

ALL THAT GLITTERS IS NOT GOLD: A STUDY OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN SCOTT FITZGERALD'S THE GREAT GATSBY**Dr. Shyamalima Kashyap**

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ABSTRACT:

American Dream has always been a much researched topic as it concerns many of the issues that were being faced by the Americans at one point. The reach of American Dream's philosophy is such that it has seeped into multiple cultures and societies alike. However, the mystic quality of this concept also comes with certain negative traits, which have led to the fall of many in search of the gold. The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald is one of the most enigmatic novels of its time, such that multiple representations of the same has been transported to movies. The plot of the novel hinges on the fruitlessness of the American Dream which reduces a man's search for ultimate success to ashes. This paper aims to study how what may look to be shiny from the outside, may not in reality be so.

Keywords: American Dream, Cons of American Dream, Delusion, Class Struggle

INTRODUCTION

The years 1800-1900 were unquestionably transformative. The United States was divided in the early 1800s between meticulous low age labourers and workers from the upper classes. The lower class's motivation was to earn enough to be able to pay their bills and save whatever little amount was left for food and groceries. However, as time passed, a shift began to occur. Entrepreneurs became the elite social class, inventions proliferated, industrialization emerged, and many people aspired to material prosperity and comfort. Every class soon felt compelled to work hard in order to attain wealth and make their lives easier. There were also negative consequences to the developments that brought about this enlightened period. As the concept of the American Dream evolved, some of its side consequences spurred debate about whether or not it would be realised, and if the changes that occurred would be detrimental or beneficial to society. The American dream was definitely realised, and the era's transformations had both positive and negative features.

The American Dream, as defined by James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic of America*, is "the dream of a land in which life should be better, richer, and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream to interpret correctly for the European upper classes, and far too many of us have grown tired and distrustful of it. It is not merely a dream of automobiles and high wages, but a dream of social order in which each man and woman can attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognised by others for what they are, regardless of fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." (Adams, 232). As the term implies, this concept represented the pinnacle of all quantifiable prosperity and luxury earned through hard work. Materialistically, people were pushed to focus on factory production, new innovations, and improved technology. The underlying motivator was the need for comfort and ease. As a result, the period became known as the Gilded Age. Gilded means to coat with gold in its most basic sense. This era's people were quick to coat their developing civilization in gold, believing that no harm could or would occur. People choose to ignore the bad effects and concentrate on the positive despite being aware that these advancements had and would continue to have detrimental effects. Slaves were emancipated once the Civil War ended. Slowly but steadily, they were able to integrate into the rest of society. The freemen were now able to enjoy the same advantages as the others, despite the fact that they had not previously received much consideration or care. They were then introduced to the idea of the American Dream and as a result of this, also developed an obsession with achieving the golden lifestyle of the wealthy.

The United States was an agrarian nation in the early 1800s. Farmers were responsible of raising livestock and harvesting various fruits and vegetables. However, as society progressed and demands grew, the need for

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agriculture became less and less. There was a cyclical effect of demand versus industrialisation. The public wanted new, higher-quality, and more easily created things, and as the manufacturers produced such goods, the novelty wore off. People would then expect newer and better products, which they would make, creating a never-ending cycle of disappointment. Economic and ethical practices changed as a result of changes in agriculture. They used laissez-faire economics, which permitted monopolies and other forms of exploitation. Laissez-faire economics was founded on the idea that less government intervention will lead to a more successful economy. However, this idea had some detrimental effects on the competition. Businesspeople often reorganised their companies as noncompeting, anti-laissez-faire monopolies as a result of the fierce rivalry that a laissez-faire economy brought about. Furthermore, businessmen pressed the federal government for beneficial legislation to foster growth. In turn, the government did not pursue a fully laissez-faire strategy; it provided commercial America great protective tariffs, land endowments, and access to public lands for regular resource extraction. The Supreme Court even awarded companies the Fourteenth Amendment protection, rendering income taxes, state regulation of railroads, and other such practices unconstitutional. While business accepted these government handouts and subsidies, it continually cried "laissez-faire" when it came to taxes or additional industry regulation. During the Gilded Age, American businesspeople appeared to have a luxurious lifestyle in every manner. (Cullen, 67)

The shifts had far-reaching consequences for the country. Individuals suffered as a result of the country as a whole becoming engrossed in the golden notion of the times. Groups of immigrants were among those who suffered. Immigrants from various countries stepped on the land of the U.S. with dreams of living and attaining the American Dream. Their primary motive was to leave behind their extremely poor and unstable economy and reside in a place where there would be no shortage of lands and jobs. Nonetheless, as they arrived in the United States, they became aware of the punitive reality and encountered a multitude of issues like the constant competition for first come first availability of jobs, less salary in relation to more work, no housing or sanitation facilities to name a few.

The recently released slaves were also affected. Despite being free, they had no social standing. It was said by Frederick Douglass, that the freeman, "lacked friends, property, or money. Although he was free from the ancient plantation, all he had under his feet was a dusty road. He was left alone, exposed, starving, and without resources under the open sky." The Congress ultimately decided to come up with organisations which would help provide various provisions to the suffering freemen and their families. Unfortunately, once the freed slaves started receiving help from such organisations and the government, they too fell prey to the trap of the glamour of the American Dream.

More labourers were required as the industry expanded. This was beneficial to individuals in need of employment. They were successful in bringing the underprivileged into the middle class. Some of the immigrants were successful in finding jobs. However, their desire for the financial luxuries assured by the American ideal led them to turn a blind eye to the terrible conditions under which they were achieving that ideal. Child labour is one such case. Children were forcefully made to work for the survival of their families in deplorable circumstances. They were expected to work in adult conditions, which could result in harm or death. However, society was so determined to have comfort and luxury that the concept of young children dying for it had little effect on the people as long as they received what they desired. They did not appear concerned that the child was not receiving an education and was gravely harmed. During this transition period, the farmers also suffered a lot owing to them being needed less because of the advancements in technological farming. Farmers in this way remained unaccomplished in their American Dream as the concept of working hard to achieving prosperity was shattered as there was no real need for effort.

Some members of society achieved the American Dream. Those who were able to see beyond the gilded concepts outperformed those whose vision were tainted by materialism. These people were able to acquire a level of ease and achievement, which they were sometimes able to pass on to others. The upper class has already realised the American Dream. The immigrants, too, never experienced the American Dream. Their vision of a rich land and a secure economy was shattered by the harsh realities of a very vulnerable economy and the numerous issues they

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encountered. The American Dream was also not realised by the Victorian Class of society. They were unable to achieve that degree of accomplishment because their perceptions of comfort were so distorted by more. What would have been a simpler and more effective society was hindered by the concepts of the golden influence in the society.

THE AMERICAN DREAM IN LITERATURE:

The study of the American dream, which existed in the national consciousness long before the phrase was coined, pervades American literature. Americans considered their society as distinct from others from its inception because of the chance it provided for individuals of all backgrounds to achieve success. This was established in the Declaration of Independence, published in 1776, and stated that "All men have been blessed with equal privileges to life, liberty, and the quest of happiness by virtue of their inherent equality." As astute example of the American Dream coming to fruition was with Benjamin Franklin who had helped conceive the Declaration of Independence. Franklin's rise from the hardships of being an apprentice to one of the most revered figures of his day demonstrated the New World's prospects. Furthermore, his belief that hard work is the only true path to victory became a cornerstone of the American ideal. Freedom is another important feature of the dream. The concept of freedom as a source of achieving the American Dream is visibly present in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, with the prime character Huck. Huck always did what he considered to be just. Worried that he was assisting his slave companion Jim's escape, he listened to his heart while making choices by the end.

The American dream is an abstract structure that fortifies the establishment of colonies in America, along with the literature that evolved in the New World. In some ways, the notion can be traced back to an article written in 1630 by John Winthrop. John Winthrop had envisioned the life in a new world, that is abundant with opportunities for both social and financial development but one where ambition had to be balanced with goodwill, generosity and kindness, especially towards the poor. What his people required, he opposed, was the freedom to make the most of their lives by cultivating vital interior values such as justice and mercy.

The outcome was the birth of the original American dream, which promised boundless opportunity for material fulfilment as a reward for aspiration, goodness of heart, and purity of soul. This may be why Winthrop chose the title of his essay, "A Model of Christian Charity." Such mentality enticed immigrants from all over Europe, promising the poor new opportunities, oppressed freedom of expression, and impoverished hope. A century later, Benjamin Franklin added the concept of a disciplined life to this ethic. He detailed his boyhood programme for personal advancement from extreme poverty to personal height in his posthumous autobiography (1818): a day that is intentionally planned out for personal development through hard work, study, and the development of social virtues. His plan swiftly became the model for social development for millions of Americans, and in the twentieth century, F. Scott Fitzgerald adopted it again as the protagonist's programme for rising in the world in *The Great Gatsby* published in 1925. One of the pioneers of American Literature, F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose works are the paradigmatic writings of the Jazz Age, a term that was coined by him. He is considered to be one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century. Many people agree that *The Great Gatsby*, which was released in 1925, is F. Scott Fitzgerald's best work. It is regarded as a foundational study on the American dream's vulnerability as well. It centres on a young guy named Jay Gatsby who, after falling in love with a member of society, spends a lot of money trying to earn her affection. She marries a member of her own socioeconomic class, and he passes away disappointed in the idea of the self-made man. The idea of social mobility in America, according to Fitzgerald, is a myth, and social structures in the "New World" are just as inflexible as the ones in Europe.

Adult novels frequently emphasised on the same mixture of innermost traits crucial for realising the American dream, which had occasionally devolved into a simple chase for the riches. William Dean Howell's *The Rise of Silas*, published in 1885, depicts the titular character rising from poor beginnings to wealth, yet remaining unsatisfied. The underlying issue, which is frequently repeated in the American novel, is the importance of a strong ethical foundation in the operation of free enterprise. Money alone will not bring the American ideal to

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fruition. *McTeague* (1899) by Frank Norris, for example, deals with raw avarice, revenge, murder, devastation, and money hoarding, which explains why the silent film based on it was dubbed *Greed*. There is no development of morality, compassion, or generosity. In a more positive sense, the narrator in Willa Cather's *My Antonia* (1918) has a Harvard law degree, is married to a wealthy socialite in New York, and derives the most joy from his memories of the simple farm girl he knew as a child on the Nebraska prairie. Sinclair Lewis depicts a major character in *Babbitt* (1922) who obtains money but not the satisfaction he longed for. Rather than growing within, he looks to the outside world for anything to fill the hole he feels within, a futile quest. Similar elements are used in Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Great Flannel Suit* (1955), but the main character recognises the personal cost of his employer's unchecked desire for money and power, and in final moments, despite making some sacrifices, he declines an appealing new position in order to spend time with his wife and three children.

The classic *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) by Abraham Cahan emphasised another negative aspect of the American dream: the attainment of wealth comes at a high cost, particularly when it includes cultural heritage. In the American novel, the protagonists' incapacity to advance is frequently due to events outside of their control. The Joads are forced off their Oklahoma farm by the depression and drought, not by their absence of discipline or drive, and their struggles in California are brought on by predatory labour procedures, not by their own incompetence, in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Poverty and prejudice, as well as fear and hesitation, limit prospects for growth in the *Native Son* by Richard Wright's (1940) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952). *The Street* (1946) by Ann Petry is about a black lady trying to raise a boy amidst the poverty and fear of 1940s Harlem. Similar issues are explored in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956), but in a Jewish setting, where the protagonist aspires for financial accomplishment while keeping feelings of affection and kindness. He does not fulfil the American ideal, but he matures as a person, reminiscent of *The Rise of Lapham* in the previous century. Sandra Cisneros depicts a character in *The House on Mango Neighbourhood* (1984) who yearns for a lovely home on a safe neighbourhood, free from the machismo threats that threaten to limit her life by consigning her to motherhood and under the control of a husband in a poor and violent neighbourhood. Gish Jen's 1998 novel *Typical American* is on members of a Chinese immigrant family who are attempting to both realise the promise of America and find their place in their new culture. A similar idea runs through Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*: the title character's gain of financial fortune is meaningless without the lady he loves. Gatsby dies for an act that she executed despite disproving his lofty perception of her that has guided his adult life, a fitting, ironic conclusion to a tale set during a decade of unheard-of economic triumph in America.

Jay Gatsby is a self-made individual in *The Great Gatsby* who started with little money and only a strategy to achieve his dream. He is so enamoured with his lavish things that he fails to recognise that money cannot buy love or happiness. Fitzgerald shows how one's emphasis on attaining wealth, power, and expensive things may pervert a dream. The culture of money and splendour that surrounds him has tainted his American ideal. Jay Gatsby is a "nouveau riche," and his romantic perspective of money does not prepare him for the self-interested, snobby, corrupt set of individuals with whom he eventually becomes acquainted. He throws elaborate parties for a large number of people, yet he has no true friends. Gatsby spends money and entertains big numbers of people because he has an insatiable longing for something greater. Nick Carraway realises that, despite his involvement in shady business activities and obsession with money, Gatsby is actually a nice person. When Nick last sees Gatsby alive, he tells him, "They're a horrible bunch.... "You're worth the entire damn lot put together." (Fitzgerald 162). Gatsby's romantic outlook on life may have contributed to his failure to realise his ideal. Despite having gained his money through crime and dubious business dealings, his heart is unaffected by the moral depravity that surrounds him.

The lovely Daisy Buchanan, whom Gatsby knew when he was in the service, served as his inspiration. Due to his poor upbringing and lack of wealth, Gatsby's parents did not think he was a fit match for Daisy. The narrator, Nick Carraway, describes Daisy as the golden girl—the epitome of a wealthy beauty. Daisy is a representation of all that Gatsby aspires to, and he says that she has a voice like money. "Her voice was "full of money—it was the endless fascination that rose and sank in it, the jingle of it, and the cymbals' song in it." (Fitzgerald 127). Gatsby

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got so charmed with Daisy's voice that he centred all of his actions on winning her over. Her voice carries the promise of immense wealth. However, Gatsby is too late to discover that her voice just bids money. Daisy is devoid of compassion, just as cold, hard wealth is devoid of it.

Gatsby's blunder is failing to recognise Daisy as a symbol of both material prosperity and the corruption that affluence can bring. Despite her outward persona of being a sweet and caring person, she is nothing but a selfish and self-centred individual whose heart is as hard as a stone. Daisy is irresponsible with others' lives; she faults Gatsby for her unintentional murder of Myrtle Wilson. Her irresponsible acts eventually lead to Gatsby's death, which she is unconcerned about. She callously commits infidelity, although she had no plans to leave her husband. When she discovers Gatsby's uncertain past, she flees back into the arms of her equally self-absorbed, unscrupulous husband. The Buchanans live in Long Island's rich and private East Egg, which is likely Gatsby's dream place. The green light shining at the dock of The Buchanan's signifies Gatsby's desire for riches and power, as well as Daisy as the purpose of Gatsby's longing. The light's obvious interpretation is that it signifies money. The green colour may also symbolise money because for a very long time, Gatsby has only longed to be a part of the East Egg. It is interesting that the fact that the green light can be seen across the bay, "minute and far away" from Gatsby's estate, represents that it—Daisy or wealth—is out of his reach, despite the fact that he can catch a glimpse of it.

Daisy and Tom's marriage is a clear example of how the American Dream has been destroyed. In spite of belonging to elite social groups and having an enormous wealth, they are constantly frustrated with each other. Tom is initially defined as "one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anti-climax" (Fitzgerald 11). Tom and Daisy are both dissatisfied with their lives and are looking for a better one. They went to France and drifted "here and there unrestfully wherever rich people played polo together." (Fitzgerald 11). They are miserable and dissatisfied with life. Tom appears to be looking for the thrill of playing football in college, and he finds a way to express his unhappiness by having an affair with Myrtle. Once more, Gatsby fails to understand that acquiring wealth and power do not guarantee happiness. The Buchanans' union is rife with deception and infidelity, but their corruption unites them. After the death of Gatsby and Myrtle, neither of the Buchannans expresses any shred of remorse or regret about their actions. They even take a quick vacation, which validates their lack of empathy for other people. Nick sees Tom and Daisy for who they truly are: cold-blooded and reckless. "They destroyed objects and living beings before withdrawing back into their money, extreme carelessness, or whatever it was that held them together. They then left other people to clean up the wreckage they had created." (Fitzgerald 188).

The fact that Gatsby's mansion is constantly crowded with guests all summer long, but only Nick and Gatsby's father attend Gatsby's burial when he passes away, is quite significant. Gatsby's superficial acquaintances were never his actual buddies; they just served as a vehicle for his profligate kindness. When it's time to pay their respects to him, none of the many people who go to his parties, ride in his automobile and hydroplane, and consume his alcohol are present. Gatsby's ambition of prosperity has been marred by the corrupt environment he has experienced. Nick is aware of Gatsby's true character, including his lowly upbringing, dishonest business practises, and dreams for success. Nonetheless, Nick recognises that, regardless of his entanglement in a world of greediness and exploitation, Gatsby was still an honourable man. Nick's American dream is built on his childhood memories and warm faces. He remembers boarding the train home from college and being entertained by pleasant faces and jingling sleigh bells. It is the antidote to Gatsby's sustaining dream, which it frames and interprets, an aspirational dream that drives Gatsby to pursue it to anticipated success and unplanned failure.

From a shallow view point, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about a man and a woman's unrequited love. The novel's major theme, on the other hand, is far broader and less romantic in scope. *The Great Gatsby* is a highly symbolic deliberation on 1920s America as a whole, particularly the collapse of the American dream in an era of unparalleled affluence and material excess. *The Great Gatsby* may seem to be just a superficial novel about the glamour of the society that Fitzgerald experienced in the early 20th century however, after closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that Fitzgerald's book is actually a profound social commentary on the corrupting and demoralising

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effects that materialism can have on members of society. While people who already possess riches and position are unhappy and unsatisfied with their life, the have-nots aspire to be like the haves. It should be highlighted that Gatsby does not fit in with this group due to his romantic idealism; no matter how high up the social ladder he rose, he would never truly fit in. This consumerism and unhappiness that Gatsby encounters contributes to dim his vision of achievement. His ambition of rising from poverty to wealth is abruptly dashed by a horrible nightmare. He is unprepared for the corrupt society he enters because of his passionate idealism. Gatsby is surrounded by examples of the misery that "success" can cause, most notably Tom and Daisy. Fitzgerald offers a powerful condemnation of a materialistic society and the effects it could have on one's goals and aspirations.

Fitzgerald saw the 1920s as a period of deteriorating moral and societal standards, as seen by its rampant materialism, inevitable pessimism, and pointless pursuit of want. The Great Gatsby's opulent parties, which serve as an example of the carefree exhilaration that gave rise to lavish gatherings and wild jazz music, ultimately contributed to the corruption of the American dream by elevating the pursuit of money and pleasure above higher ideals. Fitzgerald uses characters of *The Great Gatsby* as symbols of these cultural movements. Both Gatsby and Nick, demonstrate the cynicism and cosmopolitanism that emerged as a result of the conflict. Gatsby's parties are visited by a variety of ruthless investors and social climbers, which is evidence of the covetous pursuit of wealth. The conflict between "old money" and "new money" is reflected in the metaphorical geography of the book, where East Egg stands for the established nobility and West Egg for the self-made wealthy.

According to Fitzgerald, The American dream originally orbited around survey, uniqueness, and the pursuit of happiness. However, in the 1920s, easy cash flow and casual social laws had tainted this fiction. This view is reflected in the novel's central plotline, in which Gatsby's hopes of falling in love with Daisy are dashed by the disparity in their social classes, his resort to crime to please her, and the lifestyle of rampant consumerism she leads. Gatsby imbues Daisy with an idealised perfection that neither she deserves nor possesses, just as Americans have given America meaning via their goals for their own lives. Similar to how the American dream in the 1920s is damaged by the unworthiness of its aim—money and pleasure—Gatsby's dream is destroyed by the unworthiness of its object. Gatsby longs to recreate a lost past—his time in Louisville with Daisy—but is unable to do so, much like 1920s Americans in general who futilely search for a bygone era in which their ambitions had significance. Gatsby's only option after his dream falls apart is to pass away, while Nick's only option is to return to Minnesota, where American values have not deteriorated.

CONCLUSION:

The "American Dream" has taken on several meanings throughout history and now encompasses both domestic (such as property ownership and upward mobility) and international goals. According to the present way of thinking, Americans can prosper if they put in the necessary effort. So to speak, The Dream includes the ability for one's children to mature, obtain a good education, and follow a career without artificial restrictions. It is the opportunity to make choices for oneself without being constrained by prior assumptions about people's class, caste, religion, race, or ethnicity. The American Dream continues, although ambivalently, whether it is praised or criticised. We are constantly defining, examining, and evaluating the idea, and despite our best efforts, the notion of the American Dream only seems to become more ingrained. The literature on this topic of dream analysis is essentially limitless as authors attempt to realise, save, pursue, restore, safeguard, confront, pursue, revive, shape, refresh, and challenge the American Dream.

The idea of "The American Dream" is a broad issue in and of itself. It raises a lot of new, unclear questions that need to be clarified. Who could be against the American Dream? No one. It embodies our belief in development, opportunity, and effort. It embodies aspirations for a sizable and secure middle class. Everyone would enrol in college and buy a home. Always, children would outlive their parents. The ultimate allure of the Dream is its unassured promise of personal fulfilment. However, the phrase never really caught on, presumably because it seemed to contradict experience. The majority of Americans had always struggled with life. We all want the American Dream, but is it really attainable? We put a lot of effort into our job each day because we believe that

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our aspirations will one day come true. But will we ever actually see them? Can the American Dream actually be realised by anyone? Such questions require definitive answers which are still work in progress.

One of the most quintessentially "American" notions is still the notion that anyone should be able to pursue their goals and build the life they desire if they put up the effort. This motivating factor fosters individualism and entrepreneurship, which romanticises everyone aspiring to success in the United States. Although the American Dream has been interpreted differently by each generation, it is without a doubt and always will be a component of the American spirit.

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