the influence of Eliot's seminal



poem 'The Waste Land' in the novel. The **Valley of Ashes** alludes to this wasteland and both writers **criticise** modernity and its **ruin** of nature.

Fitzgerald's use of **irony**, **exaggeration** and depiction of the '**laissez-faire**' attitude of the old money class make the novel a **social satire**. The 'old money' characters retreat "**back into their money or their vast carelessness**" (Ch. 9). There is a real sense of **superficiality** throughout the novel as Fitzgerald notes the **inevitable** human **fallibility** in the novel.

*The Great Gatsby* is also a **novel** about **writing** a **novel**. We call this '**Metafiction**'. Think about the way in which Nick is a **self-conscious** storyteller - he refers to "**this book**" he's writing. He **consciously** uses **pretentious** words and **experiments** with his **style** and **structure**. Perhaps Fitzgerald was influenced by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Like Nick, **Marlow** is both **unreliable** and **self-conscious**.

#### Metafiction:

A type of **prose** that refers to **itself** and its **author** in the process of telling its story. It is sometimes called '**self-reflexive**' in its **style**. It draws attention to itself as an **object** and a **work of fiction**.

#### Structure and Narration

- Fitzgerald does not use his **eponymous** protagonist, instead he uses **Nick** Carraway who interestingly does not know all the **facts** of the narrative. The **gaps** in Nick's narration serve to **humanise** Gatsby as Gatsby is presented as a **shadowy figure** that can only be glimpsed through Nick's **memories**.
- Nick's viewpoint is **retrospective** which further makes Gatsby vague and romantic in his **blurry** outline. Nick also tells the reader of Gatsby's death from the very start of the novel. This gives his death an inevitable **predetermined** quality. Gatsby is raised to the pedestal of a **tragic hero**.
- Nick's portrayal of Gatsby is revealed **bit by bit**. This makes Gatsby seem more **mysterious**. Notice how Nick knows all about Gatsby by the time he writes "**the book**". However, upon writing the story, he **withholds** most of Gatsby's **past** and **identity**; thus, the reader comes to learn about Gatsby in the same fragmented way that Nick learned about Gatsby.
- Whilst Gatsby is the **eponymous** character, Nick **controls** the story.
- Nick combines **three** strands of storytelling:
  1. Nick's own experiences of life in the East. This strand controls the **chronological** order of events, based on Nick's **memories**.
  2. Gatsby's **backstory**, which is told from **multiple perspectives**. Think of how the party guests guess his **secret** identity and Jordan's **description** of his love affair with Daisy. Nick also includes Gatsby's **own voice**, but this is **not** in the **chronological** order of revelations. Perhaps Mr Gatz's description of his **son** also fits here.
  3. Nick's **reflections** on the story: he adds other **details** as he remembers them, such as the long list of party guests. This is supposed to give Nick extra **credibility**, although these details are not really **relevant** to



Gatsby's story. These reflections emphasise Nick's **retrospective** narration.

- The structure of the novel has a **quasi-volta**. The novel turns around the central chapter. The book has **nine chapters** and the plot **revolves** around the central **fifth** chapter where the readers witness Gatsby and Daisy's **reunion**. Whilst the first half of the novel leads up to their **reunion**, the latter half deals with the **inevitable ramifications** of Gatsby's **unchecked infatuation** with Daisy.
- Think about how **chapters 1-4** are written in **Nick's** point of view. Jordan's **narrative** of Daisy and Gatsby's past love triggers a **shift** in the **narrative style**. This shift helps reveal Gatsby's past and thus, it **humanises** him.
- Think also about chapter 5. It is written entirely in the **past tense** without interruption of Nick's other **storytelling strands**. What does this suggest? Perhaps this return to the **first-person past tense narrative** intensifies the **sentimentality** of Gatsby and Daisy's reunion. It marks this chapter as **poignant** and thus, it serves as an excellent **turning point**.
- Chapters 6-9 highlight the **ramifications** of Gatsby's gutsy **desire** for Daisy. It also **shatters** the **myth** of Gatsby. It undermines his **glamorous** lifestyle and mocks his **mysterious** identity.
- Nick uses other **perspectives** to shift the **blame** of Gatsby's **façade**. Think about Michaelis's account of Myrtle's death and George's actions.
- Nick tries to be a **trustworthy** narrator. Think about the way he relates to the reader using **colloquial language** like **dialect** and **slang** in his **dialogues** but fills the prose with **poetic language**. This **jarring contrast** makes the novel hard to read but it also makes Gatsby **vague** because he is presented as a **misunderstood** man **trapped** in Nick's **poetic memory**.
- Think about Nick's position as a **narrator** and **character**. He is connected to the old money class but is **not rich enough** to live amongst them; Nick is friends with people like Gatsby but is **too conservative** to indulge in their **decadent lifestyles**. He is both **"within and without"** (chapter 2) as he exists on the edge of both **social circles**.
- Nick is ultimately an **unreliable** narrator. Fitzgerald limits Nick's view so the reader fills in the gap. This brings to mind Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* where the reader makes what they will of the text; the meaning is determined by reader, not writer. Fitzgerald encourages the reader to take on the role of the **implied reader** (Iser 1974). This role encourages the reader to **fill in the gaps** of a narrative with their own **versions**.
- Nick finishes narrating the story **two years after** the events of the summer of **1922**. Nick is relying on his **memory**, which suggests that he could have forgotten key details. Although Nick uses **dialogue** to bring characters to life, he also quotes **long speeches verbatim**. The reader's sense of Nick's **accuracy** is undermined by this practice.
- Think about the way Nick does not question whether the newspaper reports or inquest statements are **biased**. He even includes Jordan's description of Gatsby's affair with Daisy despite thinking her of being **"incurably dishonest"** (chapter three).
- In essence, Nick's narration could just be more **rumours** to add on the pile of **gossip** that **plagues** the memory of Gatsby. Can we say it is a definitive account of him?



Perhaps the novel should be called 'A Great Gatsby' rather than 'The Great Gatsby' to acknowledge Nick's subjective and limited viewpoint.

Here is a **diagram** of the novel's structure.

## Freytag's Plot Structure Pyramid on *The Great Gatsby*

### Rising Action:

Event 1: Nick meets Myrtle Wilson, Tom Buchanan's mistress, and starts dating Jordan Baker.  
 Event 2: Nick is invited to Gatsby's party and meets him.  
 Event 3: Gatsby tells Nick about his past life but it is full of lies.  
 Event 4: Jordan tells Nick about Gatsby's past love with Daisy and Nick agrees to help reunite the two lovers.  
 Event 5: Daisy and Gatsby reunite in Nick's house.  
 Event 6: Gatsby and Tom swap cars when they go to the Plaza Hotel and Myrtle thinks Gatsby's car is actually Tom's car.

### Turning Point/ Climax:

Tom and Gatsby fight over Daisy at the Plaza Hotel. Tom calls Gatsby 'Mr. Nobody from Nowhere'. Daisy admits she loves both of them. When they go back to Long Island, Daisy is driving Gatsby's car and she runs over Myrtle, killing her.



### Falling Action:

Gatsby waits outside Daisy's house to make sure Tom doesn't hurt her. Nick finds both Tom and Daisy reconciled but Gatsby is still unsure.

### Resolution:

Gatsby tells Nick about his first ever kiss with Daisy. He still believes he can win Daisy back.  
 Tom tells George Wilson that it was Gatsby that killed Myrtle.  
 Gatsby takes a swim in his swimming pool and George shoots him before killing himself.

### Denouement:

Gatsby is dead and Nick finds himself trying to find people who would attend Gatsby's funeral.  
 Nick bumps into Tom who tries to make himself the victim. Tom doesn't know that Daisy was the one behind the wheel and Nick doesn't tell him.

### Exposition:

Setting: Long Island and New York City in 1920s America  
 Characters introduced at the first party Nick Carraway goes to: Tom Buchanan, Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker  
 Situation: Nick, a young bond salesman goes to his cousin Daisy's party at her home and learns of his mysterious neighbor Gatsby.

## Fitzgerald's Use of Language

Fitzgerald uses a **poetic** style and **rhythm** to create a prose that is riddled with poetic language. He writes of Gatsby's "**punctilious**" manner (chapter 4) as well as of Jordan's style of talking with "**bantering inconsequence**". These pretentious adjectives create an unusual rhythm. Fitzgerald's narrator also uses French words like "**coupé**" for car, "**hauteur**" for arrogance and "**amour**" for love. These foreign vocabulary create a sense of a **cosmopolitan atmosphere**, one that is **characteristic** of the **twentieth century**. Fitzgerald also uses the unusual adjective "**orgastic**" to describe the future (chapter 9). Here, this alludes to "**orgiastic**" which suggests a **wild** and **uncontrollable activity** and "**orgasm**" denoting **sexual climax**. Here, both allusions echo the **hedonistic decadence** of the **roaring twenties**.

Moreover, Fitzgerald uses **repetition** to give his prose an element of poetic rhythm. He writes in chapter nine of the hold that the East had on Nick. Nick confesses that "**even when the east excited me most, even when I was keenly aware of its superiority to the broad, sprawling, swollen towns beyond Ohio, with their interminable inquisitions which only spared children and the very old - even then it had always for me a quality of distortion**". Here,



Fitzgerald uses the **anaphora** of “even” to emphasise the “superior” grip that the East had over Nick. He uses **similance** to capture the **manipulative** “distortion” and **deceiving** atmosphere of the East. Earlier in the novel, Nick describes the motion of the air-bed which held Gatsby’s body as he “**shouldered**” the mattress as moving on an “**accidental course with its accidental burden**” (chapter 8). Here, the **repetition** of “accidental” contradicts the **predestination** of Gatsby’s death. Perhaps Nick blames the **careless** actions of the careless old money. Nonetheless, the verb “**shouldered**” alludes to the **biblical Jesus** who shouldered the cross. Indeed, Nick refers to Gatsby as the “**son of God**” (chapter 6). This further emphasises the **predetermined nature** of his premature death - his ultimate sacrifice for Daisy.

In addition, Fitzgerald uses **synaesthetic** language to create a mysterious atmosphere. He writes of the “**yellow cocktail music**”, “**warm darkness**”, and “**pale gold odour**”. Here, these descriptions mix the senses to create a confusing **vague** atmosphere. Perhaps this vague quality brings the scene **visually** to life for the reader as they get to imply what these senses **manifest** as. Fitzgerald also uses **colour** and **music** to set the scene. He describes ambiguous colours like “**harlequin designs**”. The adjective ‘harlequin’ can refer to a bright **shade** of green or a pattern with **diamonds**. This ambiguity places Gatsby on another realm. The food on Gatsby’s tables are “**bewitched to a dark gold**”. Here, this creates a rich and deep colour. Perhaps the food is described as though it was **money**.

### Symbols and Imagery

- The **green** light is a symbol of **hope**
  - Gatsby lets the **green** light symbolise **Daisy**
  - Think about what the colour ‘**green**’ connotes: **envy**, **inexperience**, **fertility**, **freshness** and **sickness**. Green is also considered the **colour of money**
  - Green comes back in “**the fresh green breast of the new world**” (chapter 9) - America: ‘green’ symbolises the **pursuit** of **American Dream**
- Daisy is a symbol of Gatsby’s **hopes** for the **future**
  - Perhaps she is also a **symbol** for the **American Dream**
- Fitzgerald wanted to call his novel **Gold-Hatted Gatsby**, here the colour **gold**, as in the rest of the novel, creates a sense of **worth**. Gatsby adopts the **role** of the wealthy **bourgeoisie** and **flaunts** his **material wealth** to capture **Daisy’s** attention.
- **Cars** are both symbols of **status** and **destruction**
  - Tom uses his car to assert his **social** and **material superiority** over Wilson. Think about Wilson’s **lack of transport**: Wilson can’t take Myrtle out of Tom’s reach. Tom **dangles** the car as **bait** for Wilson to emphasise his **power**.
  - The newspapers label Gatsby’s car as the “**death car**” (chapter 7). This suggests that the car is a **fatal weapon**. Myrtle’s death reinforces the **dangerous power** of the **car** and the **fragility** of **people**. Think of the description of Myrtle: her **left breast** was “**swinging loose like a flap**” (chapter 7). The **violence** of the car is emphasised here.
- **Clocks** are a symbol of the **confusion** of **time**



- Gatsby **leans too hard** against the clock which highlights the **pressure** he puts on their meeting. He puts **all his hopes and dreams** into the Daisy of the past and wills the past to “**repeat**” itself.
- **Daisy** and **Nick** think that the **clock** might have actually **broken**. This suggests that they both willed for Gatsby to have **revised time**. Gatsby remembers the **exact** time that has passed (“**five years next November**”) whilst Daisy **vaguely** remembers that “**many years**” had passed (chapter 5).

### Sources:

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