

Mr Bruff

ONLINE REVISION

MR Bruff's Guide To

'THE GREAT GATSBY'



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SAMPLE

10. Greek allusions

The Greek Gatsby - Greek Mythology in The Great Gatsby

From Shakespeare, to Dickens, to Baz Lurhman's 'Moulin Rouge', the Greek Myths are alluded to across all types of literature, theatre and film. References to the heroes, gods and goddesses from the Greek myths are frequently woven into our stories to give an extra layer of meaning to the narrative. These allusions allow us to analyse the events in a slightly different way, or give us an alternative interpretation of the writer's intentions.

A super quick who's who in Greek Mythology

Zeus

This is the guy who is in charge of all the Olympian Gods. He overthrew his father, and then drew lots with his brothers Poseidon and Hades to decide who would replace their dad. Zeus won, so he was in charge (plus the sky and thunderbolts-handly), Poseidon ruled the sea, and Hades the underworld.

Zeus was an amorous type, and was always going about and impregnating various mortals. He was married to Hera (who was his wife AND sister), and he was always upsetting her with his many affairs.

Zeus' children were: Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Hermes, Persephone, Dionysus, Perseus, Heracles, Helen of Troy, Minos, and the Muses.

Athena

Athena was not born in a normal way- she appeared from Zeus' forehead. Fully formed and wearing armour. Athena is the goddess of intelligent activity, and Zeus' favourite.

Apollo

Apollo was the son of Zeus and Leto (a goddess Zeus had impregnated before marrying Hera) and he had a twin brother called Artemis. Apollo was the god of light, and amongst other important tasks, it was him who pulled the sun across the sky in his chariot every day. Thanks for that.

In The Great Gatsby, we can see Fitzgerald alluding to some of the famous Greek myths...

Gatsby as Apollo

Apollo was one of the more important gods, and he pops up in both Greek and Roman mythology; he is a lucky so and so, and considered to be the god of all kinds of stuff- music, the sun, poetry, prophecy...but mostly the sun. Apollo is probably best known for throwing big parties, playing a Lyre (he invented it himself- nice) and

having muses dance around him. Does this sort of behaviour sound familiar? Gatsby could be seen as a modern-day Apollo.

However, where do we really draw the connection between the two? Well, Fitzgerald leaves us a clue in Wolfsheim's firm 'The Swastika Holding Company'. The swastika is the symbol for the sun; when Hitler adopted it for the Nazi party, he was evoking a different sun god- Odin of the Valkyries. However, when Fitzgerald uses it, he is drawing a connection to Apollo, the sun god.

Throughout the novel, Gatsby is described in reference to light: his smile is 'radiant', his car is 'bright with nickel' (chapter four), and his parties had guests come and go 'like moths', implying that Gatsby and his home are the flame (chapter three). However, when Gatsby becomes his most bright is when he is in contact with Daisy. In chapter five, Gatsby's brightness goes into overdrive.

The chapter opens with Nick commenting that a party at Gatsby's house was 'blazing with light', and it looks 'unreal'. Gatsby and Daisy's awkward and emotionally charged meeting seems to cause Gatsby to blaze further, and Nick describes him as an 'ecstatic patron of recurrent light'. This idea of eternity and perpetual light echoes the mythological image of Gatsby as Apollo. From meeting Daisy, Gatsby seems to have become more godlike, and now Nick claims he 'literally glowed...a new wellbeing radiated from him and filled the little room.'. After being reunited with Gatsby, we now have Daisy, and she is also glowing, as the 'brass buttons on her dress gleamed in the sunlight.'. Together, these two are lighting up the novel in Apollo-style brightness.

So what is Fitzgerald trying to say with all this sunlight and Greek mythology? If Gatsby is a modern Apollo, what can we the reader conclude from that?

Consider the parties Apollo threw: his muses dancing around him whilst he played his Lyre. Gatsby throws these similar parties, but does anyone know who he is? This god of the Jazz age is now hosting his parties in almost anonymity, all in the pursuit of a woman he is too nervous to approach, and with muses who openly hold him in contempt. At the very end of the novel when Carraway is calling the muse-party goers to attend the funeral, he finds little interest. Indeed, one insinuates Gatsby's death is his own fault, and Carraway remembers he 'used to sneer most bitterly at Gatsby on the courage of Gatsby's liquor.'. This is no Grecian golden age; modern America is riddled with insincerity, and self-interest.

In your essay you might use this to analyse Gatsby and say something like:

Fitzgerald alludes to the Greek God Apollo in his depiction of Gatsby as a god of light and party going Fitzgerald is creating a picture of a god who has no sincerity, no truth, and no morality. Gatsby's Apollo depiction foreshadows his death, and the betrayal of all those that were attracted to the wealth without ever knowing the man.

Q Find all references to Gatsby's car and house in the novel. Collect quotations that link to the theme of light, and consider how they change over the course of the novel.

Q When Gatsby dies, Carraway speculates on Gatsby's last thoughts...what were they? How can you connect this to the idea of Gatsby as Apollo, and the importance of light?

Gatsby as Athena

Gatsby and Athena have an important tie: both were created spontaneously. Athena came fully formed from Zeus' forehead, and Gatsby (or James Gatz) had parents, but he 'had never really accepted them', and Carraway tells us that 'Jay Gatsby...sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God'. This immaculate conception is probably more important when considering what it tells us about the psychology of Gatsby: here is a man who cannot except his own parents, and his own history. Instead, he invents one to suit himself.

Gatsby's rejection of his father becomes all the more tragic when at his death, it is only his father, Nick, and Owl Eyes that attend the funeral. Gatsby may have seen himself as an Athena, born of a God from a platonic conception, but the reality is that he was born and died James Gatz- an ordinary man. This gap between how we see ourselves, and how others see us is echoed again in Nick Carraway: insists that he is honest, as we discover his unreliability as a narrator.

Q Consider Gatsby's language when he speaks to Nick about his past in chapter four. In what way does Gatsby rely upon this version of history where he has come from nothing?

Q Why are Gatsby's origins important when we consider Fitzgerald's ideas regarding the American Dream?

Gatsby as Icarus

Icarus wasn't a god, he was the son of the man who built the labyrinth, Daedalus. In order to escape a tower, Icarus and Daedalus flew away on wings Daedalus had built. Despite being warned not to by his father, Icarus flew too close to the sun, and the heat melted his artificial wings, and he plunged to his watery death below.

The Gatsby-Icarus allusion pops up when Gatsby's dream to be with Daisy almost comes to fruition in chapter seven: Daisy tells Tom she wants to marry Gatsby, and Gatsby and Daisy drive off together (albeit under Tom's instruction, and his stubborn belief that Daisy would never leave him for a man like Gatsby).

From chapter seven there are a series of mistaken identities: Myrtle believes Tom is driving the car, Daisy lets Gatsby tell people he was driving the car, and then later Tom misleading Mr Wilson into believing it was Gatsby having an affair with Myrtle. Although Myrtle is the initial victim of the crash, it is Gatsby himself who plunges into the water, not of the Aegean sea, but of his own swimming pool, as a consequence of the misjudged flying too close to the sun.

Gatsby's yellow car 'with fenders spread like wings' crashes into Myrtle; this Icarus style tragedy leads us to conclude that Gatsby has tried too hard, he flew too close

to the sun, and consequentially failed. Fitzgerald's disillusionment with the American Dream is illustrated perfectly here: Gatsby made himself. He came from nothing, and then acquired all of the expected commodities to signal success. His 'new money' did not matter, and the 'old' families like the Buchanan's may not like it, but he succeeded anyway. However, Gatsby flew too high, and paid for it with his life.

Fitzgerald puts Daisy in the clouds elsewhere in the novel- in chapter five she calls Gatsby to a window to look at 'pink clouds' that she wants to 'push [him] around' in. Daisy is the ever ethereal, always out of reach object of Gatsby's desires. Icarus is not a tragic hero, but instead his death serves as a morality tale to not choose the 'golden path'. This pieces together with Gatsby's own mistakes- he would have done well to take heed of the inscription at the temple of Apollo in Delphi: 'Nothing in Excess'.

Daisy is Gatsby's sun. He flew too close, and too high, and when his yellow car crashed, so did his chance to be with her.

Q Piece together the information about the crash from the different characters. Make a note of which character gives which piece of information.

Q Re-read chapter seven, and make a list of all of the clues that the crash is going to happen.

Q Consider how likely it is that Daisy is going to leave Tom. What evidence can you find that Gatsby's dream is not going to come true?

Daisy as a Siren

The sirens were beautiful women who enticed sailors with their enchanting voices, and then destroyed them, or let them die at sea. Odysseus famously tied himself to the mast and stuffed up the ears of his sailors so he would be able to hear the voices of the sirens, but be stopped from acting upon the urge to jump ship. Daisy is our beautiful siren with her special voice.

Consider these quotations:

'The exhilarating ripple of her voice was a wild tonic in the rain.' (chapter five)

'Her voice is full of money' (chapter seven)

What is Fitzgerald suggesting about Daisy, and the way her voice makes others feel?

It is a consequence of being under Daisy's spell, just like those unfortunate sailors, that means Gatsby dies in the water of his monogrammed swimming pool.

The dark side of Daisy is siren-esque too. She is duplicitous, quickly slipping into an affair with Gatsby, and makes a cuckold of her husband. When the affair is seemingly exposed in chapter seven, Daisy's uncertainty leads the reader to not truly

believe she is capable of sticking to her word and leaving Tom. Daisy entices Gatsby, puts him under a spell, and then disappears again.

Even the green light on the dock can be interpreted as a Siren sign. This light (by the water) calls to Gatsby, and puts him under a spell. Just like the mythical Sirens, Daisy has Gatsby mesmerised by her, and calls him to her across the water with her otherworldly powers.

Q Find all the quotations that link Daisy to water (including rain).

Q Consider the quotations regarding the green light, and Daisy's power over Gatsby.

Q Re-read the flashback to Daisy and Gatsby's kiss. To what extent does Fitzgerald imply Gatsby is under her spell?

The Blind Prophet

You may have heard of the 'blind prophet' or be familiar with the literary idea that those who are blind have instead a 'sixth sense' of intuition. The original blind prophet was Teiresias, and he was the prophet of Apollo (ah ha!). He accidentally saw Athena in the nip, and so Athena responded in an entirely reasonable manner: she blinded him. Teiresias' mother got involved, and persuaded feisty Athena to relent a little...Teiresias was still blind, but Athena gave him a 'second sight' to soften the blow.

Our blind prophet in Gatsby isn't quite blind, but needing glasses and getting blind drunk is close enough. It's also worth noting that Athena sometimes appeared as an owl. At Gatsby's party, Owl Eyes first meets Carraway and Baker in Gatsby's library.

"See!" he cried triumphantly. It's a bona-fide piece of printed matter. It fooled me. This fella's a real Belasco. It's a triumph. What thoroughness! What realism! Knew when to stop, too- didn't cut the pages. But what do you want? What do you expect?"

Owl Eye's joy that the books are real, but not cut, suggests to the reader that he knows what Gatsby is- a fake. But a good one. There is authenticity in his duplicity. Gatsby has acquired money through dubious means, but he has done it for pure reasons- love. In Gatsby's lies there are elements of truth; he did go to Oxford and he did inherit money. It is just that he only stayed five months, and he was never able to collect the money he inherited. If we take Owl Eyes to be a prophetic character, we can then see his words as truth. Gatsby may be fake, but he is a real fake; and to expect anything more is unreasonable.

The comparison to 'Belasco' is an interesting one: David Belasco was a successful theatre producer, known for his detailed set design. In this way, Fitzgerald is foreshadowing the later reveal of Gatsby as a showman- the stage he has dressed to entice Daisy back into his life. Nick Carraway is yet to find this out, and at this stage still thinks of Gatsby as an eccentric and indulgent party goer.

Owl Eyes sees and admires this 'realism' in Gatsby, when other 'muses' or partygoers are too busy drinking his liquor. Other guests speculate on Gatsby's authenticity, but Owl Eyes is able to ascertain his fraudulence, and the depth of his fraudulence, from Gatsby's library. Owl Eyes sees the truth first. At the end of the novel, it is Owl Eyes who is the sole mourner to join Nick Carraway and Gatsby's father for Gatsby's funeral. Owl Eyes appears out of the rain, and Nick notes 'I don't know how he knew about the funeral' but our prophetic Owl Eyes just knew, reconfirming our interpretation of Owl Eyes as a character who is able to foretell the future.

Q Owl Eyes went to the library to sober up, having been drunk for a week. In what way could you say he was the same as the other party goers?

Read further: Owl Eyes is impressed that Gatsby has not cut the books. In the 1920s, books were bought 'uncut' and then the edges of the pages cut when you read them. Sometimes this is called 'deckle edging', and it was unavoidable until advancements in technology and paper printing meant they changed the way books were manufactured. Search online to find photographs and videos of deckle edged books.

Q If the books were uncut, what does this mean Gatsby hasn't done? Why would this impress Owl Eyes? How could you connect this to Gatsby's comments about Oxford in chapter seven?

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