

# The Great Gatsby and the Collapse of American Dream

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**[Abstract]** Gatsby's dream is a typical American Dream. His failure signified the decay of the American post-war spirit. His death belled the alarm for the other disillusioned people from fantasy dreams and set them to reconsider the social reality. This thesis would discuss the collapse of the Gatsby's dream and that of American dream based on the book plot and the background of 1920s.

**[Key words]** Great Gatsby; American dream; Collapse

## 1 Collapse of the Dream

### 1.1 Collapse of Gatsby's Dream

Fitzgerald once expressed that tragedy came naturally together with stories in his mind. For Gatsby, Daisy was the living symbol of his dream and what he desired for. Finally, when he could get his goddess, the world based on his imagination was smashed by the goddess herself. To protect Daisy, Gatsby offered to shoulder the responsibility of an accident which was Daisy's fault in fact, and Wilson shot Gatsby to death for coincidentally the victim was his wife. However, despite what he had done to Daisy, she still did not come to Gatsby's funeral.

Gatsby was always alone and lonely in his life. He struggled all the way from Lake Superior to the Long Island Sound against the torrential current until the efforts killed him. (Lukens, 1987) Until his death, all his creation, ambition and his huge vigor were spent on the efforts to pursue the unworthy beauty which was "vast, vulgar and meretricious". These efforts were doomed to be made in vain.

### 1.2 Collapse of American Dream

The 1920s was usually referred to as the "Roaring Twenties" or "Jazz Age". And Fitzgerald took himself as the one coined the term "Jazz Age" and he created a prophet and priest of Gatsby in his novel *The Great Gatsby*. (Pearson, 1970)

At its beginning, people held beliefs that humanity and better future would eventually be realized. Now the virgin forests vanished and made way for a modern civilization, the only fitting symbol of which was the "valley of ashes", the living hell. (常耀信, 2007) The "valley of ashes" in the novel presented many times, symbolizing that modern men were living in sterility and emptiness and vanity. So in the 1920s, the values supporting this whole concept that anyone can, and should achieve material success such as family, cars or a dream house, changed, instead of dreaming of equality, freedom and unity, American dreamed of getting richer than ever before, signifying the deterioration of American dream.

## 2 Reasons for the Collapse of the Dream

### 2.1 Reasons for the Collapse of Gatsby's Dream

The root cause of Gatsby's tragedy was the fact that in his heart his pursuit for spirit was much more important than his pursuit for material. However, in the Jazz Age, the society was roaring in material and people were superficial and impetuous in spirit. Also, in a society where money took the dominating role, his dream had to be achieved in material and corrupt ways because the great exclusive rights of the upper class and their discrimination against those without strong background. Misled by the beliefs of the society at that time, he took it for granted that wealth

equaled success. Without realizing the gap between reality and dream, he gave all his energy into building a mirage and a dream world. As a result, he paid to his innocence—he died together with the American dream in the Jazz Age.

The author Fitzgerald imposed what he had experienced onto his novel. People must have heard something about the exaggerate behavior of the couple. Fitzgerald said sometime he even couldn't tell whether they were in real life or they were people in one of his books. As a well-known analyst of the upper class in the 1920s, he admired it for it was fabulous and intriguing, but he also recognized that it was a place where profligacy, wealth and power got their voice and that there was a yawning gap between the rich and poor. So he created Tom to be the spokesman of the upper society, causing the misery of Gatsby.

### 2.2 Reasons for the Collapse of American Dream

In 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment was passed. It ruled that the production, transportation or sale of liquors within, into or out of America and other areas subject to its jurisdiction were to be prohibited. But it just did the reverse, because bootlegging prospered in such a circumstance and became an important way to make money. As a result, people began to live a lavish and extravagant life style.

In the 1920s, an act prohibited mass immigration from other countries and exposed immigrant quota according to nationality—the Johnson Act of 1924. Then in the same year, another act called "Indian Citizenship Act" came out. In essence they were the same, they re-ruled the citizenship—something inherited instead of earned. Status and identity in America changed into a "family matter" (Daniel, 1996). Ultimately, all of these things—the consumerism and materialism plus the legislation from the government—set up a fence between the rich and poor and an inaccurate perception of the relationship between money and happiness. The content of the American Dream changed, and the idea that money led to happiness obviously was not the case for people such as Daisy with Gatsby and Daisy with Tom. 科

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