

# Fulfillment and falsity in the great gatsby and world's fair

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



'The American Dream' is an ideal which states that every man, woman and child should have equal opportunity to be prosperous and achieve the highest possible goals; this principle is supported by the United States Declaration of Independence, which states that 'all men are created equal', thus supporting the idea that all American citizens should have identical chance to search for fulfillment within their own lives regardless of social standing, wealth, or gender. Even as men of two very different eras, novelists F. Scott Fitzgerald and E. L. Doctorow were both drawn to this fundamental social principle. Despite major differences in approach, the concept of America and the search for fulfillment are linked together in both *The Great Gatsby* and *World's Fair*.

Fitzgerald's 1920's American novel presents a society where materialism has replaced God in the pursuit of fulfillment; yellow is the color of gold, and as such the color is repeatedly used to symbolize conspicuous expenditure and is commonly associated with characters such as Gatsby. One example of this material wealth can be read in the form of Gatsby's car – Nick uses the negative adjective 'monstrous' to describe the yellow vehicle, and adds that it appears 'swollen', a descriptive piece of diction that creates visual imagery of sickness and disease. Gatsby's attempts to assimilate with the upper class have backfired, as his choice of vehicle is almost grotesque in its excesses; this is a further example of a failed search for fulfillment that offers no spiritual or emotional contentment.

America is a capitalist state; the pursuit of wealth can often be seen as a pathway to satisfaction. Within *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby's aspirations

primarily revolve around reigniting his relationship with Daisy, which in turn requires wealth. In fact, Gatsby believes he will be able to win Daisy's love with his newfound shows of conspicuous consumerism such as his lavish house and extensive range of clothing. However, Fitzgerald ultimately shows his readers through Gatsby's ultimate demise that, regardless of his wealth, the novel's titular character still dies unfulfilled and alone, his capital unable to acquire the one person Gatsby believed would grant him ultimate contentment. This idea of America is a hub of capitalism that can grant fulfillment is expressed in an extract from *World's Fair*: ' he knows the value of a dollar'. This statement is particularly reflective of the American fixation on wealth, especially during the period that Edgar is describing after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. As the protagonist, Edgar – at nine years old – has a keen awareness of monetary value and considers this knowledge one of the key components of a ' typical American Boy'.

Doctorow's narrative states that the ' typical American boy' should admire all females: ' in women he appreciates them all'. This idea links to the repeated motif throughout *The Great Gatsby* that the pursuit of happiness can be found through heterosexual relationships: examples of liaisons encountered during the search for fulfillment include those between Jordan and Nick, as well as the affair between Gatsby and Daisy which comprises much of the central plot of the novel. The very conceptualization of what it means to be an American man, Doctorow's speaker believes, is linked to this emotional and sexual desire for women. Similarly, the role of a woman living within the USA during the nineteen twenties and thirties was associated with her

willingness to submit to the lusts of her dominant counterpart males; this can be perceived through the character of Daisy, whose fate is primarily influenced by the desires of her husband and her out-of-wedlock lover. The concept of America is thus tied to the search for fulfillment through romantic endeavors.

Furthermore, Doctorow touches upon the theme of patriotism which Fitzgerald satirizes within his novel; 'the typical American boy mentions America'. America, as we know it today, is effectively a product of European colonies seeking sanctuary from religious persecution and following the hope of a prosperous life; the goals of those early settlers are well summarized by the phrase 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' which is taken from the United States Declaration of Independence. In this way, the search for fulfillment is ultimately bound up with those initial settlers' idealized concepts of America. Whilst Doctorow's speaker seems to believe in and commend the notion that America is a place where fulfillment can be found by all citizens, regardless of wealth or social class, Fitzgerald – it could be interpreted – is cynical: 'the rich get richer and the poor get- children.' This suggests that although America is commonly referred to as 'the land of the free', financial success and social mobility are restricted to those born into a handful of elite families and are not available to the average man. This idea is reinforced through the character of Gatsby; despite his immense drive to succeed, Gatsby is only able to profit through illicit projects and is discriminated against by Tom Buchanan due to his lack of an elitist familial background. In this way, Fitzgerald demonstrates skepticism about naive

nationalism and sheds doubt onto the legitimacy of the association between the search for fulfillment and American values.

Another major theme within Fitzgerald's novel is that of the cult of celebrity. In 1924, the year in which *The Great Gatsby* is set, the development of the movie industry in America led to a growing public fixation on not only celebrated actors but also sports stars such as the novel's Jordan Baker, and famous flappers including Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda Sayre. Characters such as Myrtle pursue gratification through immersing themselves in this celebrity culture and by trying to climb the social ladder. This idea of fame is reflected in the extract from *World's Fair* when the speaker states, 'I'm famous! I'm in the newspaper!' The use of exclamation marks and the use of the verb 'shouted' to describe the speaker's vocal quality reflect the young protagonist's excitement, showing that the prospect of fame can be a source of immense contentment. This idea of celebrity is also presented within *The Great Gatsby*, although in a more cynical light. At one point within the novel, Nick reels off a list of celebrities whom he has encountered over the summer at Gatsby's; the effect of this listing, combined with asyndeton, creates the sense that although these guests may be currently well known, their fame is fickle and they are easily replaced. This raises questions about whether a celebrity status – a hallmark of early twentieth century America – could be a true source of fulfillment.

The two texts vary greatly in their presentations of America in association with the search for fulfillment; Doctorow's young protagonist seemingly believes in the concept of the 'typical American boy' and strives to

exemplify the positive traits he regards in his own country and its ideals. Fitzgerald, oppositely, ultimately casts a cynical view over the association between the concept of America and the search for fulfillment, suggesting that the ideal of the ' American Dream' has been corrupted through man's greed and capitalism. The reason behind these differing views may be due to the ages of the narrators; Nick Carraway, as an experienced protagonist, has grown weary of the hypocrisy of the American ideals, whilst Edgar is still capable of seeing the possibilities for his country and holds onto his childlike nationalism.