

## Aspects of tragedy: Text overview – *The Great Gatsby*

---

This resource is an explanation of some of the ways *The Great Gatsby* can be considered in relation to the genre of tragedy. This document is intended to provide a starting point for teachers in their thinking and planning in that it gives an introductory overview of how the text can be considered through the lens of tragedy. We haven't covered every element of this genre. Instead, we hope this guide will provide a springboard to help you plan, and to get you and your students thinking about the text in more detail.

### Overview

Although *The Great Gatsby* contains aspects of a number of different genres (romance, crime, a rags to riches story, a social critique, for example), for AQA specification B, students will need to read, study and write about the text as a tragedy. The novel sits comfortably in this genre – specifically a modern 20th century tragedy and, like *Death of a Salesman*, its characters are shaped and dwarfed by the writer's representation of American consumer culture and the American Dream.

At the centre of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel is the tragic hero, Gatsby, the son of "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people", who utterly reinvents himself as the fabulously wealthy host of legendary parties in order to win back the love of Daisy Buchanan. The narrative focuses on his naïve and desperately romantic dream to "repeat the past" by reigniting their romantic affair, hoping to erase their five years apart as if those years had never happened. In doing so, he also reinvents Daisy, idealising her as a vision of perfect womanhood, failing to see her weakness and fallibility. The Daisy of Gatsby's dream is as insubstantial as a fairy's wing. Five years on she is married to Tom Buchanan and has a history with him. It is not enough for Gatsby that Daisy says she loves him now; he wants her to have always loved him in spite of her marriage to Tom. He wants to control time. Therein lies Gatsby's tragedy; as Daisy says, he wants too much. Like Willy Loman, Gatsby has the wrong dreams and they destroy him.

But Gatsby is not a tragic hero just because he is fatally flawed and makes terrible misjudgments. Such characteristics would simply make him pitiful and a fool. Fitzgerald uses a sympathetic narrator, Nick Carraway, to elevate Gatsby, to show him as somehow magnificent: as Nick says "there was something gorgeous about him". The colossal vitality of his dream is mesmerising and it is possible to argue that, like Shakespeare's Richard II, the world loses something by his demise.

## Gatsby as a tragic hero

But like Richard still, Gatsby is deeply flawed. His wealth is founded on corruption and so great is his obsession with Daisy he is prepared to do anything to achieve her, including breaking the law. It seems that he acquires his wealth through illegal means, buying up “a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago”, selling grain alcohol over the counter. According to Tom, that is just “one of his little stunts”. Gatsby has no guilt about his acquisition of wealth though; in a sense he sees it as his right. From a young age, we are told, Gatsby’s huge imagination has led him to dream and desire, embodying the American belief, ignited by Thomas Jefferson, that he can achieve anything regardless of his background.

Gatsby’s humble beginnings as a “clam-digger” in a “torn green jersey” present him as a sort of rags to riches, modern hero. In this respect he is successful, but he flaunts his wealth to the point of obscenity, evidenced by his extravagant parties and he suffers from excessive pride (shown in his display of his “colossal mansion” and the “beautiful shirts” with which he showers Daisy). Gatsby believes he can buy the world and that money will eventually make his romantic dreams also come true.

What Gatsby learns in this tragic story though is that money is not enough and that although the American Dream promised so much, it is a myth. Gatsby is ultimately bound by his humble class origins: he is Mr Nobody from Nowhere. Nick believes that Gatsby experienced a revelation at his death realising what a grotesque thing a rose is, understanding too that his enemy was the elite society that Daisy herself was a part of and which would always exclude him. In this sense he is presented as an undeniably modern tragic figure.

However, Gatsby can also be viewed as having features of a classical tragic hero. As a narrator and self-conscious writer, Nick elevates Gatsby to greatness, acknowledged by Fitzgerald in the title of the book. Gatsby is set apart from the other characters because of his “extraordinary gift for hope” and Nick believes that in the end he is “worth the whole damn bunch put together”. There is great sadness and pathos at Gatsby’s end, poignantly reflected in the pitiful absence of attendees at his funeral. Nick’s voice, though, is partly countered by Fitzgerald’s use of other voices. The voices of the guests at Gatsby’s parties could be likened to the choric voices of Greek tragedies, providing both witness to and comment on the dramatic action. The rumours surrounding Gatsby, including suggestions that “he killed a man”, that he is a “German spy” or that he is “some big bootlegger”, characterise him as enigmatic and suggest the criminal associations he has formed during his single-minded quest for Daisy.

Gatsby is also a classical tragic hero in that he is the victim of forces outside himself – Daisy’s carelessness and Tom’s hard malice. While one might agree with Daisy that Gatsby asks too much, pathos is still felt at Daisy’s abandonment of him and at his lonely death. He is punished finally for a crime he does not commit, but one for which he accepts responsibility because of the woman he

loves. This, along with the language Fitzgerald uses to document his fall, secures Gatsby's status as a tragic hero. Gatsby is described lyrically, his smile has a "quality of eternal reassurance in it" and his yearning for Daisy is described as a desire to "suck on the pap of life" and to "gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder". Stylistically, this poetic prose could be seen as reminiscent of the verse form traditionally used in classical tragedies; it gives the novel a resonance and magnitude that is, at times, at odds with the events of the story itself.

## The tragic villain

Daisy's husband Tom is obviously the antagonist. He is set up as a villain through the physical descriptions of his "cruel body" and "arrogant eyes" and through the violence of his actions (his bruising Daisy's finger and breaking Myrtle's nose with his open hand). He has no moral compass and he lacks compassion and idealism, thereby directly contrasting with Gatsby.

While Tom does not pull the trigger on the gun that kills Gatsby he is presented as having a significant role in his death. He tells Wilson that the death car that kills Myrtle was owned by Gatsby thereby fuelling Wilson's lust for revenge. Although Tom feels his actions are "entirely justified", Nick cannot forgive him. Nick holds Tom and his "careless" actions responsible for the smashing up of the lives of George, Myrtle and Gatsby.

When Fitzgerald introduces Tom to the narrative he is described as 'supercilious', 'arrogant', 'cruel', 'aggressive' and 'hard'. This list of adjectives focuses on the power that both his money and his status afford him and when Gatsby's dream is "broken up like glass" by Tom's "hard malice" it could be seen to represent the ruthlessness of the elite classes towards those whom they consider beneath them. Daisy's return to Tom at the end of the novel, her refusal to confess to her part in Myrtle's death and her non-attendance at Gatsby's funeral ultimately depict her as equally unprincipled, selfish and perhaps as villainous as her husband. She can also be seen as a Siren with her alluring voice full of money leading Gatsby, an innocent voyager, to his doom. In classical tragedies the villains are destroyed, but in this tragedy, Tom and Daisy end where they began: alive, together and wealthy. Readers are invited to judge them, as Nick does, but there is no moral dispensation of justice and no intervention from the gods.

## A sense of inevitability or fate

The fact that the end of Gatsby's story is known to the narrator at the start and acknowledged through his retrospective narrative position gives *The Great Gatsby* an obvious sense of inevitability. The frequent use of foreboding and an elegiac narrative voice, heard when Nick describes "the foul" that preyed on Gatsby and through his reference to "savage, frightening dreams", creates the sense that Gatsby and his dreams are doomed from the start. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are an interesting symbol in regards to fate. Wilson sees them as the eyes of God warning that God sees everything. It is possible to argue

that Fitzgerald suggests that God has pre-ordained Gatsby's end. However, if the eyes are God's, then they belong to an unfair God who does nothing to punish Tom Buchanan, his wife and those with inherited wealth.

## Setting

The American setting is central to the tragedy. The 1920s America which Fitzgerald represents is built on a rigid class structure and is inherently flawed and unjust, with the extreme excesses of the rich explicitly contrasted with "the hot struggles of the poor". This is ironic given that America is founded on notions of equality and supposedly at a distance from the inflexible stratifications of European societies. America promises much (the American Dream is Gatsby's and perhaps Myrtle's informing spirit), but the novel suggests that it will always exclude those who are not born into money. Thus the Dream is fundamentally flawed. Typical of a modern tragedy, the social hierarchy (in this case the patriarchal and elite of the 1920s) shapes the fate of individuals and is greater than the power of their aspirations.

Fitzgerald uses contrasts to foreground the social divisions and social inequalities on which his plot is based. The descriptions of the Buchanan's "cheerful red-and-white Georgian colonial mansion" with its "gleaming white" windows and "frosted wedding-cake of a ceiling" stand in stark contrast to the poverty presented in the *Valley of Ashes*. The desolation and deprivation of this society are seen in the description of "the ash-grey men" who are already "crumbling" and who suffer and struggle. This inequality indicates the lack of social conscience present in the privileged classes, perhaps shown most clearly through Tom's dismissal of George as "so dumb he doesn't know he's alive". Even those with money are not exempt from mockery and contempt if it has not been inherited. Gatsby's wealth is viewed as suspicious new money, not equal in status to the riches of the established elite, who are prepared to exploit him but never accept him. His mansion is across the bay from Daisy's home, with its green light at the end of the dock, and this distance symbolises how separate he is from her in every sense.

Gatsby, George and Myrtle are all presented as victims of social snobbery in varying ways. The death of Gatsby at the end of the novel (when according to Nick he undergoes a moment of anagnorisis and "found ...how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass") acts cathartically but also invites the reader to consider the responsibility of the empty-hearted society presented in the narrative and perhaps look for change in what could be the 'orgastic future'.

## Chaos, tragic victims and death

Consistent with classical tragic drama, the fall of the tragic hero has consequences beyond himself. Although Gatsby is not of high estate like classical tragic figures, his tragedy engulfs others, not in terms of national chaos, but in a domestic sense. Both Gatsby and Tom are responsible for challenging marriage as an institution. Gatsby has no respect for Tom and Daisy's marriage and

chooses to blank out the child Pammy. Tom, by flaunting his affair with Myrtle, is directly responsible for the discord in the Wilson's marriage. The collision of the love triangles results in the climactic argument in the Plaza hotel and Myrtle's fatal accident which follows. At the hotel, Tom, aware that Wilson might be taking Myrtle away and aware that Daisy says she loves Gatsby, is described as feeling "hot whips of panic" when "his wife and his mistress, until an hour ago secure and inviolate, were slipping precipitately from his control", and Gatsby loses his previous cool and begins to "talk excitedly" to Daisy when she refuses to say she never loved Tom. The resulting accident, where Daisy drives home to "steady" her nerves and kills Myrtle when she "rushed out" at them, is a direct consequence of the domestic chaos presented in the text.

Myrtle is of course a victim. True, she is cruel to her husband whom she happily betrays by having an adulterous affair with Tom, but her death is brutal and tragic. For all her faults (she is vulgar and hollow), Myrtle has a "tremendous vitality" and she desperately wants to live. When her vitality is contrasted with the graphic descriptions of her death, where 'mingled her thick dark blood with the dust', a sense of pity is aroused in the reader. Similarly Gatsby's death is tragic both in its injustice and in the way it is presented as having little impact on the surrounding society, causing only "little ripples" and "the shadows of waves" in the swimming pool. George's death is described as completing the "holocaust", a term with connotations of religious sacrifice, thereby deepening the sense of loss in what is essentially a domestic tragedy. All three can be seen as victims of the heartless, self-serving arrogance of the elite class that uses and despises them.

Interestingly, although marriage is on one level a victim in this novel, at the end there is a restoration of what appears to be domestic harmony. Fitzgerald presents Daisy and Tom as being relatively unaffected by the tragedy; they have "an unmistakable air of natural intimacy" between them when Nick sees them in a typically domestic scene, eating supper (a plate of cold fried chicken and two bottles of ale) and holding hands across the kitchen table. In this way it could be argued that some order is restored in the wake of the tragedy but it is an order that is gained at a terrible cost and one which few readers will feel is satisfying.