



WEALTH WITHOUT VIRTUE: THE CORRUPTION OF THE
AMERICAN DREAM IN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S THE GREAT
GATSBY

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Abstract: *This article examines the transformation and ultimate corruption of the American Dream as depicted in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). While the novel is widely studied for its critique of material excess, this paper focuses on a dimension that receives comparatively less scholarly attention: the deliberate erasure of personal identity as a precondition for pursuing the Dream. Drawing on close readings of the novel's central characters — Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and Jordan — and informed by critical frameworks from Michaels (1987), Berman (2001), and Churchwell (2018), this study argues that Fitzgerald presents the American Dream not merely as unattainable, but as inherently self-destructive. The pursuit of wealth, social status, and romantic idealism causes each character to forfeit authentic selfhood in exchange for constructed personas. The findings suggest that Fitzgerald's novel serves as a prescient warning about the psychological and moral costs of a culture that conflates identity with accumulation. The article also situates the novel within its historical moment — the Jazz Age — and draws brief comparisons to contemporary discourses on meritocracy, aspiration, and social mobility.*

Keywords: *American Dream, identity, *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald, materialism, Jazz Age, social class, self-reinvention, moral decay, aspiration*

Few novels in the American literary canon have captured the seductive danger of aspirational culture as precisely as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Published in 1925, the novel arrives at a moment of profound cultural flux: the post-



World War I economic boom had generated unprecedented levels of consumer wealth in the United States, yet this material prosperity coexisted uneasily with deepening social stratification, racial exclusion, and moral disorientation (Churchwell, 2018). It is within this context that Fitzgerald constructed the figure of Jay Gatsby — born James Gatz — as both the embodiment and the victim of the Dream that defines American identity.

Prior scholarship has largely focused on the novel's class critique, its imagery of excess, and its rendering of gender politics (Berman, 2001; Trilling, 1950). This article builds upon that body of work while directing analytical attention to a related but distinct phenomenon: the systematic obliteration of self that the Dream demands. Each of the novel's principal characters undergoes a form of identity distortion in the service of aspiration. Gatsby fabricates an aristocratic biography. Daisy performs an emotional vacancy that insulates her from moral responsibility. Tom appropriates the language of nativist ideology to justify his brutish privilege. Jordan Baker adopts a pose of cynical detachment that serves as armor against genuine feeling. Together, these figures illustrate Fitzgerald's central thesis: that the Dream does not merely fail — it corrupts.

This article proceeds in three parts. Section 2 revisits the historical and ideological origins of the American Dream, situating Fitzgerald's critique within broader debates about opportunity, meritocracy, and selfhood. Section 3 provides a character-focused close reading of the novel, with particular attention to the mechanisms of identity erasure. Section 4 draws conclusions about the enduring relevance of Fitzgerald's critique and its resonance with contemporary conversations about aspiration and inequality.

The American Dream: Origins and Ideological Tensions

The phrase 'American Dream' was not widely popularized until James Truslow Adams employed it in *The Epic of America* (1931), where he defined it as a vision of 'a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement' (Adams, 1931, p. 214). While Adams wrote after the events depicted in *Gatsby*, the ideological contours he



described had been integral to American self-understanding since the colonial period. The Puritan settlers who arrived in New England in the seventeenth century brought with them a theology in which earthly prosperity was interpreted as divine endorsement — a notion that would eventually secularize into the Protestant work ethic famously analyzed by Max Weber (1905).

By the early twentieth century, this ethic had been dramatically reinterpreted. The industrial capitalism of the Gilded Age had demonstrated that vast fortunes could be accumulated not through patient labor but through financial speculation, monopoly, and the exploitation of immigrant labor. The 1920s intensified this transformation: the decade's consumer culture, facilitated by installment credit, mass advertising, and the proliferation of new commodities such as automobiles and radio sets, encouraged Americans to equate identity with purchasing power (Marchand, 1985). As Michaels (1987) has argued in his influential study *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, this period saw the emergence of a cultural logic in which desire itself — rather than productive activity — became the engine of economic and social life.

It is this transformed Dream that Fitzgerald dissects. The novel's critique is not of the original Puritan vision of a land of earned opportunity, but of its deformed 1920s avatar: a Dream that promises self-invention through accumulation, and that punishes those who pursue it most earnestly. The green light at the end of Daisy's dock, which *Gatsby* stretches toward in the novel's famous opening scene, crystallizes this paradox. It is beautiful precisely because it is unreachable; the moment of attainment would destroy the Dream that sustains the dreamer.

Jay Gatsby and the Fabricated Self

Jay Gatsby is the novel's most thoroughgoing illustration of identity as artifice. Born James Gatz in rural North Dakota to 'shiftless and unsuccessful farm people' (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 104), he encounters the wealthy Dan Cody at the age of seventeen and immediately perceives the possibility of a different life — not merely a wealthier one, but a different self altogether. The transformation is so complete that the narrator, Nick Carraway, describes young Gatz as having 'invented just the sort



of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent' (p. 104). Significantly, Fitzgerald frames this not as ambition but as invention — the creation of a fictional character who happens to inhabit a real body.

What is striking about Gatsby's self-construction is its dependence on material signifiers. His mansion in West Egg, his fleet of cars, his shirts imported from England, his carefully rehearsed speech patterns — all are props in a performance designed to convince an audience of one: Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby does not desire wealth for its own sake, nor even for the social mobility it theoretically enables. He desires it as a language, a system of signs through which he can communicate his worthiness to Daisy. The tragedy, as Fitzgerald makes clear, is that Daisy does not speak that language fluently enough to receive the message. She is moved by Gatsby's shirts — she weeps over them — but her tears signal aesthetic pleasure, not recognition of the person behind the purchase.

Berman (2001) has observed that Gatsby's wealth functions less as a reward for ambition than as a compensatory mechanism — an attempt to fill the void left by the abandonment of authentic selfhood. This reading is supported by the novel's careful attention to Gatsby's inner life, which Nick describes as a sustained act of temporal denial: Gatsby does not merely want Daisy; he wants to 'repeat the past' (p. 116), to return to the moment before his real identity was eclipsed by his constructed one. The Dream, in this reading, is not forward-looking at all — it is a fantasy of retrieval, an attempt to reclaim what was surrendered in the process of becoming somebody else.

Daisy, Tom, and the Privilege of Disengagement

If Gatsby represents the Dream's most desperate pursuit, Tom and Daisy Buchanan represent its most comfortable inheritance. Born into the category of what the novel calls 'old money,' the Buchanans have no need to construct identities for themselves — their identities are conferred by lineage, education, and the sheer material weight of their wealth. Yet Fitzgerald presents this apparent advantage as its own form of corruption. The Buchanans are not enviable; they are, as Nick



famously concludes, 'careless people' who 'smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness' (p. 187).

Daisy's character is particularly complex in this regard. Her voice, famously described by Gatsby as 'full of money' (p. 127), functions as the novel's most pointed commentary on the relationship between wealth and femininity. Daisy performs a kind of willed emotional superficiality — her breathless enthusiasms and theatrical sorrows are carefully managed affects designed to charm without committing. When she kills Myrtle Wilson with Gatsby's car and allows Gatsby to assume responsibility, her passivity reads not as weakness but as the practiced exercise of a privilege that has never required her to bear consequences. The Dream, in Daisy's case, is not aspirational but protective: it insulates her from the moral weight of her actions.

Tom Buchanan's relationship to the Dream is equally revealing. Despite — or perhaps because of — his effortless possession of everything the Dream promises, Tom is consumed by anxiety. His affair with Myrtle Wilson, his crude racial theorizing (he endorses the white supremacist pseudoscience of 'The Rise of the Colored Empires'), and his physical bullying all suggest a man who feels his supremacy to be fragile rather than secure. The Dream, for Tom, is not a destination but a defense — an ideology that justifies his dominance by naturalizing it.

The Dream as Cautionary Structure

Fitzgerald's novel does not ultimately argue that the American Dream is false. It argues something more unsettling: that the Dream is true enough to destroy those who believe in it most sincerely. Gatsby achieves extraordinary material success, genuine romantic devotion, and a kind of social visibility that James Gatz could never have imagined. Yet in achieving these things, he loses the capacity for the authentic selfhood that would have made them meaningful. The parties are attended by people who do not know him. The love he pursues is a memory he has idealized into a mythology. The identity he has constructed is so complete that, by the time he is shot by George Wilson in his own swimming pool, there is almost no one to mourn the actual person who has died.



The novel's enduring relevance lies precisely in this structure. Contemporary debates about meritocracy, social mobility, and the relationship between aspiration and identity continue to circle the questions Fitzgerald posed in 1925. Scholars such as Churchwell (2018) have demonstrated how the phrase 'American Dream' has been politically weaponized in the decades since its popularization, deployed alternately to promise opportunity and to blame individuals for structural failures. In each case, the underlying mechanism is the same as the one Fitzgerald diagnosed: the Dream demands that individuals understand themselves as the authors of their own fates, and thus bear personal responsibility for outcomes that are in large part determined by forces beyond their control.

What Fitzgerald offers, then, is not pessimism but clarity. The green light still burns at the end of the dock. The boats are still beating against the current. But the novel insists that we see this striving honestly — not as the noble pursuit of a universal ideal, but as a culturally specific, historically contingent, and deeply costly way of organizing human desire. To read *The Great Gatsby* in the twenty-first century is to recognize that the critique it embodies has lost none of its urgency. The distance between James Gatz and Jay Gatsby is still the distance that a society asks its most ambitious citizens to travel, and the price of that passage is still, too often, the self.

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