



**A CLASS OF HIS OWN: THE FILMS OF JACK CLAYTON**

# The Great Gatsby

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Jack Clayton active involvement with *The Great Gatsby* began in the autumn of 1971, though his interest goes a long way further back. 'I first read the book when I was 15, and I read it at about the same time as another American novel that I was also insane about – *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*. I always wanted to do them both as pictures. I nearly did do *They Shoot Horses*, and then actually did this one.' He fields diplomatically any question about letting an English director loose on one of the quintessential expressions of American temperament. Didn't any Americans – including perhaps his own scriptwriter, Francis Ford Coppola regret that they had let the big one get away? 'I wouldn't feel qualified to do a story set in the Bronx, let's say. But apart from the romantic side of the film, and Gatsby's obsession (and I think I understand obsession quite well), it is a story about class. Which is something I love. Didn't Marx say that there are differences between classes but basically very little difference between nationalities – between the English rich and the American rich' Scott Fitzgerald of course said it too: the rich are different from us.

Clayton worked on the script with Coppola, who came in when Truman Capote had to drop out, and did 'a miraculously quick job'. It was Coppola's version that was laid on for shooting back in 1972; but Clayton spent some of the year of delay in further revisions. The major problem must of course be Gatsby himself, seen in the novel through the class-conscious, often censorious, sometimes wondering eyes of Nick Carraway (Sam Waterston), but on the screen necessarily stripped of the protective narrative shield. 'The most difficult part for an actor to play of almost any that I can think of,' says Clayton; adding that he chose Robert Redford for the possibility of danger underlying 'the WASP image'.

'In Fitzgerald's letters to his publisher, he said that he wrote Gatsby first as a much older man, modelled of course on someone he knew. And then, as so often happens with Fitzgerald, he floated off that and made a kind of Fitzgerald character out of him. So that he was never really a one person character. And there are other difficulties. Gatsby is constantly described as very laconic, and it's this descriptive impression that you take away from the book. But in fact, in the dialogue, he is almost unbelievably verbose. The famous car ride, for instance, where he talks about himself – 'I am the son of wealthy people in the Middle West... I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe.' There are a whole series of statements there; and although Fitzgerald was of course using them for a purpose, they still make Gatsby out a very chatty person. So you have to reconcile the Gatsby of the dialogue with the Gatsby of the descriptive passages.' (One is reminded that Fitzgerald, equally aware of how Gatsby had been patched together, once considered making Tom Buchanan the novel's dominant character.)

The script includes one key addition: 'A totally new sequence, which is not in the book, which I consider is really cheated in the book, and perfectly justifiable to do in the film. In the novel, the only mention of any relationship between Daisy and Gatsby after they meet again comes in a single sentence, when he tells Nick that he has fired the servants because "Daisy comes over

quite often in the afternoons.” You never have anything other than that, and it’s very smart to do it like that in a book. But for the film I would personally count it as a cheat. I think you have to see it. The sequence is also the method of finding out about the past, the past between them, without using flashback.’

Purists need not necessarily fall about in a rage. Fitzgerald wrote to Edmund Wilson in 1925 about *Gatsby*: ‘The worst fault in it, I think is a big fault. I gave no account of (and had no feeling about or knowledge of) the emotional relations between Gatsby and Daisy from the time of their reunion to the catastrophe. However, the lack is so astutely concealed by the retrospect of Gatsby’s past and by blankets of excellent prose that no one has noticed it – though everyone has felt the lack and called it by another name... I felt that what he [Mencken] really missed was the lack of any emotional backbone at the very height of it.’ Fitzgerald’s core of coolness when looking at his own work is the other side of the temperament that could write to Gertrude Stein that, ‘like Gatsby, I have only hope.’

The script also changes the scene of the first meeting between Gatsby and Daisy, over the flustered tea served by the ‘demoniac Finn’ in Nick’s cottage. ‘That scene is straight out of English drawing-room farce. And I can’t believe that someone who has had Gatsby’s background in life, who is in fact a very, very tough person, would suddenly revert to behaving like a gauche and ridiculous 17-year-old.’ (Wasn’t there, I suggest, a surviving 17-year-old in Fitzgerald himself and consequently in all his heroes? Yes, says Clayton, but still how do you make it work on screen?) He has himself added a detail near the end, after the double tragedy in which Myrtle Wilson is run down and killed, and her husband shoots Gatsby and then himself. ‘In the book, Wilson’s death and Myrtle’s death seem to me enormously thrown away. I wanted to bring back to the audience a sense of the tragedy of all of them – because Myrtle is innocent and Wilson is innocent. So when Gatsby’s father comes to the funeral, he and Nick in fact drive through the Valley of Ashes and Nick sees Katherine, Myrtle’s sister, coming out of the house and throwing away some junk. And the father meanwhile is talking about Gatsby’s boyhood. The point is that I’m equally concerned with what happens to Myrtle and Wilson. I love all the characters; and that’s something very necessary for me as a director, and perhaps necessary for most people.’

Clayton has found himself being less tender to one minor but celebrated character. The owl-eyed man duly turns up at Gatsby’s funeral, the solitary mourner from the great parties, to speak the epitaph – ‘the poor son of a bitch’ – that Dorothy Parker was to use years later after Fitzgerald’s own death. Tom Ewell plays him, and Clayton shot the two earlier scenes in which Nick first encounters the owl-eyed man in the rich drunkenness of the party. But in the final cut both scenes have been regrettably jettisoned. ‘It was not pressure. That’s usually the reason given, and people make excuses. I make no excuses. But we do not have a short picture, and simply for reasons of flow and time I had to remove the scenes... I’m not exactly a comedy director, but the scene with the owl-eyed man in the car when the wheel comes off was a beautifully done and funny thing because the actors were so terrific. But it’s virtually the only scene where none of the principals is present, and for that reason on the screen it’s like coming up against a brick wall. The story stops, and you’re asking yourself what the scene is really about.’

The funeral itself was shot at a cemetery in North London and in the studio, with special gravestones in what is apparently a distinctive American style,

recently described by Philip Toynbee as looking ‘gross, squat and infinitely sinister.’ I ask Clayton if he doesn’t feel that, however finicky and meticulous the concern about props, a location still gives away its nationality simply by some quality of light. But he insists that its transatlantic journey hasn’t affected the movie at all, and even counters with one minuscule gain. Apparently the Eastern seaboard ‘Gold Coast’ (Long Island, etc.) was then celebrated for its elm trees, long since destroyed by elm disease. ‘We have elms in our drives,’ Clayton says.

Has he, I ask, used narration at the end, or found some other way of conveying the novel’s spectacular and complex dying fall, its moral centre, the sense of regret and the capacity for wonder in those last few marvellous sentences? ‘We have gone back to Gatsby’s house at the end, in fact with a piece of narration, but not the great last few sentences because I think they are too complicated in many ways for the screen. But the very last thing, the last section of the book, I’ve tried to do in a strange way through the very last shot of the film, which has the final credit titles over it. You see Daisy and Tom coming from a great yacht along a long, long causeway, followed by people. As though everyone has forgotten Gatsby and all that life goes on again.’

Clayton has come to *Gatsby* after a long pause since *Our Mother’s House* in 1967. *Gatsby* may not be that elusive creature the Great American Novel, but it preserves marvellously intact, across half a century, the romantic readiness of the great American dream – ‘the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty.’

I remember talking to Clayton shortly after *Room at the Top*, when he reacted with notable asperity to suggestions that his film could be slotted tidily into a general move towards what could then be defined as British realism. His later pictures obviously proved his point. Now, with another of those nudging ironies, Clayton’s new film looks like being placed in the forefront of a move – already rolling along with a heavy build-up of publicity weight behind it – to bring romanticism back to the American screen. His reaction, though milder, is still much the same. ‘It all happens by chance. There is no pattern to my pattern. It’s not at all calculated; I wish it were... ‘

### **Penelope Houston, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1974**

---

#### **THE GREAT GATSBY**

*Director:* Jack Clayton  
*Production Company:* Newdon Company  
*Producer:* David Merrick  
*Associate Producer:* Hank Moonjean  
*Production Managers:* Norman I. Cohen, Peter Price  
*Assistant Directors:* David Tringham, Alex Hapsas  
*Screenplay:* Francis Ford Coppola  
*Based on the novel by:* F. Scott Fitzgerald  
*Director of Photography:* Douglas Slocombe  
*Camera Assistant:* Robin Vidgeon  
*Editor:* Tom Priestley  
*Production Designer:* John Box  
*Art Director:* Gene Rudolf, Robert Laing  
*Set Decorators:* Herbert Mulligan, Peter Howitt  
*Costumes:* Theoni V. Aldredge  
*Music Supervision/Additional Music:* Nelson Riddle  
*Choreography:* Tony Stevens  
*Sound Recording:* Ken Barker  
*Sound Re-recording:* Brian Simmons  
*Sound Editor and Technical Consultant:* Terry Rawlings

#### **Cast**

Robert Redford (*Jay Gatsby*)  
Mia Farrow (*Daisy Buchanan*)  
Bruce Dern (*Tom Buchanan*)  
Karen Black (*Myrtle Wilson*)  
Scott Wilson (*George Wilson*)  
Sam Waterston (*Nick Carraway*)  
Lois Chiles (*Jordan Baker*)  
Howard Da Silva (*Meyer Wolfsheim*)  
Roberts Blossom (*Mr Gatz*)  
Edward Herrmann (*Klipspringer*)  
Elliot Sullivan (*Wilson’s friend*)  
Arthur Hughes (*dog vendor*)  
Kathryn Leigh Scott (*Catherine*)  
Beth Porter (*Mrs McKee*)  
Paul Tamarin (*Mr McKee*)  
John Devlin (*Gatsby’s bodyguard*)  
Patsy Kensit (*Pamela Buchanan*)  
Marjorie Wildes (*Pamela’s nurse*)  
Blain Fairman (*policeman*)  
Bob Sherman, Norman Chaucer (*detectives at Pool*)  
Regina Baff (*Miss Baedeker*)  
Janet Arters, Louise Arters (*twins*)  
Sammy Smith (*comic*)

USA 1974  
144 mins

---

**A CLASS OF HIS OWN:  
THE FILMS OF JACK CLAYTON**

**Room at the Top**

Thu 2 Dec 18:10 (+ intro by BFI Curator Josephine Botting); Sat 18 Dec 14:10; Wed 22 Dec 18:10; Wed 29 Dec 14:30

**The Innocents**

Sat 4 Dec 20:40; Thu 9 Dec 20:45; Mon 13 Dec 18:10; Thu 23 Dec 14:20; Mon 27 Dec 15:20; Thu 30 Dec 14:30

**Our Mother's House**

Tue 7 Dec 20:40 (+ intro); Mon 20 Dec 18:15

**The Passions of Jack Clayton**

Wed 8 Dec 18:10

**The Pumpkin Eater**

Wed 8 Dec 20:40; Sat 18 Dec 12:50 (+ pre-recorded intro by critic Lucy Scholes); Tue 28 Dec 12:15; Thu 30 Dec 18:10

**The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne**

Fri 10 Dec 20:30; Tue 21 Dec 14:20; Wed 29 Dec 17:50

**The Great Gatsby**

Sat 11 Dec 20:20; Mon 27 Dec 12:45

**Something Wicked This Way Comes**

Sun 12 Dec 18:30; Tue 21 Dec 20:40

**Memento Mori + The Bespoke Overcoat**

Sun 19 Dec 18:00

**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

**The Apartment**

Wed 1 Dec 18:00 (+ pre-recorded intro by critic and improviser Tara Judah); Mon 13 Dec 14:30; Wed 22 Dec 20:40; Tue 28 Dec 18:10; Thu 30 Dec 20:30

**Remember the Night**

Thu 2 Dec 14:30; Mon 27 Dec 13:00; Thu 30 Dec 18:00

**Meet Me in St Louis**

Fri 3 Dec 20:45; Sun 19 Dec 12:20; Wed 22 Dec 18:00; Tue 28 Dec 12:20

**Miracle on 34th Street**

Sat 4 Dec 15:50; Sat 11 Dec 18:00; Fri 17 Dec 14:30

**A Christmas Tale (Un conte de Noël)**

Sun 5 Dec 17:50; Tue 28 Dec 15:15

**Scrooge (aka A Christmas Carol)**

Mon 6 Dec 18:30; Thu 16 Dec 21:00; Fri 17 Dec 18:20; Sat 18 Dec 18:10; Sun 19 Dec 15:40; Mon 20 Dec 18:10; Tue 21 Dec 14:30

**Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas**

Tue 7 Dec 18:30; Sat 11 Dec 16:00; Tue 21 Dec 21:00; Thu 23 Dec 20:45

**Gremlins**

Wed 8 Dec 17:50 (+ intro by Justin Johnson, Lead Programmer); Sat 18 Dec 20:45; Wed 22 Dec 20:45; Wed 29 Dec 20:50

**Bad Santa**

Fri 10 Dec 20:45; Fri 17 Dec 21:00

**It's a Wonderful Life**

From Sun 12 Dec – Thu 23 Dec

**Tokyo Godfathers (Tokyo goddofazazu)**

Tue 14 Dec 20:45; Mon 20 Dec 20:45

**Carol**

Wed 15 Dec 17:50; Mon 27 Dec 18:00; Thu 30 Dec 14:20

---

**BECOME A BFI MEMBER**

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at [bfi.org.uk/join](https://www.bfi.org.uk/join)

**BFI PLAYER**

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on [player.bfi.org.uk](https://www.player.bfi.org.uk)

---

**BFI SOUTHBANK**

Welcome to the home of great film and TV, with three cinemas and a studio, a world-class library, regular exhibitions and a pioneering Mediatheque with 1000s of free titles for you to explore. Browse special-edition merchandise in the BFI Shop.

We're also pleased to offer you a unique new space, the BFI Riverfront – with unrivalled riverside views of Waterloo Bridge and beyond, a delicious seasonal menu, plus a stylish balcony bar for cocktails or special events. Come and enjoy a pre-cinema dinner or a drink on the balcony as the sun goes down.

**Join the BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at [www.bfi.org.uk/signup](https://www.bfi.org.uk/signup)