

Tasks for *The Great Gatsby*, chapter 6

Group 1:

Look up the term "bootlegging/bootlegger". Explain the term and its historical relevance. Find photos and illustrations and discuss how the term "moral decay" is portrayed in The Great Gatsby.

Group 2:

Read the text below. Find the main points and relate them to the quote from chapter 6.

a) **”Looming over all of American history**--but particularly the country's formative years--is the Biblical figure of Adam, the only person, according to the West's major religions, to have lived unburdened by what came before him. As literary critic R.W.B. Lewis wrote in 1955, in his wonderful book *The American Adam*, early generations of Americans became captivated by the idea that they could create a future without reference to the past. The revolutionaries who fought for America's independence saw themselves as breaking not only with the Old World but with history itself. "The case and circumstances of America present themselves as in the beginning of a world," Thomas Paine wrote in 1792. Thomas Jefferson believed the new nation should regularly renew itself, arguing that, if necessary, "[t]he tree of liberty must be refreshed ... with the blood of patriots and tyrants." But, as Lewis explains, it was after the War of 1812--after the United States had finally cut loose from Great Britain and other foreign entanglements--that the notion of a country unbound from the constraints of history really began to take root. *Democratic Review*--the magazine of a nineteenth-century progressive movement known as Young America--captured this sentiment in 1839, when it editorialized, "[O]ur national birth was the beginning of a new history ... which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only."

According to this line of thought, each generation of Americans could always start over and transform their country. [...] "The expansive future is our arena," wrote *Democratic Review*. "We are entering on its untrodden space ... with a clear conscience unsullied by the past."

In his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, which appeared in 1923, D.H. Lawrence identified the celebration of the new and the rejection of the old as "the true myth of America." According to this myth, Lawrence wrote, America "starts old, old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing of the old skin, towards a new youth." The myth of America as Adam runs through our country's literature [...]" (from J. Judis, "American Adam")

<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/american-adam>

b) *The Great Gatsby*, chapter 6:

"The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar,

and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end."

Group 3:

Analyse the poem below and relate it to The Great Gatsby.

"Richard Cory" (1897)

BY EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Group 4:

Read the text below. Find the main points and discuss them in relation to The Great Gatsby. Focus on chapter 6 in particular.

Societies rise and fall; they blossom and wither away into the backwaters of history. Societies are defined by those who inhabit them, but strangely, inversely, people are also imprints of the societies they inhabit. There is an ebb and flow, where the individual affects and is affected by “the group” in varying levels of extremity. F. Scott Fitzgerald breathed these tides of humanity, and during his lifetime witnessed one of the greatest “Platonic Conceptions” of society to crash upon modern times: the Roarin’ Twenties.

The decade fed off of itself, growing larger and larger as the people grew more affected by, and, in turn, caused the explosion of the consumerism and greed that marked the era. It was a giant step, a lurch, away from enlightenment.

As Jay Gatsby would lie in his bed at night, “a universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain...” Imprinted by a society that placed increasing amounts of social importance on wealth, on the *appearance* of success, Gatsby viewed a “fantastic” and “grotesque” fantasy that fulfilled every desire of cheap and, in actuality, worthless material wealth. For five years, he fantasizes about the woman he desires, the wonderful, white, Daisy whose “voice is full of money.” These fantasies provide Gatsby a hint at the “unreality of reality,” the secret that everything around him was simply a woven fantasy, an ephemeral dream with no weight or meaning, able to float freely in his “ghostly heart.” Jay Gatsby’s emotional response to the world around him is to disappear into fantasy until the oblivious, disaffected embrace of sleep can finally wrest him away.

His reaction, or more accurately Fitzgerald’s writing of it, can reveal something about human nature in general.

We are dreamers.

It matters not what the social definition of the age may be, we dream and we plan and we scheme about fulfilling that standard. Fitzgerald was provided with a unique opportunity to capture this essence; he lived in a time where that standard was material and quantifiable. Fitzgerald was equally opportunely positioned to make an impassioned case that the standard supporting 20s society was *wrong*. If we are dreamers, and we live to fulfill the ideals of the society we inhabit, and that society’s standard has shifted and degenerated into something meaningless and empty, then we in turn become meaningless and empty ghosts. It was that meaninglessness that drove so many people to reckless parties and copious amounts of alcohol, which could turn any situation

“significant, elemental, and profound.” And it was that same emptiness that let them die alone and miserable. The “rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing.” The standards and benchmarks of society at the time were embedded into something *imaginary*, something nonexistent.

This is what makes *The Great Gatsby* so transcendent. Whether or not our current society, or indeed the society of *any* reader in *any* age, is based on a standard of meaningless wealth, is irrelevant. The readers can learn, through the eyes of someone that witnessed the standard of society’s influence on people during a tangible time, about who they are as people. It can lead them to *think*, about what their current society’s standard may be, what its effects on them are. And if they recognize that their society is enveloped in meaninglessness, they can cut off society’s impression upon them, develop their own standard of living, and provide meaning to their lives.

(from: Prappleizer's Blog, <http://prappleizer.wordpress.com/2012/02/28/jay-gatsby-and-human-nature/>)

Group 5:

Read the text below. Find the main points and discuss them in relation to The Great Gatsby. Focus on chapter 6 in particular.

“So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (180).

This last line of F. Scott Fitzgerald's iconic novel *The Great Gatsby* carries with it the weight of a warning carefully developed within its pages: each of us carries our past with us, but changing that past is an exercise in futility. The novel's narrator, Nick, gives Fitzgerald's warning a voice, informing the novel's titular character, “You can't repeat the past,” to which Gatsby replies, “Why of course you can!” (110). Despite their opposing views, the past exerts a powerful force over both characters' present circumstances, and here, Fitzgerald introduces another central idea: hope. Gatsby's past emerges in his “romantic hope” for the future—a blind optimism rooted in his personal powers of reinvention. Simultaneously, Nick's past, grounded in a sensible Midwestern upbringing, allows him to place his hope in those around him rather than in the material infatuations Gatsby treasures.

Nick's incorruptible Midwestern values (much like Gatsby's “incorruptible dream” of changing the past) guide him through the novel: “...’Just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages you've had,’” Nick's father instructed him (1). Nick continues, explaining that his father's words have forced him to “reserve all judgments” and that “reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope” (1). Nick, then, shares in a version of Gatsby's hope for the future. The important demarcation, however, is that Nick's solid upbringing has taught him to place his hope in people, not things. This, perhaps, is what Nick refers to when he says that Gatsby “represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn” but also why he must reassure himself that “Gatsby turned out all right in the end” (2). Indeed, throughout the novel, Nick reminds himself of his hope in Gatsby [...] His claim that he is “one of the few honest people” he has ever known forces him to confront the “vague understanding” of an engagement back home before he pursues his interest in Jordan Baker (60). These “interior rules” are Nick's defining characteristics, ones Gatsby notably lacks.

Gatsby's past, unlike Nick's, is indistinct. He has used his “extraordinary gift for hope” — his ambition—to better what he sees as faults in himself as his “General Resolves” prove. But Gatsby goes further than merely correcting his faults; he invents a new identity. By the time the reader meets Jay Gatsby, he has changed his name, denied his parents' existence, and exaggerated the better aspects of his life (his brief college education, his dubious wealth) to

immense proportions. In doing so, Gatsby has proved to himself that he can successfully change the story of his past. Changing his past with Daisy, then, is not such an insurmountable dream. It is important to note, however, that Gatsby consistently places his “infinite capacity for hope” in things (money, clothes, houses), which he believes will impress Daisy. They do—Daisy cries over the inherent possibility associated with Gatsby's fine shirts—but Gatsby misses the point. By not placing his hope in Daisy the person but rather the material aspects associated with acquiring her, he transforms Daisy herself into a thing—an overblown manifestation of hope and obsession. Gatsby objectifies her when he describes her voice as “full of money,” and Nick realizes this fact when he notes that Daisy must have, at times, fallen short of “the colossal vitality of [Gatsby's] illusion”(120, 97). In fact, Gatsby objectifies everyone in his world, reducing them into bits of opportunity. [...]

(from: Mason Scisco, "Past and Hope in The Great Gatsby",

http://reading.cornell.edu/reading_project_06/gatsby/documents/Scisco.pdf)