
The Great Gatsby: The Crude Awakening of the American Dream

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The Great Gatsby is a modernist literary work that was first published in 1925. This novel guides the reader on a narrative of lavish descriptions and romance. A narrative of a harrowing and romantic story that the more one reads, the more it becomes tinged with critical and censorious overtones, as the novel not only depicts the tragic story of a self-made millionaire called Jay Gatsby, and his pursuit of his great love, Daisy Buchanan, but it also reflects upon the historical context of the new materialistic lifestyle that was breeding in the US. Even though this novel is considered one of the most important literary works published in the Roaring Twenties, it is also believed to be one of the most controversial and groundbreaking novels that its author has ever written because of his critical outlook on the number of changes that the society of the United States was undergoing after World War I. The author of this novel is Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896-1940), also known as one of the greatest literary writers of the so-called "Jazz Age". Born into an upper-middle class family, he was able to study at Princeton University. Fitzgerald had the opportunity to refine himself as a writer and was able to publish his first literary work titled *This Side of Paradise*, which opened to him several opportunities as a prominent figure in the literary circle. Some years later, Fitzgerald flew to Paris and joined a group of American writers who shared his vision, who were later known as the Lost Generation.

As argued by the Senior Lecturer Susan Currell (2009), although most writers of the 1920s — including Fitzgerald— had attained confidence and readership during this period, their literary productions cast a critical eye over the myths of the American Dream and showed their discomfort and tension (p. 56). F. Scott Fitzgerald did not believe in the idealized American lifestyle which promised to be a dream of social order in which anyone could have a better and richer life, and attain their goals regardless of their race, class status or ethnicity. He knew that within the proud nation of the US laid a myth: the American Dream. Being a good observer, he closely scrutinised all the things that irked him about this new social tendency, that he had already experienced himself, in his creation of the sublime and popular *The Great Gatsby*. Through the characters of this novel, he portrayed how the new American life proved to be materialistic and competitive; with a society that measured people's success from their material acquisitions and that looked down on the people who did not achieve it. Moreover, we get to see the crude awakening of what the American Dream really is and the consequences that it brings to the people who want to attain it. The characters in the novel believe that materialism is the only way to fulfill the idealization of the American Dream and feel like they belong to the society's elite, as if achieving this so-called "ideal lifestyle" resulted from money and opulence.

In order to show that this utopian illusion of success and upward mobility is related to a deep sense of decay, Fitzgerald portrayed how this hollow obsession led to tragic consequences for some of the characters of his novel. An example can be Myrtle Wilson. Married to the owner of a run-down garage located in the Valley of Ashes, Myrtle is bored of her husband and their low-middle class status as she craves for a life of luxuries and comforts. The attempt to procure the lifestyle of the elite is portrayed through Myrtle becoming Tom Buchanan's mistress. We can see

that when they first met, Myrtle had her eyes fixed at Tom's attire. This man, who radiated a life of luxury and fortune through his clothes and manners, was her opportunity for a better life: "He had on a dress suit and patent leather shoes and I couldn't keep my eyes off him" (Fitzgerald, 2019, p. 36). She believed that by having an affair with a rich man, she would be able to catch a glimpse of how the life of the people of East Egg was, even if this affair implied being abused physically and used as a sexual object. Suddenly, her well-being and right to be respected appeared to be less important than belonging to the upper class, even if it was through romance and deceit. The dire abuse was shown in the party hosted at Tom's private apartment, where he hit and fractured Myrtle's nose after mentioning Daisy's name.

This dominance that Tom wanted to transmit is indeed the best example of the false and empty promise of the happiness that the wealth and self-fulfillment of the American Dream brings about. He was born into the upper class and has satisfied all his needs and caprices since then, but all this affluence did not prevent him from being unhappy. He is so miserable that the only way of feeling at ease with himself and his life, is by showing others how much power he possesses. Nick Carraway's first description of Tom portrayed the dominant personality of the latter: "Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body" (Fitzgerald, 2019, p. 13). Tom had multiple extramarital affairs with women from lower classes, making sure he could control them with money by buying their silence. He feels the need to have absolute command not only through these affairs, but also through his racist and sexist comments as well as through the confrontation he had with Gatsby near the end of the novel in which he points out that Gatsby came from a poor family and became a millionaire by being a liar and bootlegger. Through this confrontation, he wanted to show that *he* was the better man, the powerful one.

Tom's wife is another example of how the utopian promise of the American Dream created a "world of broken relationships and false relationships; a world of money and success rather than of social responsibility" (Berman, 2001, p. 83). Even though Daisy Buchanan claimed to be in love with Gatsby, her love for him did not seem enough to leave her husband and the social prestige that the idealized picture-perfect family represented. She chose Tom and left Gatsby to clear up the mess she made after killing Myrtle. She knew that Tom was a part of East Egg, the wealthy class which Gatsby was never going to be a part of. Daisy married Tom because of his prosperity and it is reflected in Gatsby's words when telling Tom that she never loved him: "She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me" (Fitzgerald, 2019, p. 111).

This last quote presents a duality, because it not only depicts that Daisy chose Tom because of his money, but also the way in which Gatsby is a naive believer and victim of the American Dream and the false promise of the self-made man. By saying that Daisy could not wait for him because he was poor, it shows he knew that Daisy was an inaccessible woman for him if he lacked affluence. Consequently, because Daisy's parents did not allow her to be with a man who did not meet the expectations of the perfect husband with education, wealth and lineage; Gatsby struggles all his life in order to win her back by becoming rich. The problem is that, as it was mentioned in the novel, Gatsby hears money in Daisy's voice, which does not imply that he is attracted by this, but by what it represents. Even Nick mentions it in the story: "Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves (...) gleaming (...) above the hot struggles of the poor." (Fitzgerald, 2019, p. 127). He is blinded by an idyllic version of himself that he invented, which in reality is an adaptation of Daisy's ideal version of him. The green light on Daisy's dock represents Gatsby's impossible desire, the American Dream: Daisy's love. This green light is an unattainable objective, because Jay Gatsby is a character that he invented himself along

the years, the Trimalchio¹ who hosted never-ending parties; but deep inside, he will always be James Gatz, the man whose fortune came from being a swindler (Fitzgerald & West, 2000, p. 190). James Gatz from Dakota had invented Jay Gatsby and set him in an idyllic world of ineffable gaudiness, in contrast to the gray life of the poor (MacKendrick, 1950, p. 310). However, he will never make it to the final step of the social ladder because Gatsby is *in* but not *of* the society in which Daisy lives. And that is the crude reality of the American Dream: that green light seems like a dream so close to becoming true that he even felt that by stretching his hand he would be able to reach it. And that is because he knows *what* he wants and that he will do anything in his power to achieve it; but at the same time, the dream is far away because, no matter how hard he tries, he will never be a part of East Egg. Gatsby is and will always be a class outcast.

Overall, the novel provides us with a rich lesson: the American Dream itself is as unattainable as the green light is for Gatsby. His hope in the green light defies time and beats on, boats against the current. He craves for this ideal life to be his eternal “orgastic” future, but this bogus promise of success through hard work puts the materialism and class violence that lies beneath this glorified illusion under the spotlight. The American Dream’s crude awakening...is that it is just a dream.

References

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1. Trimalchio is a fictional character who appears in one of the best-known chapters of the roman novel *Satyricon* by Petronius. He is a freed slave who has grown wealthy and hosts lavish banquets with carefully rehearsed entertainments.

