American Literature

*The Great Gatsby* Character Socratic Seminar Prep 2020

There are 57 prompts in which to choose from; read through each one and **choose 12-15** to write responses to that are ***text-driven AND relative to how your assigned character would answer***. Also, create ONE original question to ask the group during the seminar.

Your prep sheet must…

* …be handwritten,
* …include your name + your character’s name,
* …include your original question,
* …include each prompt #, and
* …respond in a well-developed answer (2-4 sentences for each prompt).
* It is alright, if you choose to use direct quotes from the novel, to simply include the page number in your response (you do not need to write out the quotes, mark them in your novel so you can easily refer to them on the day of the Seminar).
1. “[Gatsby’s] death preserves his greatness, and justifies the title of his story, a title that is anything but ironic.” (Harold Bloom, [Jay Gatsby](http://mtpros.ent.sirsi.net/client/default/search/results?qu=324274)) Yet, other sources specifically point out the irony. What do you think?
2. “‘Can’t repeat the past?’ [Gatsby] cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’” (page 110). Discuss Gatsby’s attempts to recreate history. Why is he so eager to go back to life before he went to war, when he was a young officer in love with Daisy? What has Gatsby lost and gained since those days in Louisville?
3. “*The Great Gatsby*, along with [many others], have become books we cannot do without if we want to understand ourselves.” Do you agree with this quotation? Explain.
4. Analyze Daisy’s character and make inferences as to why she doesn’t divorce Tom and marry Gatsby? Consider scenes form the novel and make your own inferences.
5. At the end of the novel when he leaves Gatsby for the last time, Nick says, “They’re a rotten crowd. You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.” And at the beginning of the novel, he asserts “Gatsby turned out all right at the end.” Explain how Nick can make such statements.
6. At the end of the novel, Nick states, “I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all - Tom, and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life.” (p. 176) What does Nick mean by this? Does this change these characters’ statuses? Are the morals and attitudes of these characters associated with the West or East?
7. At the end of the novel, only Tom and Daisy remain together, unscathed by the novels many tragedies and disappointments. Knowing what you do about these two characters, why do things turn out this way? What allows Tom and Daisy to escape much of the pain of what they contributed to? Nick shares his last, most recent meeting with Tom. Describe the meeting and make inferences.
8. Compare East Egg and West Egg. What kinds of people settle on each side of the bay? Why would a couple like the Buchanan’s reside in East Egg, and men like Nick and Gatsby on the other side? How does the division between these two villages compare to differences between the American East and West?
9. Compare Tom to George (Wilson). What attributes does each possess? Would George have been able to transcend his class and circumstances to rise above the ashes? What is class structure like in America today? Can the poorest of the working poor leave their circumstances surrounding their situation? Why or why not?
10. Compare two classic party scenes in the novel: the first party at Gatsby’s house that Nick attends, and the impromptu gathering at Tom and Myrtle’s apartment in New York City. How is each party enlivened by booze, romance, and chaos? How are the guests at each party similar, and how are they different? How does Nick’s drunken perspective color each scene?
11. Compare when Nick is introduced to Tom and when Nick is introduced to Gatsby. What do Nick’s first encounters with the two show about their character? How does Fitzgerald’s description of Tom and Gatsby’s homes and lifestyles develop an understanding of society in the 1920s?
12. Consider the last three paragraphs of the novel (which begin “And as I sat there brooding.”) These paragraphs speak of the unfulfilled longing of Gatsby. They also address the unfulfilled American dream. Compare Gatsby’s goals and desires with the desires that most Americans have.
13. Consider the setting of the novel: 1922 Long Island. Can you imagine this story within another time or place? Do you consider *The Great Gatsby* timeless, or do you think its characters and themes are deeply rooted in the postwar prosperity of the Roaring Twenties?
14. Critic Thomas C. Foster argues that this book isn’t about Gatsby. It’s about watching, seeing, and blindness ([Twenty Five Books That Shaped America](http://mtpros.ent.sirsi.net/client/default/search/results?qu=556559)). What do you think he means?
15. Did you find any humor in the story? If so, where? What is the effect of it? If not, why do you believe Fitzgerald chose to leave it out?
16. Discuss the role of honesty in *The Great Gatsby*. Which characters pride themselves on telling the truth? How does duplicity affect the relationship between Nick and Jordan, and the marriage of Tom and Daisy? What falsehoods has Gatsby relied upon to advance in society?
17. Do any of the characters learn a lesson? Change for the better or for the worse? Why do you believe Fitzgerald chose to do this?
18. Do you agree? Does his “incorruptible dream” cancel out his business activities? Or is Gatsby a tragic victim of the American Dream whose death can inspire you to become less cynical?
19. Eyes are a prominent feature throughout the novel – T. J. Eckleburg’s spectacles watch over the “valley of ashes,” “Owl-eyes” attends Gatsby’s parties and funeral, and Nick senses Myrtle’s jealous gaze upon Tom and Jordan when they stop at Wilson’s gas station. What is the significance of this theme of surveillance? Who is being watched throughout the novel?
20. Final words: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” With what thoughts or feelings does this leave the reader? To what extent is this a successful ending?
21. Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli claims: "The Great Gatsby does not proclaim the nobility of the human spirit; it is not politically correct; it does not reveal how to solve the problems of life; it delivers no fashionable or comforting messages. It is just a masterpiece." Do you agree?
22. Fitzgerald uses the symbolism of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg to comment on the moral, relations, and spiritual values of his day. Explain what the author has to say through the sign that presides over the valley of ashes. How does it reflect the morally corrupt values of the characters?
23. Fitzgerald wrote, "You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say." What did he have to say in Gatsby?
24. Gatsby spends five years dreaming about Daisy and being reunited with her. Describe Daisy the “colossal” illusion. How does his relationship with Daisy change during the story? Consider her actions at the end. As the driver of the death car, Daisy is complicit and a murderer, having struck and killed Myrtle Wilson. What allows her to retreat back into her world, unscathed by the events?
25. Gertrude Stein bestowed the label the Lost Generation on the group of American expatriate artists of the ‘20s. What qualities does this bring to mind? How does it inform the characters of The Great Gatsby?
26. How does Fitzgerald foreshadow the tragedies at the end?
27. How does Fitzgerald rely on imagery and figurative language to develop his setting and characters? How does he use symbolism to develop theme and conflict? Consider the use of colors (green, yellow, gray), names, and objects (the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg, the Valley of Ashes, the light at the end of the dock, Gatsby's house, etc.).
28. How does Gatsby represent the American dream? What does this suggest about the “American Dream” in the 1920’s? What seems to be the author’s message concerning the Dream as found in the last four paragraphs of the novel?
29. How does Tom represent a symbol more than a character in The Great Gatsby?
30. Examine the main and minor characters. How are they created and developed? What do their behaviors and interactions indicate about the world in which they inhabit? What conflict, internal and external, become pivotal for them?
31. If this was your first time reading *The Great Gatsby*, discuss what you knew about this American classic before you began reading, and how it met or defied your expectations. If you’ve read the novel before, think back to the first time you read it, and discuss how the novel has changed for you over time. Do you understand it differently today than you did in the past?
32. In his 1931 essay “[Echoes of the Jazz Age](http://pdcrodas.webs.ull.es/anglo/ScottFitzgeraldEchoesOfTheJazzAge.pdf),” Fitzgerald wrote, “It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire.” How are these perceptions reflected in The Great Gatsby?
33. In the prologue we see that Nick has arrived at a definite point of awareness. How does he function as a narrator in the novel, and why does Fitzgerald choose him to narrate this story?
34. In what ways could The Great Gatsby be considered autobiographical? What might explain our fascination with this era and/or the Fitzgeralds in particular?
35. In your experience, which of the other characters made the greatest impression on this reading:  Jordan, Tom, Myrtle, Wilson, Meyer, Mr. Gatz?
36. Is The Great Gatsby an indictment of the American Dream? Or is Fitzgerald championing it?
37. One critic says of Gatsby that without Nick Carraway between Gatsby and the reader, he “is a boor, a roughneck, a fraud, a criminal…. He is interested in people – most notably in Carraway himself – only when he wants to use them. His nice gestures stem from the fact that, as one character comments, ‘he doesn’t want any trouble with anybody.”’
38. One word often mentioned in regards to *The Great Gatsby* is “romantic”. What do you think?
39. Perhaps we’re a bit too rough on Daisy. Both Daisy and Gatsby fell in love with a perception of the other. Recount all the narrative flashback scenes and examine each carefully. Consider Jordan’s perspective in chapter 4, Gatsby’s in chapter 6, and Nick’s own views, based on Gatsby’s stories, in chapter 8. Make inferences based on your perceptions of the Louisville encounters.
40. Robert Redford explains that he wanted to play Gatsby because at the time he had not before “played a desperate man.” Would you agree this is a defining characteristic for Gatsby? Why or why not? How does Fitzgerald either keep Gatsby from coming across desperate OR how does he create the desperation?
41. The automobiles in The Great Gatsby are more than just a means of transportation. Examine the different automobiles and discuss what they could symbolize. Look at the many traffic accidents (not just the death scene). Examine the car accident after Gatsby’s party. How might it be similar to the final car accident? What kind of driver is Jordan and how does her last comment to Nick underscore her character?
42. The Great Gatsby was published in 1925, more than four years before the Wall Street crash. Why might this affect our understanding of the story and themes? Would it mean as much if it were published in the 1930s?
43. The Great Gatsby’s title was not Fitzgerald’s choice and never his favorite. How would the book’s reception be changed if it were instead called Trimalchio in West Egg,The High-Bouncing Lover,Gold-Hatted Gatsby, orAmong Ash Heaps and Millionaires?
44. The novel ends with Nick thinking about “Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock” (page 180). Consider the symbol of the green light. What dreams and hopes does the light stand for? Is Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope” an asset or a hindrance to his ambition, in the end?
45. The two most significant men in Daisy Buchanan’s life are Tom and Gatsby. Compare and contrast the two men and include a discussion about what Daisy finds attractive in each.
46. What are we to take away from the ending, especially considering who survives the book? Is it better not to dream? To be a Tom? What does the book have to say about being great? About being successful?
47. What distinguishes Gatsby and Tom? Would you argue they are more alike or different? What about Daisy and Myrtle? Do you find yourself more accepting of certain characters’ behavior? Are we supposed to?
48. What does Mr. Gatz reveal about his son’s ambitions? What is the purpose of Gatsby’s father in the novel? What does he reveal about Gatsby and how does his reaction to Gatsby’s death compare to the reactions of the other characters? What was his relationship with Gatsby like?
49. What is Nick Carraway's role in the novel? Consider Nick's father's advice in chapter one: "Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had." Does telling the story from Nick's point of view make it more believable? Why or why not? Do you feel that Nick Carraway is a reliable narrator? Can we trust that his reporting in the story is unbiased? Is he objective? Does he make assumptions? What are his values, biases? Does social status or gender affect his opinions? Give some examples to back up your argument.
50. What is the significance of the Valley of the Ashes? What images does Fitzgerald use to describe the landscape? How does the setting seem to affect the people who live there? There is a remarkable contrast in the atmosphere of the “valley of the ashes” with the atmosphere of West Egg and East Egg as well as that of Manhattan.
51. Who is in the running for the most tragic character(s)? How is he/she characterized as such?
52. Who is the protagonist of the book? Is it Gatsby? Nick? Prove it.
53. Why is the novel title The Great Gatsby? He did have his flaws as well as many strengths. List those, compare, and comment on the significance of the title and Nick’s altering attitude toward him. Re-read the beginning of the book to make some significant claims. What made Gatsby great?
54. Why is this book so often taught to teenagers? What does it have to say to us at that age? How might your experience with the story differ as an adult?
55. Why is The Great Gatsby controversial? Why has it been banned/challenged?
56. Would this have worked just as well (or even better) as a short story? Why and how?
57. Would you say that this is a fable of the 1920s? Are the characters merely caricatures? Either way, does this add to or detract from the story?

***Note Space (your responses should be hand-written on a separate piece of paper):***