

The great gatsby – the unachievable dream

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"Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" is one of the most influential and famous phrases in the United States Declaration of Independence. The Declaration of Independence encapsulates the original conception of the American Dream- the notion that every individual, regardless of their social upbringing, could have the opportunity to reach their full potential and live a comfortable lifestyle. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* takes place during the early 1920s--a time period that demonstrates the pursuit of happiness, opportunity, freedom, equality and finally the American Dream.

Myrtle Wilson, a significant character in *The Great Gatsby*, tries to pursue happiness and her American Dream by satisfying materialistic pleasures on a quest for wealth and status. The protagonist of the novel, Jay Gatsby's quest for hopeless love, signifies the fallen American Dream. Ultimately Fitzgerald uses symbols such as cars, to represent the American Dream itself, and he uses failed relationships to exemplify the corruption and descent of the American Dream. Through his portrayal of the main characters and symbols, Fitzgerald illustrates the decay of morals and values, exemplifying the underside of the American Dream.

Fitzgerald portrays twisted relationships to represent the corrupt American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*. Emotional intimacy, trust, respect, and mutual goodwill constitute a positive and healthy relationship. To the contrary, the majority of the relationships displayed between the characters are dysfunctional, and diminish the hope of living out a meaningful American Dream with emphasis on a strong family. For example, Tom and Daisy are married, yet Tom has an affair shortly after Tom marries Daisy. Indeed, Daisy is suspicious of Tom's conduct on a trip they took together to Santa Barbara.

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If he left the room for a minute she'd look around uneasily and say ' where's Tom gone and wore the most abstracted expression until she saw him coming to the door This was in August. A week after I left Santa Barbara Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night, and ripped a front wheel off his car. The girl who was with him got into the papers, too, because her arm was broken- she was one of the chamber maids in the Santa Barbara. (Fitzgerald 51) In addition to the unfaithful relationship shared by Tom and Daisy, Daisy has a twisted conception of her daughter.

Daisy's early cynicisms towards her daughter's life are shown just about an hour after the baby is born, as Daisy says, " I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool- that's the best thing a girl could be in this world, a beautiful little fool" (Fitzgerald 12). Likewise, as Daisy's daughter grows older, the girl is treated like a trophy that Daisy uses for show, and the nurse is left with the responsibilities of the child's care. (Fitzgerald 77). Like Daisy's relationship with her daughter, another dysfunctional relationship is between Myrtle and her husband George. When George suspects Myrtle of cheating, he locks her away.

This becomes evident when Tom exclaims, " I've got my wife locked away up there" (Fitzgerald 91). Another example of the decline of morals and values in the novel is Nick's romantic ideation of Jordan Baker, in spite of his established relationship at home (Fitzgerald 40). Most importantly, though, Gatsby has a tragically hopeless dream of obtaining Daisy's love. He pursues illegal activities in order to gain wealth and to attract Daisy's affection.

Clearly, the multitude of dysfunctional relationships in Fitzgerald's novel represents the misconstrual of the American Dream.

Much like the portrayal of relationships, Fitzgerald uses cars to represent the disintegration of the American Dream. In the 1920's, cars were extremely popular, coveted by all, and symbolize the vast opportunities available in the United States. Ironically, Myrtle, who seeks American materialism to an extreme degree, ends up getting killed by American materialism itself. Throughout her life, Myrtle possesses a burning desire for money. She ends up giving her life to Tom and getting killed by her own desires (Fitzgerald 93).

Through Myrtle's death, Fitzgerald conveys that dwelling too much on material objects cannot bring about a positive resolution; materialism can only bring about destruction. Destruction and corruption are shown through cars as well. Drinking impairs judgement and decreases inhibitions. Many of the characters drink as a pastime and drive under the influence. Since cars represent the American Dream, and drinking becomes a way of life, one can conclude that the characters go about achieving the American Dream in a misguided and dangerous manner. Myrtle tries to satisfy her desires by seeking wealth and status in attempts of achieving her American Dream.

Myrtle's husband, George, owns a car dealership and repair shop in the industrial wasteland of the Valley of Ashes, which depicts his lower class. In describing George's shop, Fitzgerald notes "The interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner" (Fitzgerald 27). Although George is loyal and

hardworking, Myrtle is unsatisfied with her relationship; she envies the East Eggers for living her version of the American Dream while she is stuck in the Valley of Ashes, married to a low class man.

Myrtle directly disrespects her husband as she goes after Tom, a high class, wealthy, and married man, living in the East Egg. This is captured by Nick's description of Myrtle, as he notes, " She smiled slowly and, walking through her husband as if he were a ghost, shook hands with Tom, looking him flush in the eye"(Fitzgerald 28). In fact, Myrtle demands that George supply chairs so that she and Tom could contrive against George. During Tom's visit, Myrtle demands: ' Get some chairs why don't you so someone can sit down. ' Oh, sure,' agreed Wilson hurriedly A white ashen dust veiled everything in the vicinity- except his wife, Who moved close to Tom. (Fitzgerald 28) Myrtle looks past social values and chooses a life of adultery in spite of the repercussions that her actions have on her husband.

Furthermore, not a single character in this novel feels remorse for George when Myrtle blatantly plans to cheat. Indeed Nick and Tom have the following conversation after Myrtle plans her getaway with Tom: ' It does her good to get away. ' Doesn't her husband object? ' ' Wilson? He thinks she goes to see her sister in New York.

He's so dumb he doesn't know he's alive. '(Fitzgerald 32) Nick and Tom take George for a fool, and they feel he is vacuous because he is in the lower class. In addition to the treatment of George, Myrtle's tragic death symbolize America's obsession with material wealth. Upon hearing a car approaching,

Myrtle runs out into the dusk road waving her hands in the air, at which point she is struck and killed by Gatsby's vehicle (Fitzgerald 130).

Ironically, Myrtle's chase for American materialism ended up costing her, her life as she is killed by her own desires in her quest for the American Dream. Jay Gatsby, another victim of his own desires, represents the fallen American Dream in his failed quest to win Daisy, but ends up empty handed in the end and does not receive what he had worked so hard for. Fitzgerald illustrates Gatsby's strong desires for Daisy very early on, for at the end of chapter one lays our first clue, the green light. Gatsby stretches out his arms toward the dark water and looks at a green light.

This green light is just across the water at East Egg, specifically at Daisy's backyard dock. This may be the first intimation we witness of Gatsby's passionate dream, but is extremely powerful nonetheless. Gatsby's tragic flaw is that he believes one can recapture the past and keep a moment crystallized forever.

From the moment Gatsby fell in love with Daisy, everything he did was for the sole purpose of winning her. This becomes evident as Jordan explains to Nick, ' Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just across the bay. (Fitzgerald 76). Jordan further explains to Nick that Gatsby also hopes Daisy would come by one of his parties and be impressed. ' He wants her to see his house, ' she explained. ' And your house is just next door.

' ' Oh! ' ' I think he half expected her to wander into one of his parties, some night,' went on Jordan, ' but she never did. Then he began asking people

casually if they knew her, and I was the first one he found. It was that night he sent for me at his dance, and you should have heard the elaborate way he worked up to it. Fitzgerald 77) Gatsby has a blind pursuit of Daisy and every purchase he makes and party he throws is backing the hopes of attracting her attention.

Obviously, Gatsby highly values Daisy and he goes above and beyond to impress her. This statement is further illustrated as Gatsby hires someone to cut Nick's grass to impress her, on the day that Daisy is going to visit (Fitzgerald 81). As well, upon Daisy's arrival, Gatsby shows off his big house to her, brags that it only took him three years to earn the money in the drug and oil business, and takes Daisy on a tour (Fitzgerald 87-89).

Gatsby deliberately excludes the fact that much of Gatsby's money to win Daisy over comes from organized crime and bootlegging. Breaking the law and lies become daily activities for Gatsby on his quest to win Daisy over. Gatsby also shows off his wealth by throwing expensive and beautiful shirts left right and centre as if they were a dime a dozen (Fitzgerald 89). This is to suggest that Gatsby is extremely affluent to the point that his money can be thrown around without a care. Later in the novel, Daisy accidentally kills Myrtle while driving Gatsby's car.

Nick tries to convince Gatsby that he should flee so that George would not be able to track his car; however Gatsby refuses as Fitzgerald notes, " He wouldn't consider it. He couldn't leave Daisy until he knew her next course of action. He was clutching at some last hope and I couldn't bear to shake him free" (Fitzgerald 141). Gatsby is simply unable to realize that his dream is

not a reality, and by being so focussed on his dream he leads himself further and further into a fantasy world. When Gatsby takes Daisy's hand he describes her voice as a deathless song (Fitzgerald 93).

Evidently, Gatsby's idealism is replaced by his inability to understand the changing world around him. Gatsby cannot comprehend that time passes and that one cannot keep the past crystallized forever. Fitzgerald uses the clock at Nick's house to symbolize Gatsby's delusion. The clock that falls at Nick's house that was caught by Gatsby before it could hit the ground, suggests that Gatsby feels he could stop the time from passing. Gatsby's inability to see things for what they really are, are further illustrated by in his remark. " Cannot repeat the past? he cried incredulously, ' why of course you can! " (Fitzgerald 106).

Ironically, Gatsby becomes a parody of himself in the sense that throughout The Great Gatsby, he cannot wait to distance himself from his true past, but yet he lives his adult life trying to recapture the past he had with Daisy. Gatsby needs to learn that in order to see forward into the future, one must let go of their past. Both Daisy and Gatsby go about achieving their dream in a misguided manner, and have been corrupted by their strong desire to achieve their own American Dream.

At last, Myrtle, Gatsby, twisted relationships, and cars, serve as symbols illustrating the corruption of the American Dream shown throughout The Great Gatsby. Morals and values decay as the characters seek American materialism driven by self-indulgence. The established and newly rich aim to get even richer and they associate themselves with the high class while

looking down on the poor. The working class strive to rise up in wealth and status yet never do as revealed by a song; “ the rich get richer and the poor get- children” (Fitzgerald 92). Ultimately, Fitzgerald himself sets up the American Dream to be unattainable by his characters.

A crucial element of the classic American Dream is for individuals to rise up in class based on hard work and merit. In order for this element to be possible, no specific class system may be present. On the contrary, Fitzgerald creates his novel using definite class division systems such as East Egg for the established rich, West Egg for the newly rich, and the Valley of Ashes for the low working class. The dreams of the characters in this novel are to rise in status and class, thus turning their lifelong strive for the American Dream to be paradoxical and consequently unachievable.