

The american dream: an unrealistic ideal of american culture

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The American Dream has been a fundamental ideal of American culture that promotes the belief that all citizens have the ability to achieve freedom and prosperity through hard work, initiative, and perseverance. American culture has linked this hope together with the perception of the United States itself is the land of opportunity or ‘milk and honey’. For decades, people from across the world have attempted to make America their home in order to achieve material wealth/security and personal fulfillment. Yet, achieving such a dream often is not as easy or as beneficial as it seems.

One such critic of idealizing the ‘American dream’ is an American/Iranian author and professor, Azar Nafisi. She believes that there is danger in pursuing this ideal as people can fall into a dangerous cycle of chasing this dream at all costs which in turn destroys the basic vision of this ideal and therefore the dream itself. One such novel which supports Nafisi’s criticism of The American Dream is F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*. Set in the 1920’s, Fitzgerald’s novel explores the lives of two groups: the wealthy and the lower class. Through his characters’ life choices and feelings it becomes clear that The American Dream can implode because it may push some people to find shortcuts to financial success, it creates more greed and thus, less personal fulfillment and finally, it serves to isolate people in fake/meaningless relationships.

Fitzgerald’s characters serve to illustrate how The American Dream often does not promote the character traits of hard work and perseverance. Daisy and Tom live in a beautiful white mansion in East Egg. They are from ‘old money’ in which their financial success does not require any work at all,

while Nick's family has worked hard to achieve their success and yet he himself, cannot be a member of the wealthiest class. " My own house was an eyesore, but it was a small eyesore, and it had been overlooked, so I had a view of the water, a partial view of my neighbor's lawn, and the consoling proximity of millionaires" (Fitzgerald 9). Here Nick makes the distinction between the middle class and the truly wealthy and the stark difference between hard work and entitlement. Nick's family has achieved economic success from their Midwest wholesale business but this is not enough to be rich. Meanwhile, Daisy and Tom, do not have to work at all to be at the top of the social ladder, they just inherit it through their families. So it becomes clear, that hard work doesn't allow you to reach the top of the social ladder.

Another criticism that Fitzgerald makes that supports Nafisi's warning is that many people will avoid hard work and seek out shortcuts to getting social mobility as seen through Gatsby's character. " He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong" (Fitzgerald 284). Here Gatsby illustrates two important points. First, not everyone is willing to work hard to achieve The American Dream as shortcuts through criminal activities like bootlegging can help someone climb the social ladder much quicker. Secondly, people like Gatsby who come from poverty cannot truly escape it through just hard work. Jay Gatsby is originally uneducated and comes from poverty: his parents are farmers. He has big dreams, yet he lacks social mobility in rural America. Gatsby does attempt the hard work approach,

through his years of service to Dan Cody, but that doesn't work out since Cody's ex-wife ends up with the entire inheritance.

So instead he turns to crime, and only then he manages to achieve his desired wealth. It is from his connections to the people in the upper class and underworlds like Wolfsheim, and his own creativity, that he is able to make so much money selling illegal alcohol and escapes poverty this way. Yet, he is never truly accepted by the people of East Egg. Ironically, none of Tom, Daisy or Gatsby have worked hard to achieve their success, they all took shortcuts by inheriting it or cheating to attain it. They all serve to challenge the very essence of The American Dream, that hard work will equal success because they are either lazy or cheaters.

Nafisi warns us that chasing The American Dream can destroy itself because it promotes constantly working hard for more and which can cause a cycle of wanting and dissatisfaction. This is seen in Daisy's love choices. As a teenager, she falls in love with the illusion Gatsby that he paints of himself as a wealthy young man. Once he goes off to war, she breaks her promise to wait for him to marry and throws herself to the next wealthy gentleman who comes her way. " Oh, you want too much!" she cried to Gatsby. " I love you now-isn't that enough? I can't help what's past." She began to sob helplessly. " I did love him once-but I loved you too" (Fitzgerald 264).

Daisy wants more and more. Gatsby is not enough because she has to wait for his return. She wants an ' immediate' husband and so she marries Tom, a wealthier and more available choice that meets her immediate needs.

Daisy's needs for more and unhappiness about her current situation is again made clear in the scene when she takes a tour of Gatsby's house. Her reaction to his material wealth shows her longing for more. "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before" (118-119). In this scene, Daisy's lust for materialism is made very clear. She is moved by what Gatsby now owns and her tears are coming from her lust for more, more than what Tom currently has. This is what Nafisi is trying to teach us. When we begin to get wealth, we will often want more and not be satisfied with our current situation. This is not what The American Dream is truly about. If we work hard, we should achieve financial security that should bring us contentment. However, Daisy shows us that we don't want to wait for the things we want as well, the more we have, the more we will want. How can anyone feel satisfied like this?

Finally, Nafisi and Fitzgerald highlight how pursuing The American Dream can lead to meaningless relationships and social isolation. Jay Gatsby has every material wealth anyone can imagine. He has a beautiful mansion, piles of clothes, parties everyday and exotic cars/boats. Yet, he has no one to enjoy it with: no wife, no children, no parents, no real friends. He lives all alone and throws large parties to bring life, colour, and noise to his boring life. "As soon as I arrived I made an attempt to find my host, but the two or three people of whom I asked his whereabouts stared at me in such an amazing way, and denied so vehemently any knowledge of his movements, that I slunk off in the direction of the cocktail table – the only place in the

garden where a single man could linger without looking purposeless and alone” (Fitzgerald 10).

In this scene, it is clear that Gatsby lives in isolation despite having so many parties and people around him. None of the people at his parties have a deep or meaningful connection to Gatsby. They are just using him to entertain themselves. Hence, Gatsby is surrounded by the wealthiest people in society, but it is a very shallow way to love, with very few people having valid friendships. Next, Gatsby’s lack of meaningful relationships is exposed when Daisy allows him to take the fall for Myrtle’s death which leads to his own death. He dies alone and Daisy shows no remorse for her actions. “ They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money of their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (Fitzgerald 187-188) Here, Daisy’s true colours are shown. She never really loved Gatsby because she does not mourn his death and returns back to her husband who treats her horribly. Gatsby’s entire life was built on chasing his American dream which he creates in Daisy. He must acquire more material wealth than Tom to win Daisy back. In the end, he is so close, yet, Fitzgerald uses Gatsby to show us that in chasing such a dream, we can follow people who are not worth our friendships while isolating ourselves from meaningful relationships with people who do actually value us for ourselves.

In conclusion, The American Dream comes from a belief that society can create an environment where everyone is equal and therefore, able to

achieve a good social status as long as they persevere. This is clearly not the case because both Nick and Jay Gatsby show us that there are barriers that can prevent this. The families and classes we are born into, can be a major hurdle to overcome. Also, the wealthiest classes remain at the top because of their power, privilege, and exclusion from the lower classes. Next, there are many shortcuts and ways to cheat as one looks to achieve material wealth. Many people will fall victim to greed and immediate gratification as seen with Gatsby's 'get-rich-quick schemes' in his relationship to Cody and his bootlegging. He does not have the patience to roll up his sleeves and get his hands dirty working hard for the long term. His quick route to the top does not earn him the respect of his peers or Daisy's true love.

Finally, achieving The American Dream can lead to being lonely, making others question its worth. Gatsby dedicates his life to gathering his wealth, yet when he reaches the top, he has no one to share it with and he is surrounded with people who do not truly know or care about him. Fitzgerald paints this as a sad existence whereby "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther..." (Fitzgerald 189). Gatsby pursues The American Dream at all cost and in the end, it is all in vain. He has no self-respect, true friendships, and contentment. He pays the ultimate price by sacrificing himself for such a dream and ends up dying alone and all the money in the world, cannot reverse his fate. This is exactly what Nafisi is warning us about... that if we pursue The American Dream at all costs, we will destroy the dream itself and

be left isolated and unfulfilled because material objects will never buy or replace true relationships.