**Themes**

**Society and Class**

*The Great Gatsby* is set among wealthy, educated people, who have lots of leisure time and little concern about people who are not in their social milieu. Nobody’s concerned about politics or spiritual matters but everybody cares about how they are perceived socially. Those who do come from other classes seek and envy the glamour and lifestyle that they see in the elite. Jay Gatsby, the protagonist, is able to attain a certain amount of wealth, but he cannot fake education or social behaviors that only come with "old money." The novel’s two main locales, West Egg and East Egg, are distinguished also by class. East Egg represents "old money" while West Egg represents the *nouveau riche*. East Eggers consistently look down on West Eggers for precisely this fact. Class and wealth are virtually indistinguishable from each other, but if a person lacks education, then he is clearly not part of the upper echelon.

**Questions About Women and Femininity**

1. In *The Great Gatsby*, does wealth alone decide which class a character belongs to?
2. In this text, what are the various markings of the upper class? What distinguishes it from the other classes?
3. Is society what stands in the way of Gatsby having Daisy, or is it something else?
4. What are the differences between West Egg and East Egg? How might the symbolic distance between the Eggs comment on the distance between Gatsby and Daisy?
5. Is Gatsby in the same class as Wilson? If not, is he closer to Wilson’s class, or to Tom’s? Where does Meyer Wolfsheim stand in all of this?
6. Does Gatsby love Daisy, or does he love the lifestyle she represents? Is she only his ticket to the upper classes? If so, does Gatsby realize this?

**Chew On This**

In *The Great Gatsby*, the only element not restricted to one class is unhappiness. All members of all classes have this in common.

In *The Great Gatsby*, social norms and expectations lead to insurmountable barriers for relationships between men and women of different classes. The inter-class relationship is
ultimately impossible in this text.
Love

*The Great Gatsby* does not offer a definition of love, or a contrast between love and romance – but it does suggest that what people believe to be love is often only a dream. Gatsby thinks he loves Daisy when in fact he loves a memory of her. Daisy, too, thinks she loves Gatsby, but she really loves being adored. Our narrator is “half” in love with Jordan at the end of the novel, but recognizes the impossibility of being with her anyway. Love is a source of conflict in *The Great Gatsby* as well, driving men to fight and ultimately causing three deaths. This text seems to argue that there is a violence and destruction inherent in love.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Is there a difference between love and romance in *The Great Gatsby*?
2. Is love an expected part of marriage in *The Great Gatsby*? Why or why not?
3. Are love and sex separated in *The Great Gatsby*?
4. Is Gatsby’s love for Daisy genuine? Does he love her, or his conception of her? What about Tom – does he really love Daisy? And whom does Daisy really love, after all? Is it possible, as she said, that she loved both Tom and Gatsby at once?

Chew On This

Wilson’s feelings for Myrtle are the only example of genuine love in *The Great Gatsby*.

Love in *The Great Gatsby* is only the result of self-deception and denial.
Visions of America

America in *The Great Gatsby* is presented mostly through the scope of class: the rich, the poor, and everyone in between are identified by how much money they have. We see America in the microcosm of New York City (and its suburbs), where all classes are pitted fairly close together. There’s Wilson, the working-class man who has to work constantly to stay afloat; the Buchanans, who have an unimaginable amount of money; and Nick, who’s upper-middle-class existence allows him many luxuries, but not everything he wants. Then there’s Gatsby. Even when Gatsby gets to the top, he’s looked down upon by those with old money.

In *Gatsby*, the American Dream seems corrupted. Whereas it used to stand for independence and the ability to make something of one’s self with hard work, in *Gatsby*, the American Dream seems more about materialism and selfish pursuit of pleasure. Not to mention, no amount of hard work can change where Gatsby came from, and the old money folks maintain their sense of superiority because of that simple fact. The indication is that merit and hard work aren’t enough. The idea of the American Dream proves to be disappointing and false in Fitzgerald's classic novel.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Does Gatsby achieve the American Dream? If yes, when exactly can he say that he reaches it? If no, what prevents him from truly achieving it?
2. Do you agree with Fitzgerald’s criticisms of American culture during the Jazz Age? Would you rather be living then, or are you happy in present-day America?
3. Would you rather live in East Egg or West Egg? The North-East or the Mid-West? Why?
4. How would the novel be different through Tom or Daisy’s eyes? How do you think their view of America would differ from Nick’s?
5. Nick leaves the East coast, jaded by his experiences with Gatsby, the Buchanans, Jordan Baker, etc. Do you think he’ll remain cynical even in the Mid-West, or will he leave his disgust in New York?

Chew On This

Gatsby’s experiences in New York prove that the “American Dream” is not only a difficult goal to reach for, but is truly an impossible dream to achieve during this era of American life. Nick’s narration presents a very cynical, critical view of American life in the 1920’s.
Wealth

In *The Great Gatsby*, wealth can be distinguished from class; it is possible to achieve great wealth without being accepted into the elite class, as evidenced by Jay Gatsby's experience. Poverty, on the other hand, restricts decision and action. George Wilson, for example, is unable to "go West" with his wife because he hasn't enough money. It is money that allows Tom and Daisy to go here and there, leaving other people to clean up their messes. The life of ease and luxury that Tom and others enjoy is contrasted sharply with the stranglehold of poverty containing Myrtle and George Wilson or the life from which Jay Gatsby emerges. Wealth is what separates Gatsby from his love, as he notes of Daisy that "her voice is full of money."

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. In *The Great Gatsby*, what role does wealth play in people's life expectations? Could Gatsby have achieved his life-altering childhood goals without wealth? That is, did he really want wealth, or did he want what he thought wealth could get him?
2. Why are there barriers between men and women due to wealth in this text?
3. Does money bring happiness in *The Great Gatsby*, destroy happiness, or have no effect?
4. What does Gatsby mean when he says that Daisy's voice is "full of money?" Does he mean this negatively? Why does Nick agree with him? Does this comment say more about Daisy or Gatsby?

Chew On This

Although Fitzgerald presents wealthy society as careless and selfish, ultimately all of the characters in the book, regardless of wealth or poverty, fail to demonstrate loyalty and friendship. These failures are the common denominators between the classes. In *The Great Gatsby*, materialism may appear to be beneficial, but it is an impediment to the achievement of lifelong desires.

A Marxist interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* demonstrates the emptiness and moral vacuum created by the decadence and wealth of capitalism.
Memory and The Past

_The Great Gatsby_ deals at great length with issues of the past, present, and future. In love with a girl of the past, Gatsby is unable to have her again in the present. He wants a future with her, but only if she will lie to erase the marriage in her past. The narrator indicates in the final lines of the text that nobody can ever reach the future – it is a beacon of light that calls to us, but even as we try to reach it, we are beaten back into the past. The manipulation of time in the narrative adds to this theme. Nick tells the whole tale with a tone of nostalgia – beginning the text with mention of his father’s advice to him in his youth.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Nick Carraway suggests that the future is always receding in front of us, and that we are forever beaten back towards the past. Is the future attainable in _The Great Gatsby_?
2. Nick tells Gatsby that "you can't repeat the past," yet chapters later he insists we are constantly "borne back" into it. Did he change his mind, or are these two different ways of saying the same thing?
3. Is the past remembered realistically? Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan alike think nostalgically about the past, but are they ever able to confront reality?
4. Is Gatsby driven by his memory of the past or his dream for the future? Is there a difference?
5. What are Nick's visions of his own future?

Chew On This

Gatsby ends up dead because of his inability to live in the present.

Daisy, unlike Gatsby, is ultimately able to face reality and live in the present.
Dissatisfaction

*The Great Gatsby* presents an array of characters dissatisfied with life. No one is happy with marriage, with love, with life in general, and they all destroy the lives of others in seeking to fix it. Tom destroys his wife’s love for him by committing adultery; Daisy nearly destroys her marriage by seeking another life with Gatsby, and Gatsby destroys himself in seeking Daisy. We see the results of such a jaded ennui in Jordan, who has everything, needs nothing, yet is still dissatisfied.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. How does Jordan’s "carelessness" indicate dissatisfaction? Why is wealthy society so careless?
2. Which characters are dissatisfied, and what would actually make them happy? Do they even know what they want?
3. Nick reveals that James Gatz created Jay Gatsby "from the Platonic conception of himself." What was it that dissatisfied James such that he had to create a new persona? Did this new persona solve his problems?

Chew On This

Although the wealthy characters in *The Great Gatsby* appear to "have it all," not a single one of them demonstrates satisfaction with his life, marriage, or friends.

According to *The Great Gatsby*, wealth, instead of satisfying one’s desires, provides an avenue for always craving more.
Isolation

Isolation in *The Great Gatsby* is not the same as being alone. Although the characters are always in the company of others, the isolation is an internal one, stemming from their inability to truly experience intimacy with one another. The narrator reveals his fear of loneliness when he mentions his thirtieth birthday; his fear of aging seems to be tied to his fear of isolation. Gatsby, despite throwing lavish parties with hundreds of people, dies alone. Daisy's need to be adored is most likely the cause of her own fear of isolation.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Who is lonely in this book and why? Are there any characters not alienated from others?
2. Jordan remarks that she prefers large parties because they are more intimate than small parties, where there isn't any privacy. What does this say about the nature of isolation and intimacy in *The Great Gatsby*?
3. Nick comments on an "unmistakable air of natural intimacy" around Daisy and Tom after Myrtle is killed. Do these two share intimacy? More so than Daisy and Gatsby?
4. Nick shouts at Gatsby that "They're a rotten crowd!" speaking of Tom, Daisy, and Jordan. Does Nick see Gatsby as part of them, or isolated from them?
5. Does Nick see himself as part of that crowd? What about his comment that they are all westerners who don't belong in the East – is this his way of finding commonalities they share? Does he want to be a part of them?

Chew On This

Although Nick seems to be everybody's closest friend and confidante, he is the loneliest, most alienated character in the book.

Although Nick seems to fear isolation, he is self-destructive in his relationship with Jordan, ending things when he fears they are becoming *too* intimate.
Mortality

*The Great Gatsby* culminates in death; one accidental death, one murder, and one suicide. Death takes all forms in *Gatsby*, including the metaphorical. By creating a new name and life for himself, Gatsby kills his old self. When his love fails to live up to his standards, so dies his idealized conception of her. Our narrator is constantly addressing the idea of mortality as he feels himself getting older and older while the text progresses. The various characters’ obsession with the past, as well as Nick’s belief that life draws people back to the past, is also an indication of the nearly universal fear of death.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. Why does no one come to Gatsby’s funeral?
2. Whose fault is it that Gatsby died? His own? Tom’s? Daisy’s? Wilson’s?
3. The characters in *The Great Gatsby* never explicitly discuss death or life after death. Why do you suppose they neglect these topics? What does it say about them?
4. What is the effect of Nick realizing he has turned thirty in the midst of Gatsby and Tom’s fight over Daisy?
5. Speaking of, check out those times when Nick refers to his age. He later refers to his being thirty with the jaded tone that he is "too old to lie" to himself. What is it about aging that bothers Nick so much?
6. Before Myrtle’s death, Nick says that they "drove on toward death through the cooling twilight." Literally, this means they are driving towards the scene of Myrtle’s death. But in what other ways are they driving toward death? Might they also be driving to Gatsby’s impending death? Or (gasp) to their own?
7. How did the death of Dan Cody interact with the birth of Jay Gatsby, and the death of James Gatz?
8. Did the real man behind the mask die when Jay Gatsby died, or when James Gatz died?

Chew On This

Even though death is part of the overarching story arc of *The Great Gatsby* for all characters in the novel, only Nick Carraway is willing to confront the reality of death and its meaning for his own life.
Marriage

*The Great Gatsby* questions marriage as representative of love and loyalty. The two marriages we do see here are marked by adultery on the part of one or both spouses. One begins to wonder if marriage is more a matter of convenience than it is of love. The issue is frequently raised of marrying below one’s caste; Myrtle fears that she has done so and Daisy may have not married Gatsby because of it – at least in part.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. In *The Great Gatsby*, how common is infidelity? How common is fidelity?
2. Do people marry the ones they love in *The Great Gatsby*? Can people marry whomever they love? Why or why not?
3. What are the advantages of marriage in this text?

Chew On This

It has been said that love cannot exist without trust – yet *The Great Gatsby* suggests otherwise: love and trust are in fact mutually exclusive.

Although Fitzgerald suggests that infidelity is widespread in society, he also indicates that the common choice is to maintain a marriage in spite of it. *The Great Gatsby* therefore argues for the stabilizing force of marriage – and individuals’ need for it.
Gender

*The Great Gatsby* gives us a glimpse into the gender roles of post-WWI America. Gender roles are in part decided by societal roles, as Tom’s upper class masculinity (strength, intimidation, virility) is contrasted with Wilson’s lower class version (hard working nature, naïveté). Unfaithfulness is a trait of both women and men, as we see in the text’s prevalent adultery. Women take physical abuse at the hands of Tom’s overly-macho persona, which seems a right of his gender at the time. His abuse is a form of the control that he exercises over both his mistress and his wife. Even Gatsby, who treats Daisy as if she is the most precious jewel in the world, does not ultimately understand women. He treats his love as a prize, rather than a person. Daisy and Jordan, interestingly, seem to do as they please – but they still define themselves by their ability to attract men.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. What are the expectations for male behavior depending on class?
2. Of all the men in *The Great Gatsby*, which comes closest to society’s expectations? Why?
3. What is "work life" like for men of Tom’s class, Nick’s class, and George Wilson’s class?
5. What are the expectations for female behavior and how do they vary by class?
6. How do females behave at Gatsby’s parties? Is this behavior "normal" or induced by alcohol?
7. Does Daisy present the "ideal woman" of the upper class? Why or why not?
8. What do women want from men in *The Great Gatsby*? Is it different for different women?

Chew On This

Although the reader’s inclination is to pass judgment on the men in *The Great Gatsby*, one must remember that they were living up to the expectations society placed on them: to be in charge and in control and to take care of women.

Although the majority of the men in *The Great Gatsby* are selfish, both George Wilson and
Gatsby are willing to sacrifice their own lives for the women they love. This is what sets them on a moral high ground above Tom.

In *The Great Gatsby*, neither men nor women appear to have a mitigating influence on each other’s desires; rather, they seem to inflame and incite selfish behavior, leading ultimately to tragedy.

Women in *The Great Gatsby* are consigned to minor roles, in which their major function is to entice and subvert men.
Education

In The Great Gatsby, education is a must-have for the socially elite. For the most part, characters in The Great Gatsby are well-educated – this is reflected by their speech and dialogue. The narrator takes note, however, of Gatsby’s effort to sound like everybody else. It is clear that Gatsby must practice sounding educated and wealthy. Mr. Wolfsheim speaks in a dialect that indicates his lack of education, lack of class, and general lack of what wealthy people in the 1920s might have called "good breeding." Oxford becomes "Oggsford." "Connection" becomes "gonnection." The use of different dialects works to reveal the differences between the working class and the upper class. By contrasting Wolfsheim’s and Gatsby’s diction with that of people like Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald suggests that people involved in organized crime are from the working class only, no matter how wealthy and powerful they are or how educated they appear to be. Education is what distinguishes the upper class from those below them. It is also a source of connection as loyalty – Nick and Tom have Yale in common and are therefore tied to each other.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. In The Great Gatsby, are wealth and education inextricably tied together? Why? Is education more of a mark of status than wealth?
2. What is the difference between education and experience, or "street smarts"? Which does Gatsby have? Which is more useful in The Great Gatsby?

Chew On This

Gatsby, despite his lack of education and the evident lack of time he spends reading the books he owns, has the kind of "street smarts" it takes to fool a lot of very well-educated, savvy people. Because of this, he is intellectually superior to the elite classes he wishes to join.

In The Great Gatsby, education is more important to the elite classes than wealth.

In The Great Gatsby, wealth is more important to the elite classes than education.
Lies and Deceit

Deception is a nearly universal trait in *The Great Gatsby*. While our narrator claims that he is "one of the few honest people" he has ever known, we come to doubt even his integrity. The claim that Gatsby is "great" is of course called into question, as Gatsby has fabricated his entire life to please a woman. This text seems to suggest that all human beings are inherently dishonest – as well as selfish, hypocritical, and destructive. The point is raised in the text that, while one may fool many men, no one can fool God – he is always watching.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. At one point, Jordan claims that Nick deceived her. Is this true? Or was Jordan deceiving Nick? What kind of dishonesty is she talking about, anyway?
2. There is an interesting scene where Jordan Baker and Nick discuss the fact that a "bad" driver is all-right until he meets another one. This forms a significant moment later in the novel when Jordan recognizes that Nick is not who she thought he was. How does this relate to the transformation Daisy undergoes as she realizes Gatsby is not who she thought he was?
3. Nick briefly mentions that Tom discovered Daisy’s deception very close to the time that Wilson discovered that of his own wife. How do these men each deal with the discovery? Does it make them seem more similar, or highlight their differences? Check out what Nick says about it.
4. Nick assures us he is "one of the few honest people" he knows. How does this affect the way we read his story? Do we trust his narration?
5. Are Nick and Gatsby more similar than Nick would like to admit? Is it possible to see Nick and Gatsby as possessing the same fundamental characteristic – deception?
6. In the showdown scene at the Plaza, Daisy Buchanan is ultimately honest with her husband and Gatsby despite what she might lose. Why does she choose honesty?

Chew On This

In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway presents himself as the voice of reason and reliability, yet ultimately he proves to be an unreliable narrator.

Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby are two sides of the same coin: each has built a successful façade to fool others, yet they can now no longer distinguish their true selves from the one they have created for the world.
Although characters throughout the book are consistently dishonest, their disappointment with the lies of others betrays the existence of a tangible, moral structure that guides the characters’ behavior.
Compassion and Forgiveness

The characters in *The Great Gatsby* all show a unique combination of a willingness to forgive and a stubbornness not to. Gatsby is willing to forgive Daisy’s marriage to another man, but not her loving him. Daisy is willing to forgive Tom for cheating but unwilling to forgive Gatsby for deceiving her about what kind of person he is. Much of the sadness of *The Great Gatsby* comes from this kind of almost-forgiveness; the characters are taunted with the possibility that all will be forgiven, only to have it torn away because of another character’s stubbornness.

Questions About Women and Femininity

1. What gets forgiven and what does not get forgiven in this novel? Why?
2. Nick claims in the first page of the novel that he was told to never criticize. Is he compassionate towards Gatsby, or does he judge the man? Does this evolve over the course of the novel?
3. Are we, the reader, compelled to forgive Wilson for murdering Gatsby?
4. Back to Nick’s father’s advice at the beginning of the novel: what is the effect of this opening? Might it be intended as advice for us, as we read the story? If so, how easy is it to read *The Great Gatsby* without criticizing? Is the advice perhaps ironic, indicating that we are supposed to judge?

Chew On This

Although all of the characters behave badly in the novel, Daisy is the one who seems to demonstrate forgiveness by her constant acceptance of her husband’s behavior.

Although it might appear that Tom and Daisy "forgive" each other, the reality is that they simply choose to ignore each other’s transgressions. Forgiveness plays no role in their actions or their marriage.