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The Withering of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*

For most Americans, in the past and present, the American Dream is something that is more than likely unattainable. Jay Gatsby is a man that represents the majority of Americans where their American Dream and the entirety of their hopes gradually withers away over time. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Nick, a recent Yale graduate, moves in next door to a rather gaudy and extravagant man named Jay Gatsby. Gatsby later invites Nick to one of his many fantastic parties, then later proceeds to inquire about Nick's cousin, Daisy, who is a former lover of his. Though Daisy is already married to Tom Buchanan, he is not faithful to her and has a lower class mistress named Myrtle. Myrtle is married to a lower class man named George Wilson. Though Gatsby and Daisy are technically from two different classes, they decide to have an affair. Gatsby wants Daisy to leave Tom for himself in order to fulfill his American Dream, but it all changes when Gatsby's car hits Myrtle outside Wilson's garage. Since Gatsby is willing to put anything on the line for love, he takes the blame for Daisy, who is the actual driver of the car. After the accident, Daisy goes back to Tom and cuts all ties with Gatsby. He still holds out hope for Daisy, but when George Wilson hears that Gatsby supposedly killed Myrtle he shoots him and kills him instantly, causing all hope for his American Dream to wither away. Fitzgerald uses effective symbolism and characterization in *The Great Gatsby* to show the unwavering yearn for the American Dream, the willingness to lose all morals and one's true self in order to

achieve the American Dream, and the bleak result after the gradual withering of the American Dream.

*The Great Gatsby* portrays the characters within the novel as unsatisfied, money-motivated people who are always craving more than what they already possess. One symbol that illustrates how a single character shows the desire for a dream is the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. Gatsby's dream becomes evident when "-he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward- and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might be at the end of a dock" (Fitzgerald 21). This quote shows how Gatsby is literally reaching out for a light in the distance, but can't reach it due to the water separating them. It also symbolically represents the distance between Gatsby's idea of the American Dream, which is to be with Daisy, and the forces holding them apart, such as social class and marital status. Nick later goes on to say, "'I wouldn't ask too much of her,' 'You can't repeat the past.'" and Gatsby replies, "'Can't repeat the past?' 'Why of course you can!'" (110). These quotes reveal Gatsby's hopes of getting Daisy back into his life like she was before he left for the war five years earlier. The reason that he is still chasing his dream is because he doesn't realize that some dreams are too far fetched for anyone, even for wealthy and powerful individuals, to achieve.

The American Dream is an idea that is perceived to be the perfect 'white picket fence' way of life. That is one reason many people will risk everything, including their inner self, to get what they are aiming for in their lives. In the novel, Fitzgerald writes, "The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, 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 this conception he was faithful to the end” (98). This shows how devoted Jay is to following his idea of the American Dream. He is willing to change his way of life and his entire identity in order to get what he is longing for. Gatsby’s most substantial risk for his dream is conveyed through his actions shown in this quote: ““I found out what your ‘drug stores’ were.’ ‘He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and 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”” (133). This scene of the novel discloses the means by which Jay Gatsby makes his money in the pursuance of his dream. Since Gatsby risks his past life to grasp his hope of a better one, it shows his willingness to lose his morals and everything he has previously known to achieve his dream of a perfect life.

Gatsby shows throughout the novel the dream for a quintessential existence that is unlike his own. He is striving toward this goal heedless of what the result could truly lead to. Fitzgerald explains the downfall of Gatsby’s American Dream when Nick realizes, “There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams-not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart” (95-96). In this quote, Fitzgerald shows how extravagant Gatsby’s idea of being with Daisy is, but the reality of being with her does not turn out the way he hopes. She does not bring him the pleasure that she is believed to bring to his life. This links back to the American Dream, because it shows how nothing is ever as good as it seems,

especially after the building of expectations over time. The higher the expectations are, it will cause a larger fall when disappointment strikes. In the very last sentence of the novel Fitzgerald writes, ““So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past”” (180). After Gatsby’s death at the end of chapter eight, his American Dream never sees past his grave. His dream turns out to be nothing like he expects it to be, but he never gives up hope until the moment when George Wilson ends it. This quote communicates how Gatsby’s spirit and Nick will have to come to accept their present lives while everything is pushing against them. Gatsby’s spirit will never get to have that imaginable, perfect reality that he dreams so hard for.

F. Scott Fitzgerald shows throughout *The Great Gatsby*, the process in which the American Dream eventually withers away due to high expectations and the harsh reality of life. His message is brought to life by Jay Gatsby, who gives up his former identity and all his remaining morals to reach the only thing hindering him from completing his American Dream: is the affection of Daisy. Once he comes close to grasping his dream, he realizes it is not as wonderful as previously believed. He has built up a fantastic dream of what she is like, and it is similar to how humans build up expectations of dreams and are continually let down due to the heightened unrealistic dreams brought unto them. Gatsby’s dreams are completely shattered by the death that is brought upon him by George Wilson, symbolizing moral corruption. All that is left of his American Dream is the past and there will no longer be any hope for the future of his dream. This novel ends with the impression that the American Dream is exactly what it says it is: a dream. Fitzgerald’s message shows how in life the American Dream is no more real than a dream that is trapped in one’s head in the midst of a sleepless night and is only a haunting image of a false aspiration that was never meant to be.

Works Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. 1st ed. New York: Scribner, 2004. Print.