

The Fall of American Dream in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

*The American dream is an ideal that has been present since American literature onset. Typically, the dreamer aspires to rise from rags to riches while accumulating such things as love, high status, wealth, and power on his way to the top. The dream has had variations throughout different time periods, although it is generally transformed into a materialistic vision of having a big house, a luxury car and a life of comfort. In the past century, the American dream has increasingly focused on material items as an indication of attaining success. In *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby is a high aspirant person who started out with no money but only a self-made plan for achieving his dream. He is so blinded by his luxurious possessions that he does not see that money cannot buy love or happiness. This research paper focuses on the elements how a dream can become corrupted by one's attention on acquiring wealth, power, and expensive things.*

Keywords: American dream, corruption, society, East Egg, West Egg

Introduction

Fitzgerald presents the characters of *The Great Gatsby* as a representation of social trends. Nick Caraway, the protagonist is the true representation of the dull lives of these figures. He wants the world in which people follow all the rules and regulations. He is at first detached and reluctant to recognise the complexities of human beings. He narrates, "In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning in my mind ever since, whenever you feel like criticizing anyone, he told once, Just remember that all the people in the world haven't had the advantage that you've had"(6).

As we examine the novel we come to know how the dreams and relations of the characters come to an end chiefly that of Jay Gatsby. Broccoli writes:

The Great Gatsby in particular has become so much a fact of American literature— so much a permanent presence, a persistent influence— that it is almost impossible to imagine contemporary American fiction without Jay Gatsby. No other figure in our literature has become so eponymous. (22-23)

Nick and Gatsby, both of whom fought in World War I, reveal the newfound cosmopolitanism and cynicism that resulted from the war. Gatsby boasts about his materialistic richness and throws a party for the people who hardly know about him or his past. They have many doubts in their minds regarding his character such as, "There's something funny about a fellow that'll do a thing like that.... He doesn't want any trouble with anybody.... Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once" (48-49). Nick is a special guest of Gatsby's parties because he is the only one who shows compassion for Gatsby. Nick knows the reality of Gatsby's life— his ordinary background, his dishonest business dealings, and his aspirations for success. Yet, Nick recognises that although Gatsby has become immersed in a world of materialism and corruption; he is still a good man. This is because he and Gatsby both come from the Midwest, they do not truly belong to the shallow company of East Egg and West Egg. Nick presents an

objective view of the superficial world that surrounds him in Long Island. Nick personality is deeply rooted in ideals of the Midwest and of his family. Nick comes to the East to relieve the restless feeling after return from World War I. However, soon he comes to notice that East is full of heartless and shallow people. The atmosphere does not fit well with Nick's sincere and honest character. By his Midwest background, he becomes able to make a comparison for judging the glitz and materialism that surrounds him. Nick's American dream is based on his experience of warm home life and friendly faces. He fondly recalls memories of taking the time home from college with friendly faces and jingling sleigh bells to keep him company.

Nick dream is closer to the real American dream, which was focused more on family than wealth and an unending quest for success. Nick chooses the opposite path that Gatsby could have taken from the Midwest. Gatsby still possesses the principles of the Midwest, but his values have become blurred by the bright lights and sparkle of Daisy's golden glow as she becomes for him the "iconic manifestation of this dubious vision of beauty" (Fussel 250). Fitzgerald represents— Daisy is the American Dream for Gatsby and is described to have "a voice full of money— that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song in it... High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl" (127). Again, Fitzgerald's vivid description emphasizes Daisy's materialism and illustrates how Gatsby sees her, as "an embodiment of the glamour of wealth" (Bewley 275). She can be represented as a twentieth-century siren because she seizes men with her mysterious voice. Her voice contains the promise of great riches. However, Gatsby is too late to recognize that money is the principal thing that her voice promises. There is no compassion in Daisy; in fact, she has been the object of Gatsby's obsession for past five years. And Gatsby romanticism will not allow him to separate the past from the present. He still sees Daisy as the golden girl he knew five years ago, and he is still set on their golden future together.

Daisy is at heart self-centred and full of sweetness and light. She wants to enjoy both the security of being Mrs Buchanan and the attentions of Gatsby. She is careless with people's lives; she suffers Gatsby take the blame for her unintentional murder of Mrs Martle Wilson. But Gatsby in the last proves a true human being and a true lover by not telling anyone that it was not he but Daisy who was driving the car at the time of Myrtle's accident. Even after Daisy betrays him he is anxious about her safety. The last time Nick sees Gatsby alive, he tells him, "They're a rotten crowd... You're the whole damn bunch put together" (161). Claude Le Fustec opines, "Fitzgerald shows as affecting social intercourse points to no complex elusiveness of meaning but rather to a pervasive sense of vacuity and meaninglessness" (87).

Daisy lives in the wealthy and highly exclusive East Egg of Long Island, which is the location that Gatsby probably desires. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock symbolizes Gatsby's yearning for wealth and power, and it also embodies Daisy as the object of Gatsby's desire. Gatsby says Daisy:

You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock. Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had vanished forever". (100)

A clear representation of green light is that colour 'green' represents money and envy— the "green eyed monster"— because Gatsby longs to be a part of the East Egg society. The fact that green light can be seen across the bay, "minute and far away"(100) from Gatsby's mansion, symbolizes that both Daisy and her wealth is out of his reach, even though he can still see a glimpse of it.

Tom and Daisy's marriage is further proof of the collapse of an American dream. Their profound union with the American life of class, money and little responsibility symbolically represents them as the corrupt nature of the American Dream. Tom is first described as "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anti-climax" (10). Both Tom

and Daisy are unsatisfied with their life and are searching something better. They have travelled to France and move “here and there unrest fully wherever people were rich and played polo together” (10). They are unhappy and bored with life. Tom appears to be searching for the excitement that he found in playing football in college, and he finds an outlet for his dissatisfaction by cheating his wife with Myrtle. Prigozy writes, “Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* exposes the materialism and moral blindness presented by characters like Tom and Daisy who live in a world of money and success rather than of social responsibility” (83).

Gatsby is destroyed not by his dream but by its circumstance in a corrupt, jealous and grabbing world. In this wicked world Buchanans’ marriage is full of lies and infidelities, although they are united through their corruption. After Tom has discovered Daisy’s adultery and Myrtle has been killed, their indifference is revealed when they are reunited over fried chicken and two bottles of ale. After recognizing each other weakness, they unconsciously seek out with the corrupt spiritual element they inhabit. After Myrtle and Gatsby both are killed, neither one of them send their regards to seem remorseful. In fact, they go on a short vacation, which is an indication of the lack of compassion they have towards others. Nick discovers that both Tom and Daisy are really very heartless and careless person because, “They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (187). Thus, Tom and Daisy’s actions are the main focus on too much on appearance and things of monetary value, while ignoring people’s feeling and lives. Jordan Baker’s plans are also negatively impacted by the corruptive qualities of wealth. Although Nick is attracted towards Jordan at first sight, he finally perceives that it conveys her profound disregard for other people’s feelings. Jordan also has a reputation for being coquette or for being dishonest. She was the main culprit of golf tournament scandal. Jordan belongs to the elitist East Egg social group because of her careless, dishonest ways. She is the embodiment of the East Egg’s people. Jordan may also be a signal of the types of people that Gatsby entertains since she attends his parties. She behaves same as of other selfish guests and exploits Gatsby hospitality. Thus, she has also performed the negative actions in Gatsby’s life.

The geographical locations of the East and the Midwest play a big role in describing the novel’s view of values and money, the microcosms of East Egg, West Egg, and Valley of Ashes further highlight the socioeconomic inequality between the classes. East Eggers are at the top of the social hierarchy, while the native of West Egg cannot seem to reach them just like Gatsby being able to see the green light on the Daisy’s Dock but not being able to reach it. The working class depressing area dubbed the “Valley of Ashes” reinforces the idea that corruption surrounds the wealthy. It is also the location where Tom acts out his infidelities and Daisy killing of Martle. “Valley of Ashes” is the place where Tom and Daisy respectively use and harm members of the class with no remorse. Symbolically, the Valley of Ashes represented as the dystopia of American society. The characters Myrtle and George Wilson who colonize here can be identified as those incapable to achieve of achieving the American Dream. Myrtle, who has a brief affair with Tom Buchanan, finds herself like Gatsby, fascinating by “the fresh, green breast of the new world” (186).

On the whole, the upper-class group in the novel describes characteristic of being bored, disenchanted, and unmotivated. For example, the Buchanan’s journey from one place to the next, with no real plan or goal in mind. Jordan Baker is dull personality and has a constant bored. These people are enriched, but Fitzgerald marks a question whether their possession is really worth. Gatsby has devoted his life to belonging to this group, but due to his disreputable background, he never will settle in this group. It should also be noted that Gatsby romantic idealism does not accept in with this group: no matter how far he gains achievements, he would never really accept in. Raleigh observes:

No one knew better than Gatsby that nothing could finally match the splendours of his own imagination, and the novel would suggest finally that not only had the American dream been corrupted but that it was in part anyway, necessarily corrupted, for it asked too much. Nothing of this earth, even the most beautiful of earthly objects, could be anything but a perversion of it. (101)

At last, it can say that the drifting, careless, shallow people who comprise the social group of East Egg and the West Egg are representative of the corruption and materialism. Gatsby is encircled by this materialism and discontent, which serves to destroy his dream of success. His ambitious dream turns into a dark nightmare that leads to his ultimate downfall. His romantic idealism has not prepared him for the corrupt world in which he entered. Gatsby is encircled by reason of the unhappiness that success can bring very easily, just like Tom and Daisy. Their marriage is full of lies and hypocrisy, and they both seeking for something greater than what they already have. Gatsby is also so blinded by American dream that he does not understand that money cannot buy love or happiness. Fitzgerald effectively offers a powerful critique of a materialistic society and the effects can have on one's hope and dreams. He also warns us that the acquisition of wealth does not make us have more meaningful lives, it simply invites misfortune.

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