



# Sample essay 1

'Symbolism is central to the meaning and effects of *The Great Gatsby*.'

In the light of this comment, consider ways in which symbolism is used in *The Great Gatsby*.

## Grade A answer

Writing just a few years after the end of the Great War, Fitzgerald takes as his theme the hedonism of a materialistic society in which spiritual values are dead. His eponymous hero throws parties on Sundays (to which 'the world and its mistress' flocked) because he hopes that Daisy, the object of his faith, hope and love, will come to him. In her absence, he stretches out his arms towards the green light at the end of her dock and, as Fitzgerald makes repeated references to it, that light becomes like a religious icon to him, a symbol of his hope of a new life with Daisy. To the reader, however, the green light comes to symbolise his naivety in thinking that the past can be repeated.

At the end of the novel, the narrator observes that 'Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us', suggesting that it represented the orgasm, the intensity of experience, which is forever beyond reach. Just before this reference, Nick was imagining how the Dutch sailors felt when they first arrived in America and saw 'a fresh green breast of the new world'. By juxtaposing the green breast and the green light, Fitzgerald makes the green light a symbol of the American Dream, rooted in the past, but beckoning from the unattainable future. Those who pursue it do so at the expense of the values of a caring society. Those who seem to have achieved it, like Tom and Daisy, are living in a moral vacuum which destroys any hope of happiness.

Whether they travel to the city by car or by train, Tom and Daisy have to pass the valley of ashes with its massive advertisement for Dr T. J. Eckleburg. These huge eyes brood over the novel, as Nick keeps commenting on them and Wilson equates them with the eyes of God. Through this symbol, Fitzgerald specifically suggests that, in post-war New



York, dreams of owning material possessions have replaced spiritual values. Ironically, although Wilson repeats 'God sees everything', the eyes are 'dimmed a little by so many paintless days', just as people's spirituality has been dimmed by neglect, and they see nothing.

In a telling example of intertextuality, Fitzgerald calls the valley of ashes 'the waste land', evoking the poem of that name by T. S. Eliot. Published two years before *The Great Gatsby*, Eliot's poem also presents readers with images of a barren landscape where nothing grows. Instead of worship, there is only 'a heap of broken images', like Fitzgerald's weather-beaten advertisement. Both writers describe a world which is spiritually dead, and, as Eliot writes, there is only 'fear in a handful of dust'. However, neither writer seems to interpret this as a fear of death; it is rather a fear of a meaningless life. Like Eliot's wasteland, Fitzgerald's valley of ashes is sterile, and he underlines this by comparing the ash-heaps with images of fertility like 'a fantastic farm' where the 'ashes grow like wheat'. The valley of ashes is the grim underside of New York, where their waste is discarded, and, symbolically, the trains ignore it, passing straight through as they carry the rich into town from East and West Egg.

Fitzgerald altered the landscape and the names to create these symbolic eggs. The names suggest new life and fertility, and Nick felt that his 'life was beginning over again'. Fitzgerald's choice of eggs allows him to point to the superficial similarities between the two communities by concentrating on their shape as seen by 'the gulls that fly overhead'. His narrator, however, observes both of them from inside. He comes from a well-established wealthy family, so he belongs in East Egg, but he has come to New York to make his fortune through the bond business, so he rents a house in West Egg among the 'nouveaux-riches', who have amassed their fortunes through entertainment or racketeering.

Nick describes West Egg as an 'unprecedented place that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island village'. He notes that the lives of the newly rich are empty, and that a force beyond their control, 'fate', 'herded' them like cattle 'from nothing to nothing'. However, he suggests that they know this and enjoy their lives 'with raw vigour', without worrying about the future. By contrast, people in East Egg seem to be aware that there should be more to life, but they are unable to find it. They represent old money and pretend to stand for old-established values, but Tom has had a succession of mistresses since his marriage. Whatever their differences, in 'the great barnyard of Long Island Sound' neither of the eggs is fertile. East Egg offers indifference; West Egg offers escapism, but neither community offers a future. That is why Gatsby is so exceptional; at least he has a dream, even if it is unachievable. At least he believes in the green light.

Like other Modernist writers, Fitzgerald uses symbolism to suggest his own judgements on society in this materialistic decade between the war and the Wall Street crash of 1929. Through symbolism, *The Great Gatsby* conveys a mood of disillusionment with society and



despair at its loss of values, even as Fitzgerald seems to be celebrating the excitement of the era which came to be known as the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age. He uses symbolism to expose its superficiality and explore his themes.

### Examiner's comments

#### AO1

- Confident use of critical terminology
- Strong line of argument explored
- Detailed knowledge of the text

#### AO2

- Perceptive, detailed analysis of structure, form and language

#### AO3

- Illuminating comparisons with *The Waste Land*
- Different interpretations of Gatsby offered

#### AO4

- Sound and useful knowledge of historical and literary context