Overview of the Novel

F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel The Great Gatsby is a tragic love story, a mystery, and a social commentary on American life. Although it was not a commercial success for Fitzgerald during his lifetime, this lyrical novel has become an acclaimed masterpiece read and taught throughout the world.

Unfolding in nine concise chapters, The Great Gatsby concerns the wasteful lives of four wealthy characters as observed by their acquaintance, narrator Nick Carraway. Like Fitzgerald himself, Nick is from Minnesota, attended an Ivy League university, served in the U.S. Army during World War I, moved to New York after the war, and questions—even while participating in—high society.

Having left the Midwest to work in the bond business in the summer of 1922, Nick settles in West Egg, Long Island, among the nouveau riche epitomized by his next-door neighbor Jay Gatsby. A mysterious man of thirty, Gatsby is the subject of endless fascination to the guests at his lavish all-night parties. He is rumored to be a hero of the Great War. Others say he served as a German spy. Gatsby claims to have attended Oxford University, but the evidence is suspect. As Nick learns more about Gatsby, every detail about him seems questionable, except his love for the charming Daisy Buchanan.

Jay Gatsby's decadent parties are thrown with one goal: to attract Daisy, who lives across the bay in the more fashionable East Egg. From the lawn of his sprawling mansion, Gatsby can see the green light glowing on her dock, which becomes a symbol in the novel of an unreachable treasure, the "future that year by year recedes before us."

Though Daisy is a married socialite and a mother, Gatsby still worships her as his "golden girl." They first met when she was a young lady from an affluent family and he was a working-class military officer. Daisy pledged to wait for his return from the war. Instead she married Tom Buchanan, a wealthy classmate of Nick's. Having obtained a great fortune, Gatsby sets out to win her back again.

A profound indictment of class privilege in the Jazz Age and beyond, The Great Gatsby explores the conflict between decency and self-indulgence. In the novel's conclusion, the characters collide, leaving human wreckage in their wake.

"At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete."
— from The Great Gatsby

Major Characters in the Book
Nick Caraway
Nick, a young Midwesterner educated at Yale, is the novel's narrator. When he moves to the West Egg area of Long Island, he joins the lavish social world of Tom, Jordan, Gatsby, and his cousin Daisy.

Jay Gatsby
The handsome, mysterious Gatsby, who lives in a mansion next door to Nick's cottage, is known for his lavish parties. Nick, whom he trusts, gradually learns about Gatsby's past and his love for Daisy.

Daisy Buchanan
Beautiful, charming, and spoiled, Daisy is the object of Gatsby's love. Her caprice and materialism lead her to marry Tom Buchanan.

Tom Buchanan
From an enormously wealthy Chicago family, Tom is a former Yale football star who sees himself at the top of an exclusive social hierarchy. He is conceited, violent, racist, and unfaithful.

Jordan Baker
Daisy's friend Jordan epitomizes the modern woman of the 1920s. A liberated, competitive golfer, she is firmly established in high society. She both attracts and repels Nick as a romantic interest.

George Wilson
The owner of an auto garage at the edge of the valley of ashes, George finds his only happiness through his faithless wife, Myrtle.

Myrtle Wilson
Myrtle dreams of belonging to a higher social class than George can offer. Vivacious and sensual, she hopes her adulterous affair will lead to a life of glamour.
Symbolism

Symbol: a thing that represents or stands for something else, esp. a material object representing something abstract.

We assign meaning to symbols. Thus, the symbolic meanings of an object or action are understood depending on when, where, how, and by whom they are used.

Ex. A chain:

unity/strength or imprisonment?

Venus Symbol ————————> Female Symbol

Mars Symbol ————————> Male Symbol

Metaphors as Symbolism

In Gatsby, it can be difficult to distinguish metaphors from symbolism.

Prime example: the green light

Sometimes, our understanding of symbolism is what allows us to understand the comparison conveyed by a metaphor or simile.

Relevant Text: New York Times article Gatsby’s Green Light Beckons a New Set of Strivers (Abridged) by Sarah Rimer
Prereading Analysis for the Cover of The Great Gatsby

1. In the box, make a sketch of the book cover illustration entitled “Celestial Eyes” by Francis Cugat. Match colors (using markers/crayons) and include specific details.

2. Identify the colors in the painting. What do you think the colors symbolize?

3. Identify the details in the painting. What do you think they symbolize?

4. Describe the tone of the painting. What aspects of the image helped you arrive at this conclusion?

* 5. Draw a conclusion about the book’s cover and connect it to the central message in Rimer’s NY Times article. On a separate sheet of paper, write a short answer response
The Great Gatsby Study/Discussion Questions
From the work of Jennifer Troy

- Answer each question completely.
- Write in complete sentences.
- Be thorough and support your answers with text evidence when appropriate.

CHAPTER ONE
1. Examine the connotative language Fitzgerald uses to contrast West Egg and East Egg. What words does he use to describe them? What does this imply about each location?

CHAPTER TWO
2. Draw a sketch of the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg looking over the valley of ashes. Literally, what is this a picture of?
   (Sketch here)

3. List the three most effective images that establish Wilson’s character. With which character is he in direct contrast?

4. Point of view helps us understand the opinions/feelings of an individual in a situation. How does the narrator Nick’s following comment give the us, the reader, insight into how Fitzgerald’s handles point of view in the novel? “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.”
CHAPTER THREE
5. Look at the first paragraph in this chapter. Explain the following:
   a. its contrast with the previous scene (look especially at irony)

   b. the sentence which creates a magical tone -- How?

   c. the overall effect of Fitzgerald’s choice of verbs. (First, write down the action verbs. Second, find out what the words have in common.)

6. What is the reason for and the effect of the shift in verb tense which occurs in the fourth paragraph in chapter three?

CHAPTER FOUR
7. Analyze the effect of language in the first sentence and first short paragraph (ending with “crystal glass”). How does Fitzgerald portray Gatsby? Look carefully and be prepared to discuss in class.

8. Explain the significance of Wolfsheim’s cuff buttons. How does the description of him, along with this comment, characterize Mr. Wolfsheim?: “I understand you’re looking for a business gonnegtion.”
CHAPTER FIVE
9. What tone is created by the passage beginning “with enchanting murmurs….” ending with “flight of stairs.” Use several tone words to explain the atmosphere described in the passage.

10. Explain the significance of each of the following lines:
   a. “the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever” (How has this event changed Gatsby’s expectations?)
   b. Gatsby’s “count of enchanted objects had diminished by one” (What can qualify as an enchanted object? Now that Gatsby has lost one, how is he affected?)

11. Nick comments about Gatsby’s dream, in the paragraph beginning with “As I went to say goodbye....” and ending with “no amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart.” How might Nick’s comments connect with his prior comments in chapter one: “Only Gatsby,—the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction?”
CHAPTER SIX
12. How does Gatsby feel towards time? How would he define it?

13. Look at the last three paragraphs, beginning with “one autumn night….”
   a. Which words contribute to the tone of mysterious excitement established in the first paragraph?

   b. Explain the concept of “incarnation” in this passage.

14. What is ideal about Gatsby’s dream? What is corrupt?

CHAPTER SEVEN
15. How does Nick finally explain the charm of Daisy’s voice? In what sense, then, is Daisy connected to “His Father’s business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty”?
16. Myrtle, watching Tom fill the car with gas, draws two wrong conclusions. What are they?

17. Myrtle is killed by a car. Whose car actually hits her? Who did she think was in the car? Why?

18. Explain how the last two sentences of this chapter continue the theme of Gatsby’s dream.

CHAPTER EIGHT
19. Look at the paragraph beginning with “But he didn’t despise himself and it didn’t turn out as he had imagined.” Particularly note the second sentence: “He had intended, probably, to take what he could and go—but now he found that he had committed himself to the following of a grail.” How does this allusion add meaning to the reader’s understanding of Gatsby’s dream?
20. Why did Daisy marry Tom? Connect this to her “paralysis.”

CHAPTER NINE
21. Nick is comparing the vitality of his West with his memory of the East. Look at the paragraph beginning “Even when the East excited me most....” Particularly the part following his mention of El Greco. Which words in the text help create the tone? What is the tone? What is the effect of this passage?

22. Read the paragraph beginning with “I couldn’t forgive him or like him but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified.” Read especially the part about Daisy and Tom. Explain Nick’s point here, and connect it to his mention of the two things that Tom may be purchasing. How does this tie in to the “service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty”?

23. How do the last four paragraphs of the book, beginning with “Most of the big shore places were closed now” effectively connect the main ideas in the novel? (State the main ideas first.)