

Jay gatsby's representation of america

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



It was literary critic Lionel Trilling who quite aptly described the collective entity Jay Gatsby when he wrote, “ Jay Gatsby [stands] for America itself.” Jay Gatsby lives his life entrenched in unfathomable wealth. His true roots are rather mysterious, but they revolve around an anti-Calvinistic attitude and what is Jay Gatsby essentially reinventing himself. Through Gatsby's modest upbringing, domineering drive, and his tragic demise, Gatsby truly is representative of America as a whole. From its very beginnings, America consisted of rather modest individuals who all led simple lives with accordingly simple goals (Bewley 13). Jay Gatsby, or James Gatz, began his life like the classic American ideal, through the idea of rebirth. Originally born to modest farmers, Gatsby receives his first taste of affluence from a man named Dan Cody (Mizener 182). As Fitzgerald himself puts it, “ To young Gatz, resting on his oars and looking up at the railed deck, the yacht represented all the beauty and glamour in the world...Cody asked him a few questions (one of them elicited the brand new name). (Fitzgerald 106)” It is Gatsby's total reformation that aptly reflects America's reputation as the land of opportunity. Beyond his desire and ability to become reborn, Dan Cody also facilitates the growth of Gatsby's eternal drive for wealth and glory. Critic Marius Bewley asserts, “[Gatsby] sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about his father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, meretricious beauty” (Bewley 15). Gatsby's life is dedicated to his pursuits of a lavish lifestyle that borders on, if not enters into, the arena of gaudiness. It is these immensely capitalistic goals that also parallel the pervading mindset of past, present, and future America. Through

an effective blend of a personality naturally inclined towards success and the influence of others, Gatsby manages to reinvent his own image in the eyes of those around him, just as America has done in the eyes of the world time and time again. Literary critic Marius Bewley stated, “ The American Dream, stretched between a golden past and a golden future, is always betrayed by a desolate present” (Bewley 17). It is this “ desolate present” that plagues Gatsby's life. Primarily, his modest upbringing shields him from the dishonesty present in those surrounding him (Mizener 190) and allows him to be blindly in love with Daisy (Bewley 20). Despite the seeming hopelessness of Gatsby's desire, this very inability to abandon one's goals also serves to represent America. Time and time again, America has been made glorious and has reached historic precedents through individuals who refused to abandon their goals. At one point in the novel, Nick states of Gatsby, “ There was something gorgeous about him,” but not only was this a catchphrase of the 1920's, it shows Nick's envy of Gatsby's riches and illustrates the American need for superiority and to be looked up to by the rest of the world (Bewley 26). Paradoxically, while striving for indescribable grandeur, Gatsby also inadvertently works towards humility. Most notably, in the scene where Gatsby shows off his imported shirts to Daisy and Nick, Gatsby's actions are the engenderment of what Marius Bewley refers to as an unconscious “ inner vision” Gatsby is unable to formally recognize (Bewley 22). Finally, Marius Bewley asserts that, “ Gatsby to us is less an individual than a projection, or mirror, of our ideal selves,” this notion, that Gatsby is the embodiment of all that mainstream America strives for (24) absolutely reaffirms the fact that Gatsby represents America. During an interview, F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “

Show me a hero and I'll write you a tragedy." It is this quotation that embodies all that is Gatsby's fall and its parallels to America. While lying in the pool, moments before his death, Nick aptly describes to the reader the desolate feeling surrounding the fall of the noble: "I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe [the phone call] would come and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (Fitzgerald 169). Just as with any hero, from John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. to America itself, all figures of great power and nobility eventually find their decline and consequent fall from grace. Gatsby felt alone and Gatsby felt alienated, all feelings of sorrow and failure that are not at all uncommon to the lives of many Americans. After the murder goes unnoticed by Gatsby's hired help, it seems life continues on a normal course for quite some time before the true gravity of Gatsby's death sinks in (Hindus 243). This mindset that doesn't accept change or sorrow is quite similar to the emotionless manner with which many Americans view their lives and the lives of people around them. "[Future dreams] eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch our arms farther" (Fitzgerald 189). The idea aptly portrayed in these final lines of *The Great Gatsby* is the simple notion that people will forever seek certain goals, American goals. Goals such as power, freedom, love, and wealth; and it is the total amalgamation of these goals that truly represents and describes the vibrant spirit and being of Jay Gatsby. Works Cited: Bewley, Marius. "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America." *F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York/Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1986. 11-27.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1925.

Hindus, Milton. "F. Scott Fitzgerald and Literary Anti-Semitism." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Dedria Bryfonski, and Phyllis C. Mendelson. Detroit: Gate Research Company, 1978. 243-244.

Mizener, Arthur. "The Great Gatsby." *The American Novel*. Ed. Wallace Stegner. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1965. 180-191.

Morris, Lloyd. "Postscript to Yesterday: America: The Last Fifty Years." *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Dedria Bryfonski, and Phyllis C. Mendelson. Detroit: Gate Research Company, 1978. 244-245.