Was Gatsby Great? The Great Gatsby Part 2: Crash Course English Literature #5

Crash Course: Literature
https://youtube.com/watch?v=cn0WZ8-0Z1Y
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Hi, I'm John Green, this is *Crash Course Literature*, and this [holds up book] is *The Great Gatsby*. This novel barely makes it up to 200 pages even with rather large print, yet it's so magnificently complex and rich that we can't possibly do it justice in two videos so today we're going to focus on a specific question: Is Gatsby great?

Past John Green: Mr. Green! Mr. Green! No.

John Green: Oh, it's so cute when you think you're entitled to your opinions, me from the past, even when they're entirely uninformed opinions.

As penance for being such a little Hemingway about this stuff, you will one day have to host a show about the glorious ambiguity of literature.

[Crash Course intro]

So a while back we discussed the Aristotelian tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, in which people of high birth are brought low by weakness of character. Shakespeare introduced some ambiguity into that story arc as you'll remember: There was bad luck involved in their demise, and their mistakes, such as they were, weren't so grievous as to render Romeo and Juliet unsympathetic.

Also, as in many tragedies, Shakespeare used heightened, poetic language to help us care about Romeo and Juliet and root for them instead of just holding them up as examples of what terrible things befall you when you're naughty.

Now obviously, Gatsby isn't a work of poetry, but Fitzgerald found himself with similar problems. As many a high schooler has pointed out, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* aren't terribly likeable, and the story just isn't moving or compelling if you're reading about a bunch of people you hate, some of whom get what's coming to them and some of whom don't.

Fitzgerald handles this problem by heightening the language and giving it pace. I mean, you can basically tap your foot to The Great Gatsby from the very first sentence: "In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice I've been turning over in my mind ever since."

It's got a beat and I can dance to it.

And the descriptions are jarringly, magnificently beautiful, too: Daisy's voice sounds full of money; the fading glow on Jordan Baker's face is "like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk." At the end of the novel, Nick imagines the first European explorers of New York, writing, "For a transitory, enchanted moment, man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder."

Putting aside the fact that Fitzgerald failed to foresee that humans would one day walk on the moon, not to mention create fake fake flowers [waves hand through digital digital flowers], the descriptions here are lush and beautiful. So the language of the novel elevates Gatsby's triumphs and tragedies to the stuff of real epics, which gives Gatsby a kind of unironic greatness.

[knocks over flowers] Stan! Can we just decide if these [flowers] are physical digital flowers or digital digital flowers?

Remember, you don't have to be good to be great. And as the critic Matthew J. Bruccoli notes, Gatsby "is truly great by virtue of his capacity to commit himself to his aspirations." I mean we celebrate achievement born of hard work and clarity of purpose because there's a greatness in that success that you don't get by, like, lounging around and using your pool all the time.

Remember, there's exactly one person at Gatsby's parties who doesn't get drunk: Gatsby. I mean, he's a bootlegger who doesn't drink, a swimming pool owner who doesn't swim, a man of leisure who never engages in a single leisure activity. But as Bruccoli further points out, there's plenty of irony in the titular description of Gatsby as Great.

"The adjective indicates the tawdry and exaggerated aspects of his life: Hurry, hurry, hurry! Step right up and see the Great Gatsby!" I mean, he's part magician, and- in a world of wealth- he's part carnival curiosity. Bruccoli notes that Tom Buchanan describes Gatsby's famous yellow car as "a circus wagon."

Okay let's go to the Thought Bubble. One thing Gatsby has in common with Romeo and Juliet is that they're all obsessed with controlling time, which of course continues passing anyway. Like, Juliet tries to force night to come quickly and dawn to stay away, because only under cover of darkness can her marriage thrive.

Similarly, Gatsby doesn't just want to marry Daisy: He needs her to say that she never loved Tom Buchanan at all, as if he can erase the past 5 years. What they'll do about Daisy's baby is a fascinating question that Gatsby seems wholly uninterested in, but anyway, Gatsby's dream is that he and Daisy will- to quote Nick- "go back to Louisville and be married from her house- just as if it were five years ago."

Nick's perfectly sensible response to this idea is, "You can't repeat the past." And then Gatsby utters his most famous line: "Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can." And then he says, "I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before." Romeo and Juliet want to extend the present into forever because they know their future is bleak; Gatsby believes the key to the beautiful future is a perfect restoration of the beautiful past.

Thanks, Thought Bubble

Okay, a brief aside before we return to Gatsby's questionably greatness: The idea of restoring the past to create a beautiful future is or course, not unique to Gatsby, which is why no candidate for President can ever get through a speech without mentioning some previous President, whose glorious leadership the current campaign intends to channel so as to make it morning in America again.

It's also why Americans fight so much about what the Founding Fathers would think of us, when in fact, what they would think is probably "You guys are dressed funny. Also, how come this room is so bright without any windows? Furthermore, why is this screen talking to me?"

Now of course this nostalgia isn't unique to the United States, but you also have to remember that Gatsby is the ultimate self-made man, having both literally and figuratively made a name for himself.

And this combination of aspirational impulses and the urge to restore life to some immaculate past does strike me as very American. That's what makes the tragedy of Gatsby so much more interesting and complicated than the Aristotelian model of tragedy.

Instead of being a person of high birth, Gatsby is a person of low birth, albeit one born into a world that claims not to care about or even believe in such things and instead of experiencing a reversal of fortune due to a weakness of character, Jay Gatsby- well that's were it gets complicated actually. I mean Daisy Buchanan was driving the car, but Gatsby chose to take the fall for her. But he is also doomed because he lives in a social order that's happy to drink

illegal alcohol, but condemns a sober bootlegger.

Oh, it's time for the Open Letter?
[slides over to jump into the glory that is that yellowy green mess of a chair]

An Open Letter to Prohibition. But first let's see what is the secret compartment today. Be booze, be booze, be booze. Yes! Touchdown. It's mystery liquor.

Alright the game is simple, I drink the mystery liquor and try to guess what it is. [Drinks and coughs] Southern Comfort?... No? What is it? Jack --that's too easy, Meredith. Jack Daniels. Anybody could get Jack Daniels.

Dear Prohibition,
You were crazy. I mean, for the rest of American history, our Constitution is gonna be this weird document that is perfectly normal until the 18th Amendment, which suddenly bans alcohol, and then the 21st Amendment which is suddenly like, "No, no, no. Terrible idea!" It's almost like legislating morality doesn't actually increase morality.

But Prohibition, in you, Fitzgerald found the perfect metaphor for American hypocrisy and debauchery. We are not very good at tolerating naughtiness in America, but we *love* being naughty. In short Prohibition, you were a terrible idea, but a fantastic metaphor, so thanks for that.

Best Wishes,[drinks again and coughs]
John Green.

So is Gatsby doomed by his romanticization of Daisy, by his refusal to accept that he just wasn't born to be one of the gold-hatted men of leisure, by his belief that any means justifies --if you'll pardon the pun-- Daisy's end?

Yes, yes, and yes. But more than that, the great Gatsby lives in a cold world that cares nothing for justice, a world that makes claims to fairness but really only further rewards those who have already been rewarded.

I mean, who even survives this novel? Only the idle rich: Jordan Baker, Daisy and Tom Buchanan, Nick Carraway. They survive, and they are allowed to go on being careless. As Nick writes, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy-- they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness."

They aren't cruel or malicious, they're just careless-- they don't care too much about Myrtle or Gatsby or their daughter or even each other. To live without a care in the world is supposed to be the dream, right? Everyone wants a care-free life. But Fitzgerald shows us the horror of this care-free life, how Tom and Daisy's inability to care is in some ways more monstrous than outright cruelty would be.

It's not like *Romeo and Juliet*, where the lovers are sacrificed and then Verona is healed. *Nothing* is made whole by the tragedy of *The Great Gatsby.*

I thinks that's why some readers find the novel depressing and hopeless, even amid all the lush language and witty turns of phrase.

But I don't think it is hopeless. Remember that line from the first chapter: "Gatsby turned out all right in the end, it was what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams..." As individuals, and as a collective, the tragedy isn't in dreaming; it's in chasing an unworthy dream.

So in the end, is Gatsby great? I'm interested to read your comments, but here's my takeaway: Jay Gatsby was a great man. But great people especially must be careful about what they worship. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Too far! Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by me. And our graphics team is Thought Bubble. Every week, instead of cursing, I say the name of a writer I like if you'd like to suggest writers. you can do so in comments where you can also ask questions about today;s video that will be answered by our team of English Literature experts. Thanks for watching Crash Course and as we say in my hometown, Don't Forget To Be Awesome.