

The Great Gatsby: Symbols and Techniques

Major Symbols: Fitzgerald uses many types of symbolism in the book. Some of the major types are listed below.

- **Settings:** Seasons, houses, communities, and other settings symbolize the theme, characters, or action in the book. Pay attention to descriptions of the surroundings to see how they relate to other elements of literature.
- **Possessions:** Clothes, books, cars, and other possessions tell the reader more about the characters who own them. “You are what you own” seems to be a persistent idea in the book. Pay attention to the little possessions as well as the major ones.
- **Colors:** Colors are very prominent in the book.
 - Yellow, gold, and silver usually represent wealth.
 - Blue is a color that depicts dreams or fantasies.
 - Green, a combination of yellow and blue, represents the American Dream and is also the color of money.
 - White implies purity or innocence (or at least the implied or perceived presence of those qualities).
 - Grey represents hopelessness and gloom.
 - Other colors include red (blood or danger) and lavender (indulgence or extravagance).
- **Descriptions:** Personality and appearance are often linked. Look for people’s physical descriptions to reflect their attitudes.
- **Religious Symbols:** God, Jacob’s ladder, the Holy Grail, and other religious symbols combine to say something about the main love interest in this book. Try to put the pieces together.

Literary Techniques: In addition to symbols, Fitzgerald uses several literary techniques, some of which you may have studied before, but some of which may be new to you. Some of the major techniques are as follows.

- **Juxtaposition** is used for comparisons. Juxtaposition is the technique of placing ideas in close proximity, either in the story or in the structure of the text itself. In the following example, Nick juxtaposes his house with other houses in the area, showing his place in the social structure:

My house was at the very tip of the egg, only fifty yards from the Sound, and squeezed between two huge places that rented for twelve or fifteen thousand a season . . . My house was an eyesore, but it was a small eyesore . . .—for eighty dollars a month. (Fitzgerald 5)

- Unimportant Details are often left out for clarity. In the following example, Nick summarizes several hours of a party, leaving out mundane details that might distract the reader from the more major points of the story:

People disappeared, reappeared, made plans to go somewhere, and then lost each other, searched for each other, found each other a few feet away.
(Fitzgerald 37)

- Flashbacks reveal information about characters' pasts. These flashbacks take the place of having the narrator fill in all of the information. Instead, other characters are allowed to tell their versions of the story, which may or may not be completely true. In the following example, Gatsby begins to tell Nick his life story:

“Well, I’m going to tell you something about my life,” he interrupted.
“I don’t want you to get a wrong idea of me from all these stories you hear.” (Fitzgerald 65)

- Dramatic Action is used in some scenes. Dramatic action replaces narration with what may seem to be a theatrical production. The narration that is there is almost like stage directions, directing the characters' movements. Dialogue often comes in rapid succession, with little or no attribution. In the following example, Tom and Nick engage in a short conversation about Nick's current profession:

Tom Buchanan, who had been hovering restlessly about the room, stopped and rested his hand on my shoulder.
“What are you doing, Nick?”
“I’m a bond man.”
“Who with?”
I told him.
“Never heard of them,” he remarked decisively. (Fitzgerald 10)

- Point of View is important because Fitzgerald utilizes a first-person narrator. The reader only knows what Nick knows, and Nick only knows what he is told. It is important to remember not only that the narrator's own opinion plays a part in the novel, but also that the details he is given may not always be accurate.
- Other literary terms and techniques with which you are more familiar are used throughout the book. Look for epiphany, foreshadowing, imagery, irony, paradox, simile, and theme. Many of these will be addressed in the study guides.

