The Great Gatsby: The Corruption of the American Dream through Materialism

The American dream is an ideal that has been present since American literature’s onset. Typically, the dreamer aspires to rise from rags to riches, while accumulating such things as love, high status, wealth, and power on his way to the top. The dream has had variations throughout different time periods, although it is generally based on ideas of freedom, self-reliance, and a desire for something greater. The early settlers’ dream of traveling out West to find land and start a family has gradually transformed into a materialistic vision of having a big house, a nice car, and a life of ease. In the past century, the American dream has increasingly focused on material items as an indication of attaining success. In The Great Gatsby, Jay Gatsby is a self-made man who started out with no money—only a plan for achieving his dream. He is so blinded by his luxurious possessions that he does not see that money cannot buy love or happiness. Fitzgerald demonstrates how a dream can become corrupted by one’s focus on acquiring wealth, power, and expensive things.

Gatsby’s dream “is a naïve dream based on the fallacious assumption that material possessions are synonymous with happiness, harmony, and beauty” (Fahey 70). His American dream has become corrupted by the culture of wealth and opulence that surrounds him.
Gatsby is a “nouveau riche,” and his romantic view of wealth has not prepared him for the self-interested, snobbish, corrupt group of people with which he comes to associate. He throws lavish parties for countless people, yet he has no real friends. Gatsby buys expensive things and entertains large groups of society because of his incommunicable desire for something greater. Nick Carraway realizes that although Gatsby is involved in underhanded business dealings and is fixated on money, he is a good man at heart. The last time Nick sees Gatsby alive, he tells him, “They’re a rotten crowd…. You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (Fitzgerald 162).

Gatsby’s romantic view of life may partly be to blame for his inability to achieve his dream. Although he has made his fortune through racketeering and conducting suspicious business deals, his heart seems untouched by the moral evil that is around him. “He has lived not for himself, but for his dream, for his vision of the good life inspired by the beauty of a lovely rich girl” (Fahey 71). Gatsby’s inspiration comes from the beautiful Daisy (Fay) Buchanan, whom he knew when he was in the military. Daisy’s parents considered Gatsby to be an unsuitable match, because he did not come from a good background and had little money. Nick Carraway, the narrator, sees Daisy as the golden girl—the quintessential rich beauty.
Daisy is the symbol of all that Gatsby strives for; her voice is full of money, as Gatsby describes it. Her voice was “full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song in it” (Fitzgerald 127). She can be interpreted as a twentieth-century siren because she ensnares men with her husky, mysterious voice. Gatsby became so enamored by her voice that he based all of his actions on winning Daisy over. Her voice contains the promise of vast riches. However, Gatsby is too late to realize that money is the only thing her voice promises. There is no compassion in Daisy, just as there is none in cold, hard cash.

Gatsby’s idealism is so great that even though Daisy is married and they are having an affair, he assumes that his vision will be realized as long as she will say that she has never loved her husband, Tom. “Not content merely to repeat the past, [Gatsby] must also eradicate the years in which his dream lost its reality” (Bloom 78). Daisy has been the object of Gatsby’s obsession for the past five years, and his romanticism will not allow him to separate the past from the present. He still sees Daisy as the golden girl he knew five years ago, and he is still set on their golden future together.

Gatsby’s lapse in judgment is in not realizing that Daisy represents both material success and the corruption that wealth can bring. Although she appears to be full of sweetness and light, she is at heart self-centered
and cold. Daisy is careless with people’s lives; she lets Gatsby take the blame for her unintentional manslaughter of Myrtle Wilson. Her careless actions eventually result in Gatsby’s death, of which she shows no concern. She commits adultery, but she had no real intentions of leaving her husband. After she learns of Gatsby’s shady background, she quickly runs back into the arms of her equally self-absorbed, corrupt husband.

The Buchanans live in the wealthy and highly exclusive East Egg of Long Island, which is the location that Gatsby probably desires. The green light at the end of the Buchanans’ dock symbolizes Gatsby’s yearning for wealth and power, and it also embodies Daisy as the object of Gatsby’s desire. An obvious interpretation of the light is that the green represents money. The green color can also represent envy—the “green-eyed monster”—because Gatsby longs to be a part of the East Egg society. The fact that the green light can be seen across the bay, “minute and far away” from Gatsby’s mansion, symbolizes that it—Daisy or wealth—is out of his reach, even though he can still see a glimpse of it.

Daisy and Tom’s marriage is further proof of the collapse of the American dream. Although they belong to the elitist West Egg social group and have extreme wealth, they are unhappy. Tom is first described as “one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anti-climax” (Fitzgerald 11). Tom and Daisy are both in unsatisfied with life and are searching for
something better. They have traveled to France and drifted “here and there unrestfully wherever people were rich and played polo together” (Fitzgerald 11). They are unhappy and bored with life. Tom seems to be searching for the excitement that he found in playing football in college, and he finds an outlet for his dissatisfaction by cheating on his wife with Myrtle. Once again, Gatsby does not see that attaining wealth and power does not equal happiness.

The Buchanans’ marriage is full of lies and infidelities, yet they are united through their corruption. After Tom has discovered Daisy’s infidelity and Myrtle has been killed, their callous selfishness is revealed when they are reunited over fried chicken and two bottles of ale. “They instinctively seek out each other because each recognizes the other’s strength in the corrupt spiritual element they inhabit” (Bewley 46). After Myrtle and Gatsby are both killed, neither one of the Buchanans sends their regards or seem remorseful. In fact, they go on a short vacation, which is an indication of the lack of compassion they have toward others. Nick perceives Tom and Daisy as they really are, heartless and careless. “They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (Fitzgerald 188). Tom and Daisy’s actions are an indication of the detrimental and emotionally numbing effects that wealth can have on
someone. They focus too much on appearance and things of monetary value, while ignoring people’s feelings and lives.

Jordan Baker’s plans are also negatively impacted by the corruptive qualities of wealth. Although Nick is attracted to Jordan’s bored, jaunty, careless air at first, he finally understands that it conveys her profound disregard for other people’s feelings. Jordan supports Daisy having an affair, because “Daisy ought to have something in her life” (Fitzgerald 85). She sees Gatsby as something, not someone. Jordan also has a reputation for being dishonest and for being a gossip. She was involved in a golf tournament scandal in which she was accused of moving her golf ball to her advantage. Jordan belongs to the elitist East Egg social group because of her careless, dishonest ways. She serves as a hint as to the true nature of the people from East Egg. Jordan may also be an indication of the types of people that Gatsby entertains, since she attends his parties. She is similar to many of his partygoers in that she exploits his hospitality yet never shows any genuine kindness toward him.

It is very telling that Gatsby’s house is full of people throughout the entire summer, yet when Gatsby dies, no one attends his funeral except Nick and Gatsby’s father. The shallow acquaintances of Gatsby were never his true friends—the only used him for his lavish generosity. The countless people who attend his parties, ride on his hydroplane and in his car, and drink his alcohol are nowhere to be seen when the time comes to
pay their respects for him. The only guest who calls Gatsby’s home is Klipspringer, who lived in Gatsby’s mansion for a period of time. However, he only calls to inquire about a pair of shoes that he has misplaced. The corrupt atmosphere in which Gatsby has lived blights his dream of success.

Nick is an atypical attendee of Gatsby’s parties, because he is the only one who shows compassion for Gatsby. Nick knows the truth about Gatsby—his humble background, his dishonest business dealings, and his aspirations for success. Nevertheless, Nick recognizes that although Gatsby has become immersed in a world of materialism and corruption, he is still a good man. Perhaps because he and Gatsby both come from the Midwest, they do not truly belong with the shallow company of East Egg and West Egg. Nick serves as an objective view of the superficial world that surrounds him in Long Island.

Nick’s personality is deeply rooted in ideals of the Midwest and of his family. Nick comes to the East because he is feeling restless upon his return from World War I. However, he comes to realize that the East is full of heartless and shallow people. This atmosphere does not fit well with Nick’s honest and sincere character. His Midwest background has given him a comparison for judging the glitz and materialism that surrounds him. Nick’s American dream is based on his experiences of warm home life and friendly faces. He fondly recalls memories of taking
the train home from college with friendly faces and jingling sleigh bells to
keep him company. “It is the counterpoint to Gatsby’s sustaining dream,
which it frames and interprets, a dream of aspiration that moves Gatsby
to follow it to imagined glory and unforeseen defeat” (Fahey 79). Nick’s
dream is closer to the original American dream, which was focused more
around family than wealth and an unending quest for success. Nick
represents the opposite path that Gatsby could have taken from the
Midwest. Gatsby still possesses the principles of the Midwest, but his
values have become blurred by the bright lights and the sparkle of Daisy’s
golden glow.

Although Nick describes the towns beyond the Ohio River as boring
and sprawled, it is obvious that Fitzgerald’s novel is a commentary on the
distortion of the traditional American dream as a result of the East. “The
lure of the East represents a profound displacement of the American
dream, a turning back upon itself of the historic pilgrimage towards the
frontier which had, in fact, created and sustained that dream” (Bloom 75).

While the geographic locations of the East and the Midwest play
broad roles in shaping the novel’s view on values and money, the
microcosms of East Egg, West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes further
emphasize the socioeconomic disparity between classes. East Eggers are
at the top of the social ladder, while the inhabitants of West Egg cannot
seem to reach them. This brings to surface the differences between “old
money” and “new money.” Gatsby cannot accomplish his dream partly because of the superior claims that old moneyed families have over newly wealthy individuals. This directly relates to Gatsby being able to see the green light on the Buchanan’s dock but not being able to reach it. The working-class, depressing area dubbed the “Valley of Ashes” reinforces the idea that corruption surrounds the wealthy. The Valley of Ashes is where Tom acts out his infidelities. It is also the location for Daisy’s killing of Myrtle. Tom and Daisy respectively use and harm members of this class with no remorse.

On the surface, Fitzgerald’s novel may appear to be just a shallow novel about the jazz, parties, and glitz that he experienced in the early twentieth century. After closer examination, however, it is apparent that The Great Gatsby is a profound social commentary on the corrupt and disillusioning effects that materialism can have on members of society. The have-nots yearn to be like the have, yet those who already have wealth and status are unhappy and dissatisfied with their lives. On the whole, the elitist group in the novel displays characteristics of being bored, disenchanted, and unmotivated. For example, the Buchanans drift from one place to the next, with no real plan or goal in mind. Jordan Baker has a constant bored, unaffected look upon her face. These people are the “have,” but Fitzgerald makes the reader question whether what they possess is really worth having. Gatsby has devoted his life to
belonging to this exclusive group, but it becomes obvious that he never will belong because of his disreputable background. It should also be noted that Gatsby’s romantic idealism does not fit in with this group; no matter how far up the social ladder he climbed, he would never really fit in. The great irony seems to be that the people who have the means, monetary or socially, to grasp their dreams do not have the motivation or the will.

The drifting, careless, shallow people who comprise the social group of East Egg and West Egg are representative of the corruption that materialism can bring. Gatsby is surrounded by this materialism and discontent, which serves to tarnish his dream of success. His rags-to-riches dream turns into a dark nightmare that leads to his untimely downfall. His romantic idealism has not prepared him for the corrupt world in which he enters. Gatsby is surrounded by proof of the unhappiness that “success” can bring, as seen especially through Tom and Daisy. Their marriage is full of lies and deceit, and they are both searching for something greater than what they already have. Gatsby is so blinded by his dream that he does not see that money cannot buy love or happiness. Fitzgerald effectively offers a powerful critique of a materialistic society and the effects it can have on one’s hopes and dreams.
Works Cited

