Summary of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby

Overview

"The Great Gatsby" is a tragic tale of love, obsession, and the elusive American Dream, set against the backdrop of the Roaring Twenties on Long Island, New York. Narrated by Nick Carraway, a young Midwesterner drawn into the glittering world of the wealthy, the story unfolds as a poignant reflection on the allure and disillusionment of a society consumed by wealth, status, and the pursuit of pleasure.  
  
Nick becomes entangled in the lives of his enigmatic neighbor, Jay Gatsby, and his cousin Daisy Buchanan, who lives across the bay in the more fashionable East Egg with her husband, Tom. Gatsby, a self-made millionaire shrouded in mystery, throws extravagant parties every weekend, hoping to attract Daisy's attention. Nick learns that Gatsby and Daisy had a passionate romance five years earlier, but were separated by Gatsby's lack of wealth and social standing. Now, Gatsby has amassed a fortune through illegal means and bought a mansion directly across from Daisy's, determined to win her back.  
  
Nick, acting as Gatsby's confidant and intermediary, arranges a meeting between the former lovers. The reunion is initially awkward and strained, but Gatsby's unwavering devotion and Daisy's lingering feelings rekindle their connection. Gatsby, eager to impress Daisy with his newfound wealth, takes her on a tour of his lavish mansion, showcasing his extravagant possessions and the life he has built for himself. However, Daisy's reaction is a mixture of awe and sadness, revealing the impossibility of fully recapturing the past.  
  
Tom, suspicious of Gatsby's relationship with Daisy, becomes increasingly hostile, determined to expose Gatsby's true origins and his involvement in illegal activities. The tension between the two men culminates in a heated confrontation in a New York City hotel room, where Gatsby declares his love for Daisy and insists that she never loved Tom. Daisy, torn between her past feelings for Gatsby and her present life with Tom, falters, unable to fully commit to either man.  
  
The confrontation ends in heartbreak for Gatsby, his dream of reuniting with Daisy shattered by the reality of her divided affections. As the group departs, tragedy strikes: Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress, is struck and killed by a speeding car. Gatsby, taking the blame to protect Daisy, becomes the target of George Wilson's grief-stricken rage.  
  
In the aftermath of the tragedy, Gatsby's carefully constructed world collapses. His parties cease, his friends disappear, and his carefully crafted persona is exposed as a hollow illusion. Nick, witnessing the callous indifference of Gatsby's former associates and the destructive carelessness of Tom and Daisy, becomes disillusioned with the world of the wealthy and the emptiness of their pursuits.  
  
The novel ends with Gatsby's death, a tragic consequence of his unwavering belief in a dream that proved to be both illusory and unattainable. Nick, reflecting on Gatsby's life and the events of the summer, recognizes the futility of chasing a past that cannot be repeated and the destructive power of clinging to idealized visions. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock, a symbol of Gatsby's yearning for an idealized future, becomes a poignant reminder of the elusive nature of the American Dream and the human tendency to strive for something that remains perpetually out of reach.

Whispers of Green

The story is narrated by Nick Carraway, a young man from the Midwest who moves to West Egg, Long Island, in the summer of 1922 to learn the bond business. Nick rents a small house next door to the lavish mansion of Jay Gatsby, a mysterious millionaire known for his extravagant parties.  
  
Nick is drawn into the world of the wealthy when he visits his cousin Daisy Buchanan and her husband, Tom, who live across the bay in the more fashionable East Egg. At their elegant home, Nick meets Jordan Baker, a professional golfer and friend of Daisy's, who reveals that Tom has a mistress in New York. Daisy, seemingly aware of the affair, appears both cynical and yearning for something more in her life.  
  
During dinner, Tom expresses his racist views, revealing a deep insecurity about the changing social order. The evening ends with a tense phone call from Tom's mistress, further highlighting the underlying tensions in their marriage. As Nick leaves, he observes Gatsby for the first time, a solitary figure reaching out towards a distant green light across the bay.  
  
Intrigued by his enigmatic neighbor, Nick learns from Jordan that Gatsby throws his lavish parties in the hope of attracting Daisy's attention. They had a brief but intense romance five years earlier, before Gatsby went off to war. Now, Gatsby has amassed a fortune and bought the mansion across from Daisy's, hoping to rekindle their lost love. Nick agrees to help Gatsby by inviting Daisy to tea at his house.

Ashes and Affections

The area between West Egg and New York City is a desolate industrial wasteland, a "valley of ashes" dominated by the looming billboard eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg. It is here that Tom Buchanan's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, lives with her husband, George, who runs a struggling garage.  
  
One afternoon, Tom forces Nick to accompany him on a trip to New York City, where they meet Myrtle and take her to a small, crowded apartment Tom keeps for their rendezvous. Myrtle undergoes a transformation, shedding her working-class persona and adopting an affected, haughty manner as she revels in the borrowed luxury of Tom's money.  
  
Myrtle's sister, Catherine, and a couple from downstairs, the McKees, join the gathering, which quickly devolves into a drunken, chaotic party fueled by Tom's endless supply of whiskey. Conversations revolve around gossip, infidelity, and social climbing, revealing the shallowness and moral decay beneath the veneer of wealth and sophistication.  
  
As the afternoon progresses, Myrtle becomes increasingly possessive of Tom and brazenly flaunts their affair. When she repeatedly shouts Daisy's name, Tom, enraged and drunk, violently breaks her nose. The party abruptly ends, leaving Nick feeling disgusted and disoriented by the ugliness he has witnessed.  
  
The chapter paints a stark contrast to the glittering world of Gatsby's parties, exposing the dark underbelly of the Roaring Twenties and the destructive consequences of unchecked wealth and desire. The valley of ashes, with its pervasive sense of despair and the judgmental eyes of Doctor Eckleburg, serves as a potent symbol of the moral wasteland that lies beneath the surface of the American Dream.

Gilded Illusions

Gatsby's lavish parties continue throughout the summer, drawing hordes of guests from across Long Island and New York City. Every weekend, his mansion transforms into a kaleidoscope of music, dancing, and drunken revelry, fueled by an endless flow of champagne and extravagant displays of wealth.  
  
Nick, initially hesitant, finds himself drawn into the spectacle, attending Gatsby's parties and observing the guests with a mix of fascination and amusement. He notes the constant stream of new faces, the casual introductions forgotten on the spot, and the wild rumors circulating about Gatsby's past.  
  
At one party, Nick finally meets his enigmatic neighbor. Gatsby, a surprisingly young and charming man, introduces himself and invites Nick for a ride in his hydroplane the next morning. Nick is struck by Gatsby's carefully crafted persona, his formal speech, and the air of mystery that surrounds him.  
  
During the party, a drunken guest crashes his car, adding to the chaotic atmosphere. Nick, feeling overwhelmed by the excess and the persistent rumors of Gatsby's shady dealings, leaves the party with Jordan Baker. She reveals the truth about Gatsby's past: he was born James Gatz, a poor boy from North Dakota, and reinvented himself as Jay Gatsby to win back the love of Daisy Buchanan.  
  
Nick learns that Gatsby's extravagant lifestyle and elaborate parties are all part of a grand scheme to recapture the past and reunite with Daisy. He has bought the mansion across the bay from her, hoping to attract her attention and rekindle their lost romance. Jordan reveals that Gatsby has asked her to arrange a meeting between him and Daisy, and Nick agrees to help by inviting Daisy to tea at his house.  
  
The chapter further explores the themes of illusion and reality, as Gatsby's carefully constructed persona begins to unravel. The party, while dazzling on the surface, reveals a sense of emptiness and desperation beneath the surface, hinting at the tragic consequences of Gatsby's obsessive pursuit of his unattainable dream.

Gatsby Unmasked

Nick begins keeping a list of the people who attend Gatsby's parties, a colorful assortment of social climbers, celebrities, and hangers-on, all drawn to the allure of Gatsby's wealth and the promise of a good time. The sheer volume of names underscores the superficiality and transience of Gatsby's social circle, highlighting his isolation despite the constant crowds.  
  
Gatsby picks Nick up in his extravagant car for lunch in New York City. During the drive, Gatsby attempts to dispel the rumors surrounding his past, claiming to be the son of wealthy Midwesterners and an Oxford graduate. However, his story seems rehearsed and unconvincing, leaving Nick with more questions than answers.  
  
At lunch, Gatsby introduces Nick to Meyer Wolfshiem, a notorious gambler and Gatsby's business associate. Wolfshiem, a shady character with a penchant for reminiscing about violent underworld figures, inadvertently reveals Gatsby's involvement in illegal activities. Nick is both fascinated and repelled by Gatsby's connection to this criminal world.  
  
As they leave the restaurant, they encounter Tom Buchanan. Gatsby, visibly uncomfortable in Tom's presence, disappears before a proper introduction can be made. Later that afternoon, Jordan Baker reveals the full story of Gatsby's past and his connection to Daisy.  
  
Jordan recounts how Gatsby, then a young army officer named Jay Gatz, fell in love with Daisy Fay in Louisville five years earlier. They had a passionate romance, but Gatsby was too poor to marry her. After the war, Gatsby made a fortune through illegal means and bought his mansion across from Daisy's, hoping to win her back.  
  
Gatsby's request of Nick is simple: to invite Daisy to tea so Gatsby can "come over." Nick is struck by the audacity and desperation of Gatsby's plan, realizing the depth of his obsession and the lengths he will go to recapture the past.  
  
The chapter deepens the mystery surrounding Gatsby, revealing his humble origins and his involvement in the criminal underworld. His carefully constructed facade crumbles further, exposing the lengths he has gone to create a life worthy of Daisy's love. The revelation of Gatsby's past and his grand scheme to reunite with Daisy sets the stage for the tragic events that unfold in the chapters to come.

Dreams Deferred

Nick arranges the tea party, feeling a mixture of anticipation and apprehension. Gatsby, anxious and eager to impress Daisy, sends over a gardener to cut Nick's grass and a delivery of flowers from his own greenhouse. He arrives early, dressed in a flamboyant white suit, his nervousness palpable.  
  
The meeting is initially awkward and strained. Gatsby, overwhelmed by the reality of Daisy's presence after five years, acts clumsily, knocking over a clock and retreating into a stiff, uncomfortable demeanor. Daisy, too, seems unsure how to react, her initial joy giving way to a palpable sense of unease.  
  
Nick, sensing their discomfort, leaves them alone for a while. When he returns, he finds a transformation has taken place. Gatsby is glowing with happiness, his awkwardness replaced by a newfound confidence. Daisy is tearful, but her tears seem to be a mixture of sadness and joy.  
  
Gatsby, eager to show off his wealth and success, takes Daisy on a tour of his mansion. He displays his extravagant possessions, including a collection of colorful shirts, hoping to impress her with the life he has built for himself. Daisy, overwhelmed by the sheer opulence, breaks down in tears, lamenting that she has never seen such beautiful shirts before.  
  
The rain begins again, forcing them inside. Gatsby, looking out the window, points out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, a symbol of his longing and his unattainable dream. He reveals that he bought the mansion solely to be near Daisy, hoping she would wander into one of his parties.  
  
To entertain Daisy, Gatsby calls upon Klipspringer, the "boarder" who seems to permanently reside in his mansion, to play the piano. As Klipspringer plays a popular tune, Nick observes the complex emotions playing across Gatsby's face. He senses that Daisy, while drawn to Gatsby, falls short of the idealized image he has held in his heart for so long.  
  
As Nick leaves, he sees Gatsby and Daisy lost in their own world, their hands clasped, their voices murmuring intimate secrets. He realizes the depth of Gatsby's love for Daisy and the tragic impossibility of fully recapturing the past. The chapter ends with a sense of foreboding, as the rain falls and the shadows lengthen, hinting at the storm that is about to break.

Self-Made Gatsby

Nick reveals Gatsby's true origins, dispelling the rumors that have circulated throughout the summer. Gatsby, born James Gatz to poor farmers in North Dakota, always yearned for a life of wealth and glamour. He reinvented himself at seventeen, changing his name and dedicating himself to the pursuit of his idealized vision of "Jay Gatsby."  
  
Gatsby's transformation began when he encountered Dan Cody, a wealthy copper tycoon, and became his personal assistant, sailing the world on Cody's yacht. Cody, a rough-hewn, hard-drinking man, became a mentor to Gatsby, instilling in him a taste for luxury and a disdain for alcohol. Gatsby inherited a small fortune from Cody, but was cheated out of it by Cody's mistress.  
  
Despite his newfound wealth, Gatsby remained fixated on Daisy. He returned to Louisville after the war, hoping to find her, but she was already gone, married to Tom Buchanan. Gatsby's dream of reuniting with Daisy became an obsession, driving him to amass a fortune through illegal means and create a life of extravagant display.  
  
Tom Buchanan, suspicious of Gatsby, attends one of his parties with Daisy. Gatsby, visibly nervous in Tom's presence, tries to impress him with his wealth and connections. Daisy, however, seems uncomfortable and out of place among Gatsby's guests, her initial excitement fading as the evening progresses.  
  
Tom, sensing a connection between Gatsby and Daisy, becomes increasingly hostile. He openly questions Gatsby's background and mocks his affected mannerisms. Gatsby, determined to win Daisy back, reveals his love for her, but Daisy remains hesitant, torn between her past feelings for Gatsby and her present life with Tom.  
  
The party ends on a sour note, with Tom's suspicions confirmed and Daisy's disillusionment growing. Gatsby, left alone with Nick, clings to the hope that he can still win Daisy back, believing that he can repeat the past and recapture their lost love.  
  
The chapter delves deeper into Gatsby's past, revealing the driving force behind his relentless pursuit of wealth and his obsessive desire for Daisy. It exposes the tragic flaw in Gatsby's dream: his belief that he can erase the past and recreate a lost love, ignoring the complexities of time and the irreversible consequences of choices made.

Heat and Heartbreak

The illusion of Gatsby's glamorous life begins to crumble as his parties cease and his house falls silent. Daisy's presence in his life disrupts the carefully constructed facade, revealing the emptiness beneath the surface. Gatsby fires his servants, replacing them with shady associates of Wolfshiem, further isolating himself from the world he once sought to impress.  
  
On a scorching hot day, Nick, Gatsby, Jordan, and Daisy gather for an uncomfortable luncheon at the Buchanans' house. Tom, increasingly suspicious of Gatsby's relationship with Daisy, seethes with barely concealed jealousy. The tension between the two men is palpable, their rivalry simmering beneath a veneer of forced civility.  
  
Daisy, caught in the middle, seems torn between her past love for Gatsby and her present life with Tom. She is drawn to Gatsby's romantic idealization of her, but also fearful of the consequences of breaking free from her comfortable, albeit loveless, marriage.  
  
The group decides to escape the oppressive heat by going to New York City. Tom, determined to expose Gatsby's true nature, insists on driving Gatsby's car, leaving Gatsby to follow with Daisy in Tom's coupe. During the drive, Tom confronts Gatsby about his past, revealing that he has investigated his business dealings and knows about his involvement in illegal activities.  
  
The confrontation reaches a climax in a stifling hotel room at the Plaza. Tom, fueled by jealousy and a sense of moral superiority, accuses Gatsby of being a bootlegger and a fraud. Gatsby, desperate to defend his name and win Daisy back, reveals his true love for her, declaring that she never loved Tom.  
  
Daisy, overwhelmed by the escalating tension and the weight of her own choices, falters. She admits to loving Gatsby, but cannot bring herself to deny her past feelings for Tom. The confrontation leaves Gatsby heartbroken and defeated, his dream of reuniting with Daisy shattered by the reality of her divided affections.  
  
As the group departs, Daisy leaves with Gatsby in his car, while Nick rides with Tom and Jordan. On the drive back to Long Island, they encounter a horrific scene: Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress, has been struck and killed by a speeding car. The chapter ends with a sense of impending doom, as the characters grapple with the consequences of their actions and the tragedy that has irrevocably altered their lives.

Lost and Found

Nick, unable to sleep after the day's traumatic events, goes to Gatsby's house, finding him desolate and clinging to a fading hope that Daisy will leave Tom. Gatsby recounts the story of his early love for Daisy, describing her youthful allure and the intoxicating world of wealth and privilege she represented. He admits to taking advantage of her innocence, creating a false sense of security to win her affection.  
  
Gatsby's time with Daisy before the war was a whirlwind of stolen moments and unspoken promises. He was captivated by her beauty and the effortless grace of her privileged life, while she was drawn to his charisma and the romantic vision he painted of their future together. However, Gatsby's lack of social standing and his impending deployment created an insurmountable barrier between them.  
  
After the war, Gatsby returned to Louisville, heartbroken and penniless, only to find Daisy gone, married to Tom. The realization that he had lost her fueled his obsessive pursuit of wealth, driving him to engage in illegal activities to achieve a level of success he believed would make him worthy of her love.  
  
Nick, listening to Gatsby's story, feels a mix of sympathy and disapproval. He recognizes the depth of Gatsby's love for Daisy, but also sees the futility of his attempts to recapture the past. Gatsby's dream, built on an idealized vision of Daisy and a distorted perception of the past, is ultimately unattainable.  
  
Meanwhile, the investigation into Myrtle's death unfolds. George Wilson, consumed by grief and driven to find the driver of the yellow car, becomes fixated on the idea that Gatsby was responsible. He is led to this conclusion by Tom, who, in a moment of self-preservation, reveals Gatsby's identity and implies his involvement in the accident.  
  
As Gatsby waits outside Daisy's house, hoping for a sign of her love, Nick observes Tom and Daisy inside, seemingly reconciled and conspiring to protect themselves. He realizes that Daisy will not leave Tom, and that Gatsby's dream is truly over.  
  
The chapter ends with a sense of tragic inevitability. Gatsby, clinging to his illusions, remains vulnerable to the forces that seek to destroy him. The stage is set for the final, devastating act, as Gatsby's unwavering faith in his dream leads him to a fatal confrontation with reality.

Green Dreams Fade

Nick, feeling responsible for Gatsby in the wake of the tragedy, tries to contact Gatsby's friends and associates for the funeral, but finds himself met with indifference and even hostility. Gatsby's carefully curated social circle evaporates, revealing the shallowness of their connections and the fleeting nature of his fame. Even Meyer Wolfshiem, Gatsby's business partner, refuses to attend the funeral, citing a personal policy of avoiding involvement with the dead.  
  
Only Gatsby's father, Henry C. Gatz, a simple, heartbroken man from North Dakota, makes the journey to West Egg. He arrives, overwhelmed with grief and bewildered by the opulence of his son's life. Mr. Gatz proudly shows Nick a childhood schedule Gatsby had written, filled with ambitious resolutions for self-improvement, a testament to his son's unwavering drive and determination.  
  
The funeral is a sparsely attended affair. Nick, Mr. Gatz, the minister, a few servants, and the owl-eyed man from Gatsby's library stand in the pouring rain as Gatsby is laid to rest. Daisy, the object of Gatsby's lifelong obsession, sends no message, no flowers, no acknowledgment of his existence.  
  
Nick, disillusioned by the events of the summer and the callous indifference of Gatsby's former friends, decides to leave West Egg and return to the Midwest. He reflects on the tragic waste of Gatsby's life, a life consumed by a dream that proved to be both illusory and destructive.  
  
Before leaving, Nick encounters Tom Buchanan on Fifth Avenue. In a tense exchange, Nick learns that Tom told George Wilson that Gatsby was the driver of the yellow car, leading Wilson to seek revenge and ultimately take his own life. Tom, unrepentant and self-righteous, justifies his actions, claiming that Gatsby "had it coming to him."  
  
Nick, disgusted by Tom's callous disregard for human life and his distorted sense of morality, realizes the true extent of the Buchanans' destructive carelessness. They are a couple insulated by wealth and privilege, capable of causing immense damage without consequence, leaving others to clean up the mess they leave behind.  
  
As Nick departs West Egg, he reflects on Gatsby's enduring belief in the green light, a symbol of his yearning for an idealized future. He recognizes the universality of this yearning, the human tendency to chase dreams that often recede before us. The novel ends with a poignant image of boats beating against the current, forever striving to reach a destination that remains perpetually out of reach, a metaphor for the human struggle against the relentless flow of time and the inevitable pull of the past.