**Disillusionment with the American dream in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s**

***‘The Great Gatsby’***

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**Introduction**

F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel The Great Gatsby is a tragic love story, a mystery, and a social commentary on American life. Although it was not a commercial success for Fitzgerald during his lifetime, this lyrical novel has become an acclaimed masterpiece read and taught throughout the world. The story follows a cast of characters living in the fictional town of West Egg on prosperous [Long Island](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Long_Island) in the summer of 1922. The Great Gatsby concerns the wasteful lives of four wealthy characters as observed by their acquaintance, narrator Nick Carraway. Like Fitzgerald himself, Nick is from Minnesota, attended an Ivy League university, served in the U.S. Army during World War I, moved to New York after the war, and questions—even while participating in—high society.

**About the Author**

**Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald** (September 24, 1896 – December 21, 1940), known professionally as **F. Scott Fitzgerald**, was an American [novelist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Novelist) and [short story writer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_story_writer), whose works are the paradigmatic writings of the [Jazz Age](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jazz_Age). He is widely regarded as one of the greatest [American writers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_literature) of the 20th century. Fitzgerald is considered a member of the "[Lost Generation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lost_Generation)" of the 1920s. He finished four novels: [*This Side of Paradise*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/This_Side_of_Paradise), [*The Beautiful and Damned*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Beautiful_and_Damned), [*The Great Gatsby*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Gatsby), and [*Tender Is the Night*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tender_Is_the_Night). *The Great Gatsby* is widely considered to be his magnum opus.

**Major Characters In the novel**

* [**Nick Carraway**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nick_Carraway) – a [Yale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yale_University) graduate originating from the Midwest, a World War I veteran, and, at the start of the plot, a newly arrived resident of West Egg, who is aged 29 (later 30). He also serves as the [first-person narrator](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First-person_narrator) of the novel. He is Gatsby's next-door neighbor and a bond salesman. He is easy-going, occasionally sarcastic, and somewhat optimistic, although this latter quality fades as the novel progresses.
* [**Jay Gatsby**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jay_Gatsby)  – a young, mysterious millionaire with shady business connections (later revealed to be a [bootlegger](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rum-running)), originally from [North Dakota](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Dakota). He is obsessed with Daisy Buchanan, a beautiful [debutante](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debutante), from Louisville, Kentucky whom he had met when he was a young [military officer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_officer) stationed at the Army's Camp Taylor in Louisville during World War I.
* [**Daisy Fay Buchanan**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daisy_Buchanan) – an attractive and effervescent, if shallow and self-absorbed, young Louisville, Kentucky [debutante](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debutante) and [socialite](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socialite). She is Nick's second [cousin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cousin), once removed, and the wife of Tom Buchanan. Daisy once had a romantic relationship with Gatsby, before she married Tom. Her choice between Gatsby and Tom is one of the central conflicts in the novel.
* **Thomas "Tom" Buchanan** – a millionaire who lives on East Egg, and Daisy's husband. Tom is an imposing man of muscular build with a "husky tenor" voice and arrogant demeanor. He is a former football star at [Yale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yale_University). Buchanan attended [Yale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yale_University) and is a [white supremacist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_supremacy).
* **Jordan Baker** – Daisy Buchanan's long-time friend with "autumn-leaf yellow" hair, a firm athletic body, and an aloof attitude. She is Nick Carraway's girlfriend for most of the novel and an amateur golfer with a slightly shady reputation and a penchant for untruthfulness.
* **George B. Wilson** – a mechanic and owner of a garage. He is disliked by both his wife, Myrtle Wilson, and Tom Buchanan, who describes him as "so dumb he doesn't know he's alive".
* **Myrtle Wilson** – George's wife, and Tom Buchanan's mistress.
* **Meyer Wolfshiem** – a [Jewish](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish) friend and mentor of Gatsby's, described as a gambler who fixed the [World Series](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Series). He is a clear [allusion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allusion) to [Arnold Rothstein](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Rothstein), a New York crime kingpin who was notoriously blamed for the [Black Sox Scandal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Sox_Scandal) which tainted the [1919 World Series](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1919_World_Series).

**Plot Summary**

The narrator, Nick Carraway, moves to the East Coast to work as a bond trader in Manhattan. He rents a small house in West Egg, a nouveau riche town in Long Island. In East Egg, the next town over, where old money people live, Nick reconnects with his cousin Daisy Buchanan, her husband Tom, and meets their friend Jordan Baker.  
Tom takes Nick to meet his mistress, Myrtle Wilson. Myrtle is married to George Wilson, who runs a gas station in a gross and dirty neighborhood in Queens. Tom, Nick, and Myrtle go to Manhattan, where she hosts a small party that ends with Tom punching her in the face.

Nick meets his next-door neighbor, Jay Gatsby, a very rich man who lives in a giant mansion and throws wildly extravagant parties every weekend, and who is a mysterious person no one knows much about.  
Gatsby takes Nick to lunch and introduces him to his business partner - a gangster named Meyer Wolfshiem.  
Nick starts a relationship with Jordan. Through her, Nick finds out that Gatsby and Daisy were in love five years ago, and that Gatsby would like to see her again.

Nick arranges for Daisy to come over to his house so that Gatsby can “accidentally” drop by. Daisy and Gatsby start having an affair.  
Tom and Daisy come to one of Gatsby’s parties. Daisy is disgusted by the ostentatiously vulgar display of wealth, and Tom immediately sees that Gatsby’s money most likely comes from crime.  
We learn that Gatsby was born into a poor farming family as James Gatz. He has always been extremely ambitious, creating the Jay Gatsby persona as a way of transforming himself into a successful self-made man - the ideal of the American Dream.  
Nick, Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan get together for lunch. At this lunch, Daisy and Gatsby are planning to tell Tom that she is leaving him. Gatsby suddenly feels uncomfortable doing this in Tom’s house, and Daisy suggests going to Manhattan instead.

In Manhattan, the five of them get a suite at the Plaza Hotel where many secrets come out. Gatsby reveals that Daisy is in love with him. Tom in turn reveals that Gatsby is a bootlegger, and is probably engaged in other criminal activities as well. Gatsby demands that Daisy renounce Tom entirely, and say that she has never loved him. Daisy can’t bring herself to say this because it isn’t true, crushing Gatsby’s dream and obsession. It’s clear that their relationship is over and that Daisy has chosen to stay with Tom.

That evening, Daisy and Gatsby drive home in his car, with Daisy behind the wheel. When they drive by the Wilson gas station, Myrtle runs out to the car because she thinks its Tom driving by. Daisy hits and kills her, driving off without stopping.  
Nick, Jordan, and Tom investigate the accident. Tom tells George Wilson that the car that struck Myrtle belongs to Gatsby, and George decides that Gatsby must also be Myrtle’s lover.  
That night, Gatsby decides to take the blame for the accident. He is still waiting for Daisy to change her mind and come back to him, but she and Tom skip town the next day. Nick breaks up with Jordan because she is completely unconcerned about Myrtle’s death.

Gatsby tells Nick some more of his story. As an officer in the army, he met and fell in love with Daisy, but after a month had to ship out to fight in WWI. Two years later, before he could get home, she married Tom. Gatsby has been obsessed with getting Daisy back since he shipped out to fight five years earlier.  
The next day, George Wilson shoots and kills Gatsby, and then himself.  
The police leave the Buchanan’s and Myrtle’s affair out of the report on the murder-suicide.  
Nick tries to find people to come to Gatsby’s funeral, but everyone who pretended to be Gatsby’s friend and came to his parties now refuses to come. Even Gatsby’s partner Wolfshiem doesn’t want to go to the funeral. Wolfshiem explains that he first gave Gatsby a job after WWI and that they have been partners in many illegal activities together.

Gatsby’s father comes to the funeral from Minnesota. He shows Nick a self-improvement plan that Gatsby had written for himself as a boy. Disillusioned with his time on the East coast, Nick decides to return to his home in the Midwest.

**What is ‘the American Dream’?**

The American Dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of race, class, gender or nationality, can be successful in America by virtue of hard work. It is rooted in the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that “all men are created equal” with the right to “Life, Liberty and pursuit of Happiness.” It stands as a symbol of hope for anyone who lands on the American shores trying to make it in this world. The American Dream thus presents a pretty optimistic view of American society that ignores problems like systemic racism and misogyny, xenophobia, and income inequality. It also presumes a myth of class equality, when the reality is America has a pretty well-developed class hierarchy.

**The American dream during the 1920s**

The American Dream during the 1920's transitioned from being all about hope to being all about money. After the end of the First World War, the generation of young Americans who had fought the war became intensely disillusioned, as the brutal carnage that they had just faced made the social morality of early-twentieth-century America seem like empty hypocrisy. America was witnessing an economic boom which led people to believe that they too could “cash in” at this opportunistic period. Many people started to focus more on materialistic goals such as who could have the biggest party, who could own the best car, and who could get the most women/men rather than moral values such as hope, peace, the pursuit of happiness, etc. In the book titled “Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity”, the author Roland Marchand describes a figure that he feels represents the quintessential 1920s man who is living the American Dream. He writes, “Not only did he flourish in the fast-paced, modern urban milieu of skyscrapers, taxicabs, and pleasure-seeking crowds, but he proclaimed himself an expert on the latest crazes in fashion, contemporary lingo, and popular pastimes.” During this time, people started to want to break out of the norm. They wanted to live life, tempt the laws, and be free. Leisure activities, such as dances, sports, and movies rose by about 300%. Gambling became very popular, and many people invested extra cash into the stock market.

**Disillusionment with the American Dream as shown in *The Great Gatsby***

The American dream was originally about discovery, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness. In the 1920s depicted in the novel, however, easy money and relaxed social values have corrupted this dream, especially on the East Coast. The main plotline of the novel reflects this assessment, as Gatsby’s dream of loving Daisy is ruined by the difference in their respective social statuses, his resorting to crime to make enough money to impress her, and the rampant materialism that characterizes her lifestyle. Gatsby epitomizes the idea of self-made success; he is successful financially and socially and he essentially created an entirely new persona for himself from his underprivileged past. All of the wealth and status which Gatsby acquired, that while on the surface made his life appear to be the precise definition of the American Dream were actually elements which led to its demise.In Nick’s mind, the ability to create meaningful symbols constitutes a central component of the American dream, as early Americans invested their new nation with their own ideals and values. Just as Americans have given America meaning through their dreams for their own lives, Gatsby instills Daisy with a kind of idealized perfection that she does not really possess. Gatsby’s dream is ruined by the unworthiness of its object, just as the American dream in the 1920s is ruined by the unworthiness of its object—money and pleasure. Like 1920s Americans in general, fruitlessly seeking a bygone era in which their dreams had value, Gatsby longs to re-create a vanished past—his time in Louisville with Daisy—but is incapable of doing so.

The culture of the wealthy Americans represented in Gatsby was defined mainly by consumerism and excessive material wealth. Wherever given the opportunity, Jay Gatsby is inclined to ostentation as shown in his flamboyant style of dress, and his huge mansion where he throws lavish, drunken parties. In Thorstein Veblen’s “The Theory of the Leisure Class” he writes, “…to gain and hold the esteem of men is not sufficient merely to hold wealth and power. The wealth and power must be put into evidence.” Thorstein Veblen, who popularized the term “conspicuous consumption” which so accurately describes much of what was occurring in The Great Gatsbywas trying to convey that the people who had not been raised with money and came into riches and wealth on their own attempted to demand respect and esteem by showing it off through purchases. The houses depicted in The Great Gatsby are perhaps the most obvious indicator of the relentless competition to declare one’s status, as all of the new rich attempted to outdo one another when it came to the size and amenities of their homes. Gatsby has achieved from the outside what looked like the American Dream, however although he had obtained the material status necessary to give that impression, it still wasn’t enough for him and had to seek reassurance that he in fact was impressive. For example, in Chapter Five, Gatsby says to Nick, “My house looks well doesn’t it? See how the whole front of it catches the light.”  None of the characters in The Great Gatsbyseemed to care much about hard work once they had achieved their material goals.   
  
Even the love Gatsby had for Daisy was polluted with the tainted image of the American Dream. The grand and lavish parties that he threw were merely naïve attempts to capture Daisy’s attention. Although he loves her, he undeniably also sees her as a prize to be won which symbolizes the materialistic ideology that was pervasive throughout the 1920s and depicted in the novel. Gatsby lacks the maturity to realize that Daisy cannot be obtained by money alone.

**Analysis of characters through the American Dream**

1. **Gatsby**

Gatsby himself is obviously the prime candidate for writing about the American Dream – he comes from humble roots (he’s the son of poor farmers from North Dakota) and rises to be extremely wealthy, only for everything to slip away from him in the end. In the traditional interpretation of the American Dream, people achieve their goals through honest and hard work. However, in the case of Gatsby, he acquires most of his money through crime. The irony to the American dream here is that initially Gatsby did try to earn success the traditional way by his years of service to Dan Cody but could not succeed because Cody’s ex-wife gets the entire inheritance. So, it was only after Gatsby turned to dishonest work that he could accumulate wealth. In fact, even though he did become wealthy, he still pines for Daisy’s love and loses everything in the process of trying to ‘win’ her. This shows the fragile and temporary nature of the ideals and goals of the American Dream.

1. **Daisy**

Much more than Gatsby, who is ultimately recognized as a good person by Nick, the baseness of the American Dream in the novel is represented by Daisy Buchanan and her husband Tom. Even as a young girl, Daisy was heavily influenced by false splendor of a life in rich society. “For Daisy was young and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes“. It is these words that describe Daisy Buchanan when she was young, and throughout the novel she doesn’t seem to change much. The only thing that is different about her is that she has become even more absorbed in her own world filled with money, parties, fast cars and new dresses. She has become completely insensible to other people’s emotions, which is evident in the manner in which she plays with Gatsby’s and her husband’s feelings.

### **George and Myrtle Wilson**

The couple represents people who are constantly in the pursuit of the dream – [George](http://blog.prepscholar.com/george-wilson-great-gatsby-character-analysis-quotes) owns his own shop and is doing his best to get business, though is increasingly worn down by the harsh demands of his life, while [Myrtle](http://blog.prepscholar.com/myrtle-wilson-great-gatsby-character-analysis-quotes) chases after wealth and status through an affair with Tom.

**Both are disempowered due to the lack of money at their own disposal** – Myrtle certainly has glimpses of the success that lies at the other end of the dream through Tom but has to deal with his abuse, while George is unable to improve his current life and move West since he doesn’t have the money available to him. He even has to make himself servile to Tom in an attempt to get Tom to sell his car, a fact that could even cause him to overlook the evidence of his wife’s affair. So neither character is on the upward trajectory that the American Dream promises, at least during the novel.

In the end, both of them meet terrible consequences which acts as a warning to the notion of trying to achieve more at every point in our lives. George and Myrtle’s deadly fates, along with Gatsby, help illustrate the novel’s pessimistic attitude toward the American Dream. It is clearly visible in the fact that although hard workers like George and Myrtle end up facing such severe consequences despite their efforts, the real culprits such as Tom who led Myrtle into a desperate and dangerous situation and Daisy who actually committed the crime of killing her not only end up without punishment but also continue to enjoy their life of wealth and pleasure. This is a very big counter example to the believers of The American Dream.

**Daisy as Personification of the American Dream**

*“…."Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly.*

*That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money--that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. . . . High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl. . . .”*

These were the words used by Gatsby to describe Daisy. Tying her voice with money is the way in which Fitzgerald tries to play with the concept that at the end of the day, American Dream is all about wealth.

In daisy, we see an embodiment of all that Gatsby considers perfect. He could see no fault in her much in the same way that the American Dream tries to project that there is no flaw in the American way of life and anyone can find a perfect life there.

But Daisy, of course, is only human – flawed and ultimately unable to embody the huge fantasy Gatsby projects onto her. So this, in turn, means that the American Dream itself is just a fantasy, a concept too flimsy to actually hold weight, especially in the fast-paced, dog-eat-dog world of 1920s America.

**Symbolism in *The Great Gatsby***

1. **The Green light**

The green light at the end of Daisy’s dock is a significant symbol within the book. To Gatsby, the green light represents his dream, which is Daisy. To attain her would be completing Gatsby’s American Dream. The first time the green light is seen in the novel is also the first time Nick sees Gatsby. Fitzgerald writes, “…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…” The green light is described as ‘minute and far away’ which makes it appear impossible to reach. This will prove to be true for Gatsby. The green light also represents society’s desire and the seeming impossibility of achieving the materialistic American Dream.

At the end of the novel Nick concludes the book with these words, “Gatsby believed in the green light, the elusive future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. And then one fine morning— so we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” This describes Gatsby’s inability to move on from the past. Everything he does in the novel is to try and recreate the past.

### **Eyes of T.J. Eckleburg**

Another dominant symbol within this novel is the billboard eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg. The eyes symbolize the loss of spiritual values in America. The billboard was erected to promote the business of an optometrist in Queensborough – the eyes symbolize the growing commercialism of America – a man’s success is measured in terms of how much money he is worth, not on what kind of person he may be morally. The billboard, like the spiritual values of America, is neglected – “But his eyes, dimmed a little by many paint less days, under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground.” The old-fashioned values of America, which Nick Carraway returns to reconnect with in the mid-West are completely absent from the East. God seems to have abandoned America, leaving only Dr. T.J. Eckleburg behind to stare down with his empty eyes on people who have abandoned their spiritual values in the quest to achieve material wealth.

**The parties as Motif in *The American Dream***

Gatsby throws excessively extravagant parties as evidenced by the number of guests, the lights, the food and the entertainment. For example, the juice from two hundred oranges is extracted every week for his parties. The reason Gatsby throws these huge, flashy parties is all part of his attempt to catch Daisy’s attention, either hoping that she would catch a glimpse of the bright lights across the bay or through word of mouth. However even with the grand scale of his parties, none of his guests seem to know who Gatsby is. Some even come up with ludicrous stories to explain his mystery. Most of these guests are simply there to enjoy the glamour which they believe to be the American Dream. Though when examined closely, corruption is easy to spot. During Nick’s first attendance at Gatsby’s party, he makes this observation. “I looked around. Most of the remaining women were now having fights with men said to be their husbands. … One of the men was talking with curious intensity to a young actress, and his wife, after attempting to laugh at the situation in a dignified and indifferent way, broke down entirely and resorted to flank attacks – at intervals she appeared suddenly at his side like and angry diamond, and hissed: ‘You promised!’ into his ear.”  The husbands are bored and unsatisfied with their marriages while the wives are upset at their husbands’ disregard for them. Furthermore, the guests at his parties only show up as a way to prove their social status and to enjoy what they perceive as the American Dream. No one at the party shows more than a superficial curiosity for Gatsby’s character. This is shown at the end of the novel when no more than a handful of people show up at his funeral where there could have easily been hundreds of people at his parties. This emphasizes the hollowness of the American Dream.

**Contrast between Richard Bach’s *Illusions* and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby***

Richard Bach’s *Illusions* and *The Great Gatsby* appear to be on two opposite poles of the spectrum of life’s Illusions. While the narrator in *Illusions,* with the help of Donald Shimoda,gradually keeps on discovering the various illusions of life and therefore tries to avoid them and realize their true nature, the people in *The Great Gatsby* seem to have tied their lives to the false grandeur and the uninspiring illusions that life has to offer. Richard Bach, at each step, tries to make us think about the reality behind the illusions by showing us that it is possible to do so, whereas Fitzgerald tries to make us think about it by showing us what happens if we let illusions take over.

**Conclusion**

In this document, I have put forward ideas and examples with the purpose of trying to highlight the disillusionment of the American Dream in 1920s America as displayed by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his novel, *The Great Gatsby*. In the process I have tried to paint a picture of the other major themes that gripped the American nation at the time and therefore had an effect on the consequences of the American Dream. I believe the lesson to take away from the novel is to take it as a cautionary tale of the consequences of wildly running after materialistic goals and possessions without a thought for the morality and justifications of our goals and actions. The novel, in its own pessimistic way tries to inculcate optimism in our minds about the possibility of a society that has deep routed meanings which does shake at the calling of the winds of materialism.

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In the hectic academic life at IIT Kanpur, one rarely gets the chance to go through an entire novel with thorough introspection of its various facets. This project allowed me to get back to my habit of reading literature under close scrutiny. It allowed me to rediscover new and hidden gems in the novel which I had never noticed before and for that I am grateful to Professor T. Ravichandran for the opportunity. I also thank him for the continuous support and mentorship he provided in the form of enlightening discussions on the various classic literature texts we encountered during the course. On the same note, I would also like to thank my fellow classmates who also participated in the above mentioned enlightening discussions and have made a lasting impression on my mind.

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