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7 Life Lessons From 'The Great Gatsby'

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Happy birthday, F. Scott Fitzgerald! The famed author of such Jazz Age stories as "Tender Is the Night" and "The Beautiful and the Damned" was born on this day in 1896 and would be celebrating his 117th birthday if he were still alive.

We already know from [his inspiring letter to a family friend](#) that he could dole out excellent advice on writing, as he wrote: "You've got to sell your heart, your strongest reactions, not the little minor things that only touch you lightly, the little experiences that you might tell at dinner." And [Fitzgerald's letter to his daughter](#), who was away at camp at the time, offers equally wonderful advice, as he lists off the things she should and shouldn't worry about (worry about courage; don't worry about the past).

There's much to be learned from the author's fiction, too, especially his most famous novel, "The Great Gatsby." Here are seven life lessons we've taken away from the Great American Novel:

1. Optimism is a noble, if futile trait.

Throughout the book, Gatsby is characterized as being authentically hopeful, in spite of the adversity that he faces, and the lies he consistently tells. In the end, Nick almost idolizes him in spite of his dubious morality. Fitzgerald writes, "Gatsby turned out all right at the end," implying that, even though he died fighting for his passions, he went down nobly.

This responsiveness had nothing to do with that flabby impressionability which is dignified under the name of the "creative temperament" -- it was 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.

2. Money can't buy you love (or friends).

Gatsby attempts to woo Daisy with his lavish parties and home, but ultimately, he fails, mostly because Tom informs her of the truth: He made his fortune in an illegal manner. What's more, none of Gatsby's party attendees show up to his funeral, aside from Nick.

At first I was surprised and confused; then, as he lay in his house and didn't move or breathe or speak, hour upon hour, it grew upon me that I was responsible, because no one else was interested.

3. Unbridled passion isn't always a good thing.

Gatsby and Daisy's brief affair goes unnoticed for a time, until Tom catches Jay making eyes at his lover out in the open. Perhaps if Gatsby had contained himself, the pair could have followed through with their whimsical plans.

But Tom's passion, when let loose, has even more of a detrimental effect; his red-hot emotion is quick to take a violent turn, as he slaps and injures his mistress, Myrtle, when she playfully teases him.

"Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!" shouted Mrs. Wilson. "I'll say it whenever I want to! Daisy! Dai - "
Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand.

4. It's not easy to leave your past behind you.

As the tragic conclusion and poetic closing lines to Fitzgerald's book tell us, the past can be a messy thing to escape. As hard as Gatsby tries to shirk off his reputation as a bootlegger, he's unable to do so.

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

5. Don't critique others

The book kicks off with Nick professing his inability to critique anyone less fortunate than himself, which we learn eventually leads to his empathy for Gatsby. His open-mindedness gives him a deeper perspective on the people around him and protects him from falling subject to the glitzy, surface-level materialism of the '20s.

I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret griefs of wild, unknown men.

6. Physical beauty is fickle and fleeting.

From the moment we're introduced to Daisy, she seems more like a beautiful caricature of herself rather than an actual person. She flits and giggles and wins the heart of Gatsby, but ultimately leaves him in the dust in spite of his immense efforts.

The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house.

7. You know what they say about assuming.

Fitzgerald's tragic story quickly goes from sad to sadder, and many of the terrible events that unfold are based solely on false assumptions. When George discovers that his wife has died after being hit by a car, he assumes that Gatsby was the driver and proceeds to take revenge on him. In fact, Gatsby was covering for Daisy. Says Nick:

I couldn't forgive him or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy -- they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

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