

The Great Gatsby

Historical Context and Introduction



"It was an age of miracles," Fitzgerald wrote of the Jazz Age. "It was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."



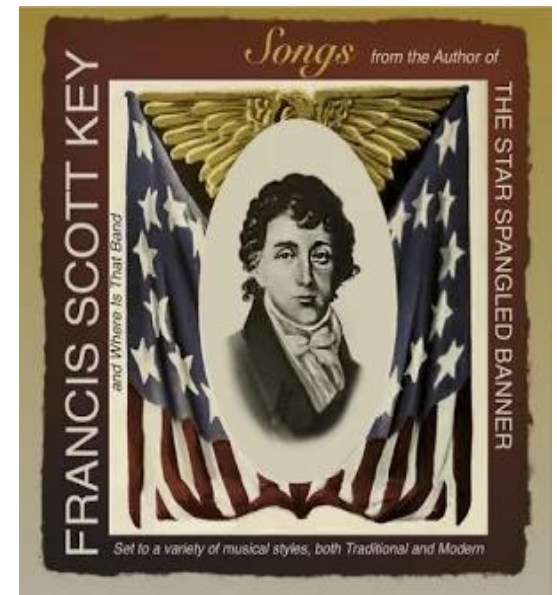
F. Scott Fitzgerald
1896-1940

A Short Biography

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in **St. Paul, Minnesota** on September 24, 1896.

His parents, although poor, had some social status.

Fitzgerald was named after his second cousin, Francis Scott Key, the author of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”





While his family was not prosperous, **Fitzgerald's mother nurtured social ambitions in her only son.**

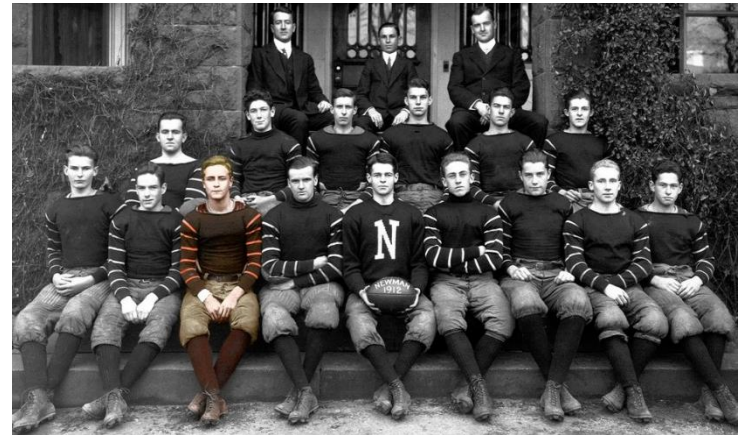
An elderly aunt helped finance his tuition at a private Catholic boarding school in New Jersey called The Newman School and then, in 1913, **at Princeton University.**

At the time, Princeton University was viewed as a training ground for the American upper class.

Coming from a background of “financial anxiety,” while at Princeton, Fitzgerald developed a fascination with the very rich.

While his grades were low, he excelled in his writings for the Princeton Triangle Club Dramatic Society and the *Princeton Tiger*. Fitzgerald’s writing from that time shows that **he was self-conscious about the differences between himself and his wealthy classmates.**

Although his grades were suffering, Fitzgerald was more upset with his struggles to make the Princeton football team.





In 1917, during his third year at Princeton, **Fitzgerald left school in order to enlist in the United States Army.** After passing a special examination, he was commissioned a Second Lieutenant in the infantry.

In June 1918, while stationed at Camp Sheridan, near Montgomery, Alabama, twenty-one year old Fitzgerald met and fell madly in love with eighteen-year-old Zelda Sayre. She was **a local debutante, the youngest daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court Judge.**

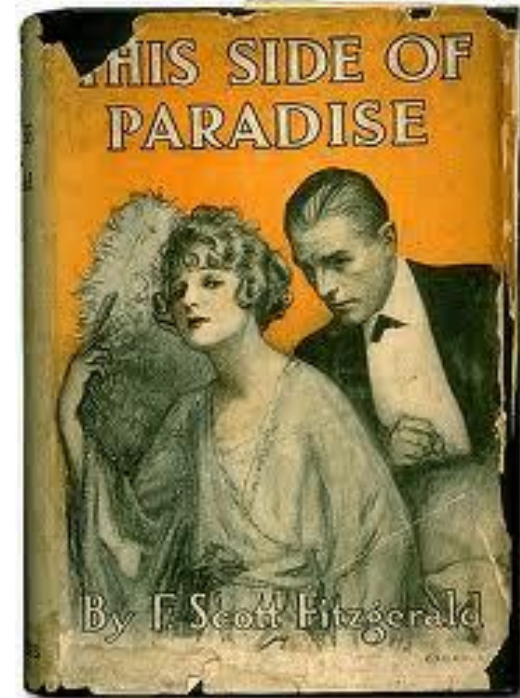
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After being discharged from the Army in 1919, Fitzgerald went to New York to **seek his fortune so that he could marry Zelda**. By day, he worked in an advertising agency, and by night, he wrote stories, submitting them to magazines. For his efforts, he collected nothing but rejection slips.



While Fitzgerald was failing financially as a writer, Zelda broke their engagement. She was unwilling to live on his small salary in the advertisement business. Fitzgerald returned to his parents' house in St. Paul to rewrite his novel, changing the title to *This Side of Paradise*.

This time the novel was accepted by Scribner's and published in March 1920 when Fitzgerald was twenty-three years old. He called it "**the story of the youth of our generation.**" Considered daring and intellectual, *This Side of Paradise* was a smashing success and an immediate bestseller. **Fitzgerald was perceived as the style-setter for the times, and he achieved celebrity status.**



Following his great success as a writer, Fitzgerald and Zelda resumed their engagement and were married in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York in 1920.

Their only child, a daughter named Frances Scott (Scottie) Fitzgerald, was born in October 1921.



Fitzgerald's life in the 1920s was a mirror to events occurring nationally during that decade.

The Roaring Twenties, also commonly referred to as **The Jazz Age**, was a time of challenge to the established order, of personal indulgence, and even **self-destructive excess**.

Fitzgerald was its self-proclaimed spokesman and symbol.



While this was an era of Prohibition, **Fitzgerald and Zelda drank alcohol publicly and partied like there was no tomorrow.** Their tastes were for life in New York's luxurious Plaza Hotel, expensive and gigantic cars, country homes on Long Island or in Connecticut, and villas in France.

They spent money as fast as Fitzgerald could make it. In fact, **they spent more than he could make,** and they found themselves in debt. Fitzgerald was to spend the rest of his life in a futile struggle to make ends meet.

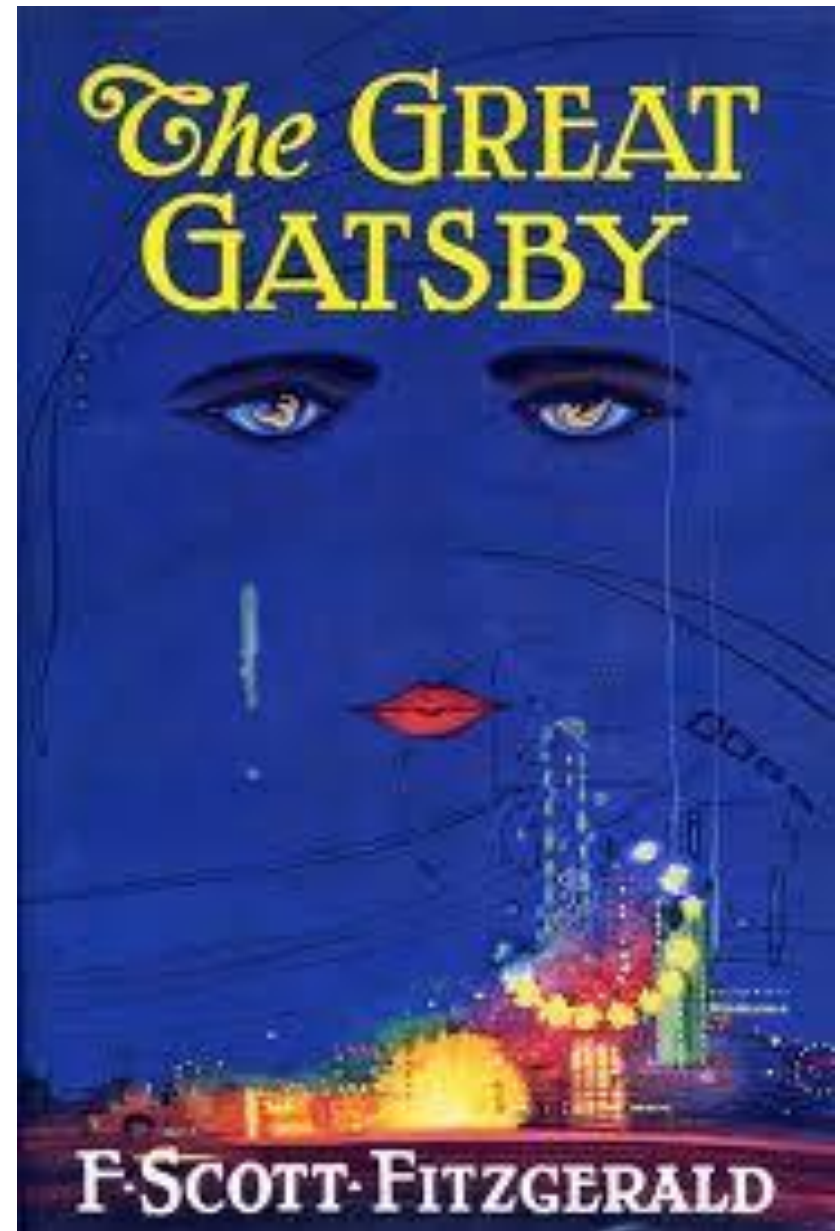


Published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* is frequently nominated as “**the great American novel.**”

A quintessential story of not only the 1920s , but also of the American experience, **the novel chronicles the exuberance, as well as the malaise of the decade, showing how America’s fascination with material success was eroding values.**

The novel received critical praise, but sales were mediocre.

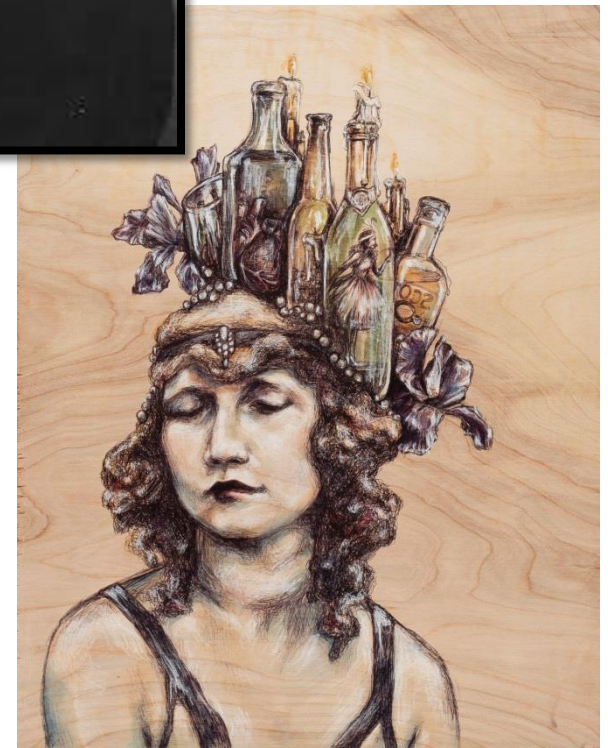
The fact that the novel did not sell well was a disappointment from which Fitzgerald never recovered.



Life in the second half of the 1920s became desperate for the Fitzgeralds.

As the Jazz Age drew to its traumatic close with the **stock market crash of 1929**, so did much of Fitzgerald's life and career.

An alcoholic since age 22, Fitzgerald's drinking got out of control, earning him the dubious title, **"America's Drunkest Writer."**





In 1930 Zelda suffered the first of **several complete nervous breakdowns**. She spent the last eighteen years of her life in sanatoriums in Europe and the U.S.

To pay Zelda's high medical bills and other debts, Fitzgerald focused on writing short stories for popular magazines, for example, *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Esquire*. He also worked in Hollywood as a screenwriter.

On December 21, 1940, while he was in Hollywood, Fitzgerald died of a heart attack. He was 44 years old.

Fitzgerald's **early death is often attributed to his alcoholism**, the pressure to earn money to pay his debts, and the collapse of the decade into the Great Depression.

What happened to Zelda?
In 1948, a fire broke out in the kitchen of Highland Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina where Zelda was being treated.

The fire moved through the dumbwaiter shaft, spreading onto every floor. The fire escapes were wooden, and caught fire as well. Nine women, including Zelda, died. She was 48 years old.

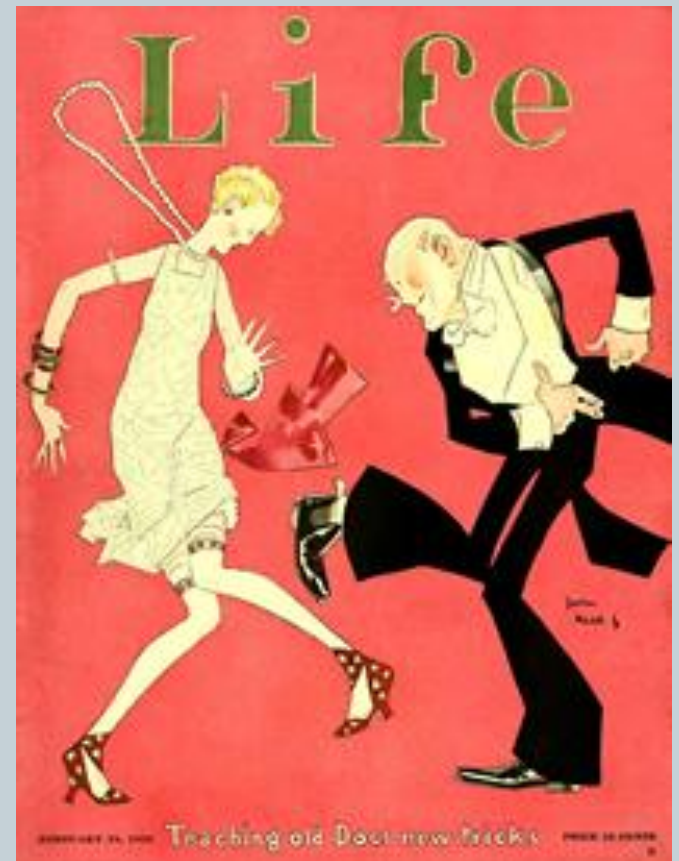




The 1920s

The 1920s – The Jazz Age

- Fitzgerald himself coined the term
- Reaction to the death/destruction/loss of innocence from WWI (post-war prosperity)
- During this time, there was a mass migration from rural areas to cities where “parties were bigger, the pace was faster, the buildings were higher, the morals looser” (Fitzgerald)
- Some called it the first truly modern decade



I. Life in the 1920s:



A. Changing Role of Women:

- 19th Amendment (1920) – granted women suffrage (right to vote)
- New jobs opened up during WWI and the women didn't want to give their jobs up when the men came back home – so...more women began to go to college

I. Life in the 1920s:



- Flappers – modern women of the 1920s – young, rebellious, fun-loving, and bold – short hair, short dresses (to the knees), more makeup (esp. lipstick) – attitudes changes – ex: began to smoke and drink in public



The 1926 fashion plate displays the typical "flapper" dress styles.

I. Life in the 1920s:



B. Prohibition Era (1919-1933):

- 18th Amendment (1919) – prohibited the making, selling, or transportation of alcohol
- Volstead Act – law passed by Congress to enforce prohibition – ignored by most of the cities on the east coast



I. Life in the 1920s:



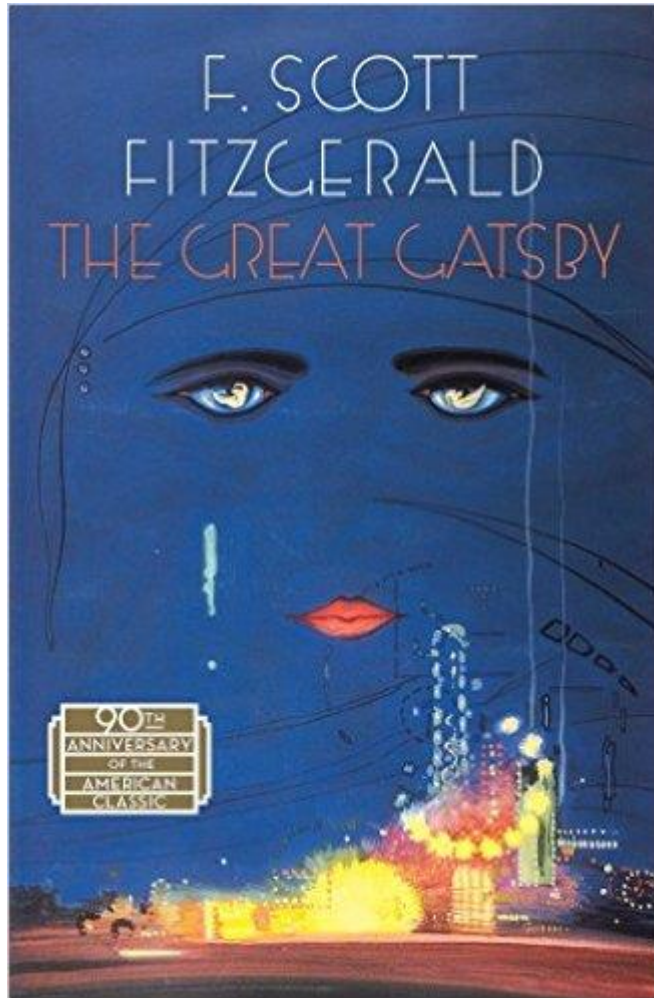
- Success of prohibition:
 - consumption of alcohol decreased
 - arrest for drunkenness decreased
- Why did Prohibition eventually fail?
 - 1) Not enforced – some police depts. were corrupt, just didn't care, or were scared of the gangsters
 - 2) Most people didn't take prohibition seriously – drank anyway

I. Life in the 1920s:

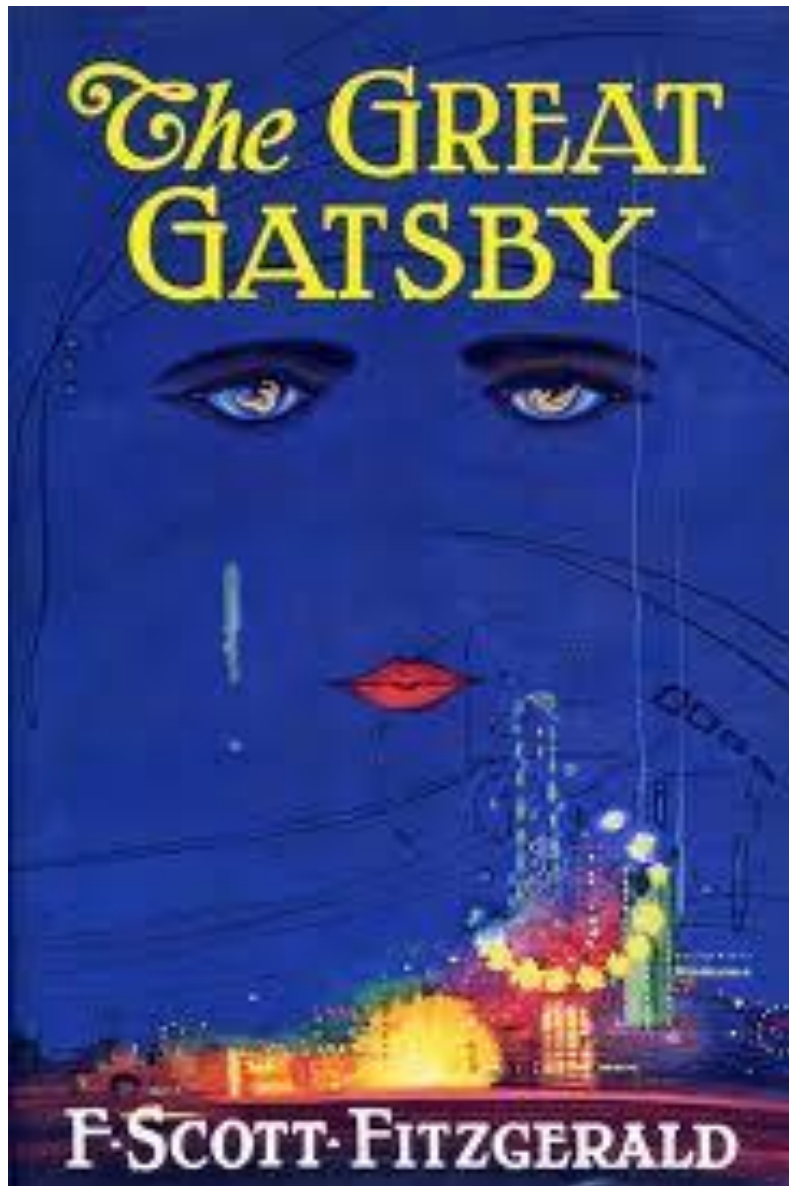


- 3) The crime wave that began made most people think that the amendment should be repealed
 - organized crime got involved in bootlegging (the illegal selling of alcohol)
 - the most famous gangster of the 1920s was Al Capone from Chicago





The Novel



Francis Cugat's jacket design for *The Great Gatsby* is the **most celebrated and widely disseminated jacket art in American Literature**. After appearing on the first printing in 1925, it was revived more than a half-century later for the "Scribner Library" paperback editions (1979 – present).

Cugat's painting is iconic: the sad, hypnotic, heavily outlined **eyes of a woman beam like headlights** through a cobalt night sky. Their irises are transfigured into reclining female forms. From one of the eyes streams a green luminescent tear; brightly rouged lips complete the sensual triangle. Below, on earth, **brightly colored carnival lights blaze before a metropolitan skyline**.



GREAT GATSBY GUIDE to

Characters



Jay Gatsby



The title character. Jay Gatsby is a former mid-westerner who moved East in order to win over Daisy Buchanan, the love he lost five years earlier.

His desire to win over Daisy leads him from poverty to extreme wealth. He is considered “new money.”



Nick Carraway



The novel's narrator. Nick is also a mid-westerner who moved East.

He happens to be Daisy's cousin.

Nick happens to move to a small house next to Gatsby's mansion in West Egg.

His mid-western sensibilities give us an outsiders perspective on how the wealthy socialites like the Buchanans lead their lives.



Daisy Buchanan



Daisy is beautiful and “delicate”. Gatsby is obsessed with winning Daisy back. Even the sound of her voice he finds absolutely mesmerizing.

She grew up in a wealthy and privileged family. She married a very wealthy man, Tom Buchanan, who is considered part of the “old money” elite.



Tom Buchanan



Daisy's hulking brute of a husband. Tom comes from an old, wealthy Chicago family and takes pride in his rough ways.

He leads a life of luxury in East Egg, playing polo, riding horses, and driving fast cars. He commands attention through his wealth, physical size, and obnoxious behavior.



Jordan Baker



Professional golfer known for her questionable integrity.

A friend of Daisy's, she also represents women of this elite social class. She is used to being admired by women wherever she goes.

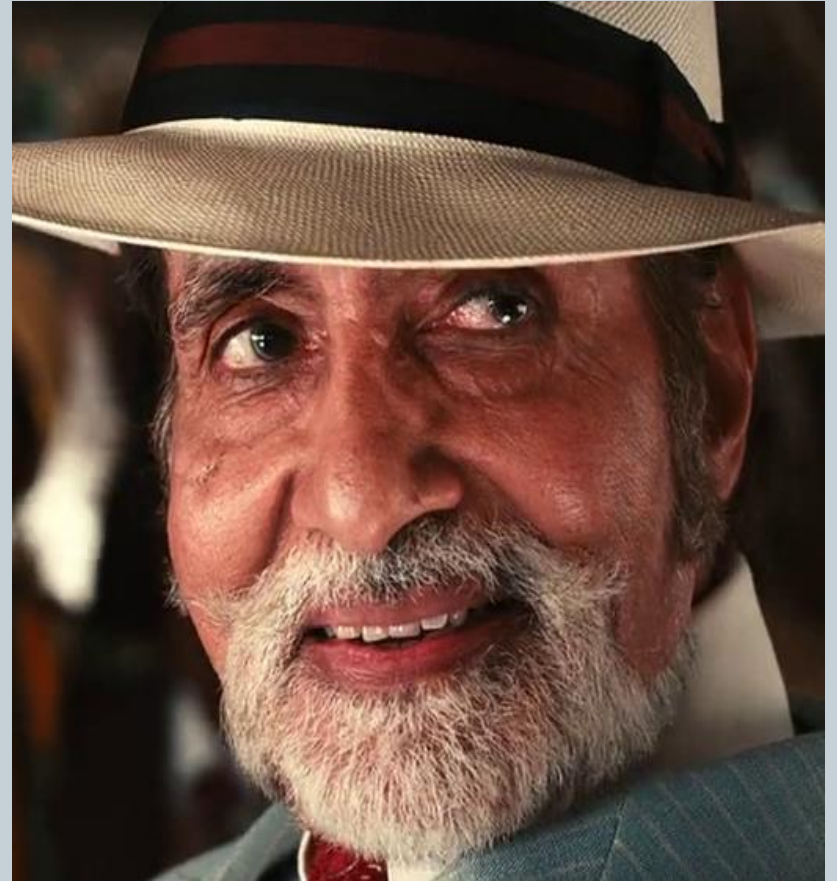
Fitzgerald often wrote about athletic women who played sports such as golf or tennis. This was considered very modern at the time.

Meyer Wolfshiem



Gatsby's business associate and link to organized crime.

A professional gambler, Wolfshiem is attributed with fixing the 1919 World Series.



George and Myrtle Wilson



A local auto mechanic



George's wife (Tom's mistress)

Old Money Vs. New Money

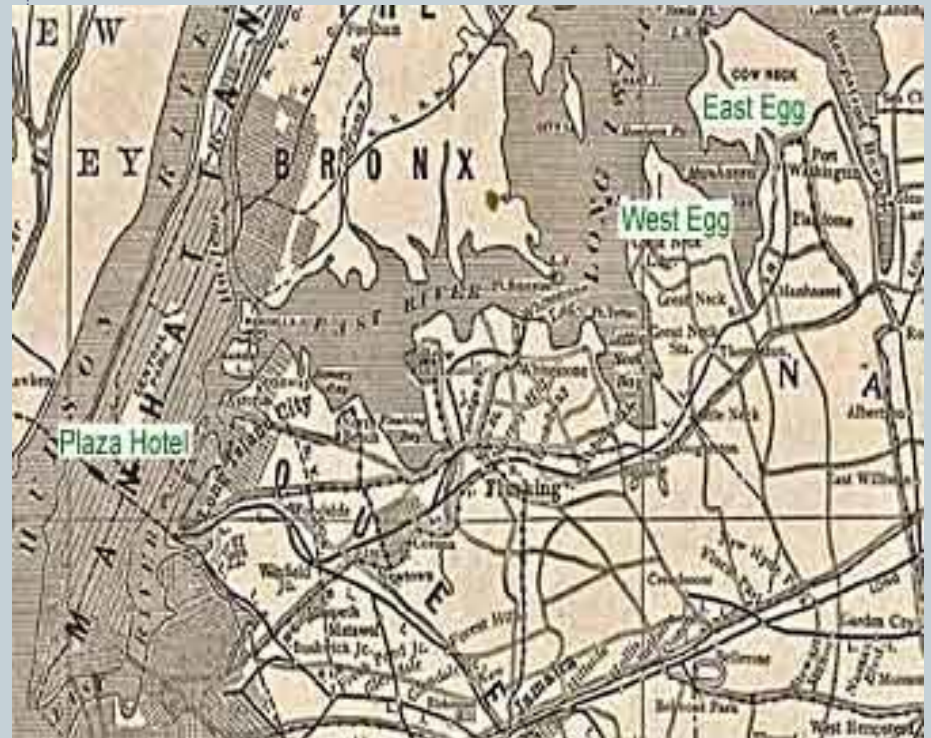
- New Money:
- Someone who has achieved the American Dream
- Not as respected in the 1920's



- Old Money
- Money from family wealth
- Born rich
- Not earned through work done by yourself
- Respected above all in the 1920's

Settings in The Great Gatsby

- West Egg- where Nick and Gatsby live, represents **new money**
- East Egg- where Daisy lives, the more fashionable area, represents **old money**



Settings in The Great Gatsby



- The City- New York City, where the characters escape to for work and play
- The Valley of Ashes- an industrial area between the City and West Egg, where Wilson's garage is located.



Symbols in The Great Gatsby



- Green Light- at the end of Daisy's dock and visible from Gatsby's mansion. Represents Gatsby's hopes and dreams about Daisy.



Symbols in The Great Gatsby



- The Valley of Ashes- the area between West Egg and New York City. It is a desolate area filled with industrial waste. It represents the social and moral decay of society during the 1920's. It also shows the negative effects of greed.

Symbols in The Great Gatsby



- The Eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg- A decaying billboard in the Valley of Ashes with eyes advertising an optometrist. There are multiple proposed meanings, including the representation of God's moral judgment on society.

