

## On “Great Dream” in *The Great Gatsby*

JING Jing

Changchun University, Changchun, China

JING Xia

No. 20 Junior Middle School of Siping, Siping, China

*The Great Gatsby* is a representative work of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and it is a specific depiction of American society during the Roaring Twenties, telling the quintessential American story of a man rising from rags to riches. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald shows how the American Dream is full of materialism, and how materialism influences the lives of people and makes it hard for people to see the reality objectively. This paper aims at interpreting Gatsby’s “Great Dream” and analyzing the influence of the social and historical backgrounds on Gatsby’s “Great Dream”.

**Keywords:** American Dream, “Great Dream”, Gatsby

### Introduction

*The Great Gatsby* is a novel by the American author F. Scott Fitzgerald which was first published in 1925, and it was republished in 1945 and 1953. *The Great Gatsby* is the most important work that Fitzgerald wrote. The Modern Library named it the second best English-language novel of the 20th century. Gatsby is the main protagonist of *The Great Gatsby*. And in this paper, Gatsby’s “Great Dream” is interpreted and the influence of the social and historical backgrounds on Gatsby is also analyzed.

### The Interpretation of Gatsby’s “Great Dream”

In *The Great Gatsby*, the “Great Dream” has two meanings. On the one hand, the dream can be called “great”, for on the way to win the love, the protagonist also realizes his own self-improvement. So in this way, his dream’s greatness lies in his great ambitions of his future and the persistence in pursuing his ideal dream. On the other hand, due to the unrealistic characteristic of his dream and the whole process of the realization, his dream cannot really be called “great”.

Gatsby is the main character and protagonist of *The Great Gatsby*. He rose from an impoverished child in rural North Dakota to become a fabulously wealthy man living in a Gothic mansion in West Egg. In *The Great Gatsby*, it is obvious that Gatsby’s dream is a symbol of the “American Dream” for the wealth and youth. Gatsby genuinely had a belief that money can buy anything, innocently thinking that his wealth can erase the last five years of his and Daisy’s life and reunite them at the original point. He only came into riches so that he can fulfill his true “American Dream”—Daisy. He was famous for the spendthrift parties he threw every Saturday night but remained mysterious, for no one knew where he came from, what he did, or how he made his fortune, and the

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JING Jing, lecturer, master, School of Foreign Languages, Changchun University.

JING Xia, lecturer, bachelor, No. 20 Junior Middle School of Siping.

party they threw at the weekend was a hallmark of the rich. When Gatsby's dream was ruined by Daisy's objection to deny that she had ever loved Tom, Fitzgerald is stating that the “American Dream” of wealth and beauty is just as fragile. As time progressed, Gatsby's true identity began to be unveiled little by little: He was born James Gatz on a farm in North Dakota, working for a millionaire, Dan Cody, who made him devote his life to the achievement of wealth. While he was trained to be an officer in Louisville, he met Daisy. He immediately fell in love with her aura of luxury, grace, and charm, and lied to her about his own background to make her believe that he was good enough to match her. However, Daisy married Tom Buchanan while Gatsby was studying at Oxford after the war. Since that time on, Gatsby dedicated himself to winning Daisy back. He made his fortune by participating in organized crime, including distributing illegal alcohol and trading in stolen securities, as he was willing to do anything to gain the social status he thought necessary to win Daisy who was the “golden girl” in his dream. As his relentless quest for Daisy demonstrated, Gatsby had an outstanding ability to transform his dreams into reality. While as time went by, Gatsby revealed himself to be a man who staked everything on his dreams, unaware that his dreams were unworthy of him. Gatsby invested Daisy with an idealistic perfection that she could not probably attain in reality and pursued her with a passionate zeal that blinded him to her limitations. Daisy was revealed to be a careless woman whose voice was full of money. Gatsby refused to accept the loss of time and his desire to repeat the past was centered on recapturing an experience with Daisy. His dream was bound to fail because it was an abstract idealism, but it became rooted in the material, rather than transcending it. However, Daisy could not fulfill Gatsby's dream, so his dream of her was disintegrated.

The stress on materialism and money and material things is a characteristic trait of people that represents the era of Fitzgerald's “American Dream”. Gatsby's greatness rests on his dream, which distinguishes him from the other disillusioned people, who had lost the capacity to wonder and to dream. But from another point of view, his “American Dream” rested on Daisy, and until the end of the story, he still held illusions towards Daisy even though Daisy's love to Gatsby was not what it was.

### **The Backgrounds of Gatsby's “Great Dream”**

The 1920s were the decades known as the Roaring Twenties. It was a time of “roaring” excitement, “roaring” confusion, and “roaring” change. It was marked by political ignorance, wild pursuit of material wealth, and social intolerance. Economically, it was a time when emphasis was shifted from production to consumption, when personal spending boomed, when automobiles, telephones, radios, and refrigerators were the new technological wonders for the middle class.

The Jazz Age is a period of time after WWI (World War I), beginning with the Roaring Twenties and ending with the beginning of the Great Depression. The author F. Scott Fitzgerald is credited with creating the term for the time, and he named some of his short stories after this period—*Tales of the Jazz Age*. The Jazz Age refers not only to the music of the time, but also to the literature, and new developments in art, and a change in the social behavior of America. The age represents a shift in values in America, and a focus on living life to the fullest. Moreover, it also refers to a growing materialism among Americans. After WWI and the flu epidemic, individuals were exuberant to be alive. The economic prosperity of the 1920s and the growth of the stock market influenced splurges in spending. Individuals wanted to just enjoy life after the misery of the previous decade.

At that period of time, all Americans have a tendency to hold a belief that if they are rich enough, they can manipulate time, remain eternally young, and buy their happiness by means of materialistic spending. The sense of wonder of the first settlers in America was quickly turned into an unsaturated pursuit for more wealth. Where there is great wealth, there is sadness and waste always to follow. The ostentatious, wild lifestyle of the wealthy during the Roaring Twenties was followed by the stark reality of the stock market crash and the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In this sense, the novel is not a lyrical story of a uniquely romantic materialism in which people try to convince themselves that desire can define reality; gesture can define action; and sentiment can define emotion. On the contrary, it is a mockery of that kind of romanticism, and it is also a complex study of the American dream. *Gatsby*, the embodiment of the American Dream, is to be looked upon sympathetically and critically.

In an age of fast-paced and "roaring" change, American fiction of the 1920s, including Fitzgerald's fiction, registered a sense of purposelessness, decadence, and cultural emptiness. It also captured both an excitement about the new and an anxiety about what was lost. Fitzgerald's fiction tells the story of the period so well that it has virtually become its literary emblem. His art was directly impacted by some personal experiences of setbacks, humiliation, and excess.

A great theme of the age was individualism and a greater emphasis on the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment in the wake of the misery, destruction, and perceived hypocrisy and waste of WWI and pre-war values. Perhaps one of the most representative literary works of the age is *The Great Gatsby* (1925) by F. Scott Fitzgerald, which highlighted what some describe as the decadence and hedonism of the post-WWI age, as well as new social and sexual attitudes, and the growth of individualism.

### **The Influence of Backgrounds on Gatsby's "Great Dream"**

*The Great Gatsby* was written during a prosperous time in American history. In 1922, America has fully recovered from WWI, and enjoys prosperity during the "roaring" 1920s. The economy soared and emotions ran high. Yet, at the same time, prohibition, the ban on the sale and manufacture of alcohol was gaining traction. The ban on alcohol made millionaires out of bootleggers, who were smuggling in the illegal substance. That scenario is the backdrop for the novel, which contributed to its popularity. On the surface, *The Great Gatsby* is a story of the thwarted romantic love. The main theme of the novel, however, encompasses a much larger, less romantic scope. *The Great Gatsby* is a highly symbolic meditation on the Roaring Twenties' America as a whole, particularly the disintegrated American Dream by the vulgar pursuit of wealth in a period of unprecedented prosperity and material excess. The Roaring Twenties depicted by Fitzgerald, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed, and empty pursuit of pleasure, was an era of decayed social and moral values. The reckless jubilation resulted ultimately in the corruption of the American Dream, as the unrestrained aspiration for money and pleasure surpassed nobler goals. Originally, the American Dream was about discovery, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness. In the Roaring Twenties, however, wealth has corrupted the dream, in particular on the East Coast. In this novel, Gatsby's only dream for Daisy strongly reflects this assessment, as Gatsby's dream of loving Daisy is corrupted by attaining wealth through illegal means to impress her. Just as Americans have endowed America with meaning through their dreams for their own lives, Gatsby instills Daisy with a sort of idealized perfection that she neither deserves nor possesses. Just as the American Dream in the Roaring Twenties

is ruined by the unworthiness of its goal, money, and pleasure, Gatsby longs to re-create a vanished past of his romantic love with Daisy but fails to fulfill it. When his dream crumbles, the only way out for Gatsby is to die.

A society is made up of various social groups over time. Members of lower status constantly suppose that their problems will be solved if they get enough wealth to reach the upper class. Many people interpret American Dream as being this passage to higher social status. As long as one reaches that point, he does not have to be concerned about money at all. In fact, the dream involves attaining a balance between the spiritual strength and the physical strength of an individual. Fitzgerald portrays the ultimate failure of American Dream in which individuals tend to believe wealth is everything. *The Great Gatsby* also describes the failure of American Dream from the point of view that American political ideals conflict with the actual social conditions. American democracy is based on the idea of equality among people, but the truth is that social discrimination still exists and the divisions among the classes cannot be overcome. The book implies that American idealism is destroyed by American greed. It is about the struggle for the soul of America by opposing forces, idealism on the one hand and materialism on the other. Fitzgerald stresses the need for hope and dream to give meaning and purpose to man's efforts. Striving towards some ideal is the way by which man can feel a sense of involvement, a sense of his identity. As a social satire, *The Great Gatsby* is also a comment on moral decadence in modern American society. It is concerned with the corruption of values and the decline of spiritual life. The beauty and splendor of Gatsby's parties mask the inner corruption within the heart of the twenties. People live from day to day to avoid looking forward to the future. In this immoral world, Gatsby tries hard to fit into the society, but in vain. When he dies, no one comes. Dreamers in a healthy society are respected and encouraged. Yet, in the twenties, they are used and mistreated. Fitzgerald uses the notion of destroyed dreams to illustrate his lost generation. The idea of American Dream still holds true nowadays. It may be wealth, fame, love, or power. But one thing never changes about American Dream. That is, everyone desires something in life, and everyone strives to get it. Gatsby is a prime example of pursuing American Dream.

### Conclusion

In this paper, the author chooses *The Great Gatsby* to analyze the protagonist—Gatsby's "Great Dream" based on social and historical backgrounds. Gatsby has a humble origin when he fell in love with the young lady. Virtually, he hopes that they can have a bright future and great expectations to realize his dream of becoming a better man, while he twists his dream and seems to be too eager to be successful. He regards winning his love of the heroine as his "Great Dream". So in order to live up to his unrealistic dreams to become a wealthy man with a high social status, he throws away his good nature, which in turn makes him suffer a lot in the end. And it seems that Gatsby is too blindly persistent in winning the love of Daisy, which is actually the embodiment of his "American Dream", and finally is falsely incriminated by Daisy and Tom.

To conclude, by analyzing the protagonist's characteristics under social and historical backgrounds, we can see that one's real worth and value lies in the conscience and affection rather than wealth and social status. And, this paper also emphasizes the significance of rebuilding people's spiritual civilization and the regression of human morality.

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