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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Discuss as a class several of the major themes of the novel using the topics below and those that the students identify. Ask students to write a two-page essay on what they consider to be the book's most important theme exploring the reasons the topic would have resonated with readers when the book was first published. Is the topic still relevant today? If so, why? If not, why not?

Alienation

At one party, Nick observes, "People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away" (p. 37). Soon afterward, Tom breaks his lover's nose. Does Fitzgerald use parties to highlight his characters' failures to relate to one another? Do Gatsby's parties reflect genuine celebration or a kind of mourning?

Friendship

Nick is the only person, aside from Gatsby's father, who attends the funeral. What kind of friendship do Nick and Gatsby have? What does Nick derive from this friendship? Is it true friendship, or does Nick simply pity Gatsby his "romantic readiness"?

Identity

In Chapter 7, we learn of Gatsby's origins as James Gatz of North Dakota. In the novel, Gatsby has become his alter ego, leaving James Gatz behind as he travels the world as Dan Cody's steward. Was Gatsby doomed to tragedy as long as he disguised his Midwestern origins in favor of a more extravagant, fictional biography? Is Nick judging Gatsby for these imaginative exploits or admiring this skill?

The American Dream

In an era of new technology, new opportunity, and artistic expansion, does Fitzgerald's novel comment on American morality and idealism? Is *The Great Gatsby* a satire or critique of American life? If not, why not?



Homework

Begin essays, using the essay topics at the end of this guide. Outlines are due at the next class.