

The American Dream Corruption in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby

¹Ibrahim Adam Said Daier, ²Dr. AbdulMahmoud Idrees Ibrahim

Faculty of Graduation, Al Zaiem Al Azhari University

Abstract: *The Great Gatsby* is a tragic love story on the surface, but it's most commonly understood as a pessimistic critique of the American Dream. In many respects, the American Dream has been deeply rooted in the concept of a journey-the journey to a new country, the journey across generations, and of course, the journey within one's life. It is about motion and progress, it is about optimism, and it is about finding success and fulfillment along the way. The American Dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of race, class, gender, or nationality, can be successful in America. if they just work hard enough. The American Dream thus presents a pretty rosy 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. Hence , the study aimed at investigating the American Dream Corruption in The Great Gatsby . The descriptive analytical method was used to carry out the study. The study sample consisted of the novel The Great Gatsby. The results of the main findings are: The Great Gatsby shows the tide turning east, as hordes flock to New York City seeking stock market fortunes. The Great Gatsby portrays this shift as a symbol of the American Dream's corruption. It's no longer a vision of building a life; it's just about getting rich. According to the above findings, the study recommends the followings: to investigate howGatsby symbolizes both the corrupted Dream and the original uncorrupted Dream and how Gatsby's corrupt dream of wealth is motivated by an incorruptible love for Daisy. The study suggests that, Gatsby's failure does not prove the folly of the American Dream rather it proves the folly of short-cutting that dream by allowing corruption and materialism to prevail over hard work, integrity, and real love. And the dream of love that remains at Gatsby's core condemns nearly every other character in the novel, all of whom are empty beyond just their lust for money.

Keywords: American Dream and Corruption.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Great Gatsby is a story of the thwarted love between a man and a woman. The main theme of the novel, however, encompasses a much larger, less romantic scope. Though all of its action takes place over a mere few months during the summer of 1922 and is set in a circumscribed geographical area in the vicinity of Long Island, New York, The Great Gatsby is a highly symbolic meditation on 1920s America as a whole, in particular the disintegration of the American dream in an era of unprecedented prosperity and material excess. Fitzgerald portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed, and empty pursuit of pleasure. The reckless jubilation that led to decadent parties and wild jazz music epitomized in The Great Gatsby by the opulent parties that Gatsby throws every Saturday night resulted ultimately in the corruption of the American dream, as the unrestrained desire for money and pleasure surpassed more noble goals. When World War I ended in 1918, the generation of young Americans who had fought the war became intensely disillusioned, as the brutal carnage that they had just faced made the Victorian social morality of early-twentieth-century America seem like stuffy, empty hypocrisy. The dizzying rise of the stock market in the aftermath of the war led to a sudden, sustained increase in the national wealth and a newfound materialism, as people

began to spend and consume at unprecedented levels. A person from any social background could, potentially, make a fortune, but the American aristocracy families with old wealth scorned the newly rich industrialists and speculators. Additionally, the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, which banned the sale of alcohol, created a thriving underworld designed to satisfy the massive demand for bootleg liquor among rich and poor alike. Fitzgerald positions the characters of *The Great Gatsby* as emblems of these social trends. Nick and Gatsby, both of whom fought in World War I, exhibit the newfound cosmopolitanism and cynicism that resulted from the war. The various social climbers and ambitious speculators who attend Gatsby's parties evidence the greedy scramble for wealth. The clash between "old money" and "new money" manifests itself in the novel's symbolic geography: East Egg represents the established aristocracy, West Egg the self-made rich. Meyer Wolfsheimer and Gatsby's fortune symbolize the rise of organized crime and bootlegging.

2. DISCUSSION

As Jim Culler stated: "That American Dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. The dream or hope has been present from the start".¹ This expression "The American Dream" was for the first time used by the historian James Truslow Adams in his book *The Epic of America* in which he defined as: "The American Dream is 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. 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 shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."^[1]In *The Great Gatsby*, the eponymous character embodies the model American construct of the self-made man. Satisfying the American Dream's devotion to the possibility that "anyone, no matter how lowly his origins, could rise and become a success",^[2] The novel *The Great Gatsby* by Scott Fitzgerald embodies many themes; however the most significant one relates to the corruption of the American dream. The American Dream is defined as someone starting low on the economic or social level, and working hard towards prosperity and or wealth and fame. By having money, a car, a big house, nice clothes and a happy family symbolizes the American dream. This dream also represents that people, no matter who he or she is, can become successful in life by his or her own work. The desire to strive for what one wants can be accomplished if they work hard enough. The dream is represented by the ideas of a self-sufficient man or woman, who works hard to achieve a goal to become successful. *The Great Gatsby* is a novel that shows what happened to the American Dream in the 1920's, which is a time period when the dreams became corrupted for many reasons. The American dream not only causes corruption but has caused destruction. Myrtle, Gatsby and Daisy have all been corrupted and destroyed by the dream. American culture, though often 'involuntarily', is defined and determined by its characteristic, not seldom even dogmatic and charismatic symbols that have always placed it in a rather distant and unapproachable notch of one's world of perception. American Dream is no exception, and if it is to be something at all, since I suspect few elusive entities to grow along the nation's progress and thus being hardly separable from its 'womb', American Dream being one of them, then only the very logo of the significance of the American nation. It can be argued that because of Fitzgerald's own ongoing personal battles, he subconsciously knew that the American Dream that he had held so dearly onto all of these years was coming to an end. The type of lifestyle that he had held on to all of these years could no longer be maintained, since the strain was too much for any man to bear thus indicating that he himself was the living embodiment of the failure of the American dream: In the background of both author's work as reminders of that moralistic and idealistic strain of Americans who populated a wilderness and created its Washingtons and Lincolns. But the society each saw around him was one in which that kind of American was hard pressed to withstand the amoral and materialistic drive for power that characterized American success. The tragic hero set forth in *Gatsby* is really the American failure, failing to hold to the course of power that wins success and failing, moreover, because of the strength of idealistic illusions ^[3]The desire for a luxurious life is what lures Myrtle into having an affair with Tom. This decision harms her marriage with George, which leads to her death and loss of true happiness. Myrtle has the hope and desire for a perfect, wealthy and famous type life. She enjoys reading gossip magazines which represent her hope for the life of "the rich and famous". This shows how the one reason she wants to be with Tom, is because he represents the life of "the rich and famous". When Myrtle first got married to George Wilson, she

thought that she was crazy about him and thought that they were happy being together. Myrtle says, “The only crazy I was when I married him. I knew right away I made a mistake. He borrowed somebody’s best suit to get married in, and never told me about it, and the man came after it one day when he was out. This shows how materialistic Myrtle is, and that she didn’t appreciate how George couldn’t afford his own suit to get married in. She looks at Tom in a different way. She looks at him as someone who can afford to buy their own suit for their own wedding. Myrtle is attracted to not only Tom’s appearance but his money as well. She believes that Tom is the ideal picture perfect man that represents the advertisement of the American Dream. Myrtle is considered to be lower class, as she doesn’t have a lot of money. Myrtle sleeps with Tom to inch her way to an upper class status. People who are upper class are the ones that have money, drive fancy cars, and have nice, big houses. Myrtle isn’t one of those people, but desires to be one of them. This later on causes destruction, and destroys Myrtle. It was later found that Daisy was the one that hit Myrtle with her car which resulted in the death of Myrtle. [4] Messner and Rosenfeld write that the American Dream ideology “encourages an exaggerated emphasis on monetary achievement while devaluing alternative criterion of success, it promotes a preoccupation with the realization of goals while de-emphasizing the importance of the ways which these goals are pursued” (10). Therefore, over-inflated expectations and emphasis on monetary success can easily lead to corruption. Other studies have also attempted to link the American Dream to materialism, which can essentially lead to corruption. [5] The dream as being tied “to the deceitful attraction of the girl who is both too fragile and too corrupt to carry it” It is ironic that Daisy was the one that killed her, since Myrtle was having an affair with her husband, Tom. This shows how the desire for a luxurious life and having the American dream, only caused destruction in this novel and destroyed someone’s life. The hope for happiness is something that Daisy hoped to have, but by finding out she married the wrong man changed who she is and her overall outlook on life. Early on in the novel, Daisy finds out a secret that Tom is hiding from her. Jordan says, “She might have the decency not to telephone him a dinner time. Tom got a call from some women at dinner time, and Jordan claims that the women is Tom’s, suggesting that he is sleeping with someone else. You learn throughout the novel that Tom and Daisy relationship is not to most ideal, happy relationship. Tom seems to be abusive towards her, and rather does not seem to care much about her. Daisy thinks she has everything, wealth, love and happiness which all tie into the American dream, but then she discovers that she has nothing and that she has been corrupted by this specific dream. She thought she has all she desired for but truly realized she had nothing. She has a child, who does not seem important to her at all. The child is never around, which shows a lot about Daisy. When her child was born, Daisy said “I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool – that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful fool.” Daisy basically explained that there are limited possibilities for women, and she would have rather had a boy. The baby has to be a beautiful fool in order to be happy and successful. Women back in the 1920’s all married for money, and not necessarily love. Daisy thought she had love when she married Tom, but truly in the long run, only came out with money. Ernest H. Lockridge writes, “Gatsby’s dream divides into three basic and related parts: the desire to repeat the past, the desire for money and the desire for incarnation of ‘unutterable visions’ in the material earth” With Gatsby, Daisy realized something that broke her heart. [6] When reunited with Gatsby, who she has not seen in about five years Daisy breaks down and starts to cry. “They’re such beautiful shirts, it makes me sad because I’ve never seen such – such beautiful shirts before.” At this time Daisy realizes that she did marry for money and not for love. She figures out that she could have married for money with Gatsby but would have had love too. The chase for the American dream and the ideal man to be with destroyed Daisy’s happiness. According to Caldwell, the concept of the American Dream is about “liberty, justice, democracy, freedom, equality, and self realization,” while the materialistic aspect is focused around “wealth, material success and property”. [7] Gatsby accomplishes wealth and prestige in a society traditionally dominated by the inheritors of ‘Old Money’. Fitzgerald first reflects this image of the self-made man onto Gatsby through the depiction of the character’s humble beginnings. The author discloses that Gatsby’s parents were “shiftless and unsuccessful farm people”, [8] The ambition for something has thrown Gatsby over the edge. His love and chase for Daisy has taken over his whole life. He feels that he has to live up to the American dream to accomplish what he truly dreams for, which is Daisy. While Gatsby was away fighting in the war, Daisy met Tom and married him. Daisy had always been rich and Gatsby thought that in order to get Daisy back, he needs to have money so that he would be able to give Daisy anything she wanted. There was a green light where Daisy lived that Gatsby would always look out to. The green light is of great significance in this novel. It becomes evident that this green light is not Daisy, but a symbol representing Gatsby’s dream of having Daisy. The fact that Daisy falls short of Gatsby’s expectations is obvious. Knowing this, one can see that no matter how hard Gatsby tries

to live his fantasy, he will never be able to achieve it. Through close examination of the green light, one may learn that the force that empowers Gatsby to follow his lifelong aspiration is that of the American Dream. Fitzgerald uses the green light as a symbol of hope, money, and jealousy. Gatsby looks up to the American dream and follows it so he can be the picture perfect man that every girl desires. Gatsby cares a lot about how people see him, and his appearance towards others. He wants everything to look perfect for Daisy, as he wants Daisy to view him as a perfect man. "We both looked down at the grass – there was a sharp line where my ragged lawn ended and the darker, well-kept expanse of his began. I suspected he meant my grass." This presents the theme of appearance vs. reality and how Gatsby wants everything to look nice and presentable for when he meets up with Daisy for the first time in five years. Gatsby becomes corrupted because his main goal is to have Daisy. He needs to have an enormous mansion so he could feel confident enough to try and get Daisy. Gatsby was blinded by the American dream and as a result of this, cause destruction of Gatsby himself. He didn't end up getting what he wanted because the American dream took over who he truly was. Jillson writes, "Despite the many conflicting strands of the American Creed, the American Dream insists that this must, and must increasingly, be a country in which opportunity is available to all and honest hard work yields the chance to succeed and thrive". [9] The American dream is a powerful dream that was significant in the novel *The Great Gatsby* by Scott Fitzgerald. It was evident that this dream only truly caused corruption and destruction. The desire for something sometimes causes people to be someone they are not and this usually does not result in a positive outcome. The American Dream is defined as someone starting low on the economic or social level, and working hard towards prosperity and or wealth and fame. Most characters in the novel *The Great Gatsby* all wanted money, wealth and happiness and would do anything in their power to get this. *The Great Gatsby* is a novel that shows what happened to the American Dream in the 1920's, which is a time period when the dreams became corrupted. The American dream not only causes corruption but has caused destruction. Myrtle, Gatsby and Daisy have all been corrupted and destroyed by the dream and it was clear to be true. Money cannot buy you happiness which is something that the three characters in the novel *The Great Gatsby* truly did not realize. Gatsby's elevation through America's economic divisions indicates a conviction of Richard Chase: "Jay Gatsby is in origin an archetype of European legend... it is fascinating to observe how, in Fitzgerald's hands, this legend is modified and in some ways fundamentally changed in accordance with American ideas." [10] Charles R. Hearn writes that: The American myth of success has had remarkable vitality and persistence, especially on the popular level. The essential question underlying... is this: What happened to this deeply ingrained and wonderfully compelling dream of success during the Depression of the 1930s when the stark reality of an economic crisis seemed to belie the assumption that, in America, anyone who possessed the proper personal virtues. [11] Historically, the myth of success has been identified with our most cherished cultural values, focusing, dramatizing, and supporting the very ideals that we consider most distinctively America.

3. CONCLUSION

The novel *The Great Gatsby* appeared in American literature in the period when the writers of the "lost generation" were active; thus, the themes of novels are deeply pessimistic taking into consideration the condition of society in America and beyond at the time. Initially, society can embrace the American Dream ideology as a positive concept allowing individuals to achieve their goals. In this novel, it has been shown the seemingly perfect and extravagant lifestyle led by Gatsby. Gatsby throws countless parties, so famous that people travel from all over the country to attend, in his impressive mansion. Money became the distinguishing factor between the worthy and the unworthy. The ideal dream turned to be a corrupt and obsessive pursuit of wealth at all costs. Basically, those who possessed a certain amount of wealth were living the American Dream while those who were struggling were not living up to their potential. Most people in society failed to realize that money did not necessarily equate to success, since not everyone could possibly become a millionaire. On the other hand, a corrupted version of the American Dream ideology can negatively influence a person's morals and goals. In addition, a corrupted American Dream can cause disillusionment, greediness and self-centeredness. Subsequently, a corrupt society can also negatively influence or corrupt the American Dream ideology. The American Dream is no exception; it is the dream that we all have to lead a happy life. America is the land of hope, the new world, a fresh start. Even in times of poverty and sadness it has become a symbol of opportunity and remains to be so till this day.

REFERENCES

- [1] Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*. New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- [2] Henry Dan Piper, 'The Great Gatsby: Finding a Hero' in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Critical Portrait*, (London: The Bodley Head Press, 1966) p.123.
- [3] Brucoli, M, and Fitzgerald, S. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Chicago: Michigan: University of Illinois Press, 2002. Mizener, Arthur. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- [4] Taylor, I. Taylor, P. Walton and J. Young. *The new criminology: For a social theory of deviance*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.
- [5] Lockridge, Ernest. "Introduction." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Ernest Lockbridge. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: 1968.
- [6] Caldwell, Wilber. *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream*. Washington D.C:Potomac Books, 2006.
- [7] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.78.
- [8] Jillson, Cal. *Pursuing the American Dream: Opportunity and Exclusion Over Four Centuries*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004.
- [9] Richard Chase, 'Three Novels of Manners: The Great Gatsby' in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, p.162-3.
- [10] Hearn, Charles R. *The American Dream in the Great Depression*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977.