

ENGLISH

**The American Dream as a Means of Social Criticism
in *The Great Gatsby***

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Title: *The American Dream as a Means of Social Criticism in The Great Gatsby.*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to show how Fitzgerald uses the American Dream as a means of social criticism of the moral implications that accompany great wealth and material excess. This is portrayed in the characters of *The Great Gatsby*. A close reading of the novel and an examination of the characters was carried out, and critical sources were used to balance the discussion and provide a valid analytical perspective. This essay illustrates how four characters act as either representative or opposite of the American Dream, and, in light of this, how their relation to the American Dream criticises the state of American society. Tom and Daisy, representative of old-fashioned aspects of the American society, highlight certain aspects of the American Dream. Gatsby and Myrtle, in pursuit of the American Dream, are a critique of the consumer society and its notion that money equals happiness is questioned. Thus, the characters of *The Great Gatsby* and their relation to the American Dream were found to illustrate a critique of American society.

Keywords: American Dream, social criticism, *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald, wealth, happiness, pursuit, corruption, consumerism.

Table of Contents

Front Page

Abstract

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Old Money: Fitzgerald's Portrayal of Tom and Daisy Buchanan	7
2.1 Tom's Inherited Wealth	8
2.2 Daisy's Money and Happiness.....	10
3. Pursuing the Dream - Gatsby and Myrtle Struggling to Fulfil Their Dream	12
3.1 Gatsby's Corrupted Pursuit of the American Dream	13
3.2 Myrtle and the Consumer Society	15
4. Conclusion	17
Works Cited	19

1. Introduction

I look out at it - and I think it is the most beautiful history in the world.
... It is the history of all aspiration - not just the American Dream
but the human dream and if I came at the end of it that too is a place
in the line of pioneers.
- F. Scott Fitzgerald (Batchelor 129)

Few writers are as closely associated with the roaring twenties as F. Scott Fitzgerald. The modern American writer coined the term 'Jazz Age' and immortalised the glamorous atmosphere and wild parties of the upper social classes, his writing essentially serving as historical documentation of the era, while retaining a sense of timelessness in themes and topics. While his writing can be described as almost poetic, his texts often contain underlying social criticism embedded in vivid imagery. Booth, in his review of *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and his Work* by Alfred Kazin, argues that "his work engaged the attention of the best critical minds of our day" (509). The many layers in Fitzgerald's work allow for analysis on several levels and from differing perspectives, functioning as a mirror through which to view society, and creating a space for discussion on the current values and ideals. This holds true in the case of his most famous novel *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925. Despite the anticipation from Fitzgerald himself, who had aspired to write "something new—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned" ("Something Extraordinary," line 14), and the hopes of his editor Maxwell Perkins, the novel did not become an immediate success in terms of sales. The reception of *Gatsby* at the time provided some lukewarm reviews calling it "a glorified anecdote" (Prigozy 74) while others admired his writing and claimed that Fitzgerald had managed to leave "even farther behind all the men of his own generations and most of his elders" (Prigozy 74). The novel is to some extent autobiographical, his own insights into the world of fame and lavish lifestyle inspiring his writing. Kern contends that Fitzgerald "revealed the latent pessimism of [his] time" (86) and illustrated the decay and eventual death of the American Dream in his writing, perhaps especially so in *The Great Gatsby*. Dealing with timeless themes such as the meaning of existence, social stratification and the pursuit of happiness, the novel is set in New York during the 1920s. One of the more interesting themes of *The Great Gatsby* is the underlying commentary regarding the American Dream. Fitzgerald

uses this national ethos as a means of social criticism of the moral implications that accompany great wealth and material excess, something which is portrayed in the characters of the novel. This essay will focus on the American Dream as a critique of the state of American society during the nineteen-twenties in America.

Most of us have an understanding of what the American Dream entails: a good life, in short. However, the concept is more complex than it may appear. The noted historian James Truslow Adams first popularised the term in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931. Adams defines the American Dream as the

dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman can be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognised by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (cited in Samuels 13)

This is one of the most referenced definitions of the American Dream, as Adams was first in bringing the idea of the Dream into the light of the public. The book was published during the Great Depression, and this fact in itself is a testimony to the spirit of the American Dream. The sense of hope characteristically associated with the American Dream is highlighted by the fact that the book was published in one of the most difficult economic crises of the nation's history. Samuel concludes: "the depression and war years would prove a fruitful period for the American Dream as the country struggled to retain a sense of identity amid economic, social and political turmoil" (13). This shows the importance of the American Dream as a mass symbol unifying a nation in crisis. In agreement with this, Adams stated that the American Dream was in fact a unique product of America and as such should be celebrated. He claimed that it was America's "only unique contribution to the civilisation of the world" (cited in Samuel 14) and thus set Americans apart from other countries, strengthening the sense of national identity. Although Adams' Dream was perhaps never pure to begin with, as seen by the precautionary formulations in his definition — he states not only what the Dream might entail but also what it is not. The fact that "many of us ourselves have grown weary and distrustful of it" shows a certain unstableness in the American Dream. This might in fact be one of the major functions of the Dream - it seems to carry all the more meaning during hard times. However, over the years Adam's original definition of the Dream has been altered almost to its

inverse - to include success in material accumulation and wealth, while inadvertently excluding many of the initial core values. Arguably, the corruption of the Dream might have an even stronger rhetorical meaning than the American Dream itself. It commonly refers to the degrading of family values and individual integrity in favour for the “economical tyranny” that the nation faced, according to Znanieci (cited in Samuel 16). The meaning of the Dream will never reach a stable definition, as the very notion of a dream of a nation is a “dimly perceived vision of a possible future” (cited in Samuel 17) as suggested by Anthony Brandt in a comment on Adams’ definition of the American Dream. Thus, the material manifestation of what the Dream entails changes over time as society evolves and values change; however, the common denominator throughout the years remains the hope for a better future. Looking at America as a nation built on a population of immigrants from all over the globe, common reference points are rare, making this national ethos an important unifying agent. The American Dream as a mass symbol and subsequently a means of connecting people can create a sense of belonging in a large impersonal society. The common ideal to strive towards that it provides may to some degree explain its seemingly infinite popularity.

Being a contender for the part of the Great American Novel, *The Great Gatsby* has as such frequently been the subject of research. The novel is a striking product of its time, and numerous researchers have looked at the novel with the theme of decadence and excess of the Jazz Age as focal point. Rupali Mirza’s study of the novel in “F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Jazz Age and *The Great Gatsby*” puts the novel in a historical and cultural perspective, examining the trends of the Jazz Age and the myth of the American Dream. Another commonly studied feature of the novel is the narration; a notoriously irregular and ambiguous issue which contributes to the air of mystery and fairytale. Cartwright and Boyle both argue the unreliability of Nick Carraway and his narration. Lisca’s “Imagery of Disorder” discusses the imagery and its function in the novel. A major part of research has been dedicated to Fitzgerald’s authorship; for instance MJ Brucoli’s *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1981) and Andrew Turnbull’s *Scott Fitzgerald, A Biography* (1962). Brucoli and Turnbull are leading in the research on Fitzgerald’s work, as well as the more recent Ruth Prigozy. In regards to previous findings, this essay aims to shed some light on the way Fitzgerald uses the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*, as portrayed in his characters, in order to criticise the state of American society. This is an interesting perspective as Fitzgerald’s writing is steeped in satirical remarks and commentary on the way of living at the time, which becomes particu-

larly palpable in the personification of these traits in his characters. While this may reveal stereotypical behaviour of the nineteen-twenties, the mentality of the American Dream is still relevant in today's society.

This paper aims to show that the American Dream is used by Fitzgerald as a means of social criticism, which is portrayed in the characters. In order to provide an interesting discussion of the novel and its critique of societal values at the time, the concept of the American Dream and its corruption will be historicised and reviewed in relation to the characters. The manner in which Fitzgerald characterises Tom, Daisy, Gatsby and Myrtle is important in terms of understanding the commentary of American society at the time, especially when put in relation to the American Dream. That is to say, how does Fitzgerald use the characters and their relation to the American Dream in the novel to criticise the state of American society? In order to accomplish this a close reading of the novel and an examination of the characters will be carried out, and I will discuss how the chosen characters relate to the American Dream and, in that sense, highlight different aspects of it. I will use a historicist approach in order to contextualise issues brought up in the novel. The first chapter of this essay will deal with Tom and Daisy, characters who represent old values and conservatism, thus providing a contrast to the American Dream. The second chapter will deal with the complicated relationship to the American Dream shared by Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson, who are both in pursuit of it. *The Great Gatsby* viewed as a novel of ideas rather than a novel of action makes an investigation of its characters interesting as they are representative of something bigger than themselves.

The primary literary focus of this essay will be *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. In order to define the concept of the American Dream and its importance in the novel, *A Cultural History of the American Dream* by Lawrence R. Samuel will be used to define and discuss the American Dream, and will form a platform from which the investigation of *The Great Gatsby* will be launched. In addition, Bob Batchelor's *Gatsby - The Cultural History of the Great American Novel* will provide a more in-depth perspective on *The Great Gatsby*. Additional critical material will be used to contextualise the concept of the American Dream and its use in social criticism.

2. Old Money: Fitzgerald's Portrayal of Tom and Daisy Buchanan

One of the most central conflicts in the novel, and perhaps one of the heaviest deciding factors in Daisy's choice to stay with Tom instead of Gatsby, is the conflict between 'Old Mo-

ney' and 'New Money'. This conflict is used by the author to emphasise the social repercussions on the subject of material excess. The upper class setting is not to be forgotten - the critique regarding the often immoral behaviour of the wealthy is a recurring topic in Fitzgerald's work. Tom and Daisy Buchanan are representative of the former category, and as such they have a safety net, both financially and socially - as shown in Daisy's ability to escape any situation with a perfect reputation. Their ability to "[retreat] back into their money" and "their vast carelessness" (Fitzgerald 186) is essentially one of the most striking judgement-calls in the novel on behalf of the narrator, contradictory to his usual habit of "reserv[ing] all judgements" (Fitzgerald 7). Despite the narrator's notorious unreliability, this explicit comment on the lives of the wealthy social elite in America is representative of the social criticism Fitzgerald conveys through the portrayal of Tom and Daisy Buchanan.

2.1 Tom's Inherited Wealth

The function of Tom's character in *The Great Gatsby*, in terms of social criticism related to the American Dream, is that of a contradictory force to Gatsby's hard-earned money, the opposite of the self-made man: inherited 'Old Money'. As Lena states in his analysis of Tom's decadence: "... money earned without labour was an invitation to corruption [...] and it was assumed that hereditary wealth had caused the decline of Europe" (Lena 22). Supposedly, America is the land of Dreams offering the possibility of escaping shackling European traditions of aristocracy and social class. In light of this, Tom's character becomes a means to criticise aged societal norms. The narrator reveals that Tom's "family were enormously wealthy - even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach" (Fitzgerald 12), immediately highlighting the negative connotations Nick —and perhaps, by extension, Fitzgerald—associates with 'Old Money'. Fitzgerald's ideas here are very much in line with Wall's reasoning, which maintains that those who are most successful in the material race come from fathers who have themselves failed in that same race (Wall 380). This idea displays Tom's function in the novel as the antithesis to Gatsby, who came from a poorer background and became a financial success, highlighting his rise to riches. In line with this, Lena argues that "his enormous inheritance renders him the diametrical opposite of the self-made man, a concept forged at the end of the nineteenth century" (Lena 21). Lena's suggestion that inherited wealth led to the decline of Europe, as stated above, emphasises Fitzgerald's critique of 'Old Money,' embodied in his depiction of the distasteful and unsympathetic Tom Buchanan.

Tom has in many ways come to represent capitalism and the large impersonal corporations which were becoming increasingly important in society at the time. The role of money in the novel could hardly escape any reader, and this in turn mirrors the view of post World War I American society. Batchelor takes a hold on this in his book, where he explains that “[m]oney stood at the centre of American culture in the 1920’s, and the era’s brokers and investment bankers reigned as society’s new heroes”(37). Although Tom does not work, he has connections in the bond business and Wall Street. This is exemplified in his conversation with Nick where Fitzgerald’s critical stance to the business is shown in Tom’s arrogance: “‘Never heard of them,’ he remarked decisively” (Fitzgerald 16), as he comments on the small company Nick works for. Lena argues that “Buchanan could be said to be looking after his own affairs by only paying attention to the trading conducted by the big established firms, who would be likely to give him the best long-term returns (with the lowest risk) on his inherited wealth” (Lena 26). In contradiction to this, Veblen, a noted economist, maintains that this puts emphasis on the gulf between the leisure class and immediate productive process (Veblen 198). In other words, the wealthy part of the population, of which Tom is a member, are not in direct contact with any trade that actually supply their wealth, highlighting the extensive gap between the working class and ‘leisure’ class. Veblen’s notion is applicable to Tom’s situation in the sense that Tom, being a member of the leisure class, is not a part of the American Dream, a fact that is emphasised by being removed from the actual process of making money through hard work. His arrogance on a topic he has little or no insight into highlights the sense that he is representative of the negative aspects of Old Money, and a direct opposite of the Dream. This is also illustrated in the contrast between the Valley of Ashes and East Egg. Furthermore, the massive “Georgian Colonial mansion” and the “string of polo ponies from Lake Forest” (Fitzgerald 12) are aspects of Tom’s characterisation that were necessary to include in order to provide a clear picture of the extravagant lifestyle of the rich. Tom’s authority and financial influence in the capitalist society is further emphasised by the meeting with George Wilson, when “a damp gleam of hope sprang into [George’s] light blue eyes” (Fitzgerald 31) as Tom and Nick approach the garage, suggesting that Tom, being in a position of power, could improve Wilson’s situation. Here Fitzgerald allows the contrast between the rich and the poor to emphasise the power that comes with extreme wealth and the negative impact it may have on those dependent on it.

Fitzgerald's depiction of Tom's lack of intellectuality is highlighted by his contrasting physical supremacy. Introducing Tom, the reader is presented with an impressive physical specimen, "a brute of a man," (Fitzgerald 18) as his wife calls him. He is the physical manifestation of masculinity in the eyes of the narrator, described as having "arrogant eyes [that] established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward" (Fitzgerald 13). In fact Lena states that "Buchanan's main characteristic is precisely his muscularity" and that he is "described as a massive body directed by a simple mind" (Lena 27). The emphasis on his physical traits rather than his intellect reflects an indifference to educating himself. Thus this is another aspect in which he is the opposite of Gatsby, who is constantly improving himself. This is shown in Gatsby's list of things to do from his childhood: "study needed inventions" and "read one improving book or magazine per week" (Fitzgerald 180). In contrast to this, Tom's attempt at literary enrichment reaches only so far as to increase his own narrow-mindedness and racism: "Have you read 'The Rise of the Coloured Empires' by this man Goddard?" (Fitzgerald 19) His racism is expressed in the confrontation with Gatsby, where he fears that "...they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white" (Fitzgerald 136), showing his inability to cope with change in society as well as in his personal life, perhaps a result of living a privileged life of inherited wealth. Tom's devotion to sports and leisure and the neglect of education and self-improvement is an issue of inherited wealth and traditional conventions which Fitzgerald aims to criticise through Tom Buchanan. His physical excellence seems trivial in the face of his intellectual shortcomings. The physical traits Fitzgerald assigns to Tom are foreshadowing his brutal personality which emphasises his rigid conservatism and small-mindedness. Lena summarises: "He is not aware that the decadence of society lies not so much in the external threats of the new riches or in the expansion of the blacks, as in himself and his own inefficiency" (Lena 33). Tom's rather unattractive shortcomings are, in the eyes of the narrator, the result of his inherited wealth.

2.2 Daisy's Money and Happiness

Daisy's character in *The Great Gatsby* serves the purpose of highlighting the underlying social criticism of the capitalist society, and the sense of betrayal and abandonment present in Daisy's character highlights the idea that money does not necessarily equal happiness. Myers

talks of the “human capacity for adaption” (135) in his book *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, where he explains how material accumulation over time will not necessarily lead to an increased level of happiness, but rather an initial high of satisfaction to be followed by the same level of happiness prior to the event. This idea can be translated to the marriage between Tom and Daisy; being unhappy before the wedding she “... cried and cried” (Fitzgerald 83), supposedly because she realised that being with Gatsby was no longer a possibility and thus on some level knew that Tom’s money would not make her happy. Barry Schwartz agrees with the paradoxical relationship between money and happiness in his review of Myers’s *American Paradox*, where he says that wealth “fills our bellies, but leaves us spiritually hungry” (Schwartz 74). This is personified in Fitzgerald’s character of Daisy. In the novel, Nick testifies of her “vast carelessness” (Fitzgerald 186) and seemingly disregarding relationship to her own daughter Pammy. Despite there not being a clear correlation between happiness and money - either way - Myers states that “[h]appiness is not the result of being rich” (Myers 134), a statement which is in many ways personified in Daisy. Daisy’s life illustrates the hysteria of the post-war time, and the hedonistic chase of a good time: “[t]hey moved with a fast crowd, all of them young and rich and wild, but she came out with an absolutely perfect reputation” (Fitzgerald 84). This is suggestive of a whimsical and deceptive personality, and her surely financially aided ability to avoid social embarrassment. This criticism of the current state of society is thinly veiled, yet Fitzgerald’s writing carries an elegance and subtlety of the subject. The upper classes, and in particular those members of society being heirs to great wealth, are targeted as an opposition to the American Dream itself, and this is portrayed in *The Great Gatsby* through Daisy’s incredible capability to float out of any situation unscathed.

Daisy’s self-avowed “sophistication” (Fitzgerald 24), or rather remarkable indifference to most things, including her own daughter, emphasises another aspect of the American Dream. In the sense that it is not merely the accumulation of material possessions — a house, a car, polo-ponies, and expensive clothing — but also the spiritual fulfilment and happiness of the individual, her impassiveness and nonchalant demeanour inhibits her from achieving even this fundamental part of the American Dream. Myers discusses the relationship between money and happiness in his book where he proposes that “... as we have grown richer, so have we become less content, this [...]destroying the American Dream” (137). Daisy’s character is essentially a study in unhappiness caused by a lack of personal, intellectual and ideological self-

realisation. Despite the immensely wealthy lifestyle, she feels at a loss in terms of meeting Gatsby's emotional expectations. Her inability to devote herself fully to him lies in her own insecurity and emotional indifference, as a result of a lifetime of carelessness. In line with this, some scholars argue that her corruption is more severe than Tom's in the sense that she masks it in an air of elegance and promises. Bewley, for instance, accuses her of "monstrous moral indifference" and claims she has a "vicious emptiness" (cited in Parson 250). This is shown in the novel in her shallow and seemingly non-existent relationship to her daughter as seen in the conversation with Nick on the veranda: "I suppose she talks, and - eats, and everything." "Oh, yes." She looked at me absently" (Fitzgerald 23). Her absent-mindedness and change of topic when her daughter is mentioned suggests a certain hardness of emotion, which is also demonstrated in her inability to connect to Gatsby, or rather to anything of emotional significance. In one instance, a display of affection between a couple at one of Gatsby's parties "... offended her - and inarguably, because it wasn't a gesture but an emotion" (Fitzgerald 114). Daisy appears to be desensitised and removed from anything that could be perceived as actual affection. Drawing from this, one could argue that Daisy's unhappiness and emotional unavailability is an indirect result of the wealthy lifestyle she has grown accustomed to since her marriage to Tom.

Opposing Bewley's view, Person suggests that Daisy is not corrupt to the same extent as her husband, calling her "more a victim than a victimiser" (Person 250) in terms of her moral indifference. In her paper "Herstory and Daisy Buchanan" she argues that she is merely a victim of circumstance, being "paralysed with conventional happiness as Mrs Tom Buchanan" (Person 253). With this in mind, Daisy's inability to connect emotionally and finally commit to Gatsby is explained by her position as a married woman under the power of her husband. Her unhappy marriage to Tom is no secret, and her sardonic attitude toward life is obvious: "You see I think everything's terrible anyhow [...] And I know. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything [...] Sophisticated - God, I'm sophisticated!" (Fitzgerald 24) Regardless of Daisy's role as victim or victimiser in the novel, the symbolism in her dishonesty and questionable morals is representative of the false allure of great wealth and material accumulation. Her unhappiness is a testimony to Myer's notion that happiness is not the result of material excess, despite her inviting mannerisms and the fact that "[h]er voice is full of money" (Fitzgerald 126). This characteristic of hers is what Nick finds most captivating, and, at their first meeting, he describes how she "laughed again, as if she said something

very witty, and held my hand for a moment, looking up into my face, promising that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see” (Fitzgerald 15). This quotation can be seen as an allusion to the seductiveness of money, and the false promises of happiness and joy that it excites. In many ways, this is representative of the function of Daisy in the novel in relation to the American Dream - she comes from Old Money, like Tom, and, despite having all that she could possibly want in terms of material possessions, she does not seem content with life. This is a way for Fitzgerald to criticise the current post-war financial hysteria that was prominent in the nineteen-twenties, showing how the possession of material things and money is not the equivalent of happiness despite the common perception. Through Daisy, Fitzgerald suggests that without personal fulfilment in life, financial success and material abundance lose their allure.

3. Pursuing the Dream - Gatsby and Myrtle Struggling to Fulfil Their American Dream

The pursuit of the American Dream is indubitably one of the most prominent themes of *The Great Gatsby*, and essential to the storyline. The changing values in society was to some extent due to the wealth Americans suddenly found within their grasp, and in combination with the growing advertising business people were being fed new ideas about the American Dream; happiness depended on the amount of financial success a person could achieve. Batchelor states that “[d]uring the 1920’s, many Americans began to equate self-worth with material possessions,” (41) which is shown in *Gatsby* by the behaviour of the protagonists; large mansions, silk shirts and expensive cars were all seemingly components essential to the happiness of a person. Fitzgerald uses the American Dream as a means of criticism of the hysterical quest for wealth, as displayed in the characters of Myrtle Wilson and Jay Gatsby. Myrtle is, although not one of the main characters, an important character in the novel both in terms of the plot but also in the sense that she is representative of the consumerist Dream. Being Tom Buchanan’s mistress she aspires to live a better life, and, through her character, Fitzgerald channels the impact of advertising and the consumer society. In many ways, this is similar to Jay Gatsby’s pursuit of Daisy Buchanan. Rising from a poor childhood, he manages through hard work, and with love as the motivating tool, to accumulate immense wealth by questionable means. A common drive in the two characters is the belief that the American Dream is, to a varying extent, material, but they have different expectations on what it actual-

ly means to achieve it. The duality of the Dream in terms of its supposedly original meaning “in which each man and each woman can be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable” (Adams cited in Samuel 13) and the connotations to financial success that it has slowly evolved into over the years has perhaps led to unrealistic expectations on it, essentially leading to corrupted versions of that Dream. The decay of the American Dream is portrayed by Fitzgerald in the novel through the characters of Myrtle and Gatsby.

3.1 Gatsby’s Corrupted Pursuit of the American Dream

Robert Carringer discusses the notion of Americanness in literature in his paper investigating American narratives, and according to his findings one of the components of a true American attitude is an “indomitable idealism” (307), a trait which is doubtlessly present in Fitzgerald’s character Jay Gatsby. In this sense, Fitzgerald uses this notion of Americanness as a critique in the novel. His “capacity for wonder” and his unwavering belief in “the orgasmic future” (Fitzgerald 188) are characteristics with which the narrator summarises Gatsby at the end of the novel. These are perhaps the most noble and impressive attributes of his character, yet the same admirable qualities eventually indirectly lead to his death. Gunn interprets Gatsby’s incredible ambition as belonging “... to a historical order which has long since ceased to exist, to a vision of possibility which almost died on the eyes of those first Dutch sailors to these shores who, paradoxically, were the last to look out on the American landscape in innocence...” (Gunn 174). In this sense, Gatsby has come to represent the undying hope and idealism which are fundamental features of the American Dream. By simultaneously making this Gatsby’s fatal mistake, Fitzgerald allows his character to be at once admirable while maintaining the idea that escapism through unrealistic dreams may be a mistake in a materialistic world that does not value the emotional aspect of the human experience as highly as the practicality of social conventions. According to Greenbie, the American Dream was “fading into a wisp of what it had once been” (cited in Samuels 27). This is reflected in Gatsby’s love for Daisy, or rather the illusion he creates of her in his mind based on a mutual past. She has become “his incorruptible dream” (Fitzgerald 160), and thus fixed, Gatsby is unable to alter or develop his image of her. Nick speculates that after their first encounter in a very long time, “... Daisy tumbled short of his dreams - not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion” (Fitzgerald 103). The very idea of the American Dream may be trans-

lated into meaning that anything is possible, and by allowing Gatsby's Dream to become so overwhelming Fitzgerald criticises the idealism of the American Dream. Gunn calls Gatsby's sense of wonder and idealism a "tragedy" (175), referring to the notion that his extravagant dreams and illusions about love are in the end what kills him. He also discusses Gatsby's inability to "distinguish his spiritual ideals from the material conditions in which he must realise them" (175), adding further arguments to the notion that Gatsby's idealism may perhaps better be seen as naivety, not anchored in realistic expectations of the practicality of life.

Gatsby's idealist visions are perhaps most strongly emphasised by his own duality, his criminality aiding him financially in his quest for Daisy. In many cases, Gatsby can be seen to represent the corrupted American Dream, driven to immorality and criminality by the expectations of the American upper class in the increasingly consumerist society. This, in turn, led to the alteration of the meaning of the American Dream. This was due mainly to the growing consumerist society which increased as capitalism took hold in society. Carringer explores this notion in his paper "*Citizen Kane, The Great Gatsby, and Some Conventions of American Narrative Author(s)*", where he looks at the new generation of Americans longing to achieve success in life:

The up-and-coming young American was shrewd and practical, an image of compulsive energy, a man with his eye always on the future. His Americanness also consisted of such traits as enterprise, indomitable idealism, a certain naturalness and openness to experience, and a relentless will to succeed. (307)

Carringer's "up-and-coming young American" can be recognised in Jay Gatsby, a self-made man who worked hard to achieve the immense wealth that would, at least in his imagination, show Daisy that he was worthy of her hand. Although the practicality of Gatsby's Dream is perhaps clouded by his obsession with Daisy, his hard although perhaps dishonest work deserves recognition. There is no doubt Gatsby possessed "a relentless will to succeed" or that he lacked "an openness to experience," although these apparently "innately" American traits are what allows him to make his criminal career. This duality is a major characteristic of Fitzgerald's protagonist. The nature of Gatsby's rise to immense wealth is also an allusion to the American Dream in the sense of its hypocrisy - the corruption of the Dream has distorted the original pursuit of happiness into a hysterical quest for wealth and material accumulation. The thriving consumer society during the nineteen-twenties led to the increasingly popular belief that money equalled happiness, and that buying more things would increase the quality of life.

This could be seen as the hypocrisy of the American Dream: the definition referring to pursuing happiness while happiness has altered to mean the accumulation of money and possessions. In his 1952 paper “Fitzgerald’s Brave New World” Fussel identified the importance of the American Dream to the characterisation of Gatsby. Fussel argues that Gatsby is corrupted by “the values and attitudes that he holds in common with the society that destroys him” (Fussel 295). In this sense Gatsby’s situation is applicable to society as a whole, and can be seen as social criticism of an increasingly material society. The change in the narrator’s tone in his judgement of Gatsby is significant in the discussion of the duality of the character: “So my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door” (Fitzgerald 70). Throughout the novel, Nick recognises the greatness of Gatsby’s Dream, allowing him to come to the conclusion that he is “worth the whole damn bunch put together” (Fitzgerald 160), his purity at heart essentially redeeming him from his criminal past. What makes Gatsby’s character so interesting is the skilful way in which Fitzgerald presents the duality of American culture and thus the American Dream through him; the corrupted aspirations of fame and fortune in stark contrast with the romantic ideals that are still present in the mindset of many people. Gatsby is perhaps the most clear example of this in the novel, as he displays both these traits; his ‘corrupted’ rise to wealth and his pure love for Daisy.

3.2 Myrtle and the Consumer Society

One could argue that Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* is a study in the pursuit of happiness, or in other words, the struggle to achieve the American Dream. The social criticism embedded in the depiction of the vibrant Myrtle becomes more clear in the face of Callahan’s exploration of the manifestation of happiness in his paper “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Evolving American Dream: The ‘Pursuit of Happiness’ in *Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*”. He asks: “What if we were to read *Gatsby* [...] as projections of that sometime struggle, sometime alliance between property and the pursuit of happiness?” (Callahan 380) This question in relation to the character of Myrtle allows us to look at her accumulation of things, such as the down-town apartment which was “...crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continuously over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles” (Fitzgerald 35) and reflect upon the notion that, for

Myrtle, a poor garage-owner's wife, happiness may in fact lay in the possession of material things. For her, the affair with Tom allows her to escape the presumably gloomy life with George. The critique of the consumer hysteria at the time is heightened by the fact that she lives in the Valley of Ashes, inhabited by "... ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (Fitzgerald 29), and thus knows the cost of extravagant living. Myrtle's belief that the material world she is allowed a taste of through Tom's company equals happiness, and that this happiness stems not necessarily from personal fulfilment but rather the accumulation of goods is in many ways representative of the era. Fitzgerald characterises her as possessing "an immediate perceptible vitality" (Fitzgerald 31) and an exaggerated impatience with boredom, almost to the point of ridiculing her. This is exemplified by the following quotation from Nick's first meeting with Myrtle: "I'm going to make a list of all the things I've got to get. A massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, and one of those cute little ash-trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother's grave that'll last all summer" (Fitzgerald 42-43). Myrtle's eagerness to spend money on things she supposedly has "got to get" is representative of the post-war attitude to the increasing consumer society. The absurdity in her need to purchase a collar while her husband struggles to make ends meet at the garage can be seen as a critique of the consumer hysteria which was prevalent in America at the time. Fitzgerald captures the changing American Dream through Myrtle's struggle to fulfil hers: she aspires to live in the same world as Tom, and although it would perhaps appear as though it is merely a shallow dream, it is nonetheless a version of the American Dream in the sense that she is in the pursuit of happiness as much as anyone with less material goals. The worldly aspects of her aspirations are not to be forgotten though: as Callahan puts it: "... property and the pursuit of happiness are sometimes [...] complementary metaphors for experience" (Callahan 380). Fitzgerald's criticism of this notion is perhaps most clear through her character. Her consumerist habits are bold and vulgar, and may strike the the reader as a strong instance of criticism of a perhaps more relatable struggle to achieve the American Dream.

Ted Ownby (1999) analyses the habits of consumption and its meaning to the individual in his paper "American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty and Culture", and summarises this in his theory of the Dreams of Consumerism. Myrtle's behaviour can in many instances be said to reflect these. She has not failed to realise the importance of material possessions to exhibit the current ideals of a successful life, and expresses her 'social climb' (in

other words her relationship with Tom) with her consumer lifestyle; she buys a puppy on a whim and continues her spending "...in the station drug-store [where she bought] a small flask of perfume" (Fitzgerald 33). The pride she takes in the things she keeps at the apartment is in line with Ownby's "Dream of Abundance" where an abundance of material possessions shows off an extravagant lifestyle. The increasingly powerful consumer society and the growing advertisement business was at the beginning of the twentieth century a fact, and this affected the ideals and values in society. One particularly powerful example of the power of advertising in a consumer society is represented by the eyes of Doctor T.J Eckleburg; "blue and gigantic" with retinas "one yard high" they "brood on" (Fitzgerald 29). Their "persistent stare" (30) watch over the Valley of Ashes. They have come to represent some sort of god in the eyes of George Wilson, Myrtle's husband. This shows how powerful the consumerist mindset was at the time, and Fitzgerald uses the eyes of Eckleburg as a way of criticising this fact. Another aspect of consumerism which Ownby points out is the "Dream of Novelty," which is appropriate in the analysis of Myrtle. Her leisurely shopping habits and her "... copies of Town Tattle [which] lay on the table together with a copy of Simon Called Peter, and some of the small scandal magazines of Broadway" (Fitzgerald 35) portray Myrtle as a woman of her time. The phenomenon of celebrity was a fairly new concept to American society in the 1920's and she embraces this as a form of luxury. Along with her earlier purchases for no other apparent reason than want, she is in many ways Fitzgerald's way of critiquing the consumer society on a level that is not exclusive to the immensely wealthy. A close look at her character leave us with the conclusion that the dreams of consumerism, perhaps the more cynical version of the American Dream, are illustrated by her character. Fitzgerald has, through Myrtle, been able to channel and analyse this development in a consumer society.

4. Conclusion

Since its publication the popularity of *The Great Gatsby* has only increased. Unfortunately for Fitzgerald his work did not reach national (and international) fame until after his death. The novel did not sell as well as other best-sellers at the time, and was initially a disappointment to the author. Today it has reached legendary status and is almost thought of as a part of the national American identity. Batchelor calls it "... an important piece of Americana [...] it stands as one of the few works of literature that nearly everyone is at least acquainted with in text or film form, its influence is broad and important as a part of popular culture" (119). In

the sense that the novel manages to capture the atmosphere of the 1920s era while still being an applicable tool in analysing popular culture makes it not only a classic but also one of the most relevant works of literature today. One such aspect of the novel is the social criticism conveyed in the novel.

The American Dream as a means of social criticism is a topic on which Fitzgerald is an expert. His social criticism is embedded in vivid imagery, and the versatility of his authorship is described by Turnbull: “[t]hrough an artist in prose fiction - with facets of the dramatist, the essayist and the social historian - Fitzgerald was fundamentally a poet” (Turnbull ix). In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald paints portraits of his characters that contain not only depth but also a significant amount of social criticism. In Tom Buchanan he voices strong criticism of the wealthy aristocracy and its inherited money through the character’s narrow-minded conservatism. His immorality stands in contrast to the ideals of the American Dream, and thus emphasise their significance. Fitzgerald expressed his satisfaction with the character in a letter to his editor: “I suppose he’s the best character I’ve ever done“ (cited in Lena 29). Similarly, Tom’s wife also functions as a contradictory force to the American Dream. The questionable link between wealth and personal fulfilment is personified in the beautiful yet indifferent Daisy, who comes to represent the fact that money cannot buy happiness. In stark contrast to Daisy stands Gatsby, a man who in the end “... paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (Fitzgerald 168), allowing his romantic convictions to cloud his vision of reality. Fitzgerald’s depiction of Gatsby shows how even the purest of dreams can become corrupt, and the duality of his character is representative of the duality of the American Dream - the corrupted notion that money equaled happiness, a lesson harshly learned by Gatsby in the end. Finally Myrtle Wilson is Fitzgerald’s comment on the hysterical consumerism and material abundance that is so convincingly pictured in the novel. Her rather vulgar appearance in the novel strikes the reader as a strong example of a perhaps more relatable struggle to achieve the American Dream. Samuel states that “[t]he American Dream may have been largely an illusion, but it was a very useful and valuable one” (171). This sentiment holds true in the sense that the national ethos of the American Dream allows Fitzgerald to criticise American society on a level which is widely accessible and relatable.

In this paper, I have aimed to show how Fitzgerald uses the American Dream in the novel as a means of critiquing the state of American society through the portrayal of Tom, Daisy, Gatsby and Myrtle. Possibility and aspiration are the themes of the American Dream that are

most commonly found in literature are(Samuel 167), and in this interpretation of the idea Daisy and Tom are not legitimate representatives of the Dream in the same sense that Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson are, but rather emphasise the values of the dream through their portrayal as the inverse of the American Dream. Thus, the characters in *The Great Gatsby* and their relation to the American Dream provide Fitzgerald with an effective means of critiquing American Society.

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