

# Gatsby's fall from greatness

Literature, American Literature



In F. Scott Fitzgerald's, *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby completes a decline from his carefully crafted image of greatness to his exposed, unsightly, and lonely death. The story of the novel is really the deconstruction of this image, and the various ways in which the true "Jay Gatz" is uncovered. Hailing from a middle-class, rural family, Gatsby seizes his chance to escape his past at a young age. After falling in love with an upper-class girl, Daisy, and not being able to please her with his military status, Gatsby turns to a more corrupt occupation to attain large-scale success. But when he finally gains the monetary status that he thinks will qualify him to satisfy Daisy, the society turns on him. His chase of the American dream is fruitless and leaves him alone. Ultimately it is clear that the dream is corrupt, and that the notion of overcoming the walls of class is a myth. The fall of the great Gatsby documents the corruption of the American society, and the hypocrisies that forbid Gatsby from ever attaining his dream. From the moment we are first introduced to Gatsby, it is clear that he desires control - over his own life, and that of others. His first image is almost God-like; as he stands, overlooking the crowd at one of his profligate parties, Nick observes: ...my eyes fell on Gatsby, standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes...I wondered if the fact that he was not drinking himself helped to set him off from his guests, for it seemed to me that he grew more correct as the fraternal hilarity increased. (50)As Gatsby stands observing the crowd at his party, there is a feeling that he is in charge. Nick detects a separation between Gatsby and the crowd, which he attributes to Gatsby's superior air. Gatsby enjoys this separation because it gives him a sense of control over his guests; indeed, this may be the only

reason that he chooses to have such extravagant gatherings. Additionally, this outward display of his wealth makes him feel more secure of his fiscal position. Gatsby's beginnings are humble at best, and his rise to the top - along with his pursuit of Daisy - is part of his pursuit of the American dream. When Gatsby gazes out over such a sight, he feels content that he has escaped his lower class. But he can only fool himself for so long, and the more Gatsby tries to assert his position, the clearer it is that he has not eluded his common beginnings. When Gatsby's past is discovered it weakens his whole position and exposes the corruption of his American dream. Before we learn of Gatsby's past, Fitzgerald asserts, " Americans, while occasionally willing to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry." (88). This statement clearly characterizes Gatsby; he is willing to be a slave to a distorted American dream, and to the other corrupt members of society, as long as he believes himself to be of high class. As it turns out, Gatsby makes tremendous sacrifices for this sake. Nick says, " Jay Gatz - that was really, or at least legally, his name. He had changed it at the age of seventeen and at the specific moment that had witnessed the beginning of his career..." (98). From an early age the American dream possesses him; and for its sake, he gives up his very identity. Gatsby sees it as a worthy sacrifice for the sake of greatness. But later on, he is exposed. "' My God, I believe the man's coming,'" said Tom. "' Doesn't he know she doesn't want him?'" (103). In the social situations that characterize high class, Gatsby is utterly clueless. He unintentionally invites himself to a party where he is not wanted, demonstrating his oblivion. Despite his misgivings about fitting in, the gates of high society have locked him out. Earning a high position based upon hard

work is impossible, as demonstrated by Gatsby's failure. In this way the American dream leads him on a chase of the unattainable. In the culminating scene of the novel, when Gatsby proclaims his love for Daisy in front of her husband, Tom, the two men are both exposed as being completely false; but only Tom is allowed to escape unscathed, because he carries the protection of natural-born money, while Gatsby's destruction is complete. As the two men fight for Daisy, Tom begins to attack Gatsby, and in doing so reveals his hypocrisy: I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out...Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white. (130) Everyone present knows that Tom is having an illicit affair, so the idea that he would preach about family values is absurd. He has constantly shown no respect for the institution of marriage, and was even missing at his own daughter's birth. And yet, Tom is the winner because he takes Daisy home. Although there is absolutely no difference between Gatsby and Tom, Gatsby's position is built upon a frail foundation while Tom's rests solidly on class. The American society has no tolerance for people like Gatsby, and it embraces men like Tom, whose words "bite physically into [him]" (132). Gatsby leaves without Daisy, and as a failure. Gatsby's destruction by the American dream is fortified by the tragic image of his funeral - only his father and Nick attend. Despite his best efforts, Nick cannot convince anyone else to come. It seems that any and all of those who knew Gatsby only valued their relationships for their own personal gain, and that they don't really care about him. Gatsby's false claim

to high class means that people use him for their own gain. Although he thought that fulfilling the American dream would bring him happiness, it strips him of friends, love, and ultimately of life. Fitzgerald's critique of the dream is complete when we realize that it allows despicable individuals like Tom to thrive, in spite of the way Gatsby is punished. The "foul dust" of mankind that prays on Gatsby is responsible for his fall, and causes us to question the very basis of a dream that is so fundamentally American.