

# **The Great Gatsby: The American Dream and the False Illusion of Greatness**

**Research Question: How does F. Scott Fitzgerald portray the failure of the American Dream through the character of Jay Gatsby?**

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## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

- 1. Introduction**
- 2. Methodology**
- 3. The American Dream**
- 4. The Roaring '20s and Materialism**
- 5. The Green Light Symbolism**
- 6. Jay Gatsby and His Illusion of Success**
- 7. Nick Carraway**
- 8. Daisy Buchanan**
- 9. Fulfillment or Illusion**
- 10. Conclusion**
- 11. Bibliography**

## Introduction

Written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the book 'The Great Gatsby' is a renowned work of fiction centering itself around the materialism and disillusionment caused by the idealization of "*The American Dream*" in the 1920s. The novel itself is a critique to the new ways of the American society where the desire to consume has overwhelmed the urge to produce and cash-grabs have destroyed the value of hard-earned money. The events taking place in the book are set in the Jazz Age, or "*The Roaring 20s*", a time of glamour and vanity which allow Fitzgerald to show that the true concept of the American Dream -hard work and honesty- are long gone, making it fundamentally unattainable (Bewley). This decay is shown in the novel utilizing Jay Gatsby himself, both his life and his downfall showing that the American Dream is no longer an honorable ideal but rather a hollow promise.

Rather than presenting Gatsby as merely a tragic and aspiring individual, Fitzgerald purposefully makes use of various literary techniques such as evolving symbolism, layered narrative filtering, and structural disillusionment to convey what Gatsby represents, rather than outright revealing just who he is. Gatsby is first introduced not live or in person or even as a man, but rather as a rumor. A myth shaped by assumptions and speculations about the man. Allowing Fitzgerald to mirror the alluring yet vain and shallow promises of the American Dream itself. In the novel Fitzgerald not only states that the dream has failed, he also formally enacts its collapse through recurring motifs such as the green light, the division of East Egg and West Egg, and Nick Carraway's selective narration of the events. Thus, Gatsby's seemingly perfect rise to prestige, and his eventual downfall not only become a personal tragedy, but rather a brittle carefully constructed literary representation of a dream that deteriorates and hollows itself out upon closer inspection.

## **Methodology**

This essay relies on a literary analysis approach to assess how F. Scott Fitzgerald conveys the disillusionment and failure of the American Dream through the mythologized character of Jay Gatsby. A close reading of *The Great Gatsby*, particularly focusing on passages which reveal key characteristics of Gatsby himself, symbolisms such as the green light, and the portrayal presented of the 1920s social context will be the primary method referred to in order to understand and discuss this idea. To further allow us to better understand the socioeconomical context of the time and the various cultural references in the novel, this essay will also explain the historical and cultural background of the 1920s, also known as "The Roaring 20s". Additionally, to provide and strengthen arguments or claims which support interpretations of the novel's themes such as decay of morality and unattainability of success, secondary scholarly sources will also be consulted. By combining various textual evidence with historical context and critical analysis, this essay intends to explain the complexities of Gatsby as a representation, motif, and now a symbol of the corrupted American Dream.

This essay aims to assess and analyze how the character Jay Gatsby is used by the author to illustrate the failure of the American Dream. With close attention to characters, symbols and perspective, Fitzgerald's literary technique in the novel is investigated to comprehend how it formulates a false illusion and its eventual collapse.

## **The American Dream**

American Dream concept is generally interpreted as aspiration, ambition or conviction. It portrays success and an individual's place in social hierarchy as outcomes of hard work, moral integrity and a strong resolution. The novel though, defines success by wealth and status rather than hard work and decisively links social mobility to inherited privilege. By doing so, it portrays the American Dream as

an illusion. Fitzgerald argues that, although it is a simple and honorable path that people want to take, the American Dream is unattainable especially under 1920s' rigid social hierarchy. Gatsby is one of many that embraced the Dream, believing with money, parties and winning over Daisy would take him to his ideal life. However, this ideal life concept itself creates inconsistencies by trying to align financial, social and emotional desires all at once. Fitzgerald critiques the societal and moral corruption underlying the promise of success in modern America, by contrasting the traditional notion of the American Dream with Gatsby's fixation.

## **The Roaring '20s and Materialism**

The story takes place in the Jazz Age, also known as The Roaring 20s, which is crucial to Fitzgerald's critique of the American Dream, as the 1920s America is most well-known for its rapid economic growth and consumerism. This stems from the fact that after World War I many Americans sought material comfort and social freedom as a means of distraction and reinvention, leading to a rise of mass production. In particular, the industries that were the most affected by this shift towards materialism were the automobile and advertising industries due to the growing obsession of putting wealth and status on display. This affluence tended to be built on morally corrupt ways of acquiring wealth such as stock market speculation and illegal trades like bootlegging – which is an industry Gatsby is implied to benefit from.

The glamour of The Roaring 20s, whether it be the lavish parties or luxurious lifestyle that people had, led to the illusion that anybody could attain success and acquire wealth (Churchwell) - be a part of the elite, regardless of who they were. However underneath this layer of sparkling champagne, shrimp cocktails and opportunities lay societal conflicts and a loss of morality. This moment is effectively utilized by Fitzgerald not just as a backdrop, but rather a reflection of the warped reality of the American Dream. Jay Gatsby is the embodiment of this dream; from his reinvention to his self-made success, believing that once he attains everything that he has worked for, it will finally allow

him to feel love, acceptance and satisfaction. However, the brutal reality of this pursuit is that it ends in tragedy, with Gatsby meeting his end; solidifying the idea that the American Dream had become hollow by the 1920s with greed and status taking the place of merit and integrity. Thus, the fast-paced and lavish lifestyle of The Roaring 20s is the perfect setting for Fitzgerald to be able to put emphasis on how the once noble American Dream had gotten irredeemably corrupt.

## **The Green Light Symbolism**

Fitzgerald uses many symbols in his narrative to show the corrupt nature of the unattainable American Dream time and time again with the most prominent of those symbols being Gatsby himself. However, another prominent reoccurring symbol in the novel is the green light which Gatsby has a tendency of looking at whenever he seems to be experiencing heavy emotions. The green light is actually an ordinary light illuminating from the end of a dock, but its significance lies in symbolizing Gatsby's "pristine dream"—a vision of perfection he can never truly reach (Prigozy). The dock belongs to Daisy, the one true love of Gatsby, and someone he can never fully have. At the scene when Nick sees Gatsby reaching his arms towards the water, the green light switches from being just a symbol into something he truly longs for. Gatsby is on the move for reaching his dream, but it is outside his reach despite how far he moves and how closer he gets. While whether Gatsby truly loved Daisy or just the seemingly perfect image of her, he had curated in his mind is debatable, it's also worth noting that Daisy is described in a way that seamlessly meshes with the American Dream. In the novel Nick infers that the green light at the end of her dock – or in other words Daisy is the one thing that Gatsby cannot have, something so close yet always out of his reach, reinforcing the idea that the dream is also unattainable just like Daisy.

The green light appearing at the end of Daisy's dock appears initially as symbol of longing, described as "minute and far away" further solidifying its physical and emotional distance from Gatsby. The adjectives "far" and "minute" are utilized to emphasize the fragility of the dream,

suggesting its unattainability is precisely why its so desirable. Typically, the color green is often inferred as and used to symbolize growth, renewal and possibility – all associations that are compatible with the American Dream. Fitzgerald breaks these links altering the very same symbols. After Gatsby reunites with Daisy, significance of the green light seemingly disappears. This shift, shows how the dreams's power diminishes once confronted with reality. Therefore, through dependence on distance and disappearance of symbols, Fitzgerald's presents the the American Dream as an illusion that is sustained by longing not by fulfillment. Gatsby fails to see the unattainability of the light. It is tragic for him not figuring out the real trap being not that he can't reach the light but if/when he reaches it the light would cease its meaning.

## **Jay Gatsby and His Illusion of Success**

Despite the novel being narrated by Nick Carraway, the character that the book centers itself around is Jay Gatsby - initially the perfect representation of the true American Dream, a self-made man who has reinvented himself through hard work, determination and sheer will. However as the story continues, it is revealed that this impenetrable barrier of perfection Gatsby presents the people with is an illusion. One that is worn carefully to hide Gatsby's obsession with perfection and his profound loneliness (Lehan), never feeling himself truly at home with the elite despite all that he has accomplished. Jay Gatsby is actually a small boy coming from a poor background and a struggling family of farmers whose actual name is James Gatz. It is revealed that Gatsby has earned all his wealth by means of bootlegging and to an extent, organized crime. Meaning that while Jay's self-invention and pursuit of success are a perfect representation of the American Dream, they also highlight the moral decay behind that success. Fitzgerald does not simply expose Gatsby to reveal his artificiality; he naturally threads it through with narrative delay and gradual disclosure.

Before Gatsby even gets to have a proper introduction, Fitzgerald builds him up as an enigma shaped and surrounded by speculation. The guests at his parties create and spread extravagant

rumors, gossip that he “killed a man”, that he was a “German spy”, that he attended Oxford with each story increasing in theatricality. Fitzgerald deliberately chooses to let Gatsby exist as myth before man. The delay in the story is actually nothing more than a reflection. It aligns perfectly with the American Dream in so many aspects. There is a big promise alongside a very high reputation, but at the same time, it is far from being sustainable and is almost unreal. Interestingly, even Carraway himself considers Gatsby as someone who possesses ‘extraordinary gift for hope’, which places him above the normal standard. The word ‘gift’ in itself speaks to the subconscious implying a divine and supernatural power. It suggests that Gatsby is not only ambitious but also very much devoted to the dream. By presenting Gatsby as a character who is shaped by rumors rather than facts, Fitzgerald signals that this image is destined to collapse.

The eventual revelation that Jay Gatsby was born James Gatz, further uproots the image of the mysterious self-made man. Fitzgerald writes that “the truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself.”. The phrase “Platonic conception” is what suggests that Gatsby does not improve himself — he creates a ready-made idealized version detached from material reality and lives by that. This rebranding and reinvention aspect externally does align with the American Dream’s praise and promise of self-determination; however the drastic volume of the transformation exposes its own artificiality. Gatsby does not evolve, he erases. His abandonment of James Gatz entirely, means Gatsby does not embody success – he performs it. By doing so Fitzgerald lifts the golden veil and reveals that success in the 1920s required fabrication. Meaning that Gatsby’s self-creation is both a testimony that the dream is possible, yet simultaneously evidence of the moral corruption it usually strings along. Reinforcing that illusion is necessitated by the American Dream.

Hence, Gatsby is both a corrupt victim and yet an innocent believer of the ideal of American Dream that he has internalized. This conclusion is evident by how he himself is also a victim of the established difference between new money elites such as himself versus the old money elites who come from inherited wealth. Gatsby himself suffers from not being seen as prestigious in a revered

way despite having carved his way up just as the American Dream preaches. He also, despite this awareness, continues to chase the same unattainable ideal believing with conviction that the only thing missing for him to be finally fulfilled is Daisy. Though Gatsby simultaneously is also a part of the problem given how he has climbed his way up unethically and by means of criminal benefits. He is yet another cog in the machine that incidentally enforces this idea of the American Dream as people see the dazzling surface of a man who has dropped his morality and become hollow inside.

## **Nick Carraway**

Nick is a narrator as a character of novel, who moves to New York to make a finance carrier and settles in a house neighboring to Jay Gatsby in Long Island. Afterall, his life changed engaging in a different lifestyle, being fascinated by his rich friends there. Indeed, he became kind of a bridge between his cousin Daisy and Jay Gatsby, who held an old romance inbetween. He can be considered honest as differentiated from other characters of the novel but he can be admitted falsified about Gatsby because of his possible affection for him.

Nick is introduced as the narrator of the story of Gatsby and the events surrounding him. Nick gives an early impression of his neutrality but at some point it becomes apparent that Nick romanticizing Gatsby's behaviors and actions to some extent. Nick imposes sympathy to the readers through a painted version of Gatsby remembered with admiration instead of presenting him straightforwardly.

Nick has the role of narrator that Fitzgerald tries to portray the failure of American dream with the choice of. The dream collapses because of the excessive faith placed in it rather than absence of commitment. Nick's consistent repetitive emphasis on Gatsby's "extraordinary gift for hope" constantly elevates him beyond mere criminal opportunism. The noun "gift" suggests something innate and almost sacred, implying that according to Nick what distinguishes Gatsby from the hollow

notion of East Egg is his conviction to the idea of possibility. Later on, Nick makes Gatsby out to be a form of lost aspiration rather than failed social climber by preserving this idealism in his narration.

Nick's bias gains prominence in the novel's closing sections as Gatsby's story nears its end where The American Dream is mourned. It is through this act of remembrance that Fitzgerald suggests that the romanticization of the dream is precisely why it survives. Thus, Nick glorifies Gatsby and incidentally ensures that the illusion endures, being yet another contributor to the failure of the dream becoming one with its mythology.

## **Daisy Buchanan**

Daisy is a charming lady who came from a wealthy family. She had a short-term romantic relationship with Jay Gatsby. After Gatsby was called by the military, she married with Tom who is wealthy and well-educated but arrogant and insensitive, and reflected as the embodiment of old money in the novel. Daisy in a way chose to be secured by wealth over going after passion.

Although she looks living a happy life outside, Daisy was unhappy on the inside confronting her husband's having an affair with another woman. When she met with Gatsby and thought of reuniting, she discovered and faced his criminal actions. Then she made a decision to choose again protection by wealth, and displayed as the representation of false premise of American dream in the novel. For Gatsby, Daisy functions as the physical manifestation of the ideal he devoted his life to pursuing akin to the green light at the end of her dock. She was the picture embodying beauty and status to fulfill the existential expectations of Gatsby, which would be kind of confirmation of his reinventing himself. The romantic affair between Daisy and Gatsby left an impression in his memory together with an appreciation of an idealized version of her instead of reality, which stayed untouched in his mind through time. Daisy was symbolizing legacy and Gatsby dreamed her also as the symbol of legitimacy that he couldn't gain by means of his wealth. Hence, Daisy was not only love of his life but also the symbol of American dream for him.

## Fulfillment or Illusion

Jay Gatsby, standing as a premise of American Dream, while perceived as he is reaching success at the beginning of the story, turned out to be a failure at later stages and ceased with a dramatic ending. Gatsby tried to achieve his goal of getting legitimacy through planning of years lasting. From his rise from poverty to his reinvention of his own self and identity, he seems to have exceeded his own dream as well. He is settled in a luxurious mansion and regularly hosting infamous extravagant parties with famous guests attending, all these lavish displays suggesting that ambition can overcome social constraints. With his self-determination, reinvention, and triumph Gatsby's life appears to be proof of that the American Dream is as good as it is shown to be. However, Fitzgerald intentionally counters this apparent triumph by repeatedly showing that Gatsby remains associated with West Egg rather than transitioning into the East Egg, a clear indicator of social exclusion applying to the newly rich as well given the fact that East Egg is the home of elites whose wealth is inherited and expanded rather than built. The place where his success should be celebrated and applauded instead ends up being the place that confirms his status as an outsider. Even his funeral revealed that he wasn't be able to belong to the community that he wanted to be accepted. Although economically he made an outstanding achievement, that didn't help him grant reaching his goal of acceptance and legitimacy.

Therefore, Gatsby's temporary ascension only exposes the American Dream. That the promise of reinvention is a lie, and that wealth can buy visibility, not belonging. Gatsby successfully gains visibility, but never unconditional acceptance. In retrospect his rise is not triumph, but rather a temporary illusion. The issue is precisely the fact that an illusion lacks sustenance, twisting and transforming such innocent desire turns into a never-ending hunger for more until the desire consumes the dreamer themselves. The dream is not the corruptor, however the lengths at which people go further to attain it are. The danger lies within the foolish idealization of this ambition more often than not causing people to get blindsided and be willing to do anything as long as they believe to reach this ideal.

## Conclusion

The novel represents social realization and lifestyle during the era of 1920's through a story involving limited number of but significant characters. At the surface, the story seems to tell about the dreams of a man come true but underneath there is a critical analysis of society dynamics. The story is impressive in terms of using the concepts of modernism, legacy, social acceptance, harmonized with hope and tragedy. The novel gives obvious clues understanding what's behind American Dream. Fitzgerald shows that the American Dream is no longer a testimony of perseverance and hard work, but rather one of inheritance and materialism through Gatsby's character, reflecting what Bewley identifies as a "spiritual emptiness" at the heart of the modern American Dream (Bewley). Gatsby's rise to wealth, which initially seems like the perfect embodiment of the promise of self-reinvention, turns out to be a morally questionable empire built on acquiring wealth and status by any means necessary. Overall, what eventually results in Gatsby's disillusionment and downfall is his own ambition and relentless pursuit of wealth and love, representing the dissatisfaction and anguish that comes from chasing an unattainable ideal such as the American Dream.

Fitzgerald universalizes Gatsby's experience, suggesting that the pursuit of the American Dream is the general shape of a shared common greed and desire for more. Through this recurring imagery, Fitzgerald portrayal of the American Dream is not merely about corruption, but rather the structural unattainability of it all, forever regressing and consuming the individuals who dare to strive toward it. Confirming that a society built on wealth, pretense and image-management cannot sustain the very ideals the dream claims to encourage and cherish.

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