

Movie discussion resource

The Great Gatsby (2013)

Engage with culture without disengaging your faith.

Genre: Drama

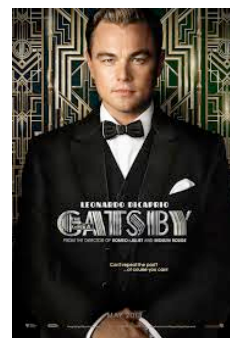
Rating: M (*adult themes, some violent images, sexual content, brief language*)

Length: 2 hours 33 minutes

Starring: Tobey Maguire, Leonardo DiCaprio, Carey Mulligan, Joel Edgerton.

Director: Baz Luhrmann

Screenplay: Baz Luhrmann, Craig Pearce (based on F.Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*)



Brief synopsis

The story is told by would-be writer Nick Carraway (Toby Maguire) who leaves the Midwest and arrives in New York City in the spring of 1922, an era of loosening morals, glittering jazz, bootleg kings, and sky-rocketing stocks. Chasing his own American Dream, Nick lands next door to a mysterious, party-giving millionaire, Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio), and across the bay from his cousin, Daisy (Carey Mulligan), and her philandering, blue-blooded husband, Tom Buchanan (Joel Edgerton). It is thus that Nick is drawn into the captivating world of the super rich, their illusions, loves and deceits. As Nick bears witness, within and without of the world he inhabits, he pens a tale of impossible love, incorruptible dreams and high-octane tragedy, and holds a mirror to our own modern times and struggles. © WB

Questions for discussion

The film and the book need to be considered as two different things, so focus discussion on the movie rather than how faithful it was to F.Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel. Some of the questions below are more about the actual movie making process that is a hallmark of Luhrmann's movies. An important question is how this process enhanced or distracted from the content. The themes of the film and the novel are relevant today in the 'dot com' boom - now 'bust' in the GFC. There will be much to discuss about the ideas depicted.

Some general questions might provide enough framework to get started:

- ❖ What stood out as the main points/highlights in the movie?
- ❖ What themes are explored?
- ❖ What assumptions were embedded in the story?
- ❖ What challenged you? What questions did it raise for you?
- ❖ Are there aspects of the story that resonated with your own experience or with the experience of others in a similar situation?
- ❖ Are there biblical or theological themes or characters that come to mind?

In pursuit of the 'holy grail'

Gatsby manipulated his circumstances, believing he was free to do anything to pursue Daisy, his 'holy grail'. His actions were premised on the belief that the means justify the end, and reveal a lack of moral and ethical constraints in his decision-making. How might his character be a symbol for modern day individuals and companies in pursuit of their own 'holy grail' with no moral and ethical constraints?

'He is Gatsby'

Baz Luhrmann's wife and collaborator Catherine Martin told the NY Times, 'He is Gatsby'. There is much to attract 'Bazzamatazz' Luhrmann to this fictional story of Gatsby, the self-made millionaire given to extravagance and excess. Does it help that Luhrmann as moviemaker has an insider's view of the kind of world he depicts? Does such a position lead itself to informed critique or collusion? Discuss.

There's a story to tell

We hear the story through Nick's recollection as a wide-eyed innocent. The main characters have died or fled, and he is the only witness left who is able to tell the story. He is encouraged to write as part of his therapy. It is certainly revelatory. How might the *process* of storytelling reveal a deeper meaning to our experiences? Discuss.

Gatsby - a babe in the woods of worldliness

Gatsby's whole life purpose is dedicated to getting Daisy back. Having revealed his dire financial circumstances to her a few years before, he has now built wealth beyond even his wildest dreams, mainly through illegal means. Yet, there is an innocence about him that collides with Tom's ruthless worldliness and deceit. Tom takes whatever he wants, but knows how to avoid the consequences and it is Tom who determines Jay's fateful ending. He represents those who really know how to ruthlessly 'play the game' - and win. Can you think of contemporary examples? Discuss.

Retrospective or prophetic?

Fitzgerald's 1925 novel is a critique of American culture in the 1920's, a symbol of the unsustainable boom that was doomed to collapse. The characters enjoyed extravagance oblivious to the financial and social catastrophe that was bound to happen eventually. In Luhrmann's film, the story is told looking back from the Depression of 1929. Is the story stronger when told retrospectively from the experience of the Great Depression, or with looming doom on the horizon to which none of the characters are privy?

Visual Feast

Critics have described it as 'a spectacle in search of a soul', a 'Bazdardisation'. But, is the excess really the point, a visual way of depicting the excesses and decadence of the 20's, and the shallowness of the nouveau riche and wanna be's? The contrasts of the haves and have nots, the wild parties and the cold and cavernous house, the way Gatsby showers his expensive shirts on Daisy, overwhelming her physically and emotionally. The wild zooms across the bay highlight the gulf between 'new' money and 'old' money. There are other times when the effects seem contrived, though maybe this is also a commentary about the way Gatsby's persona itself is contrived and constructed for effect? The party scenes are captured with constant movement and rapid editing, underlining the superficiality and hollowness of the hedonistic world of over stimulation and general excess (holding a mirror to the 21st century?). There is little character development, perhaps highlighting the superficiality. Is it possible to deliver engaging visual cinema that does not become what it is commenting on? Discuss.

Music

1920's music was very distinctive. Jazz was considered provocative and rebellious. Luhrmann uses contemporary hiphop, perhaps another music genre that is equally provocative and rebellious. How successful do you think the music selection was?

Transparent man

Gatsby is caught in the rain and his suit is transparent. Here is a self-made man who has re-constructed his identity, but even he can have his trappings stripped away to reveal a vulnerable person. In what ways might this help us to understand our own sense of identity, our illusions and constructs, and the way God knows us as we really are.



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