

# Literary analysis of f. scott fitzgerald's book, the great gatsby

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



By definition, a tragedy is a serious play in which the characters, through the actions of the main character, endure misfortunes that lead to a final, devastating catastrophe, which usually includes the death of the main character, who is the tragic protagonist. According to the Greek philosopher Aristotle, there were many criteria for the classic tragic protagonist and one of the most important criteria was that the tragic protagonist must have been from noble birth. However, Arthur Miller, an American playwright, wrote an essay featured New York Times titled Tragedy and the Common Man. The essay showed that the modern tragic protagonist does not have to be noble. In fact, the modern tragic protagonist is normally a common man. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*, the character of Jay Gatsby, follows Arthur Miller's theory of a modern tragic protagonist. It is narrated by Nick Carraway, who lives next door to the mysterious Jay Gatsby. Nick and Jay become friends as Jay discovers that Nick is cousins with his former girlfriend and the love of his life, Daisy Buchanan, who is married to another man. Jay Gatsby goes through many struggles in order to reunite with Daisy. Through this, Gatsby's tragic flaws are shown, and eventually his good fortune ends, his flaws are acknowledged, and his inevitable death occurs.

A major reason why Jay Gatsby is an example of a modern tragic protagonist is because he has several tragic flaws. One of his biggest flaws is his wanting to recapture the past. Gatsby is so obsessed with reliving the past that Nick tells him it is not possible. Unfortunately, Gatsby is ignorant: "' Can't repeat the past? ' he cried incredulously. ' Why of course you can! '" (Fitzgerald, 106). Gatsby fails to realize that it is impossible to relive the past he once had with Daisy. After dating Gatsby, Daisy moved on and got married. She

even had a child, however, Gatsby fails to acknowledge any of it as he wants to return to the past relationship he once had. Another one of Gatsby's tragic flaws is that he is blinded by his dream of being with Daisy. He is so blinded that even after showing her his home and seeing how she had changed, he is still trying to achieve his dream of being with her (92). While showing her around his lavish home, Gatsby noticed that Daisy was no longer the same woman he had been with several years prior. However, he still has his "ideal" version of Daisy stuck in his head, not allowing him to see what who she really is; a woman who only cares for a high social status. He is so blinded by his American dream of his perfect life with Daisy that he does not know, or care, that not only can he not be with Daisy, but also that the Daisy he once loved is a changed woman. Gatsby's final tragic flaw is that he pretends to be something that he is not. Nick discovers the truth about Gatsby's past, leading him to the conclusion that, " He invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old would likely to invent," (95). Jay Gatsby, whose real name is actually James Gatz, puts on an act. While many believe that he came from a wealthy Mid-Western family, was an Oxford man, and lived in all the capitals of Europe, he really came from a poor farming family in North Dakota. He dropped out of school in Minnesota a few weeks into his first semester because he could not stand being a janitor to support himself through college. It was not until he met Dan Cody where he created the identity of Jay Gatsby, the ideal version of himself. However, the character that he portrayed was not true to who he was. Although it brings him some success, such as actually being able to reunite with Daisy, his good luck eventually begins to change.

While Gatsby does achieve his dream of being with Daisy, his good fortune quickly changes. A primary reason for his reversal of good luck has to do with the source of his financial income. While fighting over Daisy in a hotel room, Tom reveals to Daisy, Nick, and Jordan that Gatsby is a bootlegger, working with Meyer Wolfsheim who is a known figure in the world of organized crime (127). This is the beginning of Gatsby's downfall. People are now aware that his money comes from an illegal source and that his stories of being from a wealthy family were all lies. With this revelation, Gatsby's luck takes another turn for the worst, as Daisy chooses to be with Tom rather than Gatsby. Exhausted Gatsby explains to Nick, " I waited, and about four o'clock she came to the window and stood there for a minute and then turned out the light" (140). After Daisy accidentally hit and killed Myrtle Wilson, she and Gatsby decided that if Tom were to try and do anything to her, that she would flicker her bedroom lights on and off. It would be a signal for Gatsby to come help. However, after waiting outside for hours, Daisy simply goes to the window for a minute before turning off the light. Daisy turning off the light is symbolic. It shows that there is no longer a relationship between Gatsby and herself, as she had chosen to stay with Tom. The final and fatal reason for his reversal of good fortune is the fact that he chooses to take the blame for Myrtle's death. After Nick asks if Daisy was driving the " death car", Gatsby replies, "' Yes, ' he said after a moment, ' but of course I'll say I was" (137). Although, Daisy is guilty of driving the car that killed Myrtle, Gatsby is still so blinded by his love for Daisy that he takes the blame for her. He does not realize it yet, but in the end, doing this for Daisy costs him his life. Gatsby eventually does recognize the mistakes that

he has made, however, by the time he realizes them, it is too late to achieve his dream.

Like all modern tragic protagonists, Gatsby's tragic flaws are eventually recognized by himself and others around him. He begins to recognize his flaws after Daisy finds out that he is a bootlegger. He tries to convince her that he isn't but eventually, " He gave that up, and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undespairingly, toward the lost voice across the room" (128). Gatsby gives up trying to convince Daisy otherwise because he can see that it is no use. She is too shocked and drawn into her own emotions to even care. He now realizes that tragic flaw of pretending to be something that he was not has only made things worse between him and Daisy and negatively effects his dream of being with her. Another way that Gatsby's flaws are realized is when nobody, specifically Daisy, calls on the day of his death. He tells the butler to watch the phone for a call, however, Nick, who knew Gatsby very well, felt that Gatsby didn't believe that anyone would call him and possibly, no longer cared (153). Gatsby realizes that his dream of recapturing the past and being with Daisy cannot happen. This is why he does not expect her call. This also may be the reason why he goes into his pool, which he had not used the entire summer. He feels that Daisy will not call her and possibly does not care enough to be around if he does. Gatsby is not the only one that gives his flaws recognition. Nick also acknowledges Gatsby's flaws, feeling that, " He had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (153). Nick notices

that Gatsby was no longer the same, especially after Daisy found out the truth about him. Nick also feels that Gatsby will have to pay a high price for being blinded by his dream. This is the foreshadowing of Gatsby's death.

Like all tragic protagonists, Gatsby is no different and suffers through a tragic death. While Gatsby was in his pool, he had been shot. No one had seen it, but his chauffeur had heard the shots and ran to the back with Nick, the butler, and the gardener had seen Gatsby dead in the pool; the gardener also noticed Wilson's dead body not too much further off in the grass (154). Wilson had shot Gatsby before shooting himself. He killed Gatsby because he believed that Gatsby was the one who had killed his wife. The car that killed Myrtle had belonged to Gatsby and Gatsby had also taken the blame for the accident. It was also obvious that Gatsby's dream of Daisy and the image he had of her was gone. Although he knew he had already lost his chances with her, when it came time for his funeral, Daisy and Tom were nowhere to be found and "Daisy hadn't sent a message or a flower" (165). This is a tragic ending to Gatsby's heartbreaking story. The girl that he loved and who had once loved him, had not even sent him a message or flower on the day of his funeral. This is upsetting because Daisy is the one to blame for Gatsby's death. Gatsby had taken the blame for her and she still did not want to be with her. Finally, like most tragic protagonists, Gatsby's death has a lasting impression on the other characters, especially Nick. After Gatsby's funeral, Nick wants to move back home and feels that, "We beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (172). Nick feels that everyone is struggling to achieve their dreams. However, while trying to do

so, they are trapped in the past. Nick realizes this after befriending Gatsby and watching the drama between Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, Myrtle, Wilson, and Jordan unfold.

As a modern tragic protagonist, Gatsby has several tragic flaws, a reversal of good fortune, the recognition of his flaws, and his tragic death. Gatsby's flaws of trying to recapture the past, being blinded by his dream of Daisy, and pretending to be someone that he is not did not work out for him as well as he thought it would. This is due to the fact that Daisy finds out about how Gatsby makes his money, which is what makes her decide to stay with Tom, even after Gatsby takes the blame for Myrtle's death. Gatsby recognizes his flaws after Daisy finds out the truth about him and when she never ends up calling him, while Nick also recognizes the many tragic flaws of Gatsby. In the end, his death happens at the hands of an enraged Wilson, and his dream is truly over while everyone else struggles to achieve theirs.

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is a timeless novel and shows how the American dream that everyone tries so hard to achieve can turn into the American nightmare. So many people try to achieve their dream, but cannot escape the past in order to move forward.