

Possible Essay questions for *The Great Gatsby*

1. Discuss Nick Carraway's character. How reliable is he as a narrator? What aspects of his character make him an effective narrator? How does his point of view color the reality of the novel, and what facts or occurrences would he have a vested interest in obscuring?
2. Nick says that Gatsby "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn," and yet he also says that Gatsby "turned out all right at the end," and he tells Gatsby that he is "worth the whole damn bunch put together." With these quotations in mind, analyze Nick's attitudes toward Gatsby.
3. Modernists, as we know from our study of Hemingway, "break up the narrative continuity," and/or "depart from standard ways of representing characters," and/or "violate the traditional syntax and coherence of narrative language" and/or thematically represent an "immense panorama of futility and anarchy." Using just two of these definitions, how can we see Fitzgerald as a modernist? (hint – don't worry about characterization, but the other three are very provable)
4. One critic has written that "the theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American Dream." Write an essay which outlines the evidence you can find in the novel which supports this contention. Consider Gatsby's dream, Nick's appreciation of Gatsby's capacity for hope, and the eventual downfall of Gatsby.
5. *The Great Gatsby* is laden with symbolism, from the obvious green light and spectacles to geography, automobiles, weather and color. Explain the use (not just the meaning) of any three symbols in the novel as they support theme.
6. Using the following quote by Prof. Matthew J. Bruccoli, a Fitzgerald scholar, explain how *The Great Gatsby* can be read as social criticism. Be specific about what is criticized (for example, issues of class, race, or gender) and be sure to support with quotations from the text.

Fitzgerald ebulliently proclaimed in 1920 that "An author ought to write for the youth of his generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward." Although this edict - perhaps a prophecy - was triumphantly fulfilled by *The Great Gatsby*, the novel was written by a man of his own time about his time. *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925; therefore many of its details now seem as remote as those in the world of Charles Dickens's fiction. Great fiction is great social history; Fitzgerald's work has become automatically identified with an American decade: The Jazz Age (which he named) or The Roaring Twenties or The Boom. Since *The Great Gatsby* is the defining novel of the Twenties, which have become trivialized and vulgarized by people who weren't there, it is necessary and useful to provide a corrective assessment of that era and Fitzgerald's response to it. The Twenties were not a ten-year binge during which everybody got rich and danced the Charleston in speakeasies while drinking bootleg hooch. Certainly the reaction to America's

participation in World War I - which ended on 11 November 1918 - triggered disillusionment, moral re-evaluation, social experiment, and hedonism. Although Fitzgerald joined the parties and chronicled them, he wrote in judgment. The Twenties were primarily an era of possibilities and aspiration a dominant Fitzgerald theme. In "Echoes of the Jazz Age" he wrote: "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."

from the 1992 preface to *The Great Gatsby* by Matthew J. Bruccoli