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THE BETRAYAL OF THE AMERICAN DREAM AND SCOTT FITZGERALD'S
THE GREAT GATSBY

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ABSTRACT

Gatsby's individual tragedy is a tragedy of American civilization. In trying to pursue his dream he not only destroys his fantasies but a glamorous world he created by amassing ill-gotten wealth to prove underworld criminal activities. His greed for destructive materialism ends in tragic failure and death. The novel deals with the betrayal and collapse of American Dream for a perverted hero who seeks glory to fulfill his ambition by a false notion of a romantic ideal which eventually exposes his pathetic vulnerability and ultimate death. Gatsby fails because of his inability to distinguish the difference between spiritual ideals and greed for material position.

Key Words: American Dream, love, betrayal, false glamour, sexual promiscuity, money and morals.

As one of the most celebrated novels of the 20th century Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has attracted critical attention for candidly portraying "about America, American character and the American Dream" (Miller 252). Few critics have comprehensively examined the American Dream that permeates the text. The novel reflects some of the images of horror of modern life in America. The reader can gauge the deeper psychology discovering the universal malaise of 'sickness' and common darkness in the individual gloom personified for the generation of twenties. It suggests much about the sterility, aridity, vacuity of modern life. It depicts how sexual relationships have been diminished, devitalized, debased and life at its vital centre has dwindled into meaninglessness and banality.

The Great Gatsby must be interpreted as a meditation about the failure of American Dream. John Peale Bishop recognized Gatsby as "The emersonian man brought to completion and eventually to failure (115) Lionel Trilling, an

influential critic on the literature of the twenties, insisted that "Gatsby, divided between power and dream, comes inevitably to stand for America itself" (251). Edwin Fussell in his essay "Fitzgerald's Brave New World" interprets the novel based on the "connection between Gatsby's individual tragedy and the tragedy of American civilization" (48). Gatsby pursues a dream which not only destroys his fantasies but a glamorous world he recreated by amassing wealth through boot legging and underworld criminal activities. His American experience is directly in conflict with the hope and idealism of the frontier values as his quest for rapacious and destructive materialism ends in tragic failure.

Readers who come to Fitzgerald's novel and to the twenties are inclined to think that the oft-mentioned subject of the American Dream is a matter of personal freedom and financial success. However, early twentieth-century thinkers like Josiah Royce Walter Lippmann wrote about that

bream in much more idealistic terms. They related it to the building of the nation in the 20th century, and to the qualities of character that implied. But Royce, for one, had written that the American Dream was getting difficult even to discern, much less to reconstruct. Perhaps it had already been lost.

The novel reveals that there are basic differences between the traditional American Dream and Gatsby's own personal dream. The American Dream envisages the romantic possibilities of the human imagination and a belief in man's inherent potential greatness. Gatsby's personal ambition matches with this outlook. The actual direction that Gatsby's personal dream took does not follow the pattern of the American Dream. The American Dream reflects the Renaissance spirit for economic development and opportunism. America offers everybody an opportunity to fulfill their seeker of an essential quest for attaining their dream. Thus, the goals of success are youth and wealth. Therefore at the core, the American Dream may be said to be self centered. A true believer of the American Dream is given to thinking in terms of the glorification of the self and he strives to establish his personal identity and amasses immense wealth.

Those who read Fitzgerald's novel in the context of twenties are inclined to think that the subject of the American Dream is a matter of personal freedom and financial success. However, early twentieth-century thinkers like Josian Royce and Walter Lippmann wrote about that dream in much more idealistic terms (Prigozy 84). They related it to progress of the nation in the twentieth century, and to the qualities of character that are needed to achieve the dream. For Fitzgerald, the American Dream was too difficult even to discern, much less to reconstruct. Perhaps it had already been lost by him. The world of *The Great Gatsby* represents the new social world feared by the tradition of American moralists from William James to John Dewey. It is a disillusioned world of broken relationships and sexual promiscuity. It is a world of money and success rather than social responsibility. It is a world of glamour, glitter and criminals in

which individuals are all free to determine their moral destinies.

The novel is an enactment of the betrayal American Dream and is expressed in the love affair between and a worldly ambitions Jay Gatsby the protagonist of the novel and Daisy Fay. The hero is, like Fitzgerald, "a man divided", yet he seeks to integrate love of a woman with accomplishment in the world. Telling his story to Nick Carraway, the narrator, after he has lost his lady love Daisy Fay, for the second and last time, Gatsby remembers that when he first met her, he felt like the latest plunderer in the line of Dan Cody, his metaphorical father.

Until Gatsby express his passionate love to Daisy, he projects little soul or feeling, only a self-absorbed passion mixed up with his urge to defy American boundaries of class, status, and money. The experience of love deeply moves and changes Gatsby, but so pervasive is the culture of material success that his new reverence and tenderness towards her are inseparable from money and possessions, and perhaps from Carraway's image of Daisy "gleaming like silver".

Gatsby discovers that Daisy loves him because of his different experience, not despite it as he feared. He surrenders his ambitions, as yet inchoate, unfocused, adolescent, to his intense feeling for Daisy. But their love is an interlude, happening "in the meantime, in between time". Although his ambitions are vague, thinking of other American trajectories, might have awaited Gatsby if Daisy had stayed true to her love for him.

Gatsby's dream, the dream inspired by Daisy, is here identified with the dream which pushed him to retrieve and sustain a moment of imaginative intensity and promise. His sense of wonder which soured, because its evocation was essentially meretricious. But there are several other important aspects of the novel which must be explored in terms of this perspective specifically, Fitzgerald's treatment of Tom Buchanan and the Wilsons; his portrait of Gatsby's early mentor, Dan Cody: the significance of the "waste land" and the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg which preside over it; Nick Carraway implicit contrast of East Egg West

Egg, and the role of World War I, which casts a kind of shadow over the events of the whole novel.

Tom and Daisy, Buchanan's are obviously meant to represent an American class. When, at the end of the novel, Nick Carraway says, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (*The Great Gatsby* 180-81), we realize that Nick's judgment is correct. The Buchanan's, standing for the modern American upper class, embody a materialism which is totally cynical, undirected by idealism or transcendental hope. Jordan Baker, also a representative of this class, mirrors Tom's materialist orientation and consequent athleticism as well as his dishonesty: "She was incurably dishonest". Daisy represents the materialism of her class as well as the materialism at the core of Gatsby's transcendental idealism. The class to which Daisy and Tom and Jordan Baker belong, the class represented in somewhat broader terms by East Egg itself. Gatsby's materialism is tragic rather than shallow. Although Nick deeply disapproves of Gatsby, a sense of the transcendental emotion at the bottom of Gatsby's materialism makes Nick stop, turn, and call out: "They're a rotten crowd ... You're worth the whole damn bunch put together" (154). Even Daisy senses the tragic nature of Gatsby's impossible transcendental-materialism when he displays his shirts for her, heaping them in a luxurious pile until she cries because she has "never seen such-such beautiful shirts before" (94), moved not so much by the shirts themselves as by the intense emotion with which Gatsby has invested them. The Buchanan's and their class represent an historical dead end.

Tom Buchanan comes from the world of established wealth, which, though contemptuous of the blatant kinds of corruption represented by Gatsby and his associates. In many ways Tom Buchanan is the most sinister character in *The Great Gatsby*, as he seems to typify the American businessman who remains the perpetual adolescent intellectually. If Tom Buchanan appears sinister in all his respectability, Jordan Baker, Daisy's friend

appears pathetic in her petty cheating at golf. But her corruption cannot be dismissed as minor, as it suggests the contagiousness of the 1920's disease. Jordan Baker remains what she is, a product of the pervasive corruption of the period: she will cheat her way through life. Meyer Wolfsheim is the most clear-cut figure of 1920's gangsterdom. He lurks in the shadows behind Gatsby throughout, and when he emerges briefly in the restaurant scene in New York to have lunch with Gatsby and Nick, we glimpse something of his career in his short and sweet tale of the "night they shot Rosy Rosenthal".

The tragedy, however, is not his alone "but also his society's for both seemed doomed by what they lack - Gatsby by his lack any critical ability to distinguish his spiritual ideals from the material conditions in and through which he must realize them" (Gunn 233). Fitzgerald thus celebrates Gatsby's veritable religion of wonder, while at the same time exposing its pathetic vulnerability and ultimate defilement.

Gatsby, is destroyed by uncritically following his fantasies. He has dreamed of riches as a means of achieving the golden vision of love and life with his old sweetheart, Daisy. To make this dream come true, he has built a fortune on fraud and violence. He is the "perverted version of the self-made man, Horatio Alger turned bootlegger and mobster, but whose dream of success and the golden girl, Fitzgerald tries to assure us, it still unsullied. In the eyes of Carraway, Jay's "sensitivity to the promises of life", and his capacity for hope and innocent wonder make him a moral angel compared to the Buchanan's, the respectable corrupters of the American Dream".

The intensity of Gatsby's dream has, in fact, made him childishly naïve as one fails to understand exactly why Gatsby seeks to win back Daisy after she is unhappily married to Tom Buchanan. Gatsby needs to maintain his belief in his special destiny" (Curmutt 59). He is blithely confident that he can regain Daisy and their youthful ecstasy merely by displaying to her his ability for conspicuous waste. To Nick's warning that "You can't repeat the past", he answers, "why of course you can". So real has sentimental vision of Daisy become that he refuses to believe that she has ever cared for Tom, and

when in the Plaza suite Tom exposes him for what he is, Gatsby is unable to detect the revulsion on Daisy's face. The illusion persists. After the accident which kills Myrtle, he chivalrously plans to shoulder the blame for Daisy's careless driving. After taking her home, he stands outside her window deluded in the belief that she needs protection from Tom, totally unaware that she is busily planning with Tom ways and means for escaping the consequences. Gatsby, a man capable of organizing a bootlegger's ring, is here as helpless as a child. Like George Wilson who kills him, Gatsby dies ignorant of the forces that preyed upon him and of the essentially infantile quality of his dreams. His death is pathetic rather than tragic; he is victim, not a hero.

Thus, the novel ends, as it began, in pessimism, a pessimism induced by Fitzgerald's recognition of the forces that "preyed on Gatsby" and "the foul dust that floated in the wake of his betrayed dream". Nick leaves New York haunted by meaningless violence and futile lies; nothing and no one in America gives him hope.

The Great Gatsby is therefore much more than a novel about the last of the romantics and a work of permanence and greatness. It is also a novel about the betrayal and collapse of the American Dream and the concept of self, and the success story of America made possible with its unique nature to carve out a special place in world history. Nick Carraway eventually realizes that the tragic death of Gatsby is sad and unfortunate, but he further realizes that the romantic readiness and the dream for which Gatsby lived for is even sadder. In its vision of modern emptiness *The Great Gatsby* is a key social document of its time so much so that had it not been written in the twenties its associated lost generation images would actually seem totally diminished.

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