

# The introduction of american dream english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



American dream has always been one of the most popular issues in American literature. It arose in the colonial period and developed in the 19th century. With the discovery of North American continent, the development of the enlightenment, the establishment of the capitalist economy and the westward movement, the social values of Americans gradually formed. All these exert a tremendous influence on the thought of American dream. The term, " American dream" was first used by James Truslow Adams in his book " The Epic of American" in 1931. He points out that: " The American dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with the opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." Actually, the definition of the so-called American Dream can be distinguished in broad sense and narrow sense. For the broad one, it refers to the equality, freedom, and democracy in the United States. The narrow one means a kind of belief that everyone in the United States, if only make efforts and never give up, will get a better life, and his dream would come true, regardless of social class and circumstance of birth. That is to say, people should depend on their own hard work, courage, creativity and determination towards prosperity, rather than rely on specific social classes and other assistance. One should be responsible for oneself, and taking every opportunity to gain success by courage and hard working. It is different from the most other countries that the United States had considerable economic freedom. The role of government is limited; making the U. S. has a great social mobility. Any person may go towards the top and become successful through their efforts and diligence. So many Americans really believed that such an opportunity to get success can be found.

## **2. 2 The connotation of American Dream in different background**

As a rooted spirit, American dream became stronger and stronger in American people's mind. But with the development of America, people's value has some change. The old values in society were breaking down and changes happened among the new generation. That is, in different social and historical background, the concepts of American dream are different, and different people have different understandings of American dream. Of course the ways to pursue their dreams are also various. So it has more connotations with the changes of history.

### **2. 2. 1 The American Dream from 18th to 19th century**

The American dream in this period can also be called " the original gold dream". From 18th to 19th century, in Europe, noble has not yet become relics. Because of the severe social hierarchy, unfair wealth distribution and serious religious discrimination, many pioneers of the enlightenment, such as Montesquieu, Descartes, started praise United States as a magical land. The " American dream" gradually sprouted among vulnerable groups. Immigrants which came to the United States in 18th century were vulnerable groups from Europe. They extremely longed for political equality, so " Equality" has become a connotation of the " American dream". It can be said that the early " American Dream" is European immigrants' dream.

### **2. 2. 2 The American Dream after Industrialization**

During the Civil War, the United States began the industrialization. More and more European immigrants accessed to America. The " American Dream"

has a new connotation. During that time, there were a lot of commercial and industrial giants who share common characteristic that they are poor, but finally they founded their big career through hard work and became a legend. For example, Ford invented the automobile production line. " At that time the United States has been in a period of rapid economic expansion." (Mailer 2007: 32) It can be said that American dream in that period means dream of democracy and expansion.

### **2. 2. 3 The American Dream in 20th century**

In 1920s, the American society enjoyed economic prosperity after the World War I. And thanks to the industrialization, promotion of electronic product profoundly changed people's life. Meanwhile, the invention of the car and its universal application, also have greatly changed the American way of life and way of thinking. Unprecedented industrial growth and accelerated consumer demand made the era known as " the Roaring Twenties", an age of material success and spiritual poverty. Money-making and corruption became the theme of the American Dream at that time. " America had been fresh and green and new, had ' pandered to the last and greatest of all human dreams' and promised something like ' the orgiastic future' for humanity." (Chang yaoxin 2008: 30)

### **2. 3 The American Dreams Reflected in the Novel**

In this novel, we can see different reflection of American dream. And, on the whole, all of them are the outcomes sharing common characteristics of that age.

### **2. 3. 1 Gatsby's American Dream**

The American dream originated from American civilization pioneer period. Pioneers say that the United States is the paradise of youth, vigor, and freedom, where people have equal opportunities to make their dreams come true. Thousands of young Americans want to pursue their " American dream", and they believe that as long as they get enough money they would have the power, status, love and happiness, Gatsby is a typical representative of them. What's more, the success of Benjamin Franklin indeed encourages those dreamers. It is obvious that how much Franklin, the self-made man, " the father of all Yankees" has influenced Gatsby. Gatsby believed that everyone can get rich, and then acquire happiness through wealth and power. And his dream can be first called the " golden dream". But his American dream is not just material possession. He endeavors to be rich so that he can fulfill his true American dream, affluent Daisy. Daisy, who is in love with Gatsby five years ago, now is the wife of rich Tom. Realizing that he cannot marry Daisy just because of the difference in their social status and economic standards, Gatsby thinks that only if he has much money and becomes one of the upper class, should he win his lost love. So " it is reasonable for him to pursue material wealth in order to win the love of Daisy." Croatia 2004: 7 Daisy is the embodiment of Gatsby's American dream, an illusory ideal dream of happiness. As for Gatsby she is like " a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock". (Fitzgerald 2007: 12)

### **2. 3. 2 The American Dream of Other Characters**

Nick, the narrator in the novel, is also a dream seeker, although he is a more rational one. He is the representative of the traditional moral codes of America. He is from the Midwest and hope to make money in the Long Island and he is also attracted by beauty and wealth. Tom, Daisy, Jordan, they were all born with wealth and status. As Tom and Daisy, they are the representatives of those carefree and corrupted dreamers. There is nothing they need to worry about, for they have no responsibility at all. As for Tom, his superior comes from his great family background. By virtue of his family, he controls two women and maybe more and more in future. In this way, he can achieve his dream of dominant rule. Daisy has a good background, too. Then though Daisy is an attractive, romantic woman, she is empty in spirit. It is properly indicated by this: " what will we do with ourselves this afternoon?"(Fitzgerald 2007: 25) All she hopes for are enough money and comfortable life with nothing to worry about. As for Jordan, she seems to be indifferent and is an opportunist in her own way . She is " incurably dishonest", but Nick is also attracted by her anyway. Meanwhile she feels the honesty and moral firmness by staying with Nick. But essentially, Jordan is also a frigid woman without any responsibility and lost in American dream.

## **Chapter Three Disillusionment of American Dream**

### **In the Novel**

#### **3. 1 The disillusionment of Gatsby's dream**

Gatsby's American dream consists of two parts: "wealth dream" and "love dream". So the disillusionment of his American dream can be divided into two parts.

##### **3. 1. 1 The disillusionment of wealth**

"James Gatz -that was really, or at least legally, his former name." (Fitzgerald 2007: 20) Jay Gatsby was his new name after he met Dan Cody, the elder millionaire and "informed Cody that a wind might catch him and break him up in half an hour" (Fitzgerald 2007: 26). Gatsby's parents were "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people". And "his imagination had never really accepted them as his parent at all" He possesses a "Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God." As a God's boy, he must be about "His Father's business" that refers to "the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty". Then it is Cody who changed Gatsby's life. Gatsby followed Cody and got fortune by doing illegal business. Then he took the ideal focused on the acquiring of wealth. But no matter how rich Gatsby was, he still tried to adapt to the upper circles which he has long wanted, and he was not really accepted by others just because of his humble birth. "The truth is that social discrimination still exists and the divisions among the classes can not be overcome." (Zhang Meijun 2011: 4) The idealism is destroyed by the reality. As a result, he has become their excellent material of suspicion and rumors for the upper class of the so-called celebrities. Since

he was always suffering people's suspicion, his illegal businesses were eventually exposed by Tom. Gatsby's dream of wealth was withered. What's more, few guests showed up in Gatsby's funeral which was held by Nick. It is a sharp contrast between the desolation, loneliness in his funeral and the prosperity in his former party. Just as "the man with owl-eyed glasses" said: "why, oh my god! They used to go there by the hundreds". (Fitzgerald 2009: 11). It showed that he did not get the recognition of the upper class, indeed.

### **3. 1. 2 The disillusionment of love**

As it is mentioned, Gatsby wanted to be rich mainly because that he hoped to regain his lost love. The reason why he was attracted by Daisy is that money decorated her as a noble princess, keeping her away from humble life. As a farmers' child, the vanity of Gatsby would greatly satisfy greatly owing to staying with Daisy. So in order to win Daisy, Gatsby dared to do illegal trade to make money because he knew that he must offer Daisy a luxurious and carefree life. Loving a rich lady gave him great courage and driving force to keep struggling. Through his efforts, Daisy fell in love with him again. However, Daisy did not love him as deeply as he had imagined, she was just attracted by his desire and his selfless love. And finally Daisy conspired with her husband, Tom to frame Gatsby. As a result, Gatsby lost his life in order to protect Daisy, while Daisy escaped with Tom. As for Gatsby, after he regains his love, he found that the love is not the same as he imaged. But he didn't give up because he thought that giving up Daisy means to admit the failure of his ideal dream. In fact, the determination and motivation he tried to regain Daisy didn't result from the unforgettable



memory of Daisy, but from perseverance in making dreams come true and his strong desire for bright future. Here, Daisy is the "love dream" of Gatsby. He put his ideal dream on Daisy, while Daisy was not a right object. Daisy is just a affluent woman who values money, luxurious life and status rather than love, so it is obvious that she only represents illusory and worthless things. She can't be the embodiment of love and happiness, and could not bring meaning and satisfaction to Gatsby's life. And the saddest thing is that Gatsby's death has no effect on Daisy, she doesn't feel any regret or sorrow. All the things of Gatsby's life have gone with his death, including his wealth and love, namely his dream. Therefore, "the falling of his American dream, that Daisy goes together with her husband to another city happily while Gatsby is murdered mistakenly, improves that all his great characterize means nothing. In other words, Gatsby's final American dream, which is to win Daisy, is totally a failure."(Yang Huiqun 2002: 3)

### **3. 2 The disillusionment of Nick's dream**

Nick, with his wealth dream, decided to go east to learn the bond business. But after participating Gatsby's parties, he deeply felt the inanity of those guests. They are all rich people suffering spiritual poverty. It is not easy to be into their life, and he was always "alone again in the unquiet darkness". Furthermore, as witnessing Gatsby's tragedy, he realized what had gone wrong with American dream from the beginning to the end. "He finally knew that it is a story of the West. Gatsby, Tom, Jordan, Daisy and he were all western people, so they cannot get well with the life in the East just because of they all had some common defects."(Liu Naiya 2009: 1)As for his love with

Jordan, it depressed him a lot. Jordan soon got engaged to another man after not seeing Nick for a short time, leaving Nick angry and making him realized that Jordan has the same irresponsible nature as that he found in Tom and Daisy. Jordan's behavior seems to echo Daisy's betraying Gatsby to marry Tom five years ago.

### **3.3 The comparison between Gatsby and other characters**

Although Gatsby, Tom, Daisy, Jordan, and Nick are all dream seekers in the same age, they present different things. Gatsby, as the representative of dream seekers in that age, is distinguished with others. The novel is narrated by Nick, and he is a link between Gatsby and Daisy and witnessed the whole story. Nick is so quiet and tolerant that many people like to tell their secret to him. Gatsby gradually developed confidence with Nick and they became friends. Comparing with Nick, Gatsby is a blind dream seeker. Gatsby's unquestioning belief in the power of money, status and the material world made him convinced that this magic power would help him realize his ultimate dream of regaining Daisy. On the contrary, Nick is more rational. As Nick said: "in my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I have been turning over in my mind ever since."

(Fitzgerald 2007: 1) Thanks to the traditional moral conducts that rooted in his mind and his father's advice on toleration, he never get lost. In addition, he found the emptiness and distortion of American dream and achieved the recognition of Tom and Daisy's corruption, irresponsibility and cowardice. Having experienced from naïve to be mature, he decided to go back to his hometown and had a quiet life under traditional morality." The characters of

Gatsby and Nick are like the two poles that the author wants to show us, and their images are not only opposite but also unified. Through shaping the two characters and their fates, the author reveals the theme of the whole story clearly—the American dream is just an illusion under the concept that money is everything."(Chen Jing 2011: 32)In addition, Tom, Daisy and Jordan are the representatives of the old noble, the corruption of American dream.

Comparing with Gatsby, they were born with wealth and status but lacking of purpose and only know how to kill time through money. They are slaves of money. It can be seen that they have no responsibility and always let others clean up the mess they had made. They all lived in " valley of ashes". While Gatsby were always with hope, he was keep making efforts all the time.

Comparing with Tom and Daisy's cowardice towards the death of Mrs.

Wilson, Gatsby's courage to protect Daisy and to face the difficult was really impressed. In Tom and Daisy's eyes, love or dream was based on money and to live a comfortable, luxurious and guaranteed life was their criterion of life.

But we can see that Gatsby devoted all to his dream. As Nick said, those fair-weather friends of Gatsby were a group of bastards. Add up all of them can fit a " Gatsby".

## **Chapter Four Reasons for the Disillusionment of American Dream**

### **4. 1 Social reasons**

Read throughout the novel, Gatsby's tragedy and the disillusionment of Gatsby's American dream, as well as Nick's, are inevitably related with the specific social environment. Love and friendship were based on money and

material desire. Since everyone only cares about their own interests, interpersonal relationship is bound to the reveal of selfish, greedy, and indifferent nature.

#### **4. 1. 1 The Jazz Age and the lost twenties**

It's really a special era in the history of America after the World War I; the Great Depression was not yet to come. In the post-war, it won a precious opportunity of developing economy. The spirit of this period was marked by a general feeling of disconnection with modernity, a break with traditions. People were indulging in pleasure. The industrialization and development of whole society made everything feasible through modern technology. In Fitzgerald's words, " That is a miraculous era and an era full of mockery." Fitzgerald called that era the " Jazz Age". The firm belief in individualism and the pursuit of happiness have corrupted into unscrupulous pursuit of wealth. So the American dream was distorted in that time.

#### **4. 1. 2 The American culture and social environment**

American culture is probably mainly related to the below—the pursuit of individualism, freedom and democracy; the hard work and struggling for the success and personal honor. " The core of it is the individualism: self first, self need is superior, always pursuit of the self-happiness and self -content through self-fighting and self-exploration and to achieve the value of oneself."(Chen Jing 2011: 13) It has both advantages and disadvantages. On the basis of highly self-fulfillment, people will be motivated to move on. Furthermore, it may push forward the whole nation developing fast. However, it brings the disadvantage that some of the people will run to an

extreme, for being successful, they may try any kind of means, even some illegal behaviors, such as Gatsby and gradually become morally corrupted and lost. On the other hand, When Gatsby gets wealth and status through his efforts; in fact, he has been into a material indifferent world. If he tries to finally complete his ideal dream in such a world, it is doomed to fail. In such a materialistic, flashy society of moral decay, the American dream had already lost its traditional meaning. So, one of the reasons for the disillusionment of Gatsby's American dream and his tragedy is the darkness and emptiness of capitalist society in that age.

## **4. 2 Personal reasons**

### **4. 2. 1 Gatsby's characteristic**

Gatsby was born in poor family, but he held his big American dream that through his own personal struggle to change his destiny, to make money and gain success to live an ideal life. Born in humble family, the poor background made young Gatsby deeply feel that his poor family brings him spiritually pain and shame. When he was 17 years old, his life was changed by meeting Cody. He gradually abandoned his belief that to rely on the personal efforts to get succeeded. He focused his mind on the acquisition of wealth by any means. After losing his love, he definitely felt that money means everything. What's more, he said that he was " God's boy", so he must do " His Father's business", which reveals his persistence in the dream without any consideration about reality.

## 4. 2. 2 The blindness in pursuit of American dream

During Gatsby's pursuit of his wealth dream and love dream, it is full of blindness. Gatsby comes from the bottom of the society, but he loves affluent Daisy who was born in the upper class. Due to the gap between the rich and the poor, and the social hierarchy, Daisy turned him down and married another rich man. Then he held an unquestioning belief in the power of money. In order to be rich, he did illegal business. He thought that "money first, pleasure first". He ignored the bottom-line. In the novel, one of the most memorable scenes is first meet of Gatsby and Daisy after five years' separation. When Gatsby tried to show off his huge mansion to Daisy and Nick, but finally it turned to the show of his numerous colorful shirts. It seems that those colorful shirts like all of his possession have a very special meaning indeed. That's why Nick thought "he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes" when Gatsby did not cease looking at her. (Fitzgerald 2007: 29)

Daisy's response to his assets means a lot to Gatsby. Driven by the American dream and stimulated by his love for Daisy, Gatsby uses all kinds of means to achieve great material success. But he doesn't know that no matter how much money or power he may possess, in the eyes of Tom and Daisy he is still "nobody from nowhere" because he has "no comfortable family standing behind him". (Fitzgerald 2007: 8) The upper class will never accept him equally. As for his love dream, Gatsby want to regain his pure love. However, Daisy is not a faithful lover. For Daisy, what she really wants is not a romantic lover but a man who can gives her a comfortable, guaranteed life and a respected social status. But after Gatsby found Daisy was not as

perfect as he imaged. He found " Her voice is full of money", " clinging with the money". He still tried to win Daisy's love and keep his dream ideal. This is the contradiction in Gatsby's mind. It is also the contradiction of the American dream itself as a kind of obsession in the spiritual value of materialism. On the other hand, " Gatsby enters a world where money takes precedence over moral integrity. Money and immediate pleasure become more important than being with Daisy. Gatsby's dream is doomed to failure because he has lost the fundamental necessities to experience love, such as honesty and moral integrity".(Cheng Meijun 2011: 15)In a word, Gatsby's dream is full of illusion and intensity. Nothing in reality could match it. " So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."(Fitzgerald 2007: 14)

## **Chapter Five Conclusion**

Jay Gatsby is the most outstanding figure in this novel. His tragedy impresses readers a lot. To call him " Great Gatsby" seems to satirize something stupid of Gatsby, but it also embodies some praise of his spirit. On the one hand, we feel sympathetic about his story. On the other hand, we appreciate his perseverance in dream and hope for life. However, the social background and the wrong object Gatsby chose to pursue result in the withering of American dream and his pitiful life. The depiction of the other figures and the comparison between Gatsby and others let readers a complete understanding of Gatsby namely dream seekers in American. The disillusionment of American dream reveals the corruption of a kind of American spirit." Dream" is still a hot issue around the world. The crisis of

American dream calls our attention to " Chinese dream". It is probably a kind of tendency that the attention to dream rise with the development of our society, especially the prosperity of economy. So most people may argue that dream is always connected with money in modern society. Also some people indeed intend to make money or gain reputation in name of dream, such as some TV programs. This phenomenon seems to be inevitable in roaring age. In addition, the young generation is regarded as fragile generation. They cannot stick to a goal and try best to endure all difficulties. Therefore, to read *The Great Gatsby* and get a comprehensive understanding of Gatsby's story benefit a lot. Money is not everything. Obsessing in money will get us lost. Gatsby's experience is definitely a warning. Furthermore, We will clearly know that to choose a right target is the first step of success. The wrong direction may lead to bad behaviors, even crimes. The other essence we can learn from Gatsby is his determination and perseverance. We should agree with Gatsby that we can change our life through our own efforts. What's more, the insipid life of Tom and Daisy alert us that spiritual poverty is terrible. We should keep learning until our hair turn grey to enrich ourselves. The last but not the least, Nick's disenchantment proves that keeping rational and being tolerate to others is quite good. Just as Nick's father told him: " Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone, just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had". (Fitzgerald 2007: 3)In a word, after studying this novel, I think, we should hold that where there is life there is hope and everyone should have the correct dream based on reality. Then keep striving and move on.