

# *The Disillusionment of the American Dream in "The Great Gatsby"*

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**Abstract:** F. Scott Fitzgerald is regarded as the spokesman of the American "Jazz Age." "Jazz Age" denotes the temporal span, including 1919 to 1929. The economy flourished during this particular period in American history, leading to a significant shift in societal ideals. Consequently, a discernible decline emerged in individuals' cognitive and ethical faculties. The Great Gatsby, a literary work that portrays the terrible existence of Gatsby and carries notable scholarly and pragmatic ramifications, symbolizes the disintegration of the "American Dream." The cohort of individuals in the United States, commonly called the "lost generation" during the 1920s, saw a notable discrepancy between their aspirational objectives and the prevailing realities of their day. This study examines the fundamental significance of Gatsby's interpretation of the "American Dream" and uncovers the inescapable inevitability of Gatsby's sad demise and the disillusionment associated with the "American Dream" through a thorough analysis of the primary textual elements inside the novel. The primary aim of this essay is to enhance readers' understanding of the widespread appeal of riches and worldly possessions while encouraging them to reflect on the development of moral, healthful, and dynamic principles.

**Keywords:** Jazz Age, American Dream, The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Information about Author and Works

Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby* in 1925. The novel is set in New York City during the Jazz Age and follows Jay Gatsby, a poor man who became rich and pursued Daisy Buchanan, an affluent woman with whom he had a deep connection as a child. The "Wilderness Era" of the American upper class during the Great Depression and the downfall of the American Dream in the 1920s are vividly shown. The American economy boomed after World War I, with fast expansion and widespread affluence. However, conceptual frameworks, guiding principles, and firmly held beliefs disintegrated. Fitzgerald describes the "Roaring Twentieth Century" as a time of significant events and art set against social and historical upheaval and chaos. Wealth became the sole measure of success as people emphasized avoiding failure over death. This book established Fitzgerald as a representative of the "Lost Generation" and the "Jazz Age" in American literature.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

Many critics have praised *The Great Gatsby's* literary structure, symbolism, and thematic depth. The book's central issue, the American Dream's disappointment, has been examined from numerous angles. The book's main idea was analyzed in Marius Begley's 1963 "Scott Fitzgerald's Critique of America." In his research, John F. Callahan studied "The Illusions of a Nation: Myth and History in the Works of Scott Fitzgerald" socio-historically. Callahan's Marxist perspective complemented Fitzgerald's indictment of capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*. William Troy stressed the importance of Nick Carraway, the narrator. Recently, more researchers have focused on the work's female characters and feminist themes.

## **1.3. Thesis Statement**

*Gatsby's* tragedy and the American Dream's demise are inevitable. Jazz Age circumstances shaped the American Dream myth. When individuals stopped living spiritually and lived in luxury, the moral pillar and ideals of the American Dream disappeared. Readers must consider how to live positively after money, which raises the topic of human purpose. The conclusion is that only spiritual life has endless potential for enrichment and development, while material life cannot support people's meaning of existence. This study explores *Gatsby's* efforts and failure in the context of the Jazz Age and societal events. It draws essential and profound conclusions. Readers should understand that materialism and spiritual neglect are detrimental. *Gatsby* died for a generation of Americans who lost their religion, ethics, and spirit. These inspirations might help readers assess modern society and obtain spiritual insight to assist them in making wise life and goal decisions.

## **2. Textual Analysis**

### **2.1. The American Dream and its Distortion**

#### **2.1.1. The Meaning and History of the "American Dream"**

The novel's tragic existence of the protagonist, *Gatsby*, and the disillusionment of the American Dream are inexorable. The prevailing conditions of the Jazz Age played a significant role in shaping the conception of the American Dream. The moral foundation and aspirational components of the American Dream ceased to exist as individuals became engrossed in worldly pursuits and abandoned the quest for spiritual fulfillment. The readers must engage in introspection concerning how one can lead a constructive life after acquiring wealth, thereby delving into the fundamental inquiry about the essence of human existence. The analysis concludes that more than a significant degree of worldly affluence is needed to sustain an individual's sense of purpose and fulfillment over an extended period. Instead, it is posited that spiritual pursuits offer boundless opportunities for personal growth and enrichment. This dissertation examines *Gatsby's* endeavors and subsequent lack of success within the context of the Jazz Age and the prevailing socioeconomic phenomena of that era. It aims to draw significant and profound conclusions from these observations. Readers must be aware of the detrimental consequences of an obsessive pursuit of material wealth and neglect of spiritual well-being. The decline of religious adherence, moral principles, and societal values among a particular cohort of Americans resulted in a loss of integrity and a diminished sense of purpose, as shown by the tragic demise of the character Jay *Gatsby*. By drawing upon these sources of inspiration, individuals can engage in a more thorough analysis of contemporary society, acquiring a profound spiritual understanding that will enable them to make rational choices regarding their conduct and the pursuit of their objectives.

### 2.1.2. The American Dream's Distortion

The "Rumour Age" or "Jazz Age" in the 1920s was brief but distinct in the U.S. After World War I, the U.S. went from debt-ridden to creditor. Thus, the U.S. became the world's leading economic power. The U.S. government's liberal economic policies helped capitalism thrive, enabling the country's shift from rural to industrial. The rapid development of civilization has led to unprecedented convenience in American society, increasing gambling billionaires overnight. Success increasingly depended on money. People started doing numerous things for money, frequently against their morals. Hedonism, Spencer's evolution theory, and James' pragmatism became prominent in the U.S. The Puritan moral framework and its principles of diligence and frugality are being replaced by a culture of consumer hedonism that prioritizes riches and material pleasure. Materialistic aims and aspirations have caused the younger generation to feel depressed and existentially empty. The "American Dream" has become synonymous with worldly pursuits. American dreams that departed from morality ended in disappointment.

## 2.2. Gatsby's American Dream

The birth of Gatsby took place within a low-income family. The guy in issue was inspired by Benjamin Franklin and utilized a variety of ways, some of which were illegal, to acquire a substantial sum of money to reclaim Daisy's devotion, a lady from the upper echelons of society. Individuals' efforts to achieve their goals are similar to those of historical individuals such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Edison, and other predecessors who worked to achieve the American dream. However, it might be argued that Gatsby's goal does not correspond to the actual concept of the "American Dream" but rather symbolizes a morally based interpretation of the "American Dream." To some extent, this circumstance contributed to the unpleasant conclusion that his aim remained unattainable.

It may be claimed that Gatsby's interpretation of the "American Dream" has two unique components, namely the "Dream of Love" and the "Dream of Wealth." The pursuit of a "love dream" influences Gatsby's "American dream," and the fulfillment of this "love dream" is predicated on the realization of his "wealth dream." His once-cherished vision of the "American Dream" was eventually broken in a society marked by rampant self-interest, avarice, and moral corruption, leading to disillusionment.

### 2.2.1. Gatsby's Personality

The story revolves around Gatsby, a complex guy with contradicting tendencies. The author shows readers the complexity of human nature through different characters. These traits help the protagonist succeed and make money but ultimately doom him.

Gatsby felt deeply unhappy and ashamed about his humble beginnings. He disliked his parents, especially his dirty father. Gatsby compared his father to a pig during his childhood. Gatsby describes the protagonist's parents as lazy farmers. The protagonist's imagination never recognizes them as his biological parents. Gatsby believed he had a celestial pedigree, differentiating him from others. From West Egg, Long Island, Jay Gatsby represents his idealized self based on Plato's theory of forms. To fit in with society, he changed his name from "James Gatz" to "Jay Gatsby" to symbolize his transition[1]. James Gatz was known by this name unofficially and legally. At 17, he made a significant change that started his career[1]. Gatsby lied about his family and past to Nick when they met. All of his wealthy Central American parents have died. Gatsby grew up in the US but went to Oxford because his family has studied there for centuries. Gatsby says the conduct is family custom[1]. As he attempts to hide his lowly roots and become an upper-class person, his actions show his moral decline in his quest for fame and fortune.

Gatsby may have been naive and persistent in his search for love. Gatsby was deeply involved in his memories of happy times with Daisy, believing she was a pure and innocent young woman. However, time and circumstances have ended their relationship. Gatsby's love for Daisy lasts throughout the novel. Gatsby spent much money on a beautiful building next to Daisy's house to rekindle her interest. He was excited to invite Daisy when he phoned Nick, Daisy's cousin. In the final chapters, Gatsby takes responsibility for the car crash and sacrifices his life to save Daisy.

### 2.2.2. Gatsby's Dream of Wealth

The foundation of Gatsby's "American Dream" was his "wealth dream," which was not entirely fulfilled. He constantly desired to leave his family's history behind and join a higher social level. Despite Gatsby's hardships, Wolfsheimer and Dan Cody were crucial to his success. Gatsby was introduced to the seductive milieu of high society, taught the customs and etiquette of a noble gentleman, and asked to accompany him as an assistant by Dan Cody, a typical drunken pioneer. Because Dan Cody, who was sober, knew what extravagant deeds Dan Cody drunk might soon be about, he provided for such contingencies by reposing more and more trust in Gatsby. "He (Gatsby) was employed in a vague personal capacity—while he remained with Cody, he was in turn steward, mate, skipper, secretary, and even jailor"[1]. Wolfsheimer led Gatsby into engaging in illicit activities, such as the sale of confidential information and financial fraud, which allowed him to amass enormous amounts of money in just five years. "Here and in Chicago, he and this Wolfsheimer acquired numerous side-street drug stores and oversaw the sale of grain alcohol" [1]. Gatsby worked with politicians and businesses, interacting with both the police and gangs, in an attempt to amass wealth quickly. Without a moral basis, the American Dream lost its original good connotations and became much more harmful.

However, despite his wealth, Gatsby was never allowed to join the upper-class groups he wanted to be a part of since he was not old money. After celebrities began questioning and circulating suspicions about this mysterious rich man's true identity, Tom eventually revealed his illegal actions. Daisy could not accept Gatsby's money, which he had amassed illegally. None of the earlier attendees showed up for Gatsby's burial. "And as the minutes went by and the attendants entered and waited in the hallway, he started to blink apprehensively and spoke about the rain in a confused, nervous manner. He pulled the minister aside and ordered him to wait for thirty minutes after he repeatedly glanced at his watch. However, it was useless. It was empty" . The funeral's sadness starkly contrasted the banquet's previous lively bustle. It proved that the upper class greatly mistrusted Gatsby and that his "love dream" had not been significantly aided by the wealth he had been yearning for.

### 2.2.3. Gatsby's Dream of Love

Daisy personified Gatsby's love ideas, while his "Dream of Love" depicted his "American dream"[2]. Regretfully, Gatsby believed he could purchase Daisy's love with money.

While visiting a military barracks south of Nashville, Gatsby fell in love with Daisy, a stunning and well-off girl. After World War I, he enlisted in the military in Europe. Five years later, he returned to find Daisy married to a wealthy man named Tom. Afterward, Gatsby used wealth to realize his vision of love. After making much money through gambling and bootlegging, he tried to impress Daisy by lavishing it on things that were very American. To get Daisy to come, Gatsby acquired a mansion close to her, threw extravagant parties, and cultivated a friendship with Daisy's cousin Nick. Gatsby had a dream and persevered in his romantic relationships. In the self-centered and dirty mob, Gatsby's unadulterated love and romanticism appear even more lofty and sophisticated. Nevertheless, Gatsby's idealistic love gradually brought him to his end in dreaming.

Daisy's interest in Gatsby might have sprung from her desire to flee the poverty and humility Gatsby had known as a teenager and her desire to become an aristocratic princess thanks to her wealth. For Gatsby, Daisy symbolizes the upper-class American virtues of being beautiful and innocent. Gatsby modeled his life after Daisy because she embodied the beauty he yearned for. She was the first "nice" female he had met. He has seen these people in various vague roles, usually wearing invisible barbed wire. It was exciting to feel his yearning for her ". Gatsby's desire to fulfill his goals and enhance his future led to his fantasy of Daisy. To sum it up, Daisy keeps Gatsby's "love dream" alive[3].

Gatsby made the incorrect decision and had unrealistic expectations of Daisy, meaning his "love dream" was doomed. Daisy claimed to be someone valuable but was not because she valued money and status more than love. She could not convey joy and love or offer Gatsby's life any meaning. Gatsby's betrayal and Daisy's self-interest demonstrate them. Second, Gatsby's goodness and beauty were alienated by his wealth. Gatsby's conceit as a peasant's child was satiated by being with a "princess" like Daisy. Gatsby might find the motivation to put in much effort and rise to the upper class if he falls in love with a wealthy girl. As mentioned, Daisy valued status and riches over Gatsby and loved him less than he believed. When Tom discovered that Gatsby obtained his riches illegally by selling moonshine, Daisy had already backed off. She lost her confidence and plunged into Tom's arms again, desperate to hold onto his high position and luxurious lifestyle. By deliberately creating the impression that he was a member of Daisy's class and could look after her, Gatsby offered her a false sense of security. She and Tom conspired to kill Gatsby[4].

Reality strikes and Gatsby's plans fall through. The "American Dream" of Gatsby was dashed, and he lost his "love" at a significant personal cost.

### **2.3. The Contradiction between Ideal and Reality**

A dream started and ended Gatsby's life. A central contradiction of the "American Dream" is the gap between ideal and reality, as shown in Gatsby's tragedy. The objective social circumstances made Gatsby's dream and spiritual idealism unattainable. The westward movement is over, unlike in the early US when capitalism was maturing. Personal wealth is mainly inherited. An individual's social standing and income are primarily defined by his family background in this social context. Like Tom Buchanon in the novel, most wealthy children are the offspring of early American pioneers who were motivated by the American Dream to tremendous success[5]. The writer believes Gatsby and Tom embody American society's two fundamental forces: idealistic unrealisticity and pragmatistic excessive selfishness and apathy. Between Gatsby and Tom for Daisy, spiritual idealism and material realism clashed, revealing the actual face of the upper class. Gatsby's defeat ended spiritual romanticism and established social material realism in society. The mainstream American community respects Tom for his adherence to secular principles.

Thus, in this age of wealth accumulation and inheritance, it is nearly challenging to rise from the lower classes to the high ranks with personal success, like the pioneering forebears of the United States. In such a cruel and realistic society, Gatsby cannot quickly accumulate wealth through legal means because he grew up when the social conditions for realizing the American Dream were unavailable, and his ancestors did not leave him abundant wealth. Gatsby had to commit crimes to succeed. Gatsby understood that "Daisy's voice is full of money" but did not know they lived in separate worlds and had different values. Gatsby's sorrow was the tragedy of his era, which ruined him as the "era-made man"[6].

### 3. Conclusion

#### 3.1. Summary

In conclusion, the demise of the "American Dream" and Gatsby were unavoidable. The American Dream, according to Nick, the novel's narrator, was once about self-worth, self-striving, and realizing dreams via one's nature. However, corruption, deteriorating social norms, and easy money destroyed it. Fitzgerald portrayed Gatsby as a contradictory individual full of ideas and reality, which reflected the materialistic, hedonistic, and spiritually degraded American culture of the 1920s. Gatsby's depressing existence was a metaphor for the American Dream's falsity, accessibility, and impending demise. The reality was not what Gatsby had imagined. His "American Dream" of rising above his social class and achieving financial success via hard work is dashed when traditional American values erode. It demonstrates the fallacy that hard work might achieve success for everyone in America. The novel's usefulness is demonstrated by how the collapse of the post-war American Dream is a powerful warning to today's dreamers and celebrity seekers.

#### 3.2. Perspective for Further Research

It is imperative to conduct additional research on the practical ramifications. The proliferation of technology and the increasing complexity of social thought have led to an enlarged desire among individuals for an improved quality of life. However, this societal progression has also given rise to a troubling increase in instances characterized by a loss of moral values. The inquiry of strategies to prevent the recurrence of the historical pattern observed in the demise of the post-war "American Dream" warrants profound contemplation. From the author's perspective, it is imperative for future research to prioritize the examination of the interplay between history and reality. Furthermore, it is of utmost importance to assimilate historical lessons and employ them as a guiding framework for the actions and decisions of individuals in the present era.

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