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### Outlier

“The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God... 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.” (Fitzgerald, NP). The Roaring Twenties in America were a time of dramatic social change, economic boom, and income inequality. At the center of this moment in history lies Jay Gatsby, the fictional character in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, who is also the inspiration for creating a means to measure the social and economic themes from that time forward. Much like the American Dream, Gatsby’s rise from poverty to immense wealth defies the rules of economic mobility that governed much of 1920s America. However, if we examine his story through the lens of the Gatsby Curve, a concept introduced by economist Alan Krueger in 2012, we see how Gatsby himself represents a rare outlier, an exception to the pattern of upward mobility in an increasingly unequal society.

The Gatsby Curve illustrates the relationship between income inequality and intergenerational mobility. It argues that societies with higher income inequality tend to have less economic mobility. The U.S. exhibits high income inequality and low economic mobility among developed nations. This means that an individual’s financial prospects are closely tied to the income and status of their parents. This dynamic means that those born into wealth are more likely to stay wealthy because they can access better education, healthcare, and networks. On the contrary, those born into poverty face greater obstacles in moving up the economic ladder because they face significant challenges, such as underfunded schools and limited access to

higher education. As the curve suggests, the more unequal the society, the harder it is to escape one's socio-economic status, reinforcing cycles of wealth and poverty across generations.

This connection between income inequality and the difficulty of social mobility manifests in various ways. Unequal access to quality education, healthcare, and job opportunities for poorer families is a significant barrier to upward mobility. For example, Gatsby's parents were "Shiftless and unsuccessful farm people." (Fitzgerald, NP). They were poor farmers in North Dakota, so he lacked the inherited wealth typically required to make something great of yourself. Gatsby also dropped out of college because he was on work-study as a janitor. "An instinct toward his future glory had led him, some months before, to the small Lutheran College of St. Olaf's in southern Minnesota. He stayed there two weeks, dismayed at its ferocious indifference to the drums of his destiny, to destiny itself, and despising the janitor's work with which he was to pay his way through." (Fitzgerald, NP). This shows that Gatsby also lacked the quality of education expected from wealthy people. The rich can invest in their children's futures through private schooling and social connections, while the poor struggle to meet even their most basic needs. This is shown through the difference between Gatsby's short-lived higher education and Tom Buchanan's elite education at Yale University. "His family were enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach." (Fitzgerald, NP). Typically, lifestyles that fail to address these disparities only cement the divide between the wealthy and less fortunate. The result is a society where the chances of escaping poverty are slim, and the opportunities for wealth are disproportionately concentrated among the privileged. So, how did Gatsby escape his destined poverty?

One key factor that allows Gatsby to break through the economic barriers of his time is his involvement in the underground economy during Prohibition. Both Fitzgerald and researcher

Stephen Brauer discuss Gatsby's secret engagement in illegal activities and how that contributed to his wealth. In the paper, *Jay Gatsby and the Prohibition Gangster as Businessman*, Brauer writes, "The 'services' that Gatsby and Wolfshiem provide their clients remain murky, but probably include bootlegging, gambling, loansharking, and selling stolen bonds." From 1920 to 1933, the sale and production of alcohol were banned in the United States, leading to the rise of bootlegging, which is the illegal production and distribution of alcohol. This illicit market created opportunities for rapid wealth accumulation, especially for individuals like Gatsby, who may have had few legal avenues to riches. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald wrote, "'He and this Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side-street drugstores 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.'" (Fitzgerald, NP). Tom's conversation in this chapter shows how Gatsby's connections to organized crime, particularly his relationship with Meyer Wolfsheim, highlight his ties to this shady economy. The world of bootlegging allowed many people, especially those from poor or immigrant backgrounds, to generate fortunes quickly. However, this wealth was often unstable and built on morally and legally suspicious foundations. For Gatsby, bootlegging may be the key to his fortune, but it is also a critical part of what makes his success an outlier. It suggests that his wealth, like the world he inhabits, is unstable and ultimately fragile.

Gatsby defies these norms and accumulates vast wealth against all odds because his improbable ascent to wealth in *The Great Gatsby* starkly contrasts with the socioeconomic barriers depicted by the Gatsby Curve, which illustrates the inverse relationship between income inequality and intergenerational mobility. Through their studies, both researchers, Lindsey Macmillan and Pier-André Bouchard St-Amant, show how Gatsby's journey from a humble

background to immense wealth places him as a rare outlier on the Gatsby Curve, a small cluster of individuals who achieve upward mobility despite the overwhelming forces of inequality. As Lindsey Macmillan states in her study, *Income Inequality, Intergenerational Mobility, and the Great Gatsby Curve: Is Education Key?*, “Income inequality is associated with several key components of the intergenerational transmission process—including access to higher education, the financial returns on education, and the residual effect of parental education upon labor-market earnings.” This statement shows how educational disparities perpetuate economic immobility. This suggests that Gatsby’s self-made success is an anomaly in a system where upward mobility is systematically hindered. Further, in Bouchard St-Amant’s study, *Uncovering Gatsby Curves*, he says, “When education is a complement, an increase in education leads to more parents investing in their children, thereby increasing the transmission of high income to their offspring.” This shows how Gatsby represents a high-ambition, low-probability success story because the evidence indicates that structural inequalities can distort the avenues, like education and parental investment, that are traditionally viewed as pathways to success. In addition, the evidence from both sources further shows that Gatsby’s tragic end not only reflects the personal costs of his relentless pursuit of the American Dream, but also serves as a broader commentary on the illusion of meritocracy in a society where the deck is stacked against those from less privileged backgrounds like Gatsby.

Furthermore, George and Myrtle Wilson prove this harsh truth about the American Dream. This couple in *The Great Gatsby* embodies the far more common reality that individuals who strive for a better life are ultimately crushed by the system that promises opportunity. Their life is best pictured when Nick said, “Then the valley of ashes opened out on both sides of us, and I had a glimpse of Mrs. Wilson straining at the garage pump with panting vitality as we went

by.” (Fitzgerald, NP). Their lives highlight the limitations placed on those without wealth, status, or connections. Myrtle reaches for a higher social class through her affair with Tom Buchanan, but her aspirations are met with exploitation and, ultimately, violence. George, burdened by poverty and despair, is left powerless in a world that offers him no path upward. Together, the Wilsons show that for most people in their position, the American Dream is not just elusive—it is a cruel illusion that reinforces inequality rather than overcoming it, further proving that Gatsby’s life and fortune are not typical.

However, despite Gatsby’s remarkable success, we must also consider a counterargument. Some might argue that Gatsby’s rise, although extraordinary, reflects the true essence of the American Dream—a narrative of self-made success through hard work, ambition, and perseverance. After all, Gatsby reinvented himself, rejecting his humble origins and striving for greatness in a world often thought to reward talent and drive. As McAdams said, “He is the embodiment of the American Dream.” (McAdams, 1993). However, this view romanticizes Gatsby’s ascent and ignores the morally compromised means of attaining his wealth. His rise was not solely driven by work ethic, but by strategic involvement in criminal activities that were inaccessible or morally unacceptable to most Americans. This idealistic interpretation overlooks the crucial role that external factors, like bootlegging, organized crime, and the speculative excesses of the 1920s, played in his success. As McAdams notes, summarizing Marius Bewley's view, “The gleaming possibilities, both spiritual and material, in a youthful, potent, exuberant America are central to Gatsby.” However, Bewley ultimately argues that “Gatsby is also the story of the withering of that American Dream in a dissolute era.” (McAdams, 1993). This duality reflects the tension between the American Dream’s promise and its corrupted reality. Gatsby may appear to have succeeded, but his deceptive and illegal methods reveal that the

economic systems of the 1920s were not open fields of fair opportunity; they were skewed by systemic inequality and moral erosion. In this context, Gatsby's journey is not just about personal achievement, but about navigating and exploiting the unstable and often corrupt economic systems of his time. This proves that Gatsby's story is not a meritocratic climb, but an exceptional manipulation of a corrupt system that places him as an outlier on the Gatsby Curve outside the bounds of the traditional American Dream.

In conclusion, Gatsby's life challenges the patterns suggested by the Gatsby Curve, making him a poignant counterexample to the broader societal trends of his era. While the curve highlights how income inequality and limited mobility tend to trap individuals in their socio-economic positions, Gatsby's rise offers a rare glimpse into the possibility of upward mobility in a highly unequal society. However, his success is built on a shady foundation, and ultimately, his story serves as a cautionary tale. The Gatsby Curve reveals the structural barriers to economic mobility and underscores how the American Dream becomes an increasingly elusive and fragile ideal in unequal societies. Understanding this curve helps policymakers and citizens recognize that inequality is not just an ethical issue, but also an economic one with far-reaching implications for the opportunities available to future generations.

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