
The Corruption of the American Dream

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The American Dream is a recurrent theme in literature. The concept has been related to the American Declaration of Independence in which he defined it as the idea of 'Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness' or to the idea of the 'Self-made man' introduced in many stories, such as Horatio Alger's. However, regardless of all the different definitions, some common themes prevail, such as individualism, the 'Self-made man', freedom and the pursuit of happiness and success. A close and complete definition would be that the American Dream is "The belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary, or social." (Pearson, 1970, p. 638) This idea of the Dream is present in *The Great Gatsby* but the author twists the concept and shows how its positive meaning can be corrupted and turned into something completely negative. Through the characters, Fitzgerald shows the decay of the concept at the hands of society and makes us wonder whether he believed in the concept at all.

The personification of the Dream in the novel is the character of Jay Gatsby. He comes from a poor family and is able to acquire a great fortune. Therefore, he is the portrayal of the 'Self-made man' and is described at the beginning of the novel by Nick, who says, "There was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life." (Fitzgerald, 1925/2010, p. 2) This first description gives us the idea that Gatsby is a very ambitious and optimistic character who believes he can accomplish anything he desires. However, as the novel progresses we see how Gatsby becomes disillusioned and his goals become blurred and confused.

At the beginning, Gatsby's Dream appears to be Daisy's love. Nonetheless, we start seeing that he is not obsessed with *her*, but with the social class she represents. Therefore, his Dream is to be a part of the "aristocratic" class in America, whose fortune is based on inherited money ("Old Money"). However, what Gatsby does not realize is that his Dream is not as close as it seems. This can be observed in the symbolic representation of the Dream: the green light on Daisy's dock. Gatsby sees the light so close but at the same time it is so far away, almost unattainable or impossible to grasp. This depiction makes the reader reflect upon Fitzgerald's intentions and wonder whether the author believed the American Dream was achievable or if he thought that because of its impossibility the Dream was only an illusion.

The author presents us with an uncorrupted and naïve Gatsby who believes in the illusion of the American Dream. Surrounded by the materialistic society of the 20s, largely criticized by its shallowness and obsession with material accumulation, Gatsby confuses wealth with status, believing that the fortune he acquires would automatically make him enter the high social classes. In this way, Fitzgerald shows the corruption of the Dream through the distortion of the original 'Pursuit of Happiness' into a mere pursuit for wealth and material possessions. At the same time, when the narrator comments on Gatsby's idealized version of Daisy saying "Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion." (Fitzgerald, 1925/2010, p. 102), he foreshadows the failure of the Dream and highlights its impossibility.

The illusion of the Dream leads to the corruption of Gatsby's character. His obsession does not allow him to act rationally and makes him take darkened paths in order to accomplish the Dream.

This is demonstrated in the way in which Gatsby earned his fortune: the fact that he had to acquire his wealth through illegal means lets Fitzgerald show that the American Dream was corrupted from the beginning and proves that in order to achieve it you have to corrupt yourself or become someone you are not. This idea is reinforced when Gatsby has to make up a different origin in order to be accepted. He invents a past by saying he is an Oxford man and claiming to be the heir of a San Francisco family. Through this, the author shows that another principle of the American Dream, that 'origin does not matter', is destroyed and that there are other factors, apart from wealth, that determine your social status and your success.

Fitzgerald shows how the Dream has been corrupted by society, which does not care if Gatsby gathers all the qualities to achieve such a Dream because they would never let him succeed. This is shown in the figures of Tom and Daisy, members of the "aristocratic" class ('Old Money'), who disregard people like Gatsby, classified as the 'New Rich', whose fortune is not based on inheritance. Both characters are condescending towards Gatsby who "In spite of being 'self-made', and wealthy, lacks the manners and background which would allow him to belong to their leisure class." (Matterson, 1990, p. 28) Their attitude towards him can be noticed in the aversion Daisy has towards the West Egg, "She was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented 'place' that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village." (Fitzgerald, 1925/2010, p. 114) or in the way Tom says "An Oxford man! [...] Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit" (Fitzgerald, 1925/2010, p. 129), proving that he looks down on Gatsby and does not believe him.

Finally, the corruption of the American Dream is highlighted by the clash between an uncorrupted past and a corrupted present. The idea that Gatsby is obsessed with the past can be interpreted as a metaphor for saying that the past represents the original American Dream. Gatsby wants to come back to it because the present symbolizes the new Dream corrupted by contemporary society. Through this contrast the author not only shows the corruption but also the impossibility of both the past and present Dream.

At the end of the novel we get to see that Gatsby is a victim of the American Dream. His own ambitions and goals of a better future are what finally kill him. He was blinded by the illusion of achievability and could not realize that his Dream, as Nick states, was "Already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city." (Fitzgerald, 1925/2010, p. 192) Through this, we understand that Gatsby represents the old positive concept of the American Dream, whereas the story itself and characters such as Tom and Daisy show that the Dream is only a shadow of what it used to be. Therefore, it is no longer a positive concept but a corrupted and impossible Dream, whose precepts are not important to society anymore. Fitzgerald presents a pessimistic view on the American Dream and makes us reflect upon its corruption, wondering if the Dream ever existed at all.

References

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