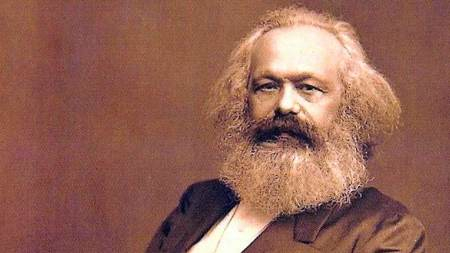
**http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2452Marxist interpretations**

[The economics of classConsumersUnfair privilegeChanging classThe glass ceilingThe proletariatFemale economic statusEmotion before economicsSocial critique](http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2452)

**The economics of class**

A Marxist approach to The Great Gatsby might be concerned with the representations of social class, and the ways in which power and wealth are attained and retained by the characters. Looking at the novel as a whole, it is seen to depict mostly the very wealthy members of society, who do not work and spend much of their time at leisure. There are some minor characters who are less wealthy, and a smaller number of servants and workers who are glimpsed working in the novel.

**Consumers**

**Tom** and **Daisy** never work, and Tom is said to be extraordinarily rich. He was a footballer, but having retired from this at a very young age, is now ‘restless’ and diverts himself with acquiring commodities, reading racist texts and his many affairs.

**Nick** is one of the less wealthy characters, and works in the stock exchange, but is still financially secure as his family is economically stable enough to support him in his work. Nick’s occupation as a ‘bond man’ is never described in detail; it involves trading in debt, which was a growing aspect of the economy, enabling the boom in consumer spending which supported the growth in manufacture. This was a new type of stock trading at the time and Nick has to learn about it himself.

**Gatsby** is introduced at the height of his power and success, and is associated purely with pleasure and extravagantly expensive pursuits such as throwing parties, driving luxury cars and going out in a hydroplane. However, we see hints of Gatsby’s work, in the secretive phone calls and references to gangster activity, and it becomes clear that his wealth is based on criminality.

**Unfair privilege**

The darker aspects of the American economy are embodied in the figures of Gatsby, Wolfsheim and the menacing, shadowy voices of Slagle and other callers. Bootlegging, fixing sporting events and cheating are clear examples of a social and economic system which is unfairly organised to privilege some people over others. Gatsby also seems to use a network of contacts in order to escape justice, as he presents a ‘white card’ to the policeman when caught speeding.

**Changing class**

An element of Gatsby’s life which would be interesting to a Marxist critic is the revelation that he began life as the son of ‘shiftless and unsuccessful farm people’ and had been consistently determined to change his economic status. Marxist ideology would not recognise this as an achievement, since this mobility merely reinforces the unfair economic divide between rich and poor as opposed to dismantling the system completely.

**The glass ceiling**

Socially aspirational, Gatsby hides his origins, concocting elaborate stories to pretend he has a higher status. This highlights the distinctions made in American society between ‘old money’ (inherited wealth, based on a long family tradition of wealth) and the ‘newly rich’ such as Dan Cody and Gatsby (each becomes a millionaire in a short space of time). Tom and Mr Sloane, in [Chapter 6](http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2409), clearly recognise the subtle social distinction, while Gatsby does not, leaving him excluded from their supper party.

Nick’s comments would require consideration in a Marxist reading of the text:

The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God – a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that – and he must be about His Father’s Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty.

Such a [blasphemous](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/blasphemous) claiming of [Jesus](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesus)’ words from the [New Testament](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/New-Testament) in [Luke 2:49](http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2452#bible_verse)) establish Gatsby as having great ambition, if not delusions of grandeur. The ‘business’ appears, however, to be very worldly and ‘vulgar’, a reference to the pursuit of money – the total opposite of [Christ](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christ)’s teaching in [Luke 6:20-21](http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2452#bible_verse).

**The proletariat**

George Wilson is the antithesis of Gatsby, someone who has worked hard and diligently for a long time, without gaining wealth or status. Wilson comes into contact with the wealthy people of West Egg and East Egg, as he attempts to make money from repairing and trading used cars and selling gas, but his hard work seems to facilitate their easy lives. Even in killing Gatsby, it could be argued that Wilson is exploited by Tom, doing the work that Tom is not willing to undertake.

A Marxist reading of the text would focus on Wilson as a representative of the proletariat, and the depiction of the valley of ashes, located on the journey between Long Island and New York City. It has been said that Fitzgerald based this location on the Corona Ash Dumps, a place where ashes were dumped from coal furnaces. This waste product of a booming industry is perhaps analogous with the idea of workers being dispensable and worthless. Aside from Michaelis, who has a role as narrator via Nick, almost all the other workers in the text are anonymous, such as Nick’s ‘Finnish woman’, the faceless chauffeurs, butlers and other servants.

**Female economic status**

The highest status female characters in the text do not work, although Jordan is apparently ‘absolutely in training’ as she is a professional golfer. However, her reputation is tainted by rumours of cheating, we never see her working, and Tom dismisses her claim to be in training with the comment, ‘How you ever get anything done is beyond me.’ Moreover, Daisy and Jordan are often presented as motionless, sitting or reclining, and when they do move it is ‘languidly’.

Myrtle differs from these women in that her socio-economic status is much lower, but she is more active in seeking to attain the symbols of wealth when she is staying at Tom’s apartment and using his money. She is single-mindedly acquisitive:

I’m going to make a list of all the things I’ve got to get. A massage and a wave and a collar for the dog and one of those cute little ashtrays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother’s grave that’ll last all summer.

It could be argued that, as Tom’s mistress, and in many ways similar to the wives in the rest of the novel, Myrtle has access to his wealth in return for her domestic and sexual contribution to the partnership. Daisy, in this respect, is very similar to Myrtle as she values Tom’s wealth so highly that she prefers Tom despite her apparent love for Gatsby. This occurs twice, underlining the idea that Daisy appraises Tom’s wealth as greater and more secure. Gatsby and Tom are equally degraded in this competition, yet each encourages Daisy to judge them in material terms rather than on any personal aspects.

**Emotion before economics**

However, a Marxist reading might closely examine the moment when Gatsby appears to prioritise love over money:

Well, there I was, way off my ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn’t care. What was the use of doing great things if I could have a better time telling her what I was going to do?

The ambiguity of this passage leaves the reader uncertain whether ambition has really been abandoned or whether Gatsby has found a way to incorporate his relationship with Daisy into his ‘business’.

Another comment about Gatsby, explaining:

he knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God

implies that his relationship limits his ambition. This is expressed in religious terms but may have a worldly meaning. These are matters of great importance for interpreting the novel, since so many readers see Gatsby as tragically devoted to Daisy, whereas it can be argued that he is always primarily devoted to money and that Daisy merely represents money.

**Social critique**

As with feminist interpretations, Marxist readings of the novel might highlight any forms of challenge to the status quo. There is no overt criticism of the social and economic system but it could be argued that Nick’s narrative implicitly criticises the hedonism and excess of the characters depicted, and by extension, the period in which the novel is set.

For some critics, Gatsby himself represents America, his dream the American Dream, and his death the inevitable failure of that ideal; this can lead directly into a Marxist exploration of the text, using the American Dream as a starting point for examining the motivations and outcomes of each character. The problem with this approach is that there is an inescapable seductiveness associated with wealth in this novel. Nick expresses this in his use of words such as ‘gorgeous’, ‘thrilling’ and ‘lovely’. His description of Daisy’s voice is a very good example of this, and it is only revealed towards the end of the novel that her voice is ‘full of money’ and that this is the true source of her attractiveness. The glamour of the novel exerts a powerful force to obscure the reality of this society, and this must be attributed to the use of Nick as a narrator, a character who is morally ambivalent to the extent that he is quite complicit in the cover-up surrounding the deaths of Myrtle and Gatsby.