

Humanist Masterpieces No 33

# The Great Gatsby

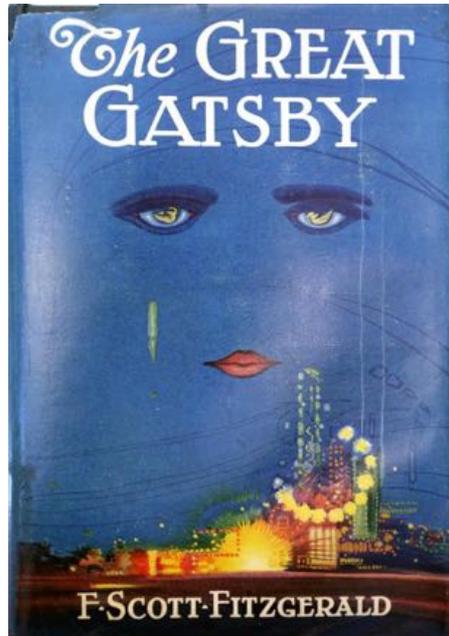
Brian McClinton

**W**HICH is the great American novel? *Moby Dick*? *Huckleberry Finn*? *The Grapes of Wrath*? *To Kill a Mockingbird*? *The Catcher in the Rye*? One that might be on any short list is *The Great Gatsby*, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1924 and published a year later. But what do we mean by ‘the great American novel’ and why should *Gatsby* qualify?

The term derives from the title of an 1868 essay by American Civil War novelist John William DeForest. Tired of the grand, romantic fiction of his era, he wanted to read a realistic ‘picture of the ordinary emotions and manners of American existence’ and a work which succeeded in ‘painting the American soul’. We might say that he felt it should capture the essence of being an American. He singled out *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, on the grounds that it was not only a great work but also a true and sympathetic representation of American life. It contained ‘a national breadth to the picture, truthful outlining of character, natural speaking, and plenty of strong feeling’.

Edith Wharton had a wider choice when she addressed the topic in a 1927 essay in the *Yale Review*. However, she questioned the whole concept because it seemed that it must always be about ‘Main Street’, a restriction which placed too much limitation on the novelist. Yet perhaps there is no American essence to be depicted anyway. After all, there is little in common between pro-Trump and anti-Trump voters or generally between the liberal North East and the Bible Belt South East. Americans are as disparate as any other people, which is inevitable in a ‘nation of immigrants’ from all over the globe. How can the Russian and the Mexican immigrant share the same national character, for example?

Surely no novelist could possibly depict all these diverse experiences and perspectives and then distil from them an essential *Homo americanus* in a single book? And even if one writer were to achieve this feat, why not others? Why should there be only ONE great American novel? But is this question



is ‘painting the American soul’, it is a rather dark portrait indeed.

The same applies to both *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which are partly indictments of racism and social inequality in American society. Then there is *The Catcher in the Rye*, which depicts the alienation of a youth of 16-17 from the cruelty and artificiality of the adult world. Clearly, it could not be said that any of these examples presents an especially positive representation of American life.

What then of *The Great Gatsby*? The novel is set in Long Island and New York in the summer of 1922. Midwesterner Nick Carraway, the 29-year-old narrator and would-be writer, has moved east from Minnesota to seek his fortune as a bond salesman. In Long Island he rents a house and reconnects with Daisy Buchanan, his second cousin once removed, and her husband Tom, an

enormously wealthy ex-footballer who was his classmate at Yale. Nick’s next door neighbour is Jay Gatsby, a mysterious millionaire who lives in a huge Gothic mansion and throws lavish parties every weekend. Nick also learns from Jordan Baker, a female professional golfer friendly with the Buchanans, that “Tom’s got some woman in New York”. —>

not itself a typical American hyperbole, indicative of the obsession with finding the ‘numero uno’ in every human achievement? Is it not revealing of America’s competitive national character to assume that there should be one, and only one, winner?

There is another important point. If we consider some of the novels that are the main candidates for the accolade, they could hardly be considered flattering portraits of the ‘American national character’. In *Moby Dick* Ahab wants to tame and control nature. This is a universal desire, but Melville presents it as a particularly American ambition and – what is more – he embodies it in a mad, tortured soul obsessed with vengeance whose attempt ends in failure and his own death. If this

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Tom's 'woman', Myrtle Wilson, lives in the Valley of Ashes, an industrial dumping ground in the New York suburbs where her husband George owns a garage. One Sunday afternoon Tom arranges for Nick to meet Myrtle and they then go to the New York apartment he keeps for the affair, where they organise a party. After much drink, Myrtle taunts Tom about Daisy, at which Tom responds by breaking her nose.

Nick finally meets Gatsby at one of his parties in early July. He is surprised to discover that he is an elegant young rough-neck a year or two over thirty rather than a florid and corpulent person of middle age. Nick later learns from Jordan Baker, who was also at the party, that Gatsby took her aside and told her that he knew Daisy in Louisville in 1917 when he was in the army and is deeply in love with her. Marriage was out of the question because he didn't then have the means to support her. In the intervening years he made his fortune, all with the goal of winning her back. He bought his house so that Daisy would be just across the bay and the wild parties are designed to impress her. Now, through the intermediary of Jordan, he wants Nick to invite Daisy to his house where he will show up unannounced.

The reunion eventually takes place and, after some initial embarrassing moments, he invites them both to a tour of his mansion. In the midst of displaying his wealth and possessions he takes hold of Daisy's hand. Nick leaves them alone together to rekindle their relationship, and before long Daisy and Gatsby are having an affair. Tom soon realises that Gatsby is in love with his wife and begins investigating him. Nick has already told us that he has discovered the truth: he was born James Gatz in North Dakota of parents who were "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people". He had not gone to Oxford, as Nick had been earlier led to believe, but had worked as an odd-job man for a gold baron who introduced him to the world of wealth and privilege. He was determined to become part of it and changed his name to Jay Gatsby.

One hot day, Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, Nick and Jordan all go into town for lunch, the first two in Tom's coupé and the other three in Gatsby's car. They end up in a suite in the Plaza Hotel where Tom confronts Gatsby, accusing him of being a criminal whose fortune comes from using drug-stores for bootlegging alcohol and other illegal activities. Gatsby declares that Daisy never loved Tom, but Daisy refuses to confirm this because she won't leave her husband. Tom then asserts his authority by ordering her to return in Gatsby's car. Driving through the Valley of Ashes, Daisy hits and kills Myrtle Wilson but doesn't stop. Later, back in Long Island, Gatsby tells Nick that he will take the blame. Next day, however, Tom tells George Wilson that Gatsby owned the car. Thinking that he must have been his wife's lover as well as her killer, Wilson goes to Gatsby's mansion where he finds him at the pool. He shoots him dead, then turns the gun on himself.

NICK arranges a small funeral for Gatsby but only a few turn up. He concludes that Tom and Daisy smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money and let other people clean up their mess. Disillusioned with his whole experience, Nick heads back to the Midwest.

*Gatsby* is a short novel of fewer than 170 pages in the Penguin edition and only nine chapters, and it wasn't initially a big seller. Few critics in 1925 acknowledged it as a special work. It was out of print when Fitzgerald died in 1940. But the war gave it a boost when the American government decided to send compact paperbacks to its millions of soldiers overseas. 155,000 copies of *Gatsby* were shipped out in 1945. Then in 1949 Hollywood produced a film version starring Alan Ladd in the title role. Soon the novel became a fixture in American high school English classes. In 1951 J.D. Salinger published *The Catcher in the Rye*, in which Holden Caulfield records that his elder brother made him read *Gatsby*.

It is a lyrical novel, full of poetic touches, which have led some critics to find traces in it of either the Keatsian dream of love or *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot. Harold Bloom is an exponent of the former view and rejects any idea that the novel is critical of America. Rather, it is a Keatsian version of the quest. "The man of imagination, however comprised, quests perpetually for an immortal female, more daemonic than human. Poor Daisy may seem an inadequate version of a *Lamia*, but she is precisely a possible American *Belle Dame Sans Merci* of 1925, and Gatsby is her inevitable victim, who does not want to know better and so is not deceived".



F. Scott Fitzgerald

Jay Gatsby, says Bloom, is at once a gangster and a romantic idealist, and above all a victim of his own High Romantic, Keatsian dream of love.

Like his creator, Scott Fitzgerald, Gatsby is the American hero of romance, a vulnerable quester whose fate has the aesthetic dignity of the romance mode at its strongest. "Gatsby is neither pathetic nor tragic, because as a quester he meets his appropriate fate, which is to die still lacking in the knowledge that would destroy the spell of his enchantment. His death preserves his greatness and justifies the title of his story, a title that is anything but ironic" (*Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretation*, p5).

Bloom, though, is basically wrong. Arguably *Gatsby* is one of the most critical of all American novels, mercilessly exposing the American Dream as, at heart, a hollow illusion. If ever a work of fiction demonstrates uncompromisingly that greed and lust destroy the possibility of love and happiness, this is it. Such has been its legacy that the corruption of America has subsequently become a recurring theme. One of the finest cinematic embodiments is Sergio Leone's grim 1984 fairy tale *Once Upon a Time in America*, an epic gangster story of friendship, love and betrayal in which the spectre of the American Dream turned sour is also exposed to devastating effect. —>

Fitzgerald was familiar with T.S. Eliot's poetry and knew *The Waste Land* almost by heart. The literary critic Lionel Trilling rightly hinted that the novel is in some ways a prose version of that poem. It contains similar symbols of waste, desolation and futility. It has also echoes of Eliot's *The Hollow Men*. The people in the novel live hollow lives and have empty relationships. Tom Buchanan is a liar, a racist, a hypocrite and a bully. Daisy, his wife and the object of Gatsby's romantic obsession, far from being a model of perfection, is a selfish, shallow and hurtful woman. Gatsby himself is a contradiction: his gift for hope of something better sits uneasily with a man who cannot forget the past and made his fortune on shady activities (did he kill a man once, as gossip suggests?). His romantic vision is made worthless by the corrupt means by which he has sought to achieve it. He may have 'turned out all right at the end' by preparing to shoulder the blame for Daisy's fatal driving but, as Nick also says, he "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn".

The phrase 'The American Dream' was popularised by the historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *Epic of America*. He defined it as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement". He said that it was not a dream of merely material wealth but of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in the older civilisations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for human beings of any and every class. Clearly in his view it is an egalitarian concept, a principle recognised long before in the *Declaration of Independence* itself: "All men are created equal".

Yet, far from being a land of opportunity, America is a very unequal society with a low level of social mobility. A large percentage have inherited their wealth: the Old Money represented by Tom Buchanan and Jordan Baker. In their view, the 'New Money' (nouveau riche) can't possibly have the same refinement, sensibility, and taste they have. On this basis alone, Gatsby never stood a chance of winning back Daisy.

In *The Great Gatsby* we see that the rich protect themselves and cynically let others act as scapegoats for their own failings. The two characters who die come from humble beginnings, while Daisy and Tom Buchanan fall back into the safety of their money, and run from the disaster they helped to create. Their values revolve solely around wealth, class and power.

Jay Gatsby, however, represents the American Dream: he is the self-made man who rises from rags to riches. But he also embodies its phoniness. Why does Gatsby make Daisy a vision of the ideal and an object of his romantic desire? The answer is that when he was a young man, she had the wealth and class that he lacks. In other words, the Dream lacks any spiritual or moral dimension. Ultimately, it deceives the dreamer into thinking it is noble when in fact it seeks the same hollow ambitions as those who are already blessed with wealth and privilege. Instead of being borne back ceaselessly into the past, America needs a better dream – one that is for the many, not the few. □

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