

## Context and reception

Set in what was called the Jazz Age (a term popularized by Fitzgerald), or the Roaring Twenties, *The Great Gatsby* vividly captures its historical moment: the economic boom of postwar America, the new [jazz](#) music, the free-flowing illegal liquor. As Fitzgerald later remarked in an essay about the era, it was “a whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure.” The brazenly lavish [culture](#) of West Egg is a reflection of the new prosperity that was possible during Prohibition, when illegal schemes involving the black-market selling of liquor abounded. Such criminal enterprises are the source of Gatsby’s income and finance his incredible parties, which are probably based on parties Fitzgerald himself attended when he lived on Long Island in the early 1920s. Even the racial anxieties of the period are evident in the novel; Tom’s [diatribe](#) on *The Rise of the Colored Empires*—a reference to a real book published in 1920 by the American political scientist Lothrop Stoddard—points to the burgeoning [eugenics](#) movement in the [United States](#) during the early 20th century.

Fitzgerald finished *The Great Gatsby* in early 1925 while he was living in France, and Scribner’s published it in April of the same year. Fitzgerald struggled considerably in choosing a title, toying with *Trimalchio* and *Under the Red, White and Blue*, among others; he was never satisfied with the title *The Great Gatsby*, under which it was ultimately published. The illustration for the dust jacket was [commissioned](#) by Fitzgerald’s editor [Maxwell Perkins](#) seven months before he was in possession of the finished manuscript. It was designed by Francis Cugat, a Spanish-born artist who did Hollywood movie posters, and depicts the eyes of a woman hanging over the carnival lights of [Coney Island](#). The design was well-loved by Fitzgerald, and he claimed in a letter to Perkins that he had written it into the book, though whether this refers to the eyes of Doctor Eckleburg or something else is uncertain. Cugat’s

painting is now one of the most well-known and celebrated examples of jacket art in [American literature](#).

While Fitzgerald considered *The Great Gatsby* to be his greatest achievement at the time it was published, the book was neither a critical nor commercial success upon publication. Reviews were mixed, and the 20,000 copies of its first printing sold slowly. It was printed one more time during Fitzgerald's life, and there were still copies unsold from this second printing when he died in 1940. The novel was rediscovered a few years later and enjoyed an exponential growth in popularity in the 1950s, soon becoming a standard text of high-school curricula. It remains one of Scribner's best sellers, and it is now considered a masterpiece of American fiction. There have been several film [adaptations](#) of the novel, most notably a [production](#) directed by Jack Clayton in 1974, starring [Robert Redford](#) as Gatsby, and [one in 2013](#) directed by [Baz Luhrmann](#), starring [Leonardo DiCaprio](#).

## **Analysis**

Above all, *The Great Gatsby* has been read as a pessimistic examination of the [American Dream](#). At its centre is a remarkable rags-to-riches story, of a boy from a poor farming background who has built himself up to fabulous wealth. Jay Gatsby is someone who once had nothing but who now entertains rich and celebrated people in his enormous house on Long Island. However, even though Gatsby's wealth may be [commensurate](#) to the likes of Tom Buchanan's, he is ultimately unable to break into the "distinguished secret society" of those who were born wealthy. His attempt to win Daisy Buchanan, a woman from a well-established family of the American elite, ends in disaster and his death. This tension between "new money" and "old money" is represented in the book by the contrast between West Egg and East Egg. West Egg is portrayed as a tawdry, [brash](#) society that "chafed under the old euphemisms," full of people who have made their money in an age of unprecedented materialism. East Egg, in contrast, is a refined society populated by America's

“staid nobility,” those who have inherited their wealth and who frown on the rawness of West Egg. In the end, it is East Egg that might be said to triumph: while Gatsby is shot and his garish parties are dispersed, Tom and Daisy are unharmed by the terrible events of the summer.

*The Great Gatsby* is memorable for the rich symbolism that underpins its story. Throughout the novel, the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock is a recurrent image that beckons to Gatsby’s sense of ambition. It is a symbol of “the orgastic future” he believes in so intensely, toward which his arms are outstretched when Nick first sees him. It is this “extraordinary gift for hope” that Nick admires so much in Gatsby, his “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life.” Once Daisy is within Gatsby’s reach, however, the “colossal significance” of the green light disappears. In essence, the green light is an unattainable promise, one that Nick understands in universal terms at the end of the novel: a future we never grasp but for which we are always reaching. Nick compares it to the hope the early settlers had in the promise of the New World. Gatsby’s dream fails, then, when he fixates his hope on a real object, Daisy. His once indefinite ambition is thereafter limited to the real world and becomes prey to all of its corruption.

The valley of ashes—an industrial wasteland located between West Egg and Manhattan—serves as a counterpoint to the brilliant future promised by the green light. As a dumping ground for the refuse of nearby factories, it stands as the consequence of America’s postwar economic boom, the ugly truth behind the consumer culture that props up newly rich people like Gatsby. In this valley live men like George Wilson who are “already crumbling.” They are the underclasses that live without hope, all the while [bolstering](#) the greed of a thriving economy. Notably, Gatsby does not in the end escape the ash of this economy that built him: it is George Wilson who comes to kill him, described as an “ashen” figure the moment before he shoots Gatsby. Over the valley of ashes hover the

bespectacled eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, which appear on the advertising billboard of an oculist. These eyes almost become a [moral conscience](#) in the morally vacuous world of *The Great Gatsby*; to George Wilson they are the eyes of God. They are said to “brood” and “[keep] their vigil” over the valley, and they witness some of the most corrupt moments of the novel: Tom and Myrtle’s affair, Myrtle’s death, and the valley itself, full of America’s industrial waste and the toiling poor. However, in the end they are another product of the materialistic culture of the age, set up by Doctor Eckleburg to “fatten his practice.” Behind them is just one more person trying to get rich. Their function as a divine being who watches and judges is thus ultimately [null](#), and the novel is left without a moral anchor