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Fitzgerald's Rendering of a Dream

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It would be remiss to ignore the obvious connection of Gatsby's dream to the American dream itself. Countless critics and scholars have noted the connection and by doing so have suggested that F. Scott Fitzgerald would approve of such a reading. However, Marius Bewley, in his article "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America," contends that Fitzgerald, through *The Great Gatsby*, offers up a rather harsh critique of the American dream and not merely a "pastoral documentary of the Jazz Age" as is often suggested (Bewley 37). Through *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald attempts to correct Americans' misconceptions about the American dream. John F. Callahan, author of *The Illusion of a Nation: Myth and History in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, agrees that Fitzgerald's scrutiny of the American dream is sharp—and pointed directly at the heart of American ideology. The dream itself is ambiguous, contradictory, romantic in nature, and undeniably beautiful while at the same time grotesquely flawed. Fitzgerald understood the duality inherent in the American dream's essential character, and his understanding is inextricably woven into the style and form of *The Great Gatsby*. It is through the language itself, and the recurrent romantic imagery, that Fitzgerald offers up his critique and presents the dream for what it truly is: a mirage that entices us to keep moving forward even as we are ceaselessly borne back into the past (Fitzgerald 189).

The majority of scholarship regarding *The Great Gatsby* either revolves around, or specifically focuses upon, Fitzgerald's style and form, and suggests that it is the lens through which he projects his critique of America's ideology and the pursuit of its dream. George Garrett claims that the language of *Gatsby*, Nick's language, offers both "lyrical evocations and depths of feelings" and "hard-knuckled matters of fact. It allows for poetry of intense perception to live

simultaneously and at ease with a hard-edged, implacable vulgarity" (Garrett 111). The juxtaposition of poetic language and vulgarity mirrors Fitzgerald's critique of the American dream—its romantic idealism and its harsh reality. Barbara Will, in her article "The Great Gatsby and the Obscene Word" also cites the power of Nick's "lyrical paragraphs" to present Gatsby's fate as an "allegory for the course of the American nation and for the struggles and dreams of its citizens" (25). And James E. Miller, author of *The Fictional Technique of Scott Fitzgerald,* takes these ideas further and directly states that Fitzgerald uses "style or language to reflect theme" (80).

If Fitzgerald's style and language indeed reflect theme (as Miller suggests and as I contend), then it becomes clear that Fitzgerald sees the American dream—its ideology and its very character—as a contradiction to and a distortion of reality. As far as language is concerned, one need only look to the use of oxymoron and hyperbole as proof of Fitzgerald's cultural critique. The first indication of Fitzgerald's attitude regarding American character and identity (which is inseparable from the American dream—the dream of equality, fairness, unity, and, ultimately, financial and material success) appears on the first page of the text, in Nick's "hostile levity" for the "intimate revelations of young men" that are "marred by obvious suppressions" (5). The "hostile levity" that Nick feels is indicative of America's attitude, as is the "obvious suppressions" of which he speaks. The "obvious suppressions," in this case, are Fitzgerald's hint at America's evasion of its history and its willingness to seek, as John Callahan puts it, "mythologies of fraudulent innocence," where we escape blame for the atrocities we have committed in the name of progress and deny the contradictions inherent in our ideology, especially that of equality for all people (Callahan 1).

Americans (Fitzgerald included) tend to perceive the American dream as a promise of freedom—freedom from persecution and unjust hostility as well as the freedom to advance and achieve success. Part of that dream is that all, not just the privileged few, share in this promise. However, Fitzgerald indicates through the language of the text (Nick's language) that our ideology is "marred" by our "obvious suppressions" to the point that even though we are united, we are still quite separate and emotionally isolated from each other. One example of this is the oxymoron Nick uses to describe Daisy and Tom as "two old friends whom [he] scarcely knew at all" (11). We hold unity in the highest esteem, but we are divided by our ambitions and are willing to oppress others to achieve our individual goals, even though our nation's founding principles seem to suggest that we would—or should—want to do otherwise. Fitzgerald continues his depiction of the "fractiousness" (11) of American identity through other contradictory images such as Mr. McKee asleep on the chair in Myrtle and Tom's apartment looking like a "photograph of a man of action" (41) as well as through the "strained counterfeit

of perfect ease" (91) that Gatsby displays when meeting Daisy after a five year separation. Through the "photograph of a man of action," Fitzgerald negatively implies (via Nick's observations) that Americans are pretentious; we rely on images instead of reality to the point that "reality [has become] an endangered concept in American society" (Barret 1). We speak of equality and unlimited possibilities, but in reality both are illusions. We exchange action for the image of it just as Gatsby has a "better time telling" Daisy of the great things he "was going to do" than he actually does doing them (Fitzgerald 157). Fitzgerald's sharper criticism, however, lies within Nick's depiction of Gatsby's "strained counterfeit of perfect ease." The words "strained" and "ease" are obviously contradictory; however, "counterfeit" truly captures Fitzgerald's criticism of America's character—our supposed perfection and idyllic "ease" is a myth, and, like Gatsby, we are "way off [our initial] ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute" with an illusory vision of what it is to participate in (as Fitzgerald sees it) "the last and greatest of all human dreams"—the American dream (189).

For Fitzgerald the American dream is beautiful yet grotesquely flawed and distorted. No matter what idyllic picture we paint of America and all of its promise, underneath the brightest of hues lies the stark white canvas of truth: No one is truly equal, and regardless of opportunities, someone is always struggling underfoot—inevitably, as one rises another falls. This beautiful yet flawed aspect is best exemplified in Nick's use of hyperbole, and romantic, fantastical imagery—in particular the imagery he uses to characterize Gatsby, who has become for most readers an emblem of the American dream itself. Nick, the often sentimental narrator, describes Gatsby's personality as an "unbroken series of successful gestures" and remarks that there was "something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away" (6). What Nick depicts as gorgeous in Gatsby is the same beauty Fitzgerald finds in the American dream. It is through Gatsby's "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," his "extraordinary gift for hope," and his "romantic readiness" (6) that Nick (and by extension, Fitzgerald) openly admits his appreciation for what is inherently beautiful in the American dream—hope and vision. Yet even as he shows an appreciation for the dream, he cannot ignore the incongruity of it, the odd and fantastically ugly reality. Within the dream resides a dehumanizing truth (as represented in Gatsby, the "intricate machine")—a truth we try to suppress: the annihilation of "years of harmony between Indians and America," massacres, slavery, the dehumanization of others and all in the name of Manifest Destiny (Callahan 8). As Callahan has observed, and as Fitzgerald long before him realized, "Americans have drawn back from the horrors of their history." Fitzgerald knew that even though we have tried to suppress it, we cannot escape

it (Callahan 5). Just as we cannot escape the excessive injustices of the Industrial Revolution—the lax regulations on sanitation, the dehumanizing living conditions, the exploitation of children—all carried out in name of profit, enormous profit, which gave rise to monopolies and oligarchies such as the Rockefellers, Vanderbilts, and Carnegies—shining emblems of the American dream. Fitzgerald understood that though families like the Rockefellers were philanthropic, the hard truth remained: below the feet of the rich lay a valley of ashes, a valley that the rich propagated and, in many cases, tyrannized for profit. This truth remains part of American character, however flawed and incongruent with our initial ideology.

Fitzgerald's realization of our flawed character is also evident in Nick's exaggerated image of Wolfshiem, who is more a caricature than a man. Nick describes him as a "small, flat nose Jew" who regards him with "two fine growths of hair which [luxuriate] in either nostril" (74). Instead of addressing people with his eyes, Nick claims he uses his "expressive nose." He eats with "ferocious delicacy," has the "finest specimen of human molars" for cuff buttons, and is ultimately corrupt. The images speak of brutality even as he sits dignifiedly in a "well-fanned Forty-second Street cellar" having luncheon and speaking of Gatsby's fine breeding and reminiscing about an implied loyalty of friends "dead and gone" (74). The image is absurd, ludicrous in its peculiarity, and representative of the contradictory qualities of American character and the corruption of its ideals. Wolfshiem, as a gangster, stands as a romanticized image or icon, yet the iconic image is just an illusion.

Consistently throughout the text, Fitzgerald (lurking behind Nick, the moral compass of Gatsby's tale) employs romantic imagery to express his recognition of the conflict between illusion and reality that is intimately connected within American identity. His understanding of the duality is seen in the romantic image of Daisy and Jordan as "two young women" who "were buoyed up" on an "enormous couch" as though on an "anchored balloon . . . both in white and their dresses rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house" (12); and in the fantastical image of the valley of ashes—a "farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens . . . [and where] men move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (28). It is seen in the mythical "city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps . . . promising all of the mystery and the beauty in the world" (73); and in the "unreality of reality [of the] promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (105). It is seen in the imaginary "sidewalk [forming] a ladder . . . to a secret place above the trees [that Gatsby could climb] if he climbed alone and [where] . . . he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder" (117); and finally in the image of "poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifting fortuitously about. . . . like that ashen, fantastic

figure gliding toward [Gatsby] through the amorphous trees" (169). The romantic imagery (and by romantic I mean fantastical, emotional, imaginary, mysterious, and contradictory to reality) clearly represents Fitzgerald's appreciation for the beauty within the illusion that is the American dream. In reality, however, he knows that the women are on the "only stationary object in the room" (12), the "fantastic farm" is merely a "solemn dumping ground" (28), the "mystery and beauty of the city" is an illusion juxtaposed with the reality of "a dead man . . . in a hearse" (73), and the promise of security and happiness cannot be found in myth or in an imaginary life, regardless of the loftiness of ideals and dreams, for Nick knows they both are "like air" (169)—unable to be grasped.

Fitzgerald's final admission and attempt to clear the misconception that the American dream is somehow beyond reproach is realized on the last page of the novel when Nick equates the wonder of the Dutch sailors who first saw America's beauty to "Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock" (189). His description of the landscape is romantic and fantastical and suggests that the Dutch sailors who first saw the land must have been spellbound by its beauty and incomprehensible potential. Nick believes that the same was true for Gatsby when he picked out Daisy's light at the end of her dock. He, like the sailors, had come a long way and could not possibly understand fully the elusiveness of dreams and the contradictory quality of the mirage before him—so close, yet so far. Fitzgerald recognizes that America has great potential and promise, but no guarantees. We, like Gatsby, can be blinded by our own ambition and miss the truth (the reality) that lies before us. Although America is the land founded upon the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness, the means or embodiment of that happiness can be corrupt and misguided, as Fitzgerald suggests through the character of Gatsby, and even Wolfshiem. Because Gatsby places all of his hope for happiness in Daisy—and what it takes to get such a girl (i.e., money)—he is ultimately ruined by his romantic idealism. Through Nick's perception of Gatsby, Fitzgerald depicts a rather cynical perspective regarding the American dream; however, not all hope is lost. In the second to last paragraph there is redemption in America's unrelenting spirit when Nick states, "It [the dream] eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther . . . And one fine morning——." Fitzgerald knows well the spirit of America, but he also knows the reality of life. We as Americans are like boats moving against a current. Every move forward comes with some movement backward. We look ahead and back at the same time. We want progress and then miss what we left behind. Though we live contrarily, Fitzgerald knows that there is greatness to our country and our idealism, and his understanding of that greatness is reflected in the imagery Nick uses to capture it.

Scholars may argue about the potential flaw in the chronology of *The Great Gatsby*, citing it, as Thomas A. Pendleton does, as "a real and significant limitation on the novel's achievement." Not many, however, contest Fitzgerald's skill in manipulating language. In fact he is applauded for, as Edmund Wilson puts it, "every word, every cadence, every detail," for each "performs a definite function" (qtd. in Pendleton 11). I firmly support Wilson's view and contend that the "definite function" of which he speaks is Fitzgerald's use of language as a reflection of the duality inherent in the American dream and his critique of the enticing yet elusive mirage that keeps us forever reaching out for that "one fine morning——" (Fitzgerald 11).

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