

The Great Gatsby: An Analysis of the Characters of Tom and Gatsby

Francis Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel, *The Great Gatsby* takes place during the Roaring Twenties. This was a time when nearly anyone with a gambling soul and an intuition for the illegal or immoral could fall right into fortune. This is a tale of two men – one who gave all for nothing, and one who gave nothing for everything. Although Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan are stark in contrast, their stories both revolve around deceit, money, and the love of one woman.

The voice of the story is Nick Caraway, who is Gatsby's neighbor and the cousin of Tom Buchanan's wife, Daisy. Gatsby is a new millionaire who hosts elaborate parties every weekend at his gorgeous mansion, giving rise to gossip about his enormous wealth. Gatsby and Daisy dated once prior to her marriage with Tom. The latter is a successful businessman who comes from a bloodline of money and greed. As the story unfolds, we learn that Gatsby's every action is triggered by love, while Tom's – only by selfishness.

The story takes place in Long Island, where both of the men live. It begins by immediately contrasting the men based upon their respective geographical locations. Gatsby is a resident of the "less fashionable" West Egg, while Tom lives in East Egg, where residents are believed to be more prestigious and have a history of wealth and status.

The areas of East Egg and West Egg in Long Island are not only separated geographically by "a courtesy bay", but also in spirit. They divide society into two classes of rich people. The East Egg represents the already established aristocratic society, while the West Egg consists of those, who due to favorable circumstances have gained their wealth and settled down in this area. The West Egg stands for the "new money" and its inhabitants desperately try to be accepted by the "old money" that are reluctant to see them as equals. Those who come from East Egg demonstrate their separateness during one of Gatsby's lavish parties developing an attitude of superiority. They represent "the staid nobility of the countryside – East Egg condescending to West Egg, and carefully on guard against its spectroscopic gayety" (Fitzgerald, 49).

Nevertheless, they visit these parties to mock the festivities and to confirm that they do not want to associate with the self-made riches who, like Gatsby, sprang out of nowhere. The residents of the West Egg, despite all their efforts to lead extravagant and luxurious lifestyle, are no match to the East Egg. The latter adhere to classic understanding of the aristocracy, which can be transmitted only by heredity and upbringing.

Both, Tom and Gatsby live a secret life of deceit. Gatsby found a shortcut to success and took it when he met a wealthy bootlegger named, Meyer Wolfsheim. Gatsby assured

himself that wealth was the key to winning back Daisy, and he was willing to do anything necessary to win her back – even if it had to be unethical. There appears to be no legislature strong enough to keep him from capturing his American Dream. Gatsby tells everybody that he was in drug store and oil business, omitting the fact of illegal bootlegging, which became the main source of accumulating vast income. Gatsby keeps his criminal activities in secret, savoring the role of a generous and gracious host. Gatsby also claims to have graduated from Oxford University and ceaselessly uses the phrase “old sport” throughout the novel. The story he concocts about himself is too trivial and people find it hard to believe, spreading all sort of gossip around Gatsby’s mysterious persona. The truth about his life would most likely undermine his prestige and anger the rich.

Tom is also living a secret life in New York with his mistress, Myrtle Wilson. Although he considers himself to be of aristocratic breed, his brutal behavior signifies quite the opposite. Tom forbids Myrtle to mention his wife’s name and, when she disobeys, Tom reveals his gentleman nature. “Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand” (Fitzgerald, 41). Moreover, Tom does not try to conceal his infidelity and introduces Myrtle to Nick, who becomes an outside observer of their strained relationship. Tom’s wife Daisy also knows about the amourette, but plays a role of a happy wife in the public.

Tom and Gatsby each strive to project a strong image in order to maintain their social status and professionalism. Tom drops his guard in New York when he is around Myrtle and finally seems complacent. Gatsby loses his composure and acts like a nervous child when he makes contact with Daisy again. The men appear strong and defiant among their peers, but show a weaker side when around their lovers.

Both men act similarly when talking over the phone. Tom sneaks away from everyone to hold phone conversations with his mistress and never reveals who he is talking to. Like Tom, Gatsby also holds short, discreet phone conversations while coordinating his underground bootlegging operation. In reality, Tom’s secret life is aimed at pleasing himself while Gatsby’s is about pleasing Daisy.

Each man flaunts his wealth in different ways. Tom flaunts his directly by boasting about his accomplishments. Tom does not like going out as well as gather large groups of people in his house. When guest do come to his house, he prefers to be in control and does not miss any opportunity to boast about his superiority and wealth. For Tom money is the center of his life, it gives his comfort, confidence and power, and there is no need in proving his social status. When things get out of control Tom hides behind his money together with his wife.

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever kept them together and let other people clean up the mess they had made (Fitzgerald, 191).

Gatsby flaunts his wealth indirectly by hosting elaborate parties in his mansion. He does not verbally brag about his fortune, but it is visible to anyone who attends his parties. Gatsby sees money as the key into the world of the affluent, the means of existence, but not as the essence of life. The story reveals that Gatsby only hosts parties with the intention of meeting Daisy again. He hopes that Daisy will hear about his success from someone who attends one of the parties and would want to make contact with him.

As the story progresses, it becomes evident that Gatsby has strategically picked the location of his mansion so that he may be close to the Buchanan's residence, more precisely Tom's wife, Daisy. Gatsby can see the green light at the end of Daisy's dock from his home. As long as the light is burning and Daisy lives there, hope is still alive that he can win her heart. The green light represents Daisy, who is in the East for the time being. But with hard work and determination, he feels that he can capture the light and bring it to the West.

The most common denominator between the two men is Daisy. As the story continues, we learn that Daisy has been the chief motivator for Gatsby's mysteriously accumulated income. Gatsby and Daisy dated before he went off to war and when he returned, he discovered that she had married Tom. Gatsby feels that he lost her because he was unable to provide the lavish lifestyle that she desires – rich girls don't marry poor boys. He becomes determined to transform himself into a wealthy man so that she will marry him.

Although Tom is married to Daisy, he seems to take her for granted. Tom is used to control everything in his life, his wife is no exception. When he finally discovers the secret affair between Daisy and Gatsby, he feels that he loses control over his wife. However, he soon regains it by telling Daisy about the illegal business Gatsby is involved in. He victoriously concludes: "He [Gatsby] won't annoy you. I think he realizes that his presumptuous little flirtation is over" (Fitzgerald, 144). Daisy is too preoccupied with her well-being to risk it for the sake of love she does not feel. With Tom she is sure that years later his money will be there, while with Gatsby she does not have any guarantees.

Although Gatsby may have obtained his wealth illegally, he was a good-hearted person. He befriended Nick and was more than willing to lend a hand to someone in need. It becomes apparent that Gatsby had a hard life prior to his success, and the reader can relate to Gatsby on a personal level because his actions were motivated by his love for a

woman. Any person that is familiar with that overwhelming feeling of love or lust may find themselves supportive and approving of Gatsby.

Tom is described as a godly man with arrogant eyes, which can be attributed to his attitude in general. He is not only a very arrogant individual, but very confrontational. Tom is bound and determined to present Gatsby in unfavorable light. With that intention he finds out where he's from, where he went to school, and what he really does for a living. When he confronts Gatsby in the hotel room at the height of the story, Gatsby backs down but Tom continues to press forth by attacking what little dignity that Gatsby has left. His ego is in the way so much that he fails to see how hypocritical he really is. Gatsby is not perfect and neither is Tom.

Buchanan may have been more law abiding than Gatsby, but his personal characteristics were more deceitful. The one thing that Gatsby wanted – Daisy – Tom took for granted just like everything else in his life because he was privileged and respected. His only motives were greed, and his status in the society. Tom stole Gatsby's love of life without any competition. It's not hard to look like an eagle when you're flying with turkeys. At least Gatsby had the courage to fight for what he wanted regardless of any obstacle in his path. Tom proved to be a coward on the night of Myrtle's death. He hid cowardly behind the walls of his East Egg palace. He clearly displays his true colors in his sanctuary of selfishness.

Gatsby was willing to take the blame for Myrtle's death to keep Daisy out of trouble. He had plenty of time to run away but he chose not to. Instead, he decided to await his destiny and accept it. Gatsby decided to go for a swim on the day of his death as if it was the "calm before the storm." A real crook would have run cowardly like Tom, but not Gatsby. It seems that he finally accepted the fact that he had lost and surrendered peacefully, not cowardly. Was it because he really wanted to die for Daisy, or could no longer live a life without her?

The truth about Gatsby is discovered after his death. When Gatsby's father arrives to his son's funeral, we learn that Gatsby's birth name is Jay Gatz. His father believes his son to have been an honest hard-worker, who would have helped build up the country. Only Nick knows the truth – that Jay Gatz made an illegal fortune under another name – but does not have the heart to tell Gatsby's father that his son was a bootlegger. It is obvious that Gatsby knew his father would not approve of the illegal lifestyle. Perhaps he changed his name to keep his family from earning a bad reputation, or to better hide his true identity.

Gatsby is killed after having sold his soul in a failed attempt to obtain happiness. He gave everything just to have one more chance with Daisy but it was all for naught and

cost him his life. Tom quietly escapes from East Egg with his health, fortune, and marriage still intact; he sacrificed nothing just as he always had before. I guess the old saying is true: "nice guys really do finish last."