



Using this guide

Why read this guide?

The purposes of this A-level Literature Guide are to enable you to organise your thoughts and responses to the text, deepen your understanding of key features and aspects and help you to address the particular requirements of examination questions and coursework tasks in order to obtain the best possible grade. It will also prove useful to those of you writing a coursework piece on the text as it provides a number of summaries, lists, analyses and references to help with the content and construction of the assignment.

Note that teachers and examiners are seeking above all else evidence of an *informed personal response to the text*. A guide such as this can help you to understand the text and form your own opinions, and it can suggest areas to think about, but it cannot replace your own ideas and responses as an informed and autonomous reader.

Page references in this guide refer to the 1990 Penguin Classics edition of the text, edited by Tony Tanner.

How to make the most of this guide

You may find it useful to read sections of this guide when you need them, rather than reading it from start to finish. For example, you may find it helpful to read the *Contexts* section before you start reading the text, or to read the *Chapter summaries and commentaries* section in conjunction with the text — whether to back up your first reading of it at school or college or to help you revise. The sections relating to the Assessment Objectives will be especially useful in the weeks leading up to the exam.

Key elements



Look at the **Context** boxes to find interesting facts that are relevant to the text.

Context

Be exam-ready

Broaden your thinking about the text by answering the questions in the **Pause for thought** boxes. These help you to consider your own opinions in order to develop your skills of criticism and analysis.

Pause for **Thought**



Build critical skills

Taking it further boxes suggest poems, films, etc. that provide further background or illuminating parallels to the text.

Taking it **Further**



Where to find out more

Use the **Task boxes** to develop your understanding of the text and test your knowledge of it. Answers for some of the tasks are given online, and do not forget to look online for further self-tests on the text.

Task

Test yourself

Follow up cross references to the **Top ten quotations** (see pp. 90–92), where each quotation is accompanied by a commentary that shows why it is important.

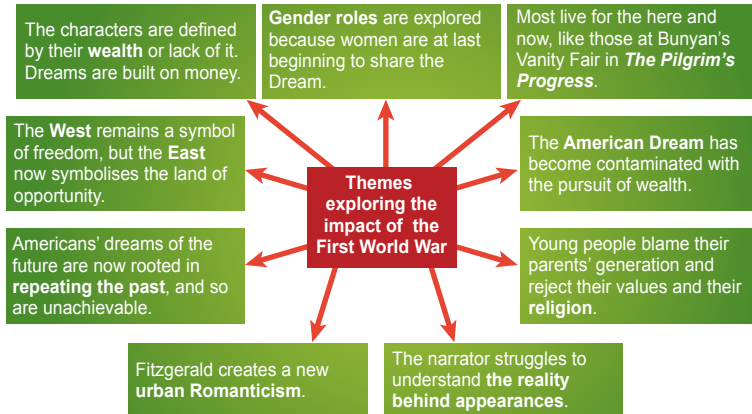
Know your text

Don't forget to go online: www.philipallan.co.uk/literatureguidesonline where you can find additional exam responses, a glossary of literary terms, interactive questions, podcasts and much more.



Themes

As this diagram shows, the themes are all interlinked and crucial to them all is the fact that the novel is set at a particular time in history, shortly after the First World War.



The American Dream

Context

Daniel Boone was famous for winning what is now known as the state of Kentucky from the Native Americans. Buffalo Bill Cody was a soldier and showman, among other things. He earned his nickname by killing 4,280 buffalo in 18 months.

The American Dream is rooted in the American Declaration of Independence (see Historical context, p. 61 of this guide) and its insistence on 'all men' having the right to the 'Pursuit of Happiness' and in the desire of immigrants to create a land of opportunity. The pioneer in *The Great Gatsby*, Dan Cody, 'a token of forgotten violence' (p. 157), bears the names of two of the legendary heroes of frontier life, Daniel Boone and Bill Cody.

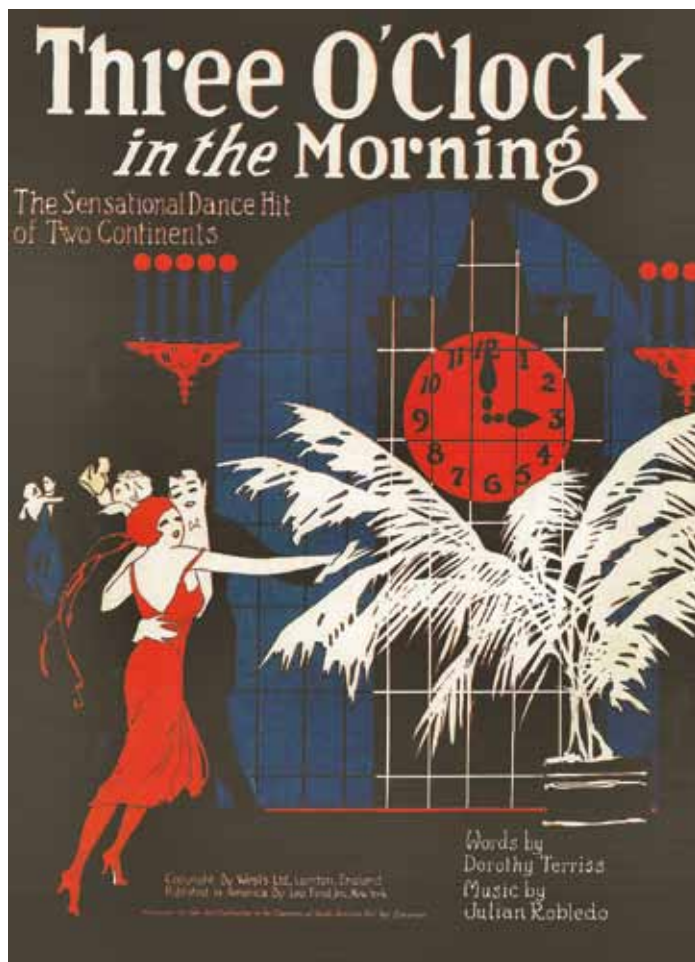
Fitzgerald makes no attempt to romanticise his portrait of Cody, who would seem to be the antithesis of the American Dream, yet in fact he represents the hard reality. If happiness is defined as a 'right' and regarded as an entitlement like 'life' and 'liberty', then the Declaration of Independence can be interpreted as justifying the actions of those who pursue wealth at any cost. Cody's wealth was supposedly 'a product of the Nevada silver fields, of the Yukon, of every rush for metal since seventy-five' (p. 96). Prospecting did create millionaires, but the mania to get rich brought out the worst in human nature. In the twentieth century, men like Jay Gatsby got rich quickly, but Fitzgerald shows that his methods sit uneasily with the romance of his dream.

Wealth

The Great Gatsby is full of money and the reader is permitted to glimpse the extravagant lifestyle of the fabulously wealthy. However, Fitzgerald has exposed the reality behind the façade. In this society everyone is defined by their wealth and when it was acquired. There is a sharp division between the inhabitants of East Egg with their 'old money' and those of West Egg with 'new money', but both are going from 'nothing to nothing'. Both communities live in close proximity to the desperate poverty of those in the valley of ashes and have to travel through the valley every time they go into New York.

New York was built with 'nonofactory money', which has a bad smell because it has been acquired illegally. Nick's family's money comes from a business built up when his great-uncle paid for a substitute to fight for him in the American Civil War. Tom is from Chicago, so it is most likely that his family made their money in the infamous meat trade. Gatsby's dream is built on the money he has to acquire to reach Daisy, but his methods of acquiring it frighten her away.

Manhattan is the financial centre and that is where Nick is learning about the bond business. Although the word suggests honour and dependability, bonds are only a substitute for real money, and in the 1920s they were sold 'on the margin', to people who could not afford to pay for them but intended to pay their creditor out of the profits when the shares were sold. New York is also where the gambler and criminal businessman, Meyer Wolfshiem, has his office.



Dance music flourished in the nightclubs frequented by the wealthy. The song 'Three o'clock in the morning' is mentioned in Chapter VI.

Context

During the American Civil War (1861–65), 11 Southern slave-owning states seceded from the United States and formed the Confederacy, which fought against the United States (the Union). The South was heavily defeated and slavery was officially abolished throughout America.



East and West

Early settlers from Europe travelled west to the New World. For Americans, the West has always been a powerful symbol of opportunity and freedom. Going west was always seen as following the path of the sun and therefore the setting in the west is the end of the trail and the pioneers' journeys, their hopes and dreams. However, life for the pioneers who pushed forward the frontier of civilisation in the Wild West was hard and the law was difficult to enforce, so they developed a distinctive American spirit, very different from those who remained in the East, where the influence of the Old World was stronger.

The pioneers were survivors and Nick suggests that the harshness of their lives had destroyed their sense of the 'fundamental decencies'. When the continent was 'tamed', its mineral wealth exploited and the West Coast populated, there were no longer so many opportunities to make one's fortune, so the same ruthless men turned east. The financial and business world on the Eastern Seaboard came to symbolise the opportunity to make lots of money quickly.

Repeating the past

The Romantic poets were fascinated by time and Keats especially explored different ways of trying to defeat time in his poetry. Fitzgerald takes up this theme of the Romantics and explores humanity's attempts to repeat the past. Jay Gatsby has rewritten his past, manipulated time once when he reinvented himself (p. 95), and he dreams of doing it again.

Nick also wants to go back to the clear-cut moral world of wartime (p. 8). He dreams of returning home on the train (pp. 166–67), as he had done as a youth, and finding again the old familiar traditions and moral values he had grown up with.

Nick 'felt that Tom would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game' (p. 12).

The man who built Gatsby's house tried to bribe his neighbours to participate in his recreation of the past. They refused (p. 85). He has faithfully recreated 'a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy' (p. 11), but it is a 'huge incoherent failure of a house' (p. 171), a description that underlines the futility of Gatsby's dream of repeating the past.

Taking it Further

An Hôtel de Ville is a city or town hall. To see an image of a typical Normandy Hôtel de Ville check out:

<http://static.panoramio.com/photos/original/5545325.jpg>

Urban Romanticism

Fitzgerald chose to have a narrator with a romantic imagination so that, when Nick sees Gatsby's photograph, he enthuses, 'it was all true. I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart' (pp. 65–66). This choice allows Fitzgerald to gloss over the means by which Gatsby became rich and concentrate on his dream.

Nick, however, is not a Romantic in the nineteenth-century tradition; Fitzgerald reconstructed Romanticism to fit 1920s urban America. Nick describes New York with its 'white chasms', created by tall buildings, in 'the enchanted metropolitan twilight' (p. 57), and he finds Romantic images indoors, such as his description of how the wind blew the curtains 'like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-coloured rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea' (p. 13).

When Daisy imagines that she sees a nightingale, she knows that it is not native to America and must have 'come over on the Cunard or White Star Line' (p. 20), a symbolic acknowledgement that Romanticism has had to adapt to American culture. Nevertheless, it gives insight into the sadness beneath her 'tense gaiety', and the suggestion of her longing for romantic love adds pathos to the scene where the 'fifth guest's shrill metallic urgency' (p. 21) will not let her forget that her husband has a mistress.

Fitzgerald echoes 'Ode to a Nightingale' when Daisy and Nick visit Gatsby's house. While Keats listens to the bird's song, he is lying under trees. The moon is out 'But here there is no light,/Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown'. Nick observes that Daisy and Gatsby sit in a dark corner of the room 'where there was no light save what the gleaming floor bounced in from the hall' (p. 92). Instead of moonlight coming down from 'heaven', the light from an electric bulb in the hall is reflected upwards. Instead of the light being 'blown' naturally on the breezes, it is 'bounced' like a solid man-made object. As well as creating an urban Romantic moment, the echo helps Fitzgerald evoke the significance of the moment for the two lovers as they are alone for the first time for five years.

Context

In classical mythology, Philomel, a tragic victim of male lust and brutality, was turned into a nightingale, so, as well as being a romantic image, the bird carries associations with tragedy. So do the Cunard and White Star Lines, because of the sinking of the *Lusitania* and the *Titanic*.

Task 5

Find other examples of Fitzgerald's use of contemporary technology to evoke romantic images. Explore what you think he has achieved by doing so.



Appearance and reality

Nick's view

Nick reports his sense impressions as events unfold, but he struggles to understand the reality behind them. He is our eyes; we see only what he notices and comments on. Nick is, by nature, an onlooker. At the Buchanans' house, he wants to give the impression of being frank and open, 'to look squarely at every one, and yet to avoid all eyes' (pp. 20–21), not wanting to get involved. Incomprehensibly, he tells us that his instinct was to telephone for the police. A hint of an explanation may be found in the following paragraph. Tom and Jordan stroll back into the library, 'as if to a vigil beside a perfectly tangible body'. To the over-imaginative Nick, the telephone call has killed something, and Tom and Jordan are going to keep watch and say prayers over it. Fitzgerald seems to be signalling to his readers that Nick has a tendency for hyperbole, and we should not take everything he says too literally.

In New York, he watches with a 'restless eye' and imagines assignations with romantic women (p. 57). When Tom and Daisy come to one of Gatsby's parties, he feels an unpleasantness in the air and speculates that he is looking at the party, and at West Egg itself, through Daisy's eyes: 'It is invariably saddening to look through new eyes at things upon which you have expended your own powers of adjustment' (pp. 100–01). These remind the reader that he is not an omniscient narrator and that everything he writes is filtered through his own vision and insight, or lack of it.

After Gatsby's death, Nick realises that 'the East was haunted for me... distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction' (p. 167), reminding the reader once again that we are reading Nick's interpretation, filtered through his defective vision. Finally, sprawled out on the beach, he broods 'on the old, unknown world', trying to see through the eyes of the pioneering Dutch sailors.

Windows

Fitzgerald continues to investigate the gap between appearance and reality by making numerous references to windows. In each one the observer's vision may have been distorted, and Fitzgerald seems to be warning his readers to mistrust the perceptions of his narrator, who thinks 'life is much more successfully looked at from a single window' (p. 10). This increases the mystery and ambiguity surrounding events.

...Nick's interpretation, filtered through his defective vision

Top ten **quotation** >

The 'labyrinth of wind-shields' in Gatsby's car (p. 63) acts like a maze of mirrors reflecting a dozen suns. It is as if they are in 'a conservatory', with no awareness of what is happening outside on the road. Later, looking through the window of Gatsby's house, Daisy thinks the clouds look solid enough to support Gatsby's weight (p. 91). Daisy romantically imagines she can keep Gatsby as a sort of doll, to play with when she wants to. Myrtle looks out of a window at the garage and sees Tom with another woman (p. 119). However, what appears to be the truth that the other woman is his wife or a new mistress is actually an illusion.

After the accident, Nick peers through the pantry window at Tom and Daisy (p. 138). He thinks he sees 'intimacy' between Tom and Daisy, but 'anyone' might disagree that they are 'conspiring together'; they are not holding hands, Tom's hand covers Daisy's, so it is more likely he is taking charge. Again, Wilson looks through the window at the faded advertisement for Dr T. J. Eckleburg and believes that the eyes belong to God, but these eyes are blind (p. 152). Wilson is taken in by the appearance, but the reader understands the reality. While the people who live in the valley of ashes are losing their dreams and dying, turning into ash or dust, Eckleburg will ironically live on and survive to represent the age of materialism.

Religion

Fitzgerald had a strongly religious, Catholic upbringing, and, although he chose to leave the church at the age of 21, there is a powerful spiritual element at work in this novel. He exposes the emptiness beneath the glittering sophistication of postwar America and he invokes religion to demonstrate it.

The most explicitly religious reference comes when Wilson looks at the eyes of Dr T. J. Eckleburg and tells Michaelis how he told Myrtle: 'God knows what you've been doing, everything you've been doing. You may fool me, but you can't fool God!' (p. 152). The fact that Wilson equates an advertisement with God suggests that spiritual values have been replaced by empty, meaningless images.

There are several references directly linking Gatsby with Christianity. He claims that what he tells Nick about his past is 'God's truth' and 'his right hand suddenly ordered divine retribution to stand by' (p. 63). However, everything he tells Nick is either an obvious lie or it is disproved later in the novel. Nick claims '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' (p. 95).

...the emptiness
beneath the
glittering
sophistication



Fitzgerald's use of capitalisation and the fact that the phrases are taken verbatim from the Bible clearly signal that he wants to link Gatsby with Christ. This reference, however, must be ironic. His adopted father is Cody, an unscrupulous self-made millionaire, so 'His Father's business' must be amassing a fortune by any means.

Nick says that Gatsby 'knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God' (p. 107); suggesting that this was the moment when Gatsby abandoned his lofty ambitions in order to pursue wealth so that he could win Daisy. If that is what Nick means, then Fitzgerald has shown us that he is mistaken, as Gatsby dedicated himself to the pursuit of worldly wealth before he met Daisy, when he changed his name and rowed out to Cody's yacht.

It must be significant that Gatsby shoulders his own mattress as he walks to his death, dies at about three o'clock in the afternoon, the same hour as Christ was crucified, and 'on the third day' his father comes and his true identity is revealed (p. 158).

However, these religious references say more about the narrator, Nick Carraway, than they do about the eponymous hero. Although Nick clearly had a very religious upbringing and has a strong moral code, it seems that he no longer believes in God. He appears to be searching for something to fill that spiritual need in his life when he meets Gatsby. What attracts him to Gatsby is his 'extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness' (p. 8). Like Christ, Gatsby offers the promise of something better, 'the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us'.

Top ten **quotation** >

The seven deadly sins

Further evidence of Nick's religious background can be found in his illustrations of the seven deadly sins. For instance:

Pride

Tom says: 'It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things' (p. 18). Fitzgerald exposes the lie that the American Dream is open to all, because those who have power work to keep it.

Envy

Gatsby 'took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand' (p. 142). Fitzgerald exposes a materialistic society based on envy, in which everyone covets something they have

Task 6

Find evidence of some of the other sins: gluttony, lust, avarice, wrath and sloth.

not got, everyone wants to get rich, or, if they are rich, preserve their position against the newly rich.

The seven cardinal virtues

Nick observes that ‘everyone suspects himself of at least one of the cardinal virtues’ (p. 59) and claims that his virtue is honesty.

Faith

Nick says of Wolfshiem that ‘It never occurred to me that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people’ (p. 71). Fitzgerald’s use of the word ‘faith’ here is ironic, as God has been replaced by sport and the desire to make money by betting on its outcome.

Nick says of Gatsby that ‘I had one of those renewals of complete faith in him that I’d experienced before’ (p. 123). Nick’s faith is not in God but in Gatsby.

Hope

Nick writes that Gatsby had ‘an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again’ (p. 8). However, Gatsby’s hope is not in a spiritual heaven, but that another man’s wife will declare her love for him.

Nick expresses an awareness of something better, but seems to have no hope of his own, except to learn ‘the shining secrets that only Midas and Morgan and Maecenas knew’ (p. 10), how to make money.

‘The World’s Fair’ (p. 79)

Since 1678 when John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the concept of society being a ‘fair’ has frequently been employed by writers. Thackeray clearly explains this metaphor in *Vanity Fair* (1847): ‘Vanity Fair is a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbugs and falsenesses and pretensions.’

Fitzgerald first intended his short story ‘Absolution’ to be the prologue to *The Great Gatsby*, giving insights into his eponymous hero’s upbringing. In this story, a priest tells a boy to go and observe a ‘glittering’ amusement park, but not to get up close ‘because if you do you’ll only feel the heat and the sweat and the life.’ However, the boy, ‘sat there, half terrified...but underneath his terror he felt that...there was something ineffably gorgeous somewhere that had nothing to do with God.’

Task 7

Explore the novel for evidence of the other virtues: prudence, love, justice, fortitude, temperance.

Context

In Bunyan’s novel, *Vanity Fair* was a fair selling vanities, in the town of Vanity. It offers his hero, Christian, worldly pleasures to tempt him away from his pilgrimage to the Celestial City.



Context

The epigraph is attributed to Thomas Parke D'Invilliers. However, he was a fictional character in Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*.

Nick seems obsessed with 'the heat and the sweat'

Fitzgerald uses words and images from the semantic field of circus and carnival to show that Nick is attracted to the 'ineffably gorgeous' World's Fair, but is aware of its falseness and later feels only 'the heat and the sweat'. Here are some other examples that Fitzgerald has used.

- The epigraph to the book (p. 5), taken from Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, suggests that Gatsby has to act like a circus performer and become the 'gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover' in order to win Daisy.
- At Gatsby's parties, there are 'enough coloured lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden', and the salads have 'harlequin designs' (p. 41).
- Gatsby's guests 'conducted themselves according to the rules of behaviour associated with an amusement park' (p. 43).
- Nick tells us that Gatsby's 'career as Trimalchio was over' (p. 108). Trimalchio threw lavish parties and sought to impress his guests with all manner of excesses. (See Context box on p. 20 of this guide.)
- Nick notes that 'the whole caravansary had fallen in like a card house at the disapproval in her [Daisy's] eyes' (p. 109).
- From this point on, Nick no longer uses the language of the fairground; he seems obsessed with 'the heat and the sweat', although Tom refers to Gatsby's car as 'this circus wagon' (p. 115). Nick has realised at last that what appears 'ineffably gorgeous' has 'nothing to do with God' ('Absolution').

Gender roles

Female roles

During the First World War, women had become used to filling the men's roles in the workplace; they had more freedom and financial independence. The rapid growth in mass-produced cars gave them the opportunity for greater mobility, and new technology created celebrities in entertainment and sport. The original wording of the Declaration of Independence promised the Dream to men, but, in the Roaring Twenties, it became possible for women to pursue it.

Jordan Baker

Fitzgerald named Jordan Baker after two automobile manufacturers, so her name fits well with a girl who has taken full advantage of the opportunities for women in postwar America and become a professional sportswoman. There is tension, however, because the male characters have traditional attitudes and disapprove of her emancipation.

Context

Edward S. Jordan manufactured smart luxury cars aimed at women. The Baker Company manufactured electric automobiles, which held many land speed and distance records in the early 1900s.

Daisy Buchanan

As an unmarried woman, Daisy had her own car and was able to work voluntarily for the Red Cross, which meant that she was not under constant supervision. However, Daisy grew up in the old-fashioned world of Kentucky, and she belongs to a class in which women were still not expected to support themselves. Marriage was the only appropriate way for her to break away from parental control. As a married woman, Daisy has less freedom as she has no car of her own.

Myrtle Wilson

Myrtle is poor and the only way she can change her situation is through a man. For ten years she has tried to persuade her husband to go west, so when she meets the handsome and obviously rich Tom Buchanan, and he propositions her, she sees an opportunity to lift herself out of the despairing environment that is the valley of ashes.

Male roles

Fitzgerald also explores a range of men's roles. Tom represents a powerful patriarchy strongly resisting social change. Nick's sexuality is not made clear. Daisy describes him as a 'rose'; Myrtle points him out as someone to whom it is incredible that she could ever be attracted. Nick is attracted to Jordan because she is 'like a young cadet', and he has a strange encounter with Chester McKee, 'a pale, feminine man'.

Pause for Thought



What are the most important themes of the film version you have watched? How do these compare with those of the novel?

Working with the text



Meeting the Assessment Objectives

AO1: Articulate creative, informed and relevant responses to literary texts, using appropriate terminology and concepts, and coherent, accurate written expression.

For AO1, you need to write fluently, structuring your essay carefully, guiding your reader clearly through your line of argument and using the sophisticated vocabulary, including critical terminology, which is appropriate to an A-level essay. You will need to use frequent embedded quotations to give evidence of close detailed knowledge, and you should demonstrate familiarity with the whole text.

AO2: Demonstrate detailed critical understanding in analysing the ways in which structure, form and language shape meaning in literary texts.

For AO2, it is a good idea to practise writing in analytical sentences, comprising a brief quotation or close reference, a definition or description of the feature you intend to analyse, an explanation of how Fitzgerald has used this feature, and an evaluation of why he chose to use it.

AO3i: Explore connections and comparisons between different literary texts.

Your examination board may require you to compare and contrast one or more other texts with *The Great Gatsby*, and you should try to find specific points of comparison, rather than merely generalising. If this AO is assessed in single-text questions, you could explore the connections with another postwar work such as T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Other useful additional texts would be Fitzgerald's own short stories; 'Absolution', which was originally part of *The Great Gatsby*, deals with

...practise writing
in analytical
sentences



Taking it Further

Read 'Absolution' on <http://gutenberg.net.au/fsf/ABSOLUTION.html> and 'Winter Dreams' on www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/winterd/winter.html.

the early life of a boy like James Gatz. 'Winter Dreams' deals with a poor boy, Dexter Green, attracted to the life of the rich; although here Fitzgerald uses an omniscient narrator rather than a partially involved narrator. Both Gatsby and Dexter dream of the shallow superficial glitter of a society which pursues wealth. Like Gatsby, for whom Daisy's popularity 'increased her value', Dexter is attracted to Irene because she was 'sturdily popular, so intensely great'. There is a significant contrast at the end when the omniscient narrator of 'Winter Dreams' states 'The dream was gone', whereas Nick can only speculate that Gatsby 'must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream'.

Alternatively you could choose to trace a common theme which appears in *The Great Gatsby* and one or more other texts such as love, the American Dream, the role of women or appearance and reality.

AO3ii: Look at various possible different interpretations and use these to develop your own.

This implies looking at various critical views as well as thinking about what you and your fellow students think. Because Nick is an unreliable narrator, there are plenty of opportunities for you to explore different interpretations of events. For example, you may think that his presentation of Daisy and Jordan is unsympathetic and judgemental and offer another possible reading of the detailed observations he makes.

Nick accepts the inquest's findings that Wilson murdered Gatsby. However there is evidence which suggests that Fitzgerald intended to raise the possibility that this might have been a contract killing, carried out by a hit man hired by one of Gatsby's business associates. When Gatsby starts his affair with Daisy, he dismisses all his servants and replaces them with 'some people Wolfshiem wanted to do something for' (p. 109). Fitzgerald makes a point of saying that the chauffeur, 'one of Wolfshiem's protégés', heard the shots but did nothing. Nick firmly believes that the servants knew that Gatsby was dead before he arrived. This suggests that Wolfshiem planted his servants in Gatsby's house to keep an eye on Gatsby. It is possible that Gatsby was double-crossing Wolfshiem. After all, Gatsby offers Nick 'a little business on the side' and reassures him that he 'wouldn't have to do any business with Wolfshiem' (p. 80). Additionally, Wilson did not fight in the war, and he is too poor to own a car. It seems unlikely that he would own a gun or have the skill to kill with the first shot a man floating on an airbed without puncturing it.

You could suggest that it is ironic that Nick might have totally misread the whole story. Instead of Gatsby being the tragic hero of a romantic

love story, he might have been merely another victim of internecine strife in the criminal underworld. Instead of Wilson being a romantic hero, he might have just been an innocent victim of chance. Their deaths may have had nothing to do with any of the characters whom Nick thought so crucial to his two interlinked triangles of love and betrayal. If Fitzgerald did employ an unreliable narrator in order to suggest this, then interesting issues are raised.

AO4: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.

Some awareness of the effect of the First World War on the American economy and the American psyche is essential here. You should also demonstrate understanding of the historical roots of the American Dream and the significance of the symbolism of East and West in America. The most significant literary influences on Fitzgerald's writing are the poet John Keats, and the Polish writer Joseph Conrad.

Men's attitudes to women were markedly different, and you also need to be aware of the different attitudes towards race prevalent in the 1920s; Nick now seems unpleasantly anti-Semitic in his comments about Wolfshiem and racist in his attitude towards his Finnish housekeeper and Black Americans. His use of the word '**holocaust**' to describe the scene of the deaths of just two men was hyperbolic at the time of writing but now sounds unacceptably disrespectful to the victims of Nazi Germany.

Essay writing

The following sections give guidance on writing essays. Sample essays at A grade and C grade are provided online at www.philipallan.co.uk/literatureguidesonline.

Extract-based essay questions

Here are the questions to address when analysing any given extract from this novel:

- Why has Fitzgerald included this passage in the novel? What is its importance?
- How does this passage fit into the narrative structure of the novel?
- Which of the themes is Fitzgerald evoking here, and how does this passage fit into his treatment of that theme in the whole novel?
- What previous scenes do we need to recall in order to understand the implications of this passage?

Task 13

Find evidence that Nick may be seen as racist.

Holocaust great destruction or loss of life, or the source of that destruction, especially fire



Task 14

How would you approach a question to be marked only on AO1 and AO2 asking you to compare the ways in which Fitzgerald describes the two parties on pp. 43–56 and pp. 100–05?

- Does this extract foreshadow any future scenes?
- It is a first-person narrative, so how reliable is Nick's account at this point?
- Is there any evidence that Nick is self-consciously crafting his narrative?
- Is there any evidence of Nick's ambivalent attitudes?
- Is there any evidence that Nick's narrative is enhanced by his imagination?
- What does this passage reveal about Nick's character, feelings and his thoughts?
- Does Fitzgerald use any recurring images or symbols in this passage? If so, analyse how they fit into the overall pattern.
- If there is description, what mood is Fitzgerald evoking and how does he do it?
- Is there any speech in this passage? If so, what does it add to the effectiveness, and what does it tell us about the speaker?
- Are there any words, phrases or metaphors that would reward close analysis?

Whole-text questions

Make sure you know which Assessment Objectives are examined by your board and concentrate on those. AO1 is assessed by looking at your whole essay and judging whether your writing skills and vocabulary are appropriate for A-level, whether your essay has been carefully planned and whether you are clearly very familiar with the whole text. The other Assessment Objectives you can plan for.

Sample question

'The Great Gatsby is a sordid tale of deception, adultery and murder.' How do you respond to this view of the novel?

Possible approach

- Since there is no disputing the fact that the novel is about deception, adultery and murder, the question expects you to concentrate on whether this makes the story sordid. Define 'sordid' and then consider the evidence in turn.
- You could gain valuable marks for AO4 by demonstrating an understanding of the novel's various contexts. Fitzgerald sets the novel against the sordid backdrop of corruption through references to the fixing of the 1919 Baseball World Series, bootlegging, and passing counterfeit or stolen bonds. He also exposes the corruption of the

police through the murder of Rosenthal and the police commissioner's collusion with Gatsby.

- You can meet the requirements of AO2 by exploring Fitzgerald's narrative technique. His use of an involved narrator blurs the boundaries between deception and honesty. Nick is not a reliable narrator and his attitude is different from the reader's.
- There is an opportunity to gain marks for AO3 by offering an alternative interpretation: Gatsby's murder could be an ennobling act of love by Wilson *or* a sordid contract killing by one of Gatsby's criminal associates.
- Attitudes to adultery are also affected by Nick's distorted moral vision. Analyse his language for AO2 to show that Tom's and Myrtle's affair is described as sordid, but Daisy's and Gatsby's affair is excused by Nick's belief in the romance of Gatsby's love.
- Having shown that you understand why this question has been set, offer evidence which disagrees with its conclusion. You could analyse evidence of Fitzgerald's lyrical prose and Nick's romantic imagination.
- You can then draw your essay to a conclusion by saying that the story could be described as sordid *but* Fitzgerald lifts it out of being base and ignoble into the genre of romance with Gatsby's 'ineffable' dream and Nick's poetic descriptions.

Comparative questions

The examiners will expect you to offer a balanced essay with equal consideration given to each text, comparing and contrasting them seamlessly throughout your essay. As always, AO1 will be assessed throughout but you can plan carefully to meet the requirements of the other AOs.

Sample question

'We have only the word "love", yet we understand it to mean so much. There are so many different kinds of love that one single word cannot possibly do for them all.' Compare and contrast the presentation of love in at least two texts you have studied in the light of this comment.

Possible approach comparing *The Great Gatsby* with *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*

- It is especially important in a comparative essay to decide on your line of argument before you start planning your essay. You might conclude that Fitzgerald concentrates on romantic and parental love whereas Bernières explores love in all its forms.

...decide on your line of argument before you start planning your essay