

# Modernism and the great gatsby

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has been hailed as one of the greatest literary works of Modernism. *The Great Gatsby* set the tone for the movement that defined American literature in the early decades well into the present day. The characters of *The Great Gatsby* are a direct reflection of the "lost generation" to which Fitzgerald belonged. In many ways, his characters could be seen as a portrait of the people he associated with, if not somewhat of a self-portrait. Through his individual characters, their personalities, and their crises, Fitzgerald presents a detailed display of Modernism in his classic novel. At the launch of World War I, Americans felt the impact of men going off to battle and women working in factories; lifestyles were beginning to divert from family traditions. People were forced to abandon their traditional values and adapt to the challenges and changes around them, giving birth to Modernism. Modernism does not have one specific definition, but an array of definitions and interpretations. Simply put, Modernism is "an omnibus term for a number of tendencies in the arts which were prominent in the first half of the 20th century" (Drabble 658). According to Hugh Holman, Modernism is "a strong and conscious break with tradition. Modern implies a historical discontinuity, a sense of alienation, of loss, and of despair" (Holman 326). M. H. Abrams states that "[T]he term Modernism is widely used to identify new and distinctive features in the subjects, forms, concepts, and styles of literature and the other arts in the early decades of the present century, but especially after World War I." Although different writers and critics have assigned Modernism varying definitions, they all agree that at the heart of Modernism is a "deliberate and radical break from the traditional bases not only of Western art, but of Western culture in general" (Abrams). Modernism

reflected not just a style of literature, but a new worldview. Around the time of the rise of Modernism, the studies of Sigmund Freud and other psychologists and anthropologists were coming into light and beginning to have an impact on literature. As a result, much of the literature from this period reflects ideas of self awareness and stream of consciousness. In general, modernism believes that “ we create the world in the act of perceiving it” (Holman 326). Holman adds that Modernism rejects traditional values and beliefs, embracing the individual, inward, and unconscious as opposed to the social, outward, sub-conscious (Holman 326). From the radical shift of traditional values into a new way of thought and life, the “ lost generation” emerged. The Anthology of American Literature reports that this group of self-proclaimed writers found themselves entirely faithless and isolated from a culture they felt no longer made any sense. These sentiments were especially exemplified in the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway (McMichael 983). A Glossary of Literary Terms states that writers of the “ lost generation” frequently portrayed themselves as being estranged from the accepted conventions that they deliberately defied (Abrams). The characters of *The Great Gatsby*, though they never admit to it themselves, are classic members of the lost generation. Their lives are empty; they attempt to fill this void with extravagant parties, excessive travelling, and extramarital affairs, and by flaunting their wealth. Consider Tom and Daisy Buchanan, the distant relatives of Nick Carraway. According to Nick, the narrator of the novel, “ They had spent a year in France for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together” (Fitzgerald ch. 1) in the true

fashion of the wealthy lost generation. Though Tom and Daisy have comfortably settled in East Egg, “ I felt that Tom would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game” (ch. 1). Tom spends his time trying to make something of his life through his constant travels, shameless infidelity, and the reading and arguing of books that reflect his personal worldview. Nick, being an observant and insightful narrator, says of Tom, “ Something was making him nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart” (ch. 1). In the modernist tradition, Tom is never content, and always seeking something more. Another key player in The Great Gatsby is Daisy Buchanan. She is the stereotypical wealthy wife of the 1920’s who has little thought or care about anything. Daisy portrays the characteristic Modernist feeling of alienation. She is very isolated in the way that she is stuck in a loveless marriage, has no knowledge or regard of anything that happens outside her upper class circle, and her only friends are as lost as she is. Her sole purpose seems to be to drift to and fro with Tom as a kind of trophy among his other prizes. Although she is a mother, Daisy does not find any kind of meaning in her role as a mother, but uses her daughter as an object to show off. Although Daisy seems to know deep within that her life is empty, in all other respects she seems to be in complete denial. Nick notes that he saw “ turbulent emotions possessed her” (ch. 1) yet the only thing remotely resembling a confession of her unhappiness is in the following excerpt: “[Y]ou see I think everything’s terrible anyhow,’ she went on in a convinced way. ‘ Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I KNOW. I’ve been everywhere and seen

everything and done everything.’ Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way...and she laughed with thrilling scorn. ‘ Sophisticated—God, I’m sophisticated!’” (ch. 1). This small insight into Daisy is probably the clearest example in the novel of the mindset of the lost generation. Daisy has travelled and experienced many things, but it has not made her life at all satisfying. In a section describing Daisy’s past we read that “ something within her was crying for a decision. She wanted her life shaped now, immediately—and the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand” (ch. 8). Although Daisy may have initially had some love for Tom, her decision was materially influenced. Jay Gatsby is the best example of the Modernist value that focuses more on individual choices, pulling away from the structured society as a whole. Nick says of Gatsby that he had “ an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again” (ch. 1) Gatsby’s boyhood was spent on his family farm, living a very traditional family lifestyle. However, because he rejects the traditional world he came from and is not accepted into the world he is attracted to, Gatsby finds himself alienated from both of these worlds. The Buchanans have the patterned traditions set forth by their previous generations, but their true happiness is corrupted by the emptiness in their lives. While they try to fill this emptiness with all of the material things money can provide, Gatsby’s life is full of ambition and excitement as he has a goal in reaching his vision of the America Dream. Nick notes that “ He was clutching at some last hope and I couldn’t bear to shake him free” (ch. 8) and that he was “ watching over

nothing” (ch. 7). Although Gatsby’s optimism is attractive, Nick knows that what Gatsby strives for will never be a reality. Gatsby has become alienated by the traditional life he once knew as well as the modern life he desperately wants to belong to, but Gatsby remains faithful to his illusory American dream. In a very symbolic scene, when Nick sees Gatsby for the first time, Gatsby “ stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way...he was trembling” (ch. 1). Nick’s closing remarks about Gatsby confirm “ his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him” (ch. 9). Gatsby is close enough to Daisy and the life he longs for that he can see it far off, but both Daisy and his dream of being part of her life in her world are far out of reach, and remain that way. Nick Carraway finishes his narrative with closing thoughts on the main characters of *The Great Gatsby*. Tom and Daisy Buchanan have left hastily left the society of East Egg, escaping the speculation that they had anything to do with Gatsby’s death. Nick coldly says of his former friends, “ 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 it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...” (ch. 9). Of Gatsby himself, Nick sympathetically writes: “ Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” (ch. 9). At the end of the novel, Nick’s evident frustration with those he had been associated with leaves the lingering feeling of despair, gloom, and ambiguity, in the tradition of true Modernism. The most

defining characteristics of Modernism were the authors of the lost generation and the characters they created who were models of the very same sense of purposelessness; “boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (ch. 9). It is the sentiment of being lost somewhere between the golden past and the impending future that Fitzgerald captures perfectly in *The Great Gatsby*. The lost generation was caught somewhere between two vastly different times in a nameless void that we now call Modernism.

Works Cited  
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