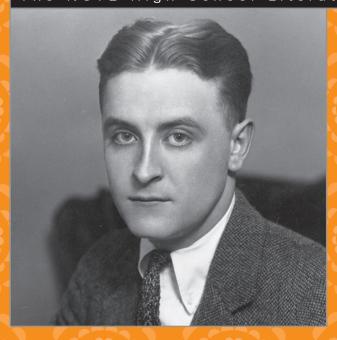
## The Great Gatsby in the Classroom

Searching for the American Dream

The NCTE High School Literature Series



David Dowling

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# Introduction: Why Gatsby? Why Now?

"What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon?' cried Daisy, 'and the day after that, and the next thirty years?" So asks Daisy Buchanan, beautiful, rich, and torn between the romantic appeal of Jay Gatsby and the status and convenience of her marriage to Tom.

The Great Gatsby has often been described as a portrait of the American dream gone bad. It has remained a force in American literature because it captures well the conflict between wealth and the values that are the foundation of this country, leading the reader to question the belief that honesty and hard work will lead to success. The dream implies that no matter what a person's roots, America provides the opportunity and the freedom to succeed. These are the values author F. Scott Fitzgerald grew up with, but the Jazz Age of the 1920s began the vulgarization of them. Money talks, and it often shapes lives and identities more definitively than the human values of love, family, and community. From Fitzgerald's era to the present, identities have been shaped by the material goods with which people surround themselves. And so it goes today; the country hurries ahead, addicted to wealth and the materialism that is its result. To understand *The Great Gatsby* is to begin to evaluate our role in an affluent society.

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Daisy's question exemplifies the decadent nature of life based on material success. The dilemma is to find happiness in a world where people are too often judged on what they own. Fitzgerald presents the story through the eyes of Nick Carraway, World War I vet and bondsman, who comes east from Chicago in the spring of 1922. The conservative West no longer meets his aspirations, and New York is the center of the financial markets: "Everybody I knew was in the bond business so I supposed it could support one more single man." Through his eyes we slowly discover the past and present of the mysterious Jay Gatsby who, rich beyond all ordinary measures, still strives for happiness through his pursuit of Daisy. Nick's observations about Gatsby form the basis of the reader's understandings about wealth and identity. This is what makes the novel relevant today. It forces readers to think about their own values and relationships in a world too often mad about money.

The Great Gatsby can be a difficult novel for many high school students. It is set in a time period unfamiliar to readers today, it involves a social class most have little experience with, the presentation of events is not chronological, and the first-person narrator can be difficult to relate to. Given these potential difficulties, why teach it? *Gatsby* is still a tremendously important novel because it addresses the issues involved when core values such as honesty and hard work come in conflict with the desire for money and material things. By modeling and guiding a careful analysis of the characters' roles, relationships, and motivations, students will be able to examine their own attitudes about the influence of wealth in the 1920s and today.

It is my belief that students should be guided through this book, and most novels, to help with a literal understanding of it. Once facts and events are clear, readers can more easily produce

interpretive and personal responses that demonstrate a more complete interpretation of the text. Given the proper guidance before, during, and after reading, students can become more adept in applying all four levels of reading/thinking: literal, interpretive, analytical, and evaluative. Reading fiction allows the reader to see many sides of many people (characters), whereas in society we see only some of the influences on a person's world. This aspect of fiction allows for multiple insights and points of view and is what makes the study of fiction interesting and worthwhile. Theorists and practitioners advocate the use of active reading strategies to help students appreciate, understand, and use works of fiction in their lives.

There are those who would dismiss Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* and other novels as irrelevant in today's diverse and interrelated world. Good fiction, however, is not judged by its contemporary setting but by its truthfulness. *Gatsby*'s relevance can be seen in a small apartment in Tehran, where Azar Nafisi meets in secret with seven young women, their chadors removed and long hair flowing. In her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Nafisi and her students discuss *Gatsby* and other novels amid the assassinations and disappearances of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. They explore this "counterrevolutionary" literature to help give meaning and direction to their lives in contemporary society. Fiction does not indoctrinate, it illuminates, and readers today need guidance to understand and feel its shining influence.

For Nafisi, the central question for herself and her students was "how these great works of literature and imagination could help us in our present trapped situations as women" (19). Similarly, we American teachers should ask, how can works of fiction help students trapped in a world that often minimizes the importance of works of imagination?

Nafisi, a professor of English at the University of Tehran before being expelled in the revolution, illustrates how literature can make a difference. She maintains that Gatsby is a classic American novel because it is about the "American" dream and because "Americans have a dream: they feel nostalgic about the promise of the future" (109). As Nafisi discusses the romantic love and the American dream of Gatsby inside a university classroom, loudspeakers outside blare the slogan "Death to America" (111). This ironic juxtaposition illustrates the potential relevance and significance of fiction. As the theocratic Islamic Revolution and Khomeini take over the country, more secular individuals like Nafisi find power in fiction, and The Great Gatsby is one of the vehicles of liberation. She describes this connection: "He [Gatsby] wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and in the end he discovered that the past was dead, the present a sham, and there was no future. Was this not similar to our revolution, which had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream?" (144).

Understanding *Gatsby* helped illuminate the conditions of life for Nafisi and her students during the instability in Iran during the 1970s. It still has this potential in U.S. high schools of the twenty-first century by helping students to understand the place of love, money, and dreams in their lives.

#### Selection and Scheduling of Lessons

The Great Gatsby is not a long novel, but it is densely and intricately constructed and requires careful reading. I tell students that we'll read a chapter or two for each class and that we'll finish the book in three to four weeks. Any longer than that and they'll forget the beginning before they get to the end. For each chapter

of *Gatsby*, I have included a number of activities to help students focus on and comprehend the more important elements of the novel. How many you choose to use is up to you. I've never used all the activities for every chapter. (I'm on an alternating day, 78-minute block schedule.) The sample reading schedule you'll find at the end of this chapter is designed for a college prep class. For better, faster readers, I often combine Chapters 5 and 6 and Chapters 8 and 9 to reduce the total number of days for the unit by two.

Given the many activities described here, you'll have to choose those that best fit your time frame, emphasis, and personal style. The main objective is to guide students in active, critical reading strategies so they learn to apply them independently and come to better understand their own reading and responses to literature. A chart listing the sequence of activities is on the inside front and back covers. I've listed the approximate length of time for each activity to help with your planning. The time estimate is for a college prep or heterogeneously grouped class. I teach this novel to tenth graders, whereas many schools cover American literature in eleventh grade. Honors-level students can progress more rapidly and complete more of the activities.

The Great Gatsby is one of a handful of books that is read by most U.S. high school students. That's a large readership. For such an important novel, the strategies used to present it should be carefully selected. What are the best ways to "teach" it? There is no one correct answer, but instructional decisions should focus on strategies that actively engage the reader in recalling details, making inferences, analyzing themes, and developing an appreciation of the author's craft. In addition, students should be guided in their assessments of these themes as they evaluate the novel's impact on their own lives.

#### Sample Reading Schedule

#### The Great Gatsby - F. Scott Fitzgerald

Page numbers refer to the following edition: Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby* (Scribner edition), 1925 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995).

Chapter(s)	<u>Due</u>		<u>Pages</u>	Assignment
1	Mon.	10/4	5–26 (22)	
2	Wed.	10/6	27–42 (16)	
3	Fri.	10/8	43–64 (22)	
4	Tues.	10/12	65–85 (21)	
5	Thurs.	10/14	86–102(17)	
6	Mon.	10/18	103–118 (16)	
7	Wed.	10/20	119–153 (35)	
8	Fri.	10/22	154–170 (17)	
9	Tues.	10/26	171–189 (19)	
Concluding Activities	Thurs.	10/28	_	

#### **Prereading Activity:**

Freewrite for ten minutes about the following questions. Explain as fully as possible.

- 1. How would you describe the "American dream"?
- 2. What is your definition of wealth?
- 3. What are Americans' attitudes toward wealth and poverty?
- 4. What is your attitude toward wealth and poverty?

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is one of high school's most often-assigned texts, and teachers have many resources to turn to when teaching this novel. Why, then, another book on the subject of teaching this classic? Because it's a book that focuses on the unique needs of high school teachers, providing classroom-tested activities that help students make meaning out of literature. It also addresses the challenges of adolescent literacy by drawing from both "classic" print texts and other media, including film, drawing, and drama.

Veteran high school English teacher David Dowling demonstrates how teachers can help students connect *The Great Gatsby* to the value systems of the twenty-first century, offering active reading and thinking strategies designed to enhance higher-level thinking and personal responses to fiction. He outlines specific teaching strategies for each chapter of *Gatsby*, as well as a variety of preand postreading projects and writing assignments. His multimodal approach to teaching effective reading strategies includes oral, written, drawing, and dramatic activities to better engage students in thematic and affective elements of the novel. Other features of the book include

- An analysis of a contemporary PBS documentary, Affluenza
- Excerpts and articles of literary criticism
- Student writing and drawing samples
- A chapter on teaching the power of fiction, with a wealth of classroom activities for novels commonly taught in high schools

All of this and more provides teachers with important knowledge about *Gatsby* that will enhance their own and students' understanding of the novel and its enduring appeal.



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