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March 2018

English 3 5/6

Running in the Dark

People praise F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* for its accurate depiction and critique of the 1920s. The novel takes place in two suburbs on Long Island and follows the character Jay Gatsby, a man born into a poor farming family until he runs away as a young boy and reinvents himself. He uses illegal means to become very wealthy, but this wealth is not necessarily accompanied by happiness and at the end of the book, he gets shot and is killed. The novel takes place after industrialization and WWI, both of which resulted in an economic boom and caused a paradigm shift in American culture. This economic boom caused people to begin to relax their tight grip on their conservative traditions. A main theme of the novel is the American Dream. The American Dream is if one works hard enough in America, regardless of class and social standing, they can succeed by making a better life for themselves. While one aspect of this broad idea is working hard for money or success, its definition changes in the twenties to become more corrupted because it focused solely on building wealth rather than building a happy life. While Gatsby has the motivation to accomplish his goals, the corruption of the 1920s, which ultimately destroys Gatsby, reveals Fitzgerald's critique that one’s drive for wealth should only be done with honesty.

Gatsby has the motivation to accompli

sh his goals through reinvention and self improvement. Fitzgerald describes Gatsby’s life before he reinvents himself and describes the motivations behind this action, writing that ”the truth was that Jay Gatsby..sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to his conception he was faithful to the end.” (104) Fitzgerald describes what Gatsby modeled his reinvented character after, effectively using allusion to describe this transformation. A “Platonic conception” is an idea that is free from anything else such as experiences and the material world. Gatsby’s “Platonic conception” is his new identity that he creates that ignores his upbringing and creates something pure and different, revealing an important aspect of Gatsby’s character. Gatsby has the motivation to imagine a better future for himself and the power to carry on with this dream to become successful. Gatsby is the embodiment of the American Dream because, despite his poor and unsuccessful past, he strives to create a rich and successful life for himself. Later in the book, after Gatsby dies, Fitzgerald writes about Gatsby’s father discovering Gatsby’s daily schedule and goals from when he was younger. Some of Gatsby’s goals, self titled “General Resolves” included “Read one improving book or magazine per week” and “No more smoking or chewing.” (181-82) This reveals that when Gatsby was younger, he was a motivated man on a dedicated path for self progress. Fitzgerald uses show not tell to describe Gatsby’s work ethic and motivation for self improvement, and illustrate his literal daily commitment to the bettering of his character. Because Gatsby has the motivation to turn himself into something better, he embodies the American Dream because he will improve himself until he succeeds. By effectively using show not tell, Fitzgerald is able to communicate his claim that Gatsby is a motivated man who was able to follow the American Dream.

But the attitudes of the twenties corrupts Gatsby’s way of achieving the American Dream and Gatsby uses dishonest techniques to achieve success. Fitzgerald than describes a scene where Gatsby introduces the narrator, Nick, to his mentor Meyer Wolfsheim. Gatsby explains,“‘Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he’s a gambler.’ Gatsby hesitated, then added coolly: “He’s the man who fixed the World’s Series back in 1919.’” (78) In this scene, Fitzgerald uses diction to portray the attitudes and emotions of characters. Fitzgerald describes that Gatsby “coolly” describes one of the dishonest things Wolfsheim has done. Gatsby only would say “coolly” because he believes that rigging the World Series is “cool” and because he is a close friend he is “cool.” This reveals Gatsby’s feeling of admiration of Wolfsheim. Since Wolfsheim is Gatsby’s mentor, Gatsby likely picked up many illegal schemes from Wolfsheim. Though Gatsby has the motivation and strives to do better, Wolfsheim influences Gatsby to use dishonest techniques to get rich. Gatsby’s honest strive for success is corrupted as people like Wolfsheim and the attitude around him influence him to use easier, but illegal tactics. Fitzgerald effectively portrays Gatsby’s corruption by using diction to portray subtle emotions and feelings in his characters. Towards the end of the book, Tom, the main antagonist accuses Gatsby of bootlegging. Tom says that “‘I found out what your ‘drug stores’ were. “ He turned to us and spoke rapidly. ‘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.’” (141) The historical context for this is the Prohibition in the United States. Prohibition was the ban of the production and sale of alcoholic beverages from 1920 to 1933 to try to cure some problems in society caused by alcohol. Instead of solving problems, Prohibition caused more because organized criminal gangs sold alcohol and were able to get stronger because the demand for alcohol was so strong. Gatsby has involvement in the system of selling alcohol during the prohibition and illegally sold alcohol. Instead of honestly working, Gatsby is steered by people like Wolfsheim and end up contributing to the problem of crime. Gatsby would have gotten rich honestly because he has the work ethic, but Fitzgerald uses him as an example of the corruption of the American Dream.

With Gatsby’s failure to achieve success, such as not having good relationships with other people, Fitzgerald expresses his critique of the American dream. After Gatsby dies, one person other than Gatsby’s dad and Nick show up to the funeral, a man named Owl Eyes. Owl Eyes exclaims“‘Go on!’ He started. ‘Why, my God! They used to go there by the hundreds.’ He took off his glasses and wiped them again outside and in. ‘The poor son-of-a-bitch,’ he said.” (183) When he was rich, Gatsby throws many parties with hundreds of people. Now at his funeral, no one from his parties shows up. Fitzgerald uses tone to best reveal his intent. Owl Eyes starts with amazement that so many people went to Gatsby’s parties, but turns to pity because no one from those parties showed up to Gatsby’s funeral. Fitzgerald speaks through his character Owl Eyes and feels pity for Gatsby. Gatsby succeeded in terms of the 1920s definition of the American Dream because he built all this wealth, but still failed because no one cared enough to his funeral. By including this scene, Fitzgerald voices his opinion that the attitude of the 1920s prevented Gatsby from truly achieving an important part of the American Dream. The American Dream is building a better life and part of it includes building good relationships with one’s peers. If Gatsby had focused more on building good relationships, more people would have showed up to the funeral because they cared. Because the idea of the American Dream changed in the 1920s, Gatsby did not look to achieve it, proving Fitzgerald’s critique on the American Dream. At the end of the book, the Nick describes Gatsby’s life. He describes that Gatsby “had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him.” (189) In this scene, Nick describes Gatsby’s life. Fitzgerald writes that “he could hardly fail to grasp it.” Fitzgerald uses symbolism to write this because he describes Gatsby’s goal as a physical object that one could reach out and grab. Since his goal is tangible and real, Gatsby only focuses on that goal. Gatsby starts his journey with hope and strives for this goal. But he gets sidetracked by the allure of using illegal means to achieve his goal quicker. Gatsby is so focused on achieving his goal of gaining wealth that he forgets what the true meaning of the American Dream is: to improve one’s life. Gatsby forgets to do things such as building good relationships because he is so focused on wealth. But his goal ends up behind them and he realizes that he has not achieved it, but only achieved what the attitudes of the 1920s told him to achieve, getting rich. Because Gatsby’s drive for success is corrupted by the attitudes and morals of the 1920s, Fitzgerald critiques those attitudes saying that those attitudes do not make happy people and because of that, Fitzgerald had Gatsby pay those consequences.

Fitzgerald successfully critiques the corruption of the corruption of the American Dream in the 1920s. In the start, Gatsby has drive and a strong will to improve and change himself until he can get success. On his way to achieving success, he is steered away from honesty by people like Wolfsheim and the general attitude of the 1920s because it would help him achieve his goal quicker. These have consequences and are revealed once Gatsby gets to the 1920s version of success and did not actually build anything meaningful. To truly find success and happiness in one’s life, one must not cheat and build good relationships everywhere one goes instead of just solely focusing on wealth and ignoring everything else.

Works Cited:

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. The Great Gatsby. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. Print