

*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*?*

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The strain of social discomfort that runs through the first chapter is generated entirely by the affairs and actions of the upper class, namely the difficult marriage of the Buchanan's and Jordan Baker's uncouth interest in the difficulties of that marriage. That same discomfort is ramped up even further when Tom forces Nick to meet two members of the lower class, his mistress Myrtle and her husband George. Through Tom's interactions with these two characters, as well as their personalities and actions, the reader attains an understanding of the frivolity of the lives of the wealthy and finds that class, as well as money, plays a strong role in shaping social experience.

The introduction of these characters, as well as their later actions, reveals many interesting similarities between the upper and lower classes which help to strengthen Fitzgerald's opinionated characterization of the rich. What the reader finds in Myrtle's character is a vulgar attempt to emulate the lifestyle of the rich. Much like Tom, Myrtle is loud, presumptuous, corpulent, and pseudo-intellectual, giving supercilious advice to her guests about the cost of having one's "appendicitis out". Myrtle's crude behavior at her party can essentially be viewed as an intentional parody of Tom's behavior at his own party, at which he made pseudo-intellectual, racist comments about the "white race" to his guest, Nick. This potent similarity "sharpens" Fitzgerald's initial characterization of the Buchanans, the rich, by casting their sophisticated, cruel behavior in an absurd light.

While Myrtle provides a parody of Tom, George's character "sharpens" the characterization of rich by providing a poignant example of submission to the dominance of the wealthy. George's character is the antithesis of Myrtle, thin, lowly, anemic, and disparate, making him a target for and showcase of the abusive, cruel side of the rich. When George inquires about the tardiness of the car Tom promised to sell him, he is beaten down when Tom threatens to not sell it to him. Because he needs the business, he cannot stand up to Tom, which highlights the economic cruelty and dominance of the wealthy. Then, when Myrtle "walk[ed] through her husband as if he were a ghost," she is, by extension of her connection with Tom and the airs she puts on, exerting the dominance of the wealthy over the character of George, just as Tom did moments before. Thus, the character of George serves as an object of the abuse of the wealthy, improving the characterization of the cruel side of the rich in the novel.

It is clear from the characters of Myrtle and George Wilson that the social experience in the novel is shaped largely by wealth and the corresponding social status. The wealthy Buchanans have traveled all around the world, living with other young, wealthy sophisticates. This social experience was facilitated directly by their enormous combined wealth and the status it generated. The Wilsons, on the other hand, have nothing. They are trapped in The Valley of Ashes by their poverty, and, as a result, have none of the class and so enjoy none of the opulence or social experience of the Buchanans. Even in her attempt at emulating the upper class through the cluttered and gaudy furnishings of her Washington Heights apartment, Myrtle fails to enjoy the social experience of the wealthy because she is ingrained with the crass social patterns of the poor. Her drunken evening, which ends in her broken nose, is a social experience worlds away

from the generally calm and socially structured evening Nick spent at the Buchanan's East Egg mansion. Thus, it can be seen by the contrasts of the Wilsons with the Buchanans that the social experience in *The Great Gatsby* is dictated by class and wealth.