



The Great Gatsby

What Words Tell Us About Characters

When describing characters, authors carefully choose words with specific connotations to help readers imagine characters as accurately as possible. For example, one of Fitzgerald's first descriptions of Tom Buchanan is:

"His speaking voice, a gruff husky tenor, added to the impression of fractiousness he conveyed."

The word *fractiousness* means "having the quality of being easily angered." Along with the description of Tom's rough voice, readers can easily picture a rather frightening, short-tempered man. The word *fractious* sounds stronger and more intimidating than *irritable* or *grumpy*, which are words with similar definitions but weaker connotations. This chart shows other examples of how Fitzgerald uses words with precise meanings to describe characters.

Character	Word or Phrase	What the Word or Phrase Tells Us
Jay Gatsby	punctilious	<i>Punctilious</i> means "showing great attention to details or correct behavior." Gatsby did not come from a wealthy family, even though pretends he did, and so he is overly concerned with proper etiquette. However, it is this careful attention to detail that makes people question his background.
Daisy Buchanan	tense gayety	While the words in this phrase seem to contradict each other—with <i>tense</i> meaning "rigid or nervous" and <i>gayety</i> meaning "cheerfulness"—both words work together to describe Daisy perfectly. Although she puts on airs of being lighthearted, she is in a loveless marriage, and there is something inside her that stops her from being truly happy.
Myrtle Wilson	hauteur	<i>Hauteur</i> is "pride in a way that is disdainful of others." Even though Myrtle has a modest life, she is desperate to climb the social ladder and so acts as if she is of a higher class than she actually is. The word <i>hauteur</i> shows the arrogance that is part of her act as well as her disgust with people who are not wealthy.
Jordan Baker	contemptuous	<i>Contemptuous</i> means "showing scorn or disrespect toward others," and it is used to describe Jordan several times in the novel. We see Jordan as a contrast to Daisy, as Jordan is a cynical "new woman" of the 1920s, skeptical and distrustful of others.

RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)