
The Great Gatsby: The Cynical Dream

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The Great Gatsby was written by Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald and published in 1925, within the artistic movement of Modernism. Its author is well known for his depictions of the Jazz Age, a term he used to refer to the Roaring Twenties, which is portrayed in this particular novel. Its story shows how modernity influenced American society, due to the ongoing urbanization and the recurring ideal of the United States as a land of opportunities. During this era, a literary group — with Fitzgerald among its members— originated as an aftermath of World War I and of a feeling of disillusionment. Modern America was a land that had filled the youth with hope, but had only given them disappointment, creating a contradiction between optimism and disenchantment.

In “Gatsby: False Prophet of the American Dream”, Pearson (1970) defines the American Dream as “the belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary, or social” (p. 638). Taking this definition into account, we can state that within the novel the most accurate representation of this concept is Jay Gatsby. He represents the self-made man who is in pursuit of his dream, and even the material medium through which he tries to grasp his goals has an intimate relationship with the values of the American Dream. His objective is to conquer Daisy, who, for him, embodies a time that is gone, when everything was better. However, he is surrounded by people who do not represent the American Dream, but quite the opposite. Daisy, Tom and even Nick represent the self-absorbed and cynical portion of the American society. This group belongs to what Caldwell (2006), the author of *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream*, defines as modern cynicism, characterized by shattered ideals and a sense of detached hopelessness. The presence of these people makes it impossible for the believers of the Dream to fulfil their own objectives. In this sense, *The Great Gatsby* demythologizes the American Dream by showing that it is not always attainable, to which end it introduces characters that are too cynical to believe in the idea of a bright future and too self-involved to think about others.

According to Caldwell (2006), the American Dream is divided into two faces that struggle to reconcile: the idealistic Dream and the material Dream. While the first one “aspired to liberty, justice, democracy, freedom, equality and self-realization”, the second one “aspired to wealth, material success and property” (p. 39). The latter is the one that gained momentum during the 1920’s, which may explain why Gatsby thinks that by showing Daisy his shirts and his ostentatious house he will fulfil his dream of winning her back. This modern and materialistic dream sets the scene of the story from the very beginning of the book. The epigraph of the novel, a poem written by a character from another novel by Fitzgerald, functions as a premonition of Gatsby’s dream. It can be interpreted as an exhortation from the American Dream itself directed towards Gatsby to make him show his material goods in order to catch Daisy’s attention: “Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her; if you can bounce high, bounce for her too” (Fitzgerald, 1925/1953, p. 3). He is a believer of this notion of materialism as a means to an end, and for some time, this way of thinking helps him, as it can be seen when Daisy starts to cry over the beauty of his shirts. His dream feels closer to him, but he remains unable to grasp it. In his article, Pearson (1970) presents a possible explanation for this: “The American Dream is not to be a reality, in that it no longer exists, except in the minds of men like Gatsby, whom it destroys” (p. 645). What this means is that those who

seek their dreams fail to reach them because they only exist within them, there is no shared sense of accomplishment, which is needed for the American Dream. The pursuers are surrounded by cynical and selfish individuals who only think about themselves.

The problem with these cynical people is that they do not realize that individual accomplishment can only be fulfilled when the whole society's interests are covered (as Caldwell also explains in his book). By only looking at their own interests, everyone's objectives seem further away, and this is where cynicism intensifies, in the collision between the idea of a bright future and the pessimistic perspective of it being unattainable. This collision strengthens the feeling of hopelessness as it shatters those ideals that seem unrealistic. In many occasions along the novel, Nick shows how every character, even himself, defends his or her own interests at all costs. Daisy, for example, acts according to what is convenient for her, as we can see by contrasting her visit to Gatsby's house and her later admitting that she actually does not love Gatsby when Tom confronts him in New York. Together with Tom, 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" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1953, p. 180). This implies that if they hurt someone, they would not care unless it was detrimental for them. This was the case of Myrtle, and their solution was to escape and blame someone else.

In "Desire's Second Act", Schreier (2007) describes Nick as a character who, within this upper social class, feels both an insider and an outsider, repelled by it, but at the same time, attracted to it (p. 164) and represented by it. This puts him in the position of a middle ground between the cynics and Gatsby, the dreamer. He begins as a character as detached and opposed to Gatsby as any other; a hopeless person who puts his interest first: "I thought I loved her. But I am slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires, and I knew that first I had to get myself definitely out of that tangle back home" (Fitzgerald, 1925/1953, p. 59). However, this hopelessness of his seems to intensify after Gatsby's death, when he realizes that nobody else is willing to give up their own interests to help with the funeral. Gatsby represented the materialistic dream with his parties, his house and his physical presence. However, once all of these things disappear, he is alone. Nobody cares about his existence as a human being. This realization leads Nick to his last thoughts about Gatsby and his hope of getting to where he wanted, even if that place was buried in the past. And it is at this point that his mindset changes, he chooses to imitate him and look for his own hope in the past, like a "boat against the current", by returning to the place where he came from. With this ending, Gatsby's death becomes a symbol of the failure of the American Dream. Cynicism even took control of Gatsby, who no longer cared about his objective, and, according to Nick, "must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream." (Fitzgerald, 1925/1953, p. 162)

From the very beginning, *The Great Gatsby* manages to create a clear representation of the American Dream, only to demythologize it afterwards by showing that it is not available for everyone. Not even for those who have the material means to get hold of their objectives. Believing in a brighter future seems improbable, as with modernization comes this new cynicism and individualism that reign above a larger portion of society, making it impossible to move forward collectively. This novel shows that the lack of cooperation can create a feeling of stagnation. A bright future seems improbable due to the impossibility of grasping their dreams, but the present is not comforting either. The past seems to be the only shelter.

References

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