Like Pale Gold - The Great Gatsby Part I: Crash Course English Literature #4

Crash Course: Literature
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===== Introduction =====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature.

So the two books most often cited as the "Great American novel" are *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and this slender beast, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The US is a country founded on the principles of freedom and equality; *Huck Finn* is a novel about slavery and radical inequality. We're also a nation that believes in the American Dream. We pride ourselves on our lack of aristocracy and the equality of opportunity, but *Gatsby* is a novel about our de facto aristocracy and the limits of American Opportunity. I mean, Daisy Buchanan-

(John From The Past)
Mr Green, I hate everything about this stupid collection of first world problems passing for a novel, but my hatred of that Willa Cather-ing loser Daisy Buchanan burns with the fire of a thousand suns!

(John)
Ugh, me from the past, here's the thing: you're not supposed to like Daisy Buchanan, at least not in the uncomplicated way that you like, say, cupcakes. By the way, Stan, where are my cupcakes?

(Stan) It's not your birthday or Merebration.

(John) Ah, stupid Merebration, coming only once a year.

I don't know where you got the idea that the quality of a novel should be judged by the likeability of its characters, but let me submit to you that Daisy Buchanan doesn't have to be likeable to be interesting. Furthermore, most of what makes her unlikeable - her sense of entitlement, her limited empathy, her inability to make difficult choices - are the very same things that make you unlikeable! That's the pleasure and challenge of reading great novels, you get to see yourself as others see you, and you get to see others as they see themselves.

(Intro Music)

===== Characters (1:31) =====
So today we're going to focus on the American Dream and how it plays out in the Great Gatsby. Spoiler alert, some petals fall off the Daisy. So let's begin with the characters.

From the first chapter, we know three things about our narrator, Nick Carraway - By the way, get it? Care away? It's not that sophisticated, he could have done better.

1) Nick grew up in the Midwest then moved to New York's West Egg, and then something happened that made him move back to the Midwest.

Also, 2) He is prone to the use of highfalutin language as when he introduces Jay Gatsby by saying, "Gatsby turned out alright in the end; it was what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men." That dream, by the way, with all of its foul dust, is the American Dream.

Finally, 3) Nick is rich, and he got rich not by working but by having a rich ancestor who paid someone off to serve in the Civil War on his behalf which allowed Nick's ancestor to spend the Civil War making money. So how's that for equal opportunity?

And then there's Gatsby, about whom we learn absolutely nothing in chapter 1, except for the aforementioned foul dust floating in the wake of his dreams and that he had an "extraordinary gift for hope." This extraordinary gift for hope is the essential fact of Gatsby and also many romantic leads from Romeo to Edward Cullen to Henry VIII, who might have given up on several of his wives but never gave up on the idea of love!

All of these people share a creepy belief that if they just get the thing they want - the thing being a female human being - then they'll finally be happy. We have a word for this; it's called objectification.

Then you have the aggressively vapid Daisy Buchanan, Nick's distant cousin who lives across the bay from Gatsby and Nick in the much more fashionable East Egg. Daisy Buchanan is crazy rich - like polo pony rich - thanks to her marriage to Tom Buchanan.

Tom is a former football player and a life long asshat who Nick describes as "one of those men who achieves such an acute, limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savors of anti-climax." Listen, if you're under 21 it might be difficult to apprehend the depth of that burn, but trust me, it's a burn.

===== Some Plot and Discussion (3:31) =====

So soon after the novel begins, Daisy and Tom ask Nick to come over for dinner, where the golfer Jordan Baker is also there, and they have this awful party. And there's this great moment when Tom goes on a racist rant and says "We're Nordics and we've produced all the things that make a civilization," which is hilarious because none of those people has actually produced anything.

They didn't make the fancy furniture they're sitting on, they didn't grow or cook the food they're eating, they don't even light their own freaking candles! Anyway we also learn that Tom has a mistress and that Daisy might not be as stupid as she's letting on, because she looks at her young daughter and famously says, "I hope she'll be a fool, that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool."

Now look, it's difficult to argue that Daisy is a good person - after all, in the novel's climax she allows Gatsby to take the fall for something she did - but she's a product of a much older American system, one that, for instance, allows rich people to pay poor people to go fight the Civil War for them.

===== An Open Letter to the Heroic Past (4:25) =====

Oh it's time for the open letter? I never noticed this chair was gold before, Stan. It makes me think of wealth. And to a lesser extent, decay.

An open letter to the Heroic Past. But first, let's see what's on top of the secret compartment today. Oh, it's a champagne glass, I love champagne. Stan! There are champagne poppers in here! You put explosive miniature champagne bottles in my champagne glass instead of champagne!!

Dear Heroic Past,
Like champagne poppers, you're always a little bit underwhelming. (POP!). The thing is, Heroic Past, which of our pasts was so heroic? Was it the part where we owned other human beings? Was it the part where we fought over the right to own other human beings? Was it Gatsby's Jazz Age, with its fast cars, deliciously illegal alcohol and rapidly expanding stock portfolios? I mean, the amazing thing about the Great Gatsby is that Fitzgerald didn't know the Great Depression was coming, but his book sure reads like prophecy.

The truth, Heroic Past, is that we may thing we want to recreate you, but what we actually want to do is we want to recreate you without all the problems we don't remember.

And that's how you ruin your life over a girl you dated for a month five years ago.

Best wishes,
John Green

===== Thought Bubble - Plot Summary (5:35) =====
From that dinner party, it's clear that wealth consumes the rich, but there's also a moment where it becomes clear that wealth consumes the poor. Daisy tells a story about her butler, that he used to polish silver for a big family in the city night and day until the caustic silver polish ruined his nose. Alright, let's go the the Thought Bubble.

So whenever Nick is hanging out with the mega-rich Tom, the parties are always awful and everybody always wants the kind of status and wealth that Tom Buchanan has, which is hilarious because of course Tom is a horrible asshat who makes Paris Hilton look, like, charming and grounded.

But then we get to go to some awesome parties, at Gatsby's house on West Egg. And even though Gatsby has the annoying habit of saying "old sport" all the time and trying to sound upper-crusty, he's totally charming. He has a "smile that makes you feel he is irresistibly prejudiced in your favor", to quote Nick.

The first party at Gatsby's house also contains, despite being set during Prohibition, the greatest drunk-driving scene in the history of American literature in which a guy gets in an accident, like, three seconds after getting into his car, and even though the wheel has fallen off the car, he keeps trying to drive it. To Fitzgerald, that had become the American Dream by the 1920s: everyone wanted enough money to buy fancy cars and enough whiskey to crash them.

But Gatsby, tellingly, doesn't drink. He's never even used his pool, well until the very end of the novel. All the money he's acquired and all the parties he throws, are about one thing and one thing only: winning back Daisy Buchanan. There's a flashback in the novel to Gatsby's first meeting with Daisy and when you hear Gatsby tell that story it's very telling that it's hard to understand whether Gatsby is falling for Daisy or for her mansion.

But when they finally reunite years later and Gatsby has a mansion of his own everything is yellow: Gatsby's car is yellow, his tie, the buttons on Daisy's dress; at one point Nick, who's third-wheeling it big time in this scene, describes some flowers as "smelling like pale gold." What does that even mean?!

=====On Colors and Symbolism (7:32)=====
Thanks, Thought Bubble. So the most famous color symbol in *The Great Gatsby* is the Green Light at the end of Daisy's dock that Gatsby is always looking out at from across the bay. Gatsby just wants to reach across the bay and get to that Green Light and if he can he believes he will have the girl and the life that has driven his wild ambition.

Nick calls that Green Light at one point "an enchanted object", and that's what symbols really are in both literature and real life. So yes, the Green Light is a symbol in *Gatsby* but this isn't only stuff that happens in novels. We all have enchanted objects in our lives. On the night that I got engaged I drank champagne with the woman who is now my wife and I still have the cork from that champagne bottle - I'm lying. I couldn't afford corky champagne it was twist off champagne, but I still have the bottle cap.

So just as the Green Light is an enchanted object, gold and yellow are enchanted colors in *Gatsby* and also, for the record, in real life. I mean think of golden opportunities, or golden ages, or your golden youth, or the golden arches. Unless you're at McDonald's, gold is the color that conflates wealth and beauty.

But while in our culture the yellow color of gold is seen as telling us that wealth is beauty and beauty, wealth - in the novel The Great Gatsby it's a bit different. In the novel yellow is the color not only of wealth but also of death: Myrtle Wilson's house is yellow, the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg - which stare over so much death in the novel in so many ways - are ringed in yellow glasses, Gatsby's car - that fatal missile - is yellow. Now that may seem like symbol hunting to you, but I'd argue that it's really important to understand that Fitzgerald is using gold to decouple the ideas of wealth and greatness, and instead he's associating richness with corruption and amorality and finally death.

In the roaring 20's and today wealth was seen as profoundly good; it was seen as an end that justified most means. Wealth was the American Dream. But the foul dust that trailed in the wake of those dreams - the casual destruction, the cyclical violence, the erosion of altruism - make it clear that at least to Fitzgerald, wealth isn't simply good.

=====In Closing (9:29)=====

The last chapter of *The Great Gatsby* is one of the saddest passages in American Literature, showing how difficult it is to distinguish between guilt and innocence, and how intractably unfair our society is - even if we don't have barons and duchesses.

I mean, some people argue that Gatsby couldn't live the American Dream because he didn't come by his money honestly, but who in the novel did come by their money honestly? And you can argue that Gatsby fails because nothing is ever enough - it's not enough for Daisy to love him, she must also say that she never loved Tom.

But this is America, man, when was enough ever enough for us? We invented super-sizing! I mean - we invented the stretch limousine, we invented the Hummer, and then we invented the Hummer stretch limousine! We all believe, as Nick says at the end of the novel, "that if we can only run faster, stretch out our arms farther, then one fine morning..."

We've come to believe in this American Dream not just in the United States but throughout the world. We understand that much will be lost in pursuit of this dream - not just that butler's noses will be ruined - but that vast valleys of ashes will pile up outside of our cities as we consume ever more stuff. We know this is unsustainable, we know that these parties can't last forever, and that we won't be able to drive home in our three wheeled cars; but still we press on.

Next week we'll consider whether Gatsby's quest, and ours, is a heroic one, but for now I just want to encourage you not to dismiss the characters in this novel simply because they may seem different from you. At one point Nick recalls all the people who would go to those great parties and sneer most bitterly at Gatsby on the courage of Gatsby's liquor.

Let me submit to you that those of us who would sneer at Gatsby do so on the courage of his liquor, because the truth is, we all share his ambition. Thanks for watching. I'll see you next week.

===== Credits (11:06) =====

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. The associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show was written by me and our graphics team is Thought Bubble.

Every week when I might otherwise curse, I use the name of one of my favorite writers. 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 literature experts.

And now I will leave you to observe the abundant metaphorical resonances of this chair, but thanks for watching Crash Course and as we say in my home town, don't forget to be awesome.