

Ava Brocchini

Catherine Mintler

EXPO 1213-002

14 February 2025

Death by the American Dream

Since its publication in 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald's, *The Great Gatsby*, has endured as an outstanding piece of American literature. Set in the opulent Jazz Age, the novel follows the tragic life of Jay Gatsby and his relentless pursuit of an unattainable dream, the love of Daisy Buchanan. While deeply rooted in its historical context, the novel's themes surpass its time, speaking to universal human experiences that remain relevant in the 21st century. Fitzgerald's work endures due to its profound critique of the American Dream, which James Truslow Adams originally defined as "that 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." This vision emphasized the promise of upward mobility, freedom, and equality for all, regardless of social standing. However, *The Great Gatsby* has shown that most people lose themselves and their morality while trying to achieve a dream that never really comes true.

The American Dream, a foundational belief in self-made success, was especially powerful in the 1920s when the economy was booming. Many believed that reinvention and prosperity were within reach. However, Fitzgerald reveals the moral decay behind this pursuit, as Gatsby's wealth is built on shady dealings. We see this in the novel when Tom Buchanan says, "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 shows us that Gatsby did not make an honest fortune. This suggests that the climb to success often comes

at an ethical cost, complicating the notion of a pure and attainable dream. Gatsby's road to wealth and eventual downfall mirrors the eventual collapse of the Roaring Twenties into the Great Depression, further reinforcing Fitzgerald's critique.

The novel's disillusionment with the American Dream remains relevant today. Economic inequality is widespread, and the dream is increasingly seen as an unattainable myth, with wealth concentrated among a privileged few while most struggle to advance. Dan Cody was a character in the novel among the privileged few. Nick states in the story, "And it was from Cody that he inherited money—a legacy of twenty-five thousand dollars. He didn't get it. He never understood the legal device that was used against him, but what remained of the millions went intact to Ella Kaye." (Fitzgerald, NP). Gatsby was set to inherit Cody's wealth upon his passing, but someone manipulated Cody into taking him out of the will and leaving him with nothing. This pushed Gatsby to his next mentor, Meyer Wolfsheim. Gatsby described him as "the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919." (Fitzgerald, NP). Wolfsheim was a gangster who was involved in bootlegging, gambling, drugs, and racketeering. Naturally, Gatsby became involved in these illegal activities to attain his wealth with the help of his new mentor.

A real example of this manipulation of the economy is Jordan Belfort, the modern-day Gatsby. Belfort, also known as "The Wolf of Wall Street," made his fortune by running Stratton Oakmont, the brokerage firm that made millions by manipulating penny stock prices. This manipulation of Wall Street is a prime example of why the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) exists. The SEC protects investors from misconduct and promotes fairness in the securities markets, ensuring that those attempting to reach the American Dream do not fall into corrupt methods to achieve their goals.

A large part of Gatsby's American Dream was having a future relationship with Daisy. He reinvents himself as a wealthy businessman, believing that material success will allow him to reclaim his past romance with her. In the novel, Gatsby says, "'And what's more, I love Daisy too. Once in a while I go off on a spree and make a fool of myself, but I always come back, and in my heart I love her all the time.'" (Fitzgerald, NP). His belief that status and wealth will win Daisy's love mirrors modern society's fixation on material success and social status. Gatsby threw lavish parties to get her attention in an attempt to win her back. This further shows that his dream is not merely wealth but an idealized past where he and Daisy are happy and in love. However, Gatsby's pursuit of this dream leads to his downfall, demonstrating the unfortunate nature of the American Dream.

Another significant aspect of the American Dream in the novel is identity and reinvention. Gatsby's transformation from a poor farm boy to a wealthy socialite highlights the societal desire for self-creation. Fitzgerald wrote, "His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people... 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." (Fitzgerald, NP). The 1920s were characterized by shifting identities, particularly with the rise of the flapper culture and new social norms. Gatsby's physical and financial reinvention aligns with this broader cultural movement, yet his persona is ultimately built on illusion. Fitzgerald intentionally wanted Gatsby's character to have ambiguity, reinforcing the importance of mystery in Gatsby's identity. The mystery behind his character also alludes to the illegal activities he was involved in to attain his wealth.

In addition to the complexities of Gatsby's character that Fitzgerald created, one of the most apparent literary elements contributing to the novel's longevity is its symbolism. Among the most famous is the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, representing Gatsby's hopes and dreams. It is a constant yet distant beacon, much like the unattainable American Dream. Another powerful symbol is the billboard of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg's eyes, which critics and readers have interpreted in multiple ways. Some view the eyes as a representation of God's judgment over a morally decaying society, while others see them as a critique of commercialism and the emptiness of Gatsby's world. As a classmate argues in Chapter Two, the eyes "may symbolize God's judging gaze, mirroring the moral degradation and depravity in their surroundings," yet they could also represent "the commercialism and emptiness of the world Gatsby and the others live in." (Rivera, NP). The symbol of God behind the eyes is ironic knowing that God also represents capitalism in this novel, as shown by the quote from Nick stating, "He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty." (Fitzgerald, NP). Nick is referring to Gatsby and how he has become the "son of capitalism."

Ultimately, *The Great Gatsby* remains relevant nearly a century after its publication because of its universal themes, social critique, and compelling literary techniques, all of which relate to the American Dream. Its exploration of the fake nature of this dream, the fragility of identity, and the symbols that transcend time ensure its place in classrooms where it continues to spark conversations. As long as society struggles with wealth, ambition, and reinvention issues, Fitzgerald's story will continue to captivate and challenge readers.

Works Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. The Project Gutenberg eBook of *The Great Gatsby*, by F.

Scott Fitzgerald. eBook #64317. Project Gutenberg, January 17, 2021, online.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/64317/64317-h/64317-h.htm>

Rivera, Mahlia. 2025. "Re/Reading *Gatsby*." *hypothes.is* annotation. Project Gutenberg. Online.

Citation date. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/64317/64317-h/64317-h.htm>