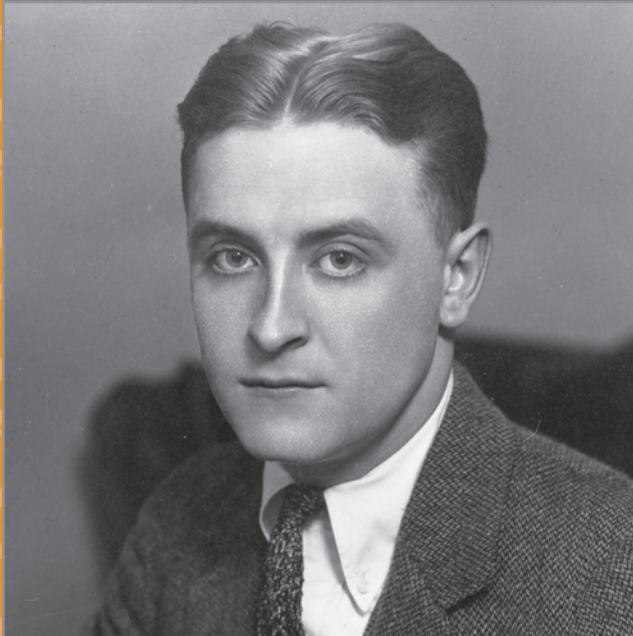


# *The Great Gatsby* in the Classroom

Searching for the American Dream

The NCTE High School Literature Series



David Dowling

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# 1

## 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.



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?









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 pre- and 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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