



THE GREAT GATSBY: Study Questions

1. We see all the action of The Great Gatsby from the perspective of one character whose narration seems to be shaped by his own values and temperament. What is Nick Carraway like, what does he value, and how do his character and his values matter to our understanding of the action of the novel?
2. Early in the novel, Nick says of Gatsby that he “turned out all right at the end” (p.2) Later, however, after he tells Gatsby “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (154) he abruptly calls this “the only compliment I ever gave him because I disapproved of him from beginning to end.” What does this curiously ambivalent admiration for Gatsby tell us about Nick, and especially about his relation to Gatsby’s “incorruptible dream?”
3. From his first appearance, Tom Buchanan is a mouthpiece of racism. For instance, he sees himself as one of the “Nordics” who “make civilization;” and who must prevent “these other races” from having “control of things” [p.13]. Elsewhere, he complains of the lack of “self-control” of people who “begin by sneering at family life and family institutions,” and threaten to “throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white” [130]. How does Tom’s expression of such attitudes illuminate his character, his relations with Daisy, and his sense of his place in the world?
4. How is Wolfsheim, along with the anti-Semitism informing his characterization, important to shaping the conflicts of the novel?
5. One of the concluding images of The Great Gatsby is Nick’s description of “the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes---a fresh, green breast of the new world.” (180). This imagery reminds us of the predominance in the novel of fantasies insistently associated with men. What is the place for Daisy, and for the novel’s female characters generally, in such fantasies? Are the dreams of the women in the novel consistent with those fantasies, or do we encounter any points of resistance?
6. The introduction of Myrtle and George Wilson underscores the importance of social class in the novel. How does their presence sharpen Fitzgerald’s characterization of the rich, and what might the resulting contrasts suggest about the role of class in shaping social experience in The Great Gatsby?
7. According to one of the characters in Azar Nafisi’s contemporary memoir, Reading Lolita in Tehran, the only “sympathetic” person in the novel is “the cuckolded husband, Mr. Wilson.” What aspects of The Great Gatsby might be offered as grounds for such a claim, and is the claim ultimately convincing?
8. At the end of Chapter Five, Nick makes much of the power of Daisy’s voice over Gatsby: “I think that voice held him most, with its fluctuating, feverish warmth, because it couldn’t be over-dreamed—that voice was a deathless song” (p.96). Later on, Gatsby observes that “Her voice is full of money,” and Nick develops the point: “That was it, I’d never understood before. It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it.” Is it possible for characters in Gatsby’s world to disentangle different kinds of value: In particular, do the social conventions and self-understandings of the main characters allow them to

disentangle the material value associated with economic wealth, the value attributed to a human object of desire, the aesthetic value of a beautiful object, and the moral values by which one assesses a person's character? Why, if it all, does this matter?

9. An intriguing exchange between Nick and Gatsby takes place near the end of Chapter Six: "I wouldn't ask too much of her," Nick says "You can't repeat the past." "Can't repeat the past?" Gatsby cries out. "Why of course you can!" (p. 110). How does the past impinge upon the present in the lives of both Nick and Gatsby? Should we see Gatsby as eccentric in his view that one can not merely repeat, but change, the past by starting over?

10. At Gatsby's funeral, Nick remembers "without resentment, that Daisy hadn't sent a message or a flower" [174]. Should Nick's attitude surprise us, and how might it illuminate the world that Gatsby, Nick, and Daisy inhabited, and the value of Gatsby's "incorruptible dream" (154)?