

Symbolism in "the  
great gatsby" by f  
scott fitzgerald and  
"the glass menagerie"  
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## **Symbolism in “ The Great Gatsby” by F Scott Fitzgerald and “ The Glass Menagerie” by Tennessee Williams Essay Sample**

Symbolism is an invaluable literary tool that may be employed by authors or playwrights to aid in the development of characters or to display themes in novels and plays. F. Scott Fitzgerald uses symbolism heavily in his text “ The Great Gatsby”, as does Tennessee Williams in “ The Glass Menagerie”.

Various symbols appear throughout the respective texts that allow the reader to gain insight into character’s personalities and also add value to major themes and ideas in the texts.

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “ The Great Gatsby” is a text that is reflective of the Period in which it was written, the ‘ roaring’ twenties. It was written in America during the mid-1920s, a time of moral decadence and feelings of complacency following the conclusion of the Great War. On the surface, the text appears to be about love, wealth and power, yet this first impression does not do justice to the text’s many complexities and hidden depths. The text also explores corruption, idealism, faith and the illusions of dreams through the use of a variety of images and symbols. Primarily, “ The Great Gatsby” deals with the corruption of the great American Dream, personified by Jay Gatsby, a dreamer intent on procuring the attentions of his long-time love Daisy Buchanan at any cost. The American dream offers faith in the possibility of a better life. The main theory behind the dreams is the belief that material wealth alone can bring that dream to fruition, and to this concept, Gatsby was “ faithful to the end”.

For American's the car symbolises wealth and social status. Therefore it is suited for Gatsby to own one of the most majestic cars ever created. The car is yellow, a colour Fitzgerald uses repeatedly throughout to represent corruption and extravagant wealth. The use of the symbolic automobile can be seen as a demonstration of how an ideal based on materialism alone can be destructive. This was the fatal car that kills Myrtle Wilson, a woman lacking in self-respect who craves attention and wealth, whose death indirectly leads to Gatsby's own demise.

Appearance is another important factor of Gatsby's dream. In his quest to win Daisy's heart Gatsby chooses to wear his best outfit. "...the front door opened nervously and Gatsby in a white flannel suit, silver shirt and gold coloured tie hurried in". Fitzgerald uses silver and gold to symbolise wealth and excessive consumption sporadically throughout the text, yet the reader gets the impression that 'all the glitters is not gold'. Gatsby's material possessions mean nothing to him personally, but are symbolic of the man he has become, a man worthy of the attentions of Daisy. In fact, Gatsby rates his belongings "according to the measure of response it drew from her [Daisy's] well loved eyes".

Like Fitzgerald, Williams also uses colour as a symbol to portray key ideas in his text "The Glass Menagerie". Written in 1945, the play itself is set in the mid 30's, where America is discovering itself, recovering from recession and nervously awaiting war. As Tom Wingfield, the play's narrator, describes America at the time, "here there was only hot swing music, and liquor, dance halls, bars and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief deceptive rainbows."

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Colour symbolism arises in the concept of " Blue Roses" in " The Glass Menagerie". Although only mentioned briefly, the notion of " Blue Roses" is a significant key to the main character of The Glass Menagerie, Laura Wingfield, an insecure, sensitive and graceful young woman of twenty-four years. The nickname " Blue Roses" is given to Laura by Jim O'Conner, her first ever ' gentleman caller' when they are in high school together. The name is highly symbolic of Laura's character. Laura rejects Jim's assertion, saying that " blue is all wrong for roses", yet the description is fitting for her, not only due to her physical crippling defect but also her unique personality. " Blue Roses" are also symbolic of Laura's physical presence. Although she is humanly visible, she is frail (like a rose) with an ethereal aura that appears almost imaginary.

In addition to the reference to " Blue Roses", the image of a rainbow is also used repeatedly in this play to symbolise the hope of escape and achieving one's dreams. It is highly symbolic, therefore, that every scene where the rainbow image appears is followed by some disastrous or upsetting events. For example, the chandeliers at the Paradise Dance Hall across from the Wingfield's apartment create beautiful rainbow patterns, but these rainbow references are soon followed by disappointment for Laura when she learns of Jim's engagement. The rainbow image is particularly linked to the text's narrator Tom Wingfield, a hopeless dreamer that feels trapped by his family responsibilities. The rainbow gives him hope, but it is proven that Tom actually never does leave his pain. He does escape, but the memory of Laura and his mother still haunt him. At the conclusion of the play we see Tom note

that " the window is filled with pieces of coloured glass, tiny transparent bottles of delicate colours, like bits of a shattered rainbow."

While rainbows are a symbol of hope in *The Glass Menagerie*, the colour green represents hope and dreams in *The Great Gatsby*. Specifically, green light that burns constantly at the end of Daisy's dock is a multi-faceted symbol that represents Gatsby's longing for Daisy and the extent he was willing to go to in order to recreate the past. As Nick comments at the conclusion of the text, " Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter - tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms out farther..." Here Fitzgerald extends the symbol of the green light to the audience and invites them to continue to hope and dream against the odds.

In stark comparison to the optimistic and hopeful symbolism of the green light is the Valley of Ashes, a dirty and dry dumping ground that portrays the true emptiness of the world the novel is set in. The colour grey is used repeatedly by Fitzgerald to describe aspects of the valley and symbolises the disappearance of dreams. In addition, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg on a billboard are a constant reminder of the decline in American purity and spirituality. The eyes, referred to abstractly as the eyes of God, oversee Daisy's careless actions that result in the death of Myrtle, who had been having an affair with Daisy's husband Tom. Daisy appears to feel no remorse for her actions, and as Nick concludes, " They were careless people, Tom and Daisy - they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their carelessness ... and let other people clean up the mess they had made."

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While Daisy may feel no remorse for her actions, other characters such as Wilson (Myrtle's husband) understand that in the end God's eyes see everything. While gazing out at the eye's of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg overlooking his garage, Wilson cries, " I took her [Myrtle] to the window and I said, ' God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me but you can't fool God!"

If the greyness of the Valley of Ashes is used by Fitzgerald to symbolise the deterioration of dreams, then we can compare this symbol to the glass unicorn used in William's text *The Glass Menagerie*. The unicorn plays a paramount role in symbolising the relationship between Laura and the gentleman caller Jim. Laura occupies much of her time with her glass collection, her glass menagerie of animals. The unicorn just happens to be her favourite animal, and the reader can therefore make a close connection between Laura, a unique character, and the unicorn, a unique animal. In high school, Laura was the unicorn in a society full of horses because she was shy and had a leg brace.

It is highly symbolic that Jim breaks the horn of the glass unicorn just before revealing the truth to Laura about his marital status. When Laura finds out that Jim is engaged to be married, Laura's hopes are shattered. By breaking the glass unicorn's horn, Jim unintentionally brings Laura into the real world where she is no longer sheltered by the confines of her illusionary glass world. When the unicorn loses its horn and becomes like the rest of the animals in the glass menagerie, it loses its uniqueness. Likewise, when Laura gains confidence through Jim, she realizes that she is not too different from everyone else.

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The glass menagerie itself is symbolic and represents the culmination of the Wingfield's dreams. Each character aspires to achieve individual goals - for Tom, it is escape, for Laura, it is attaining the affections of her love, while for Mrs. Wingfield, it is to recapture the past. In the end, the menagerie proves to be symbolic of the family's shattered dreams and failures. For the Wingfield's their menial existence is immortalised in glass, and they are restricted by the boring monotony of their lives during "that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle-class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind." All the characters as a whole have tried to escape the harsh reality, yet in every case they manage to fail, and in turn shatter their dreams like glass.

Both Fitzgerald and Williams made use of the historical period of their respective texts *The Great Gatsby* and *The Glass Menagerie* were written to deliver a warning about the dangers of undying belief in dreams and illusions and also to highlight moral deterioration. Both authors also invite their readers to make judgements about how the social position of characters influences their decisions and actions. In addition, both *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Great Gatsby* highlight how meaningless material possessions are. In particular, the character of Jay Gatsby demonstrates how even the richest man in the world cannot have everything. Although his wealth drew Daisy closer to him, he never truly could have possessed her heart. He demanded Daisy to state that she had never loved Tom Buchanan. "Oh, you want too much!" she cried to Gatsby, "I love you now-isn't that enough? I can't help what's past. I did love him once-but I loved you too." As highlighted in this Essay, it is through the use of symbolism in both texts that the authors' key

ideas can be developed, and a certain response can be drawn from the reader.