

Great gatsby and death of a salesman: comparison



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There are two versions of the American Dream. The historical dream is the promise of a land of freedom with opportunity and equality for all. However since 1900, the American Dream has come to mean a dream of financial success.(1) With material success, it is expected that happiness of every kind will follow. America is seen as the land of opportunity. Ultimately both Fitzgerald and Miller see the American Dream as a failure.

For Jay Gatsby, obtaining the material dream is a means to personal fulfilment, but for Willy Loman this concept is reversed: personal fulfilment is a means to obtaining the material dream. Miller presents a confused dream through Willy Loman who cannot separate the issues of wealth and being well liked:

Be liked and you will never want

Here, Miller is illustrating the myth that in order to be professionally and financially successful, to be popular is essential. Willy immerses himself in a past where commerce and emotion were linked. In this way, Miller is presenting the American Dream as a concept unable to change with time. Miller presents a dream that is carried by Americas individuals who will not allow contemporary society to kill it off, as shown in Happs vow to continue Willys dream after his death. In both texts the Dream is presented as an all-consuming force. I think that the pulpless halves of the oranges and lemons left after Gatsbys parties represent how Fitzgerald feels about how twenties society treated its dreamers. Gatsby was used in life, but forgotten in death when the party was over. I think he views the party guests as the pulpless halves who consume all that they are given without a thought about who

gave it to them. Miller also presents this idea of the American Dream as consuming:

You cant eat the orange and throw the peel away- a man is not a piece of fruit!

Willy feels his sales company has used him. The pursuit of the dream is presented as selfish as it leads people to use others.. The writers present the unrestrained desire for money and pleasure as leading to corrupt methods of achieving the Dream. There was a great belief that money was the route to happiness. The Dream consumed people to the extent that they cheated in order to obtain it. For example, Gatsby bootlegs in an era of prohibition in the belief that acquiring wealth will attract Daisy to him. Jordan cheats at golf whereas Biff steals and Willy has an affair, believing the Womans claim to put him right through to the buyers. I think the writers are implying that the material dream was held with such high regard as a means to happiness that corruption in the pursuit of this dream was not uncommon. The stockings in Death of a Salesman expose the irony and hypocrisy of the Dream, and therefore the corruption behind the Dream. Willy gives new stockings to the Woman whereas Linda has to mend her old ones. Both Fitzgerald and Miller recognize that there were honest ways to be successful as personified in the characters of Nick and Bernard. Miller sees it as necessary to work hard to achieve the Dream, even Willys hero, Dave Singleman still had to work at the age of 84. Miller presents corrupt means as failing, but Fitzgerald sees success through hard work as rare. The writers are suggesting that that the material dream encouraged greed and selfishness, leading to corruption. Corruption shows the decline in the values

of the original, idealized American Dream, such as honesty and hard work. Hard work as a means to material success is seen to be rare. Tom and Daisy are born into their worlds of white palaces and never had to work for their wealth. Both Wilson and Willy work hard but are not successful.

America, the land where the characters aim to fulfil their dreams is presented as a corrupt land, with little of its supposed plentiful opportunity. Both writers present an atmosphere of competition and prejudice attitudes. Although Bernard defies Willy by becoming an extremely successful lawyer, Miller presents discrimination surrounding the character. As a boy, Bernard was presented as an almost comic figure, at least for Willy who labelled him as anaemic. It is presumed that Bernard will never be accepted, but unlike Gatsby, he is, especially after achieving the Dream. Gatsby is part of the new rich which is unacceptable to the established wealth of the Buchanans. The white palaces of established East Egg show the established wealth compared with Gatsbys factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville which implies that he was a fake. Willys house amidst the towering, angular shapes of surrounding apartment blocks shows Millers view of an oppressive business world. The Buchanans wealth is symbolised by the colour white, signifying its honest and pure origins, whereas Gatsby wears vulgar pink shirts and owns a yellow car. Gatsby even adopts the term old sport in an attempt to be accepted by the old money. However, white is a colour which can easily be tainted, which symbolises Fitzgeralds view of the Dream. Fitzgerald implies the importance of status within the Dream as Daisy feel the opportunity is not available for her to be in a serious relationship with Gatsby, as his wealth carries no status. There is no opportunity in what Fitzgerald represents as the real

America of crushed dreams: the Valley of Ashes. However, in both texts opportunity is available to the characters. Gatsby took up his opportunity to go sailing with Dan Cody and achieved his material dream through his ingenuity. Willy's mistake is that although offered opportunities, he does not take them up. He did not take the job offered to him by Charley or go to Alaska with Ben. Willy's regret and distance from the Dream is illustrated when Ben and Willy stand at opposite ends of the stage. I think Miller is indicating the way in which acquiring the dream was more highly regarded if done so independently. Fitzgerald uses the green light to show Gatsby's distance from the Dream.

The notion of competition behind the Dream was that this should be healthy, but I think both writers are suggesting that this led to rivalry and greed. Unlike Gatsby, Happy recognizes that he cannot compete with status, but feels a need to compete:

I don't know what gets into me; maybe I just have an over-developed sense of competition or something

Happy competes sexually, even though he recognizes that it is a crummy characteristic, as he feels a need to win at something. Ben is presented as possessing the essential quality of competitiveness needed to be successful:

Screw on your fists and you can fight for a fortune

Biff, influenced by Ben and being a footballer in high school has had this notion of competition instilled in him from an early age. Whereas the

characters in *Death of a Salesman* compete materially, those in *The Great Gatsby* already have these materials.

Both texts present the search for the spiritual dream as having over-ridden the search for the material dream, as it was believed that money could buy everything, even spiritual fulfillment. As Gatsby discovers, this is not the case. His wealth cannot rekindle the relationship he had with Daisy. The majority of those who have achieved the material dream are presented as failing to achieve spiritual fulfillment. Ben has pioneered to achieve the Dream, yet offers no answers on how to succeed, simply repeats:

when I was seventeen I walked into the jungle, and when I was twenty-one I walked out. And by God I was rich

Ben is presented as an empty character through which Miller is presenting his view of a dream that has no substance, and is ultimately just an illusion. After all, Ben is an illusionary character. Daisy and Tom are bored with their existence. They were born into wealth and their lives have had little purpose. They drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together, by which I think Fitzgerald is suggesting that life holds no possibilities once achieving the material dream- the Buchanans seem still to be searching for their purpose in life. Fitzgerald ironically comments on this by placing these wealthy characters in eggs which suggests a promise of new life, but in reality, even though these characters have achieved the material dream there are no possibilities for them. Tom has an affair with Myrtle Wilson to seek spiritual fulfillment and as a diversion from his boredom. Both writers use location as a technique of describing their views

of America. Both writers, particularly Fitzgerald, present the Mid-West as the land of promise, and a place where values really exist. Miller presents a Western America where Biffs spiritual agrarian dream is accepted and available. In the East this dream is dismissed by Willy, highlighting Millers belief that the Material Dream was largely the only acceptable dream. This idea is also reflected in The Great Gatsby. Gatsbys dream is rejected by Daisy, living on East Egg. The East, and its values are presented as dismissing the West, and its values. The preservation of American values such as honesty is seen to lie in the West. Nick moves west at the end of the novel to recapture these values, disgusted by the people of the East. Happy is disgusted by his own lack of values. His true desire is to settle down with somebody with substance, like his mother, but feels that his over-developed sense of competition prevents him from doing so. I think Miller is suggesting how the pressure of carrying the Dream instilled a feeling of belonging and a desire to be part of something bigger than your own existence. Although possessing a desire for spiritual fulfillment, Happs sexual exploits make him feel a sense of self-importance, as if he has somehow won and allow an escape from an otherwise mundane existence. Gatsbys guests attend his parties and drink for the same reason. Of all these attempts to find spiritual fulfillment, none of them are successful, suggesting that peoples primary concern was money. For example, Fitzgerald rarely mentions that Daisy has a daughter, and only once mentions her by name. Daisy treats her daughter as another possession to show off, signifying the decline in family values. Her selfish, shallow nature illustrates Fitzgeralds view of the Dream. Daisy at her most emotional in the novel is when she cries at the sight of Gatsbys shirts.

It makes me sad because Ive never seen such- such beautiful shirts before.

Daisy is moved to tears by Gatsbys ostentatious representation of wealth. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg represent the eyes of God. Fitzgerald is expressing his view that even within the commercial world (Doctor T. J. Eckleburg is in fact an advertisement) God is omnipresent, overlooking everyone. The eyes dimmed a little by many paintless days symbolizes the extent at which humanity has lost its connection to God. Both writers present a dream that lacks in spiritual fulfillment, both when pursued and obtained.

Both Miller and Fitzgerald present the American Dream as having its origins in the past. It is a dream that over time has been corrupted. This past is the reason why the characters will, or in Biffs case will not, stand by the dream. Gatsby wants to recreate his past and Willy wants to live in a past world where emotion and commerce were linked. Willy confuses past and present as their boundaries have become blurred, showing Millers belief that the common man was unable to adjust to a contemporary dream of declining standards. Miller uses music that is described as gay, high and rollicking to represent the optimism and excitement felt in the past. When moving into the past the entire house and surroundings become covered with leaves, which I think symbolizes the possibility and growth that Miller felt existed in the past dream. The dream is presented as a creation of a feeling of failure. Willy feels he has failed in being well liked by his Father and Ben and takes this as a reason for them abandoning him. Gatsby feels his lack of wealth is why his relationship with Daisy failed. Both Gatsby and Willy seek to rectify the traits that they feel were reasons for their failures. The writers present a dream that is incapable of change over time. Fitzgerald represents this by

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the clock that Gatsby knocks down. The clock represents the past, a time that Gatsby is unable to repeat with Daisy. Fitzgeralds structure of withholding information on Gatsby emphasizes his view of a hidden, corrupt society. Neither text is presented in chronological order, which allows the reader or audience to piece together information. The use of a narrator who is also a writer makes Fitzgeralds views more effective as he writes in the first person. Both writers present the American Dream as having a definite past, but a very bleak future, if any at all.

Although the main characters, the eternal dreamers, of both texts die, the American Dream lives on. The evident failure of Gatsby and Willy is not presented as a deterrent for others. Nick concludes that this is human nature, indeed we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther, strive harder for the Dream. Happy vows to achieve his Fathers Dream. Both Fitzgerald and Miller are presenting that there will always be those who are willing to dream. I think Fitzgerald also believes that the truth will eventually catch up with these people, to destroy the dreamers. This is illustrated by George, the spiritless man who destroys Gatsby, the dreamer. Although Willys death was by suicide, his means was by car. Myrtle was also killed by a car. Both characters are killed by the materialism that they dreamed of. Willy believes that his insurance will be worth more than his life. Gatsbys Father values Gatsbys life by his possessions:

His pride in his son and his sons possessions was continually increasing.

Both writers are presenting dehumanization within American society, where wealth is seen to be of more value than life.

The American Dream is seen as contagious and addictive. Linda gets caught up in Willys Dream and Nick gets so enchanted by Gatsby and his dream that he writes a book about it. Fitzgerald values the dreamer qualities of society- indeed Gatsby is *The Great Gatsby*, whereas I think Miller is indicating the danger of dreaming. The title *Death of a Salesman* suggests that Willy was dying through his dreams from the start of the text. We are never told what Willy sells. Willy is merely a salesman, as the title states. I think Millers use of the indefinite article highlights his belief that Willys dream, and indeed failure, was common. The possibility of success makes it difficult to see the play as an attack on the American system. Bernard is, in fact, living proof of the systems effectiveness. (2) The Dream is a flawed dream and the texts expose the corrupt extents to which people will go to in pursuit of personal gain. According to both Miller and Fitzgerald the spiritual dream has decayed. Miller presents a deluded and confused dream through the character of Willy. Fitzgerald sees the Dream as fictional. Gatsby is presented as a fictional character- this is not even his real name, he has fabricated his own identity. The Lomans and Gatsby are examples of the disappointment of life if you continually live in a dream world. The Dream comes to define the person, rather than the person defining their own dream.