

Utopia of the American Dream: Revisiting Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract: A utopia is an imaginary world that has perfect qualities for its people. It is a dream paradise or heaven, a perfect world or society without any problem. It is an ideal place which one wishes or dreams of; a wish-fulfillment that is articulated in literature. The American Dream is the national ethos of the United States which includes the ideals of democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality for all Americans. It implies equal opportunity for all for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility for the family and children which can be achieved through hard labor in a society with few barriers. It is an idea that defines the experiences of the people of America since its existence. The concept of the American Dream is based on the idea that given equal opportunities anyone can achieve success through hard work. Equal opportunities and hard labor are key words in American Dream. Anyone can achieve anything by means of hard labor if he gets equal opportunities to realize his dream. The idea of utopia has been a part of the American Dream since its very conception. Scott Fitzgerald is a modern American novelist. This paper highlights the search for utopia and the failure of the American Dream in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. It underscores how the American Dream of success through hard work is a utopian idea in the modern American society which is corrupt and morally degenerated to its very core.

Keywords: Utopia, American Dream, Success, Morality, Failure

A utopia is an imagined community or society that possesses almost perfect qualities for its citizens. It is a dream paradise or heaven, a perfect world or society without any problem. It is an ideal place which one wishes or dreams of; a wish-fulfillment that is articulated in literature. The American Dream is the national ethos of the United States which includes the ideals of democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity and equality for all Americans. It implies equal opportunity for all for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility for the family and children which can be achieved through hard labor in a society with few barriers. It is an idea that defines the experiences of the people of America since its existence. The term was coined by historian James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book *Epic of America*. He defined American Dream as 'a better and richer and fuller life' for every American, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement' irrespective of 'social class or circumstances of birth.

The American Dream can be traced to the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that "all men are created equal with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The Preamble of the U.S Constitution declares similar freedom to "to secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity."

The idea of the American Dream existed long before James Truslow coined the term. Historically it originated in the American quest for new lands and the conquest of the Frontier. The Governor of Virginia expressed it well in 1774, the Americans “for ever imagine the Lands further off are still better than those upon which they are already settled . . . if they attained Paradise, they would move on if they heard of a better place farther west.” When the Europeans first came to settle in America after it was discovered by Columbus in 1492, they found America a New World, a virgin land, a land with infinite possibilities. It was a land of great promise for them where they could attain their dream of success by means of hard labor. American dream puts emphasis on the concept of the self-made man, that is, a person can attain his dream goal of success by means of hard labor. He does not depend on others of success. “The dream became the pursuit of self-actualization, the pursuit of wealth and social standing that elevated one’s lot and improved the quality of life” (Introduction 7). However, the dream of happiness or success was synonymous with acquiring lots of material wealth which opens the gate to power, position and status in society. It was a dream that one could acquire lots of wealth by means of hard labor and thus could achieve upward social mobility to be a member of the upper class.

The concept of the ‘American Dream’ has repeatedly found its place in popular discourse as well as in American literature. A few instances are: *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. Writers like Hunter S. Thompson, Edward Albee, John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes, and Giannina Braschi used the theme of the American Dream as well in their writings. Besides, the American Dream is often used as a theme by Asian American fiction writers as well.

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was an American novelist, whose writings illustrate the flamboyance and excess of the Jazz Age, that is, 1920s. Though he was a popular writer and achieved fame and fortune in his life, his novels did not receive much critical acclaim until after his death. Like Ernest Hemingway, he was the most notable member of the ‘Lost Generation’ of the 1920s. He is renowned for his four famous novels: *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tender is the Night*. His unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon* was published posthumously. He also published four volumes of short stories and contributed around 164 short stories in magazines during his lifetime.

The Great Gatsby is a classic of American literature. It is a critique of the American Dream and the modern American society. This paper highlights how Fitzgerald depicts the all-pervading and corrosive moral degeneration in American society which has resulted in the failure of the American Dream in the modern America. Basically, the plot revolves around the dream of the protagonist Jay Gatsby, though other characters like Tom Buchanan, Jordan baker and Myrtle Wilson have their dreams in their own ways. Tom Buchanan, a former national football player, dreams of “the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game” (29). Myrtle Wilson, the wife of the garage owner on the Valley of Ashes, George Wilson, dreams of upward social mobility and a luxurious life through her illicit relationship with wealthy Tom

Buchanan. Unlike the American dream which presupposes hard labor on the part of the dreamer to achieve his goal, the dreams of Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson are not backed by hard labor in true sense of the term. On the contrary, Jay Gatsby has two dreams of his life—to be wealthy and to marry Daisy whom he loves intensely. First, his original name is James Gatz. He hails from a poor peasant family in North Dakota. A chance meeting with a millionaire, Dan Cody, with whom he works, makes him dedicate himself to achieve wealth. His second but primary dream is to marry Daisy. It is his romantic dream. When getting training to be an officer in Louisville, he meets and falls in love with the most beautiful Daisy who hails from a rich aristocratic family. Daisy is courted by several officers; but she falls in love with Gatsby and promises to wait for him. But she marries a wealthy and powerful young man named Tom Buchanan who belongs to the same upper class wealthy aristocratic family. When Jay Gatsby returns from War, he devotes his life to get back Daisy. He acquires wealth by corrupt means in order to be very rich so that he can go back to his past and marry Daisy. Actually, he becomes fabulously rich by hard labor, though by corrupt means. He is a self-made man. Unlike the traditionally rich Tom and Daisy, he does not inherit any wealth and property. He acquires it. His dream centers round Daisy. He is a romantic lover. In the very first chapter, Nick Carraway, the omniscient narrator describes how he finds Jay Gatsby, his neighbor:

I decided to call him. Miss Baker had mentioned him at dinner, and that would do for an introduction. But I did not call him for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of the dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness. (40)

This green light is a significant recurring symbol in the novel. It signifies Gatsby's romantic dream for Daisy. His stretched-out arms suggest his dream to embrace Daisy. After he meets Daisy in the house of Nick, he no longer sees the green light. Jay has no friends so to say. He is all alone in his pursuit of his dream.

He owns and lives in a huge Gothic mansion in West Egg of Long Island, just the opposite of East Egg where Daisy and Tom live. He throws lavish parties every Saturday night with the hope that someday Daisy would come to his party and their relationship would revive, but no one knows anything about him. Even the guests do not know who their host is. He appears to be a mysterious man whose reputation is built by rumours in his great parties. They speculate about his identity. Eventually Nick receives an invitation from Jay Gatsby to his lavish party. In the party, he meets Jay Gatsby and Jordan Baker. Jay Gatsby requests Nick through Jordan Baker to arrange a meeting between him and Daisy in his house. Jay Gatsby is so much obsessed with his dream of getting back Daisy in his life that he wants to obliterate the years of their separation and to redeem the past years of his passionate love with Daisy and to marry her. The following conversation between Nick and Jay Gatsby makes it clear:

He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: "I never loved you." After she had obliterated three years with that sentence, they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken. One of them was that, after she was free, they were to go back to Louisville and be married from her house—just as if it were five years ago.

. . . . "You can't repeat the past."

"Can't repeat the past? "He cried incredulously. Why of course you can!"

He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. (105-106)

Nick arranges a meeting between Jay and Daisy. After some time, Jay invites Nick and Daisy to his house. He shows them all his rooms and things. Fitzgerald describes the reaction of Jay through Nick:

He hadn't once ceased looking at Daisy and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes. Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real. Once he nearly toppled down a flight of stairs. (92)

While Jay Gatsby loves Daisy with his mind and soul, Daisy's love for Jay is not so deep. She is drawn towards the artificial outward glamour of life. When Jay shows his expensive suits, dressing-gowns, ties, shirts, 'piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high,' Daisy screams in great joy. Fitzgerald describes her joy in these words:

Suddenly with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.

"They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before." (92)

Jay Gatsby's romantic love and his dedication for Daisy do not match the object of his dream. Daisy loves outward glamour of life. She lacks the depth of true and sincere love for Jay. Jay feels this lack of depth in the love of Daisy for him and Fitzgerald expresses this idea in these sentences:

His heart beat faster and faster as Daisy's white face came up to his own. He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God. (106)

After Tom comes to know about the relationship between Daisy and Jay, he becomes furious. He knows that Daisy would not leave him; but he wants to prove his superiority to Jay. So, one day he arrogantly proposes all of them to drive to New York. While returning he insists that Daisy and Jay drive together by Jay's yellow car. Daisy drives the car and runs over Myrtle who rushes forward thinking that it is Tom who is driving the car because while going to New

York Tom was driving the same car. Daisy and Jay do not stop and rush forward. Then Nick and Tom return along the same road and find that Myrtle is dead. Tom drops the hint to angry George Wilson that the yellow car belongs to Jay. George vows to take revenge thinking that Jay is Myrtle's secret lover. When Nick returns home he finds Jay waiting behind a bush keeping watch over Daisy and Tom. Jay thinks that Tom may create problem for Daisy. Nick and Jay find Daisy and Tom sitting opposite each other at the kitchen table with a plate of cold fried chicken between them and two bottles of ale. Fitzgerald describes the intimacy between Daisy and Tom as if nothing has happened:

They weren't happy, and neither of them had touched the chicken and the ale—and yet they weren't unhappy either. There was unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together. (133)

Jay Gatsby refuses to budge from his watch over Daisy and Nick returns home. In the words of Nick:

“I want to wait here till Daisy goes to bed. Good night, old sport.” He put his hands in his coat pockets and turned back eagerly to his scrutiny of the house, as though my presence marred the sacredness of the vigil. So, I walked away and left him standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing. (134)

Next day Gatsby is found murdered in his swimming pool. The body of George Wilson is also found in the nearby garden. Wilson first kills Gatsby and then commits suicide. Nick takes upon himself the responsibility of arranging the funeral of Jay Gatsby. Nick instinctively calls Daisy only to find out that she and Tom have left for some unknown destination. Nick contacts many of Jay's business partners, friends and guests to attend the funeral. Nobody except Jay's old father, Henry Gatz, the Owl-eyed man, the West Egg post man and a few servants attend his funeral. Jay Gatsby lives and dies alone. He becomes great for his idealistic and romantic love for Daisy.

In this novel Scott Fitzgerald depicts the failure of the American Dream in the failure of Jay Gatsby to achieve his dream, that is, Daisy. Daisy is not worthy of Gatsby's dream and love. She is fickle-minded and artificial in her love for Jay. She is a hypocrite like her husband Tom. She never reveals the truth that she was driving the car when the accident occurred. She is careless and callous in her attitude. She does not attend Jay's funeral who sacrifices his life for the sake of her love. No doubt Jay acquires his wealth by unfair means. But he is great for his single-minded devotion to achieve his dream of Daisy.

Besides, Fitzgerald exposes the degeneration of moral values in all spheres of life in modern American society. It has crept into the family, the basic unit of society. There is illicit and immoral relationship and hypocrisy between husband and wife. For instance, Daisy and Tom have no true love between them. Tom has extra-marital relationship with the wife of a low-class garage owner, Myrtle Wilson. And Daisy knows that Tom has illicit relation with someone, though she has no idea about that woman. It reveals artificial relationship between

Tom and Daisy which lacks honesty, sincerity and faithfulness on which true relationship between a husband and a wife should be based. On the contrary, their relationship is based on wealth and glamour of the traditionally rich aristocratic families without any moral values. What seems to be a successful happy family has no solid base of moral values. In this manner Scott Fitzgerald shows in this novel how in course of time the American dream of success has become divorced from moral values and hence it fails.

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