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English 11, Period 3

15 November 2024

The Illusion of the American Dream in  
The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* is one of the most celebrated works in American literature, yet its true message is far from celebratory. Set during the Roaring Twenties, the novel follows Jay Gatsby's obsessive pursuit of wealth and status in the hope of winning back his former love, Daisy Buchanan. Through Gatsby's tragic story, Fitzgerald argues that the American Dream—the belief that anyone can achieve success through hard work and determination—is fundamentally corrupt. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald uses the green light, the Valley of Ashes, and the character of Gatsby himself to show that the American Dream is an illusion that ultimately leads to moral decay and destruction.

The green light at the end of Daisy's dock is one of the novel's most powerful symbols of the American Dream's false promise. Early in the novel, Nick observes Gatsby reaching toward a green light across the water, a gesture that captures his longing and hope. Fitzgerald writes that Gatsby "stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a trembling way" (Fitzgerald 20). The green light represents everything Gatsby desires—Daisy, wealth, and social acceptance—but it always remains just out of reach. Scholar Matthew Bruccoli notes that the green light "functions as a symbol of the American Dream itself: always visible, always beckoning, but never truly obtainable" (Bruccoli 87). By the end of the novel, Nick reflects that Gatsby's dream was "already behind him" and that he had been "beating against the current," suggesting that the

pursuit of such a dream is ultimately futile (Fitzgerald 180). The green light, then, is not a symbol of hope but of delusion.

The Valley of Ashes represents the devastating human cost of the wealthy class's pursuit of material success. Located between West Egg and New York City, the Valley of Ashes is a gray industrial wasteland where the poor live and labor while the rich enjoy their parties and pleasures. Fitzgerald describes it as "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens" (Fitzgerald 23). The people who live there, like George Wilson, are ground down by poverty while those above them—Tom Buchanan in particular—exploit and discard them without consequence. Literary critic Lois Tyson argues that the Valley of Ashes "represents the underside of the American Dream, the reality that prosperity for some requires the suffering of others" (Tyson 112). When Myrtle Wilson is struck and killed by Gatsby's car—driven by Daisy—no one from the wealthy class faces justice. This reinforces Fitzgerald's critique that the American Dream is not a universal promise but a privilege that destroys those who cannot access it.

Gatsby himself embodies the corruption at the heart of the American Dream. He is a self-made man, having reinvented himself from the poor James Gatz into the glamorous Jay Gatsby—but the means by which he achieved his wealth were entirely illegal. Nick learns that Gatsby made his fortune through bootlegging and ties to organized crime. Despite his elaborate parties and lavish lifestyle, Gatsby is never truly accepted by old money society; Tom Buchanan dismisses him as "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (Fitzgerald 130). Gatsby's dream is not really about love or happiness but about status—he wants to be seen as worthy. Fitzgerald suggests that this hunger for validation is itself a kind of emptiness. As Nick observes, "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their

money" (Fitzgerald 179). Gatsby, who worked so hard to enter their world, is ultimately destroyed by it. His death goes largely unmourned, and the green light he once reached for loses all meaning.

Through the green light, the Valley of Ashes, and Gatsby's tragic fate, Fitzgerald builds a damning portrait of the American Dream. Rather than a story of hope, *The Great Gatsby* is a warning about the dangers of chasing a dream built on illusion, inequality, and moral compromise. Fitzgerald's novel remains relevant today because the myth of effortless success and upward mobility continues to shape—and in many cases harm—American society. The green light is still out there, still glowing, and people are still reaching for it. Fitzgerald's message is that we should look more carefully at what it actually represents before we spend our lives trying to grasp it.

Works Cited

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