



The American dream in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: A boon or a bane

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Abstract

The paper explores the corrupted idea of the American Dream in one of the greatest novels written on the topic, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Even though the pursuance of the American Dream stems from the idea of hard work and success that is pure, truthful, and just, Jay Gatsby's approach in achieving it leads to his demise. His relationships with other characters, particularly Tom Buchanan and Daisy Buchanan, were tainted because of the morally corrupted notion of the American Dream. This paper textually analyzes *The Great Gatsby* and explores that how Gatsby runs after a dream (Daisy) that he cannot achieve even after becoming financially wealthy, and how the corrupt ideals of the American Dream become the reason that he cannot fulfill his own dreams.

Keywords: American dream, morality, corruption, bane, ideals, jazz age

1. Introduction

The American dream is a on-going concept that has been debated since it was conceived with the birth of America as an independent nation. The American dream, in the contemporary times, has changed its shape and has been redefined into the 'universal dream': A dream of success. But before this redefinition occurred, the concept of American dream itself went through major changes during the course of American history. The original concept of the American Dream was given by James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Adams 404). With time and booming capitalism, this concept of American dream went through materialistic changes as well. After the first world war, America was enjoying the riches of the plunder of European economy. Trade and businesses went through the roof, and it was complete unprecedented. But, as materialism flourished, its evilness negatively affected the American society. In an era filled with immensely prospering possibilities of success and wealth, came the criticism of the era itself. The 'Jazz Age' (the roaring 1920's) made the natural spiritualism and worldly materialism, inextricably confused as the same thing (Bewley 223). From within the constructs of the jazz age, arose a novelist who adventerly, was an extreme critic of redefined idea of the American Dream: F. Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's most famous work, *The Great Gatsby*, portrays the popular misconception of the jazz age: that American imperialism is a necessity for living a good and happy life. However, there are certain 'evils' that dwell behind the masks that his characters wear. Their 'outwardly' happiness is nonetheless concealing the 'alienation' as the side effect of the so-called reinvention of the 'American Dream'. It was Walt Whitman, who envisioned the 'Great American Dream' as a reinterpretation "to include connections to society, to the Transcendentalist Self, alternately called Genius, the Oversoul, and Nature" (Setzer 6), which coincidentally became a re-ignition George Washington's original idea of the American Dream. In

light of this original idea, Fitzgerald challenges the redefined version of the American dream as a bane of human life. This paper explores the life of his novel's main character Jay Gatsby, and his efforts to become a part of the elite class. Consequently, this paper also explores how Gatsby's concept of the American dream destroyed his love-life and plunged him towards his death.

2. Literature Review and Analysis

The idea of the American dream itself is a subjective one, meaning that every individual, is free to choose how he/she views, defines, and experiences this dream. Although morally, the concept of the American dream includes truth and justice, but within the business of capitalism, not everyone plays by these rules. The subjective element of how one can view the success and the American dream is given by Fitzgerald himself when he writes "life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all." (Fitzgerald 6). Gatsby has an idealistic yet a mysterious personality. Till the end of the novel, he seems to be a composed character that is nonetheless an embodiment of the American dream. But the society in which Gatsby lives, never truly accepts him as a morally acceptable character. People come to his parties, enjoy themselves, but still gossip about his fortune. The idea of the American dream becomes socially corrupt because even though Gatsby is a self-made millionaire, the society in which he lives, does not accept him. One reason for his exclusion from the 'inherited' elite class is that he lives in West Egg, whereas the "East Egg is reserved for the elite members of the upper class born into old money" (Pumphrey 116). Lois Tyson is also of the view that Jay Gatsby is "...the character who seems at first to embody the American dream and the hope capitalism thereby offers to all, reveals, upon closer inspection, the hollowness of that dream" (Tyson 73).

Fitzgerald also extrapolates the idea of the American dream creating a social bane within the American lifestyle by consistently referring to the racism in his novel. For the elite, who are enjoying the 'inherited' American dream of the jazz age, the concept of 'colored people' rising to their social

status is an appalling one. An example from *The Great Gatsby* may appear in a subtler tone towards the hatred for the colored race, but it is nonetheless an embodiment of the evil quality that American imperialism brings to the 'inherited' rich people. Tom Buchanan's dialogue "... It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things." (Fitzgerald 13) is then replied by Daisy Buchanan as "We've got to beat them down," (Fitzgerald 13).

Tom's characterization, which stems out from his hot-headed and a typical villainous ideology does not only relate to the typical form of racism (white vs. black). The social class structure and dominance for Tom is a traditional birthright which he possesses and exudes in front of others. Particularly for Gatsby, Tom's hatred is everything but racist in its essence, and that too is just a hindrance from the actual nature (that Gatsby is white) ^[1]. Tom's sense of pomposity exists in the fact that he never attends Gatsby's parties. Although the bourgeoisie and elite class did attend them, for Tom, it is a blotch on his pride to attend Gatsby's parties unless Gatsby personally invites him. A sense of self-pride to such an extent only stems out from the evil exuberance of the American dream, which exists in Tom's character as his hatred towards Gatsby. Tom can only go as far as verbally abuse Gatsby. If Gatsby had been black, then according to 1920's morals, Tom would have been revered as a hero for putting Gatsby 'in his place' through physical violence. Tom's reluctance in attending Gatsby's parties out of his self-pride can also be seen in Chapter 4, when all the big-shots with big names attend Gatsby's party. The narrator, Nick Carraway, describes the people coming in and wearing their wealth on their sleeves. This description is also a depiction of their desires to attain the wealth that Gatsby has. They seem almost living under the shadow of Gatsby's 'Greatness', because for them, the greatness was purely materialistic and desirable. For them, the American dream is an abomination of their self-pride and holding contempt and jealousy for Gatsby, while still enjoying his champagnes and other luxuries that Gatsby offers them. This concept then turns out to be a morally corrupt notion of humanism and becomes a bane of the American dream through materialism. Although for Tom, this notion is not unnerveing, as he holds a higher status and pride than Gatsby.

The major development in the novel that depicts the bane of the twisted social concept of the American dream occurs between Gatsby and Daisy's relationship. While Gatsby may or may not be revealed as the protagonist of the entire plot, Daisy definitely does not prove herself worthy of being called a protagonist. Marius Bewley writes that:

[Gatsby] is a "mythic" character, and no other word will define him. Not only is he an embodiment (as Fitzgerald makes clear at the outset) of that conflict between illusion and reality at the heart of American life; he is an heroic personification of the American romantic hero, the true heir

¹ Although Fitzgerald does not write about Jay Gatsby's complexion (White or Black), there is one instance where a reader can find a hint to his skin color. In chapter 7, when Tom is complaining about the society allowing intermarriages between whites and blacks, Jordan Baker speaks that "We're all white here" (Fitzgerald 100), which includes all those that are in the room, including Jay Gatsby.

of the American dream. (Bewley 226-227).

Gatsby's devotion to Daisy and his love for her can make him an American romantic hero as Bewley suggests. The illusion of his senseless love for a woman that is outside his social class tempts him to follow a morally corrupt path in achieving a status which is already tainted by the evils of the socially materialistic American dream. As Tyson also confers that:

If Gatsby is the novel's representative of the American dream, however, the dream must be a corrupt one, for Gatsby achieves it only through criminal activities, a fact that severely deflates the image of the honest, hardworking man that the dream is supposed to foster. (Tyson 73)

From this perspective, the reader of the novel may look at Gatsby's character quite subjectively, that he did it all out of love. But then 'morally' how does he not lose his title of a protagonist? The reader may confer then that "all is fair in love and war", and that Gatsby had no other choice. For Daisy though, her choices were not too bound. She came from a rich family, she could have easily married Gatsby when he had nothing, but because of social pressures in her own class, she did not consider Gatsby as a suitor who could provide her with the materialistic matrimonial life that she wanted. Her interest in Gatsby nonetheless remained in her heart even after Gatsby was no longer in the picture. However, it was reignited with ferocity and passion once she got to know that Gatsby had become rich. One of the famous scenes when Gatsby is showing his shirts to Daisy, her affection is heightened by the colors of shirts and not Gatsby's attempt to win back her love through his emotions. When Daisy says that "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such — such beautiful shirts before." (Fitzgerald 72), her sadness is rather materialistic in the sense that Gatsby's fortune is something she desired, only because she had affection for Gatsby that she did not have for Tom. At one place the realization of the American dream as a destruction of the love between Daisy and Gatsby can be seen when Gatsby says to Tom that "She never loved you, do you hear?" he cried. "She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me!" (Fitzgerald 100). Here the concepts of the 'American Dream' are pitted against each other — meaning that the requirement of a happy life (without money) versus a good life (with money) are both necessities of the same concept that has destroyed the love between Gatsby and Daisy. For Daisy, her love was always at fault in the sense that she really did 'love' Tom, while being interrogated by Gatsby about her feelings for himself, she chose to say "Even alone I can't say I never loved Tom," she admitted in a pitiful voice. "It wouldn't be true" (Fitzgerald 102). This is also where Tom knows that he has won and that he defeats Gatsby mentally by putting the notion of his hindrance in Daisy's mind with his materialistic life. Gatsby's initial 'penniless' love for Daisy never stood a chance, as the society and Daisy never completely accepted him as part of the elite class. His reminiscence of the past confirms his inability to be suitable for Daisy:

But he knew that he was in Daisy's house by a colossal accident...he was at present a penniless young man without a past...eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand.

(Fitzgerald 114)

Gatsby himself confirms the way that he views Daisy as a person. For him, she is consumed by the notion of money and materialistic life, that even Gatsby himself becomes unsure that even if Daisy comes back to him, would she be coming back because of his love for her, or that now he can give her the material things that she always wanted? Gatsby talks about Daisy that:

“Her voice is full of money,” he said suddenly. That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money — that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it... high in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl.... (Fitzgerald 92)

In this regard, the American dream and the pursuance of such a dream destroy love, the purest emotion of human life. At one place, the roots of the American dream becoming a bane within a familial relationship between Henry C. Gatz and his son Jay Gatsby can also be realized. After his son’s death, Henry is in complete awe at the status of his son’s wealth and for a moment, he is engulfed within the material possessions that he desired. In that moment, forgets everything, including his son. Fitzgerald writes about Henry when he looks around his son’s mansion that “...when he looked around him now for the first time and saw the height and splendor of the hall and the great rooms opening out from it into other rooms, his grief began to be mixed with an awed pride.” (Fitzgerald 128).

3. Conclusion

The story of *The Great Gatsby* revolves around the failure of the American dream. Gatsby was poor - a social notion that put him out of the question of gaining Daisy's hand in marriage. Then he got rich, tried to achieve the American dream by doing illegal businesses in order to set himself on the pedestal of ‘a rich man marrying a rich woman’ in order to justify his love. But, doing so, only fated himself to die in the end. Gatsby’s efforts to win back the love of his life was based on illegal attempts at achieving the ‘American Dream’. For Gatsby, his American dream had become the irrefutable American Daisy. This was his subjective attempt to achieve a happy and adjusted life, and it revolved around none other than achieving Daisy as his wife. As Fitzgerald writes his concluding remarks on the life of Gatsby that:

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it... (Fitzgerald 138)

To his realization, Gatsby was on a path of his destruction in order to achieve a dream that for him turned evil. Kermit Vanderbilt writes on Gatsby’s vision and version of his personalized American dream that “Gatsby weds his "unutterable visions" to the "perishable breath" of his idealized American Daisy...But the journey toward the temple of beauty develops, in traditional mythic pattern, into a metaphysical encounter with evil” (Vanderbilt 293).

For Gatsby, the American dream became his own emotional (losing Daisy) and physical (losing his life) undoing.

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