

Beneath the surface
glitter, 'the great
gatsby' is a
profoundly
pessimistic novel...

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F. Scott Fitzgerald has created a very intricate world in 'The Great Gatsby'. It is a world that includes the exceedingly rich and also those who are much worse off. The novel focuses around the wealthier section of this world, those who live in East and West Egg. Fitzgerald is very thorough in his descriptions, in order to fully convey to us the glamour, sparkle and hope of that world. The 'glitter' is very present, but as the story progresses the surface begins to become translucent, and there are many clues leading to more pessimistic depths of the story. This is where we can see the collapse of The American Dream and all the hopes it brings.

The glitter in the novel is presented in several ways. The state in which most of the characters live and the seemingly endless flow of wealth certainly are main contributors. East and West Egg are seeping with money; the houses are not merely houses but mansions, the cars are luxurious and the clothes worn are incredibly glamorous. The parties that Gatsby has are vast and magical. Vivid and colorful language is used to detail his parties, which all adds to the glitter effect.

" Champagne like the stars"

" glistening hors-d'oeuvre.... Harlequin designs..... bewitched to a dark gold."

" floating rounds of cocktails"

Another element of the novel's glitter is Gatsby's idealism. He holds on to one dream for so long, he never loses that element of hope or determination. This gives us all a sense of optimism, and indeed Nick, who sees Gatsby's platonic search for the American Dream as an element of positivity and

hope. If the novel is taken at just a front then it certainly will be read as optimistic. Nick is given hope for the future and gains a friend and Gatsby gains his dream.

However if one looks deeper into the novel a different opinion can be formulated. Although the book is called 'The Great Gatsby' it actually focuses around Nick Carraway and his experiences. When Nick first meets his old friend Tom Buchanan and his wife Daisy (a distant relative of Nick) he is astounded at what he finds. There is rife hypocrisy and a general lack of purpose.

"Tom would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully for the dramatic turbulence of some irrevocable football game."

Tom also shows signs of something even more incorrect with his bigoted comment:

"Civilisation's going to pieces.. I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read this book 'The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard?"

"It's up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things."

What compounds this effect is Daisy's comment, a repeat of what Tom had said earlier. This shows that she is not only brainwashed by Tom, but has no capability / wish of making up her own opinion.

“ We’ve got to beat them down”

The corruption of this family continues to envelop Nick when Jordan tells him of Tom’s adulterous affair, with this woman in New York (Myrtle). The full extent of the complete corruption that is Tom and Daisy’s marriage, is revealed to Nick when he finds out that Daisy is actually aware of what Tom is up to.

The second chapter includes Nick’s symbolic vision of the state of the country. He describes the valley of ashes with such words as desolate, grotesque and ghastly. The valley of ashes show the decay of the American Dream as the ash represents corruption. The ash floats aimlessly around, much like many of the people in that area. As the men try to do their work, they are engulfed with this corruption, which impedes sight and the work trying to be done. Everything Nick describes is grey; the workers, the trucks, the track, the land and the air.

The ash / corruption has engulfed everything in this part of the country. The huge sign of Doctor T. J Eckleburg’s eyes that look over the valley of ashes gives us a powerful image. Some say that it represents the eyes of God. Pessimism is drawn from the fact that the sign is very old and very faded, forgotten about. We can see this as God having left the valley of ashes and given up due to it becoming too corrupt and unnatural and no longer having an interest.

In contrast to Gatsby’s party mentioned earlier, when Nick attends Myrtle’s party he is surrounded by falseness and vulgarness. However even at

Gatsby's party Nick realises that the people there are all materialistic, except the one person who does not participate in his own parties. The people attending Myrtle's party are all of lower class, but act as if it is a higher-class function. Myrtle changes into a dress that makes her appear upper class, which shows her to be phoney.

The party is also full of horrible people such as Mr and Mrs McKee. Nick is quite compelled by the way the people act, but is also greatly saddened, by the way in which they feel they must act. Gossip is spread round the party like a fire. Needless to say all the gossip is false and lies of some sort or another. The party ends with an act of severe violence that inevitably follows Tom around with his corrupt lifestyle, and Nick wakes up the next morning with a hangover in a cold station.

Things do seem to become more optimistic when Nick learns of Gatsby and his dream. When he is told that Gatsby bought his house just so he could be close to Daisy.

" He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendour."

The whole ideal that Gatsby has for Daisy, his hope, his optimism, his determination give Nick a sense of hope himself. He sees the purity of Gatsby's personal dream, and the similarity of it to The American Dream. He sees the wonder and intensity that the dream brings into Gatsby's life. Nick realises the true value of the dream to Gatsby. Chasing the dream and maintaining the ideal keeps Gatsby alive. It has also kept Gatsby pure and

uncorrupted. Seeking an ideal has given his life purpose and meaning; he does not drift like the others do. However, to get to where he is on the social scale he has had to delve into an unlawful market. So he has therefore had to become corrupt in order to seek the American Dream. But what happens when Gatsby reaches his dream, gets Daisy and she is not quite what all the years have built her up to be? The inevitable outcome will be disappointment.

“ There must have been moments that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams - not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion”

Gatsby expects the ideal from Daisy and she can't live up to this. In the hotel towards the end of the book she screams at Gatsby:

“ Oh, you want too much! ... I love you now, isn't that enough?”

Although Gatsby accepts this there is one crucial flaw. Gatsby's dream may have kept him out of self-corruption and pure, but his dream itself while changing into reality has become corrupt. Although Gatsby remains pure, Daisy is far from, and is materialistic. Nick understands this and sees the failure of Gatsby's dream when Daisy goes through Gatsby's wardrobe and cries.

“ It makes me sad because I've never seen such - such beautiful shirts before.”

His dream is affected by the dust that corrupts the rest of the world. His reality sprung from the imagination of a poor and unsuccessful farmers son. Gatsby's past had been made up of lies, and he had used rumors and gossip to his advantage to gain reputation and social status. The actual life that he was living was a fraud, a lie, never the truth. He had in a sense already corrupted himself and although he is very different to Myrtle, comparisons can be drawn up as to their similarities in trying to be someone they're not.

In the confusion that Daisy causes towards the end of the novel, Myrtle ends up getting killed, ironically by Daisy herself, unknowingly. As Myrtle bleeds to death, her blood is described as mingling with the dust. This is symbolic of the corruption, deceit and lies that resulted in her death. It is also ironic that she was very much a part of the corruption that killed her. Following the accident there is

“ An inexplicable amount of dust everywhere”

in Gatsby's house. This shows us that corruption was starting to overtake even the Great Incorruptible Gatsby. Surely if it affects him, then no one is safe from corruption. Gatsby held on to his dream too long, and when he realised it had fallen through he had nothing left. He realised that his life was wasted, putting so much hope and faith into something and having it fail before him.

“ If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what

a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely scented grass.”

Soon after this chilling realisation he is shot, for getting involved in the corrupt world of Tom and Daisy. Perhaps one of the most tragic things in the book, is that no-one turns up to his funeral. This shows the world in which Gatsby lived was wrought with materialism, and all but one of his friends were victim to it.

Everyone in this book seeks the American Dream; everyone except Tom and Daisy, who are the epitamy of it. However they both lead useless lives and float about aimlessly, like the dust, having become corrupted by materialistic issues. Myrtle and her friends seek to gain it, they all corrupt their aims with materialism and falsity on the way, and Myrtle, who perhaps gets the closest by having the affair with Tom, not only is corrupted, but also killed by the corruption.

Gatsby seeks it, idealises Daisy too much and therefore is disappointed. He also has had to corrupt himself in his line of work in order for him to be able to be anywhere near close to achieving the dream. Arguably he does achieve this dream, but he has done it through corrupt methods. He is the closest to achieving the true American Dream, however he dies due to the corruption he brought upon himself by chasing it into reality. Gatsby failed to achieve his ideal. Even that of which he did, he was unable to keep, as Daisy's materialism drew her back to Tom. Tom and Daisy are indeed the only two to come out of the situation unscaved in anyway, and much like they started.

The book shows us that the corrupt thrive and prosper, those who chase the American Dream inevitably end up failing. Everyone who does gain or already has the American Dream becomes a materialist. The pure that strive to reach the American Dream and succeed (Gatsby) end up dead. The gaining or maintaining of the dream also involves destroying many innocent lives along the way. The novel therefore shows us that the true American Dream is unreachable and incapable of being realised. It may already be a part of American history, and not a present day achievable dream.