

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Study programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and
Literature and Hungarian Language and Literature

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The American Dream and the American Family

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jadranka Zlomislić, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2018

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Američki san i američka obitelj

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the impact of the American Dream on the American family with a particular emphasis on the period of the Roaring Twenties. By using Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as a representative novel of the period the aim is to show that family background has a significant impact not only on how individuals pursue the American Dream but also the extent to which they achieve or fail in their endeavors. The diversity of the family backgrounds of the main characters in the novel will be crucial in illustrating the significant impact of stereotypes and biases on social acceptance and social mobility. On the one hand, Tom and Daisy Buchanan will be introduced as the typical representatives of the old money category whose members are well received in society. On the other hand, Jay Gatsby will be the main example of a character who falls into the new money category whose members are often excluded from high society and although they may attain materialistic success they mostly fail in attaining a complete fulfillment of their true vision of the American Dream.

Key words: American Dream, American family, *The Great Gatsby*, old money, new money

Introduction

The American Dream is a term often applied by both American citizens and people coming to the USA as something all the newcomers aspire to achieve. Different people have different visions of the American Dream so that the idea of the Dream has evolved over the years. From the pilgrims to Obama and through many influential people in America's history, like Jefferson or Franklin, the notion of working hard in order to succeed in life has always been present. The work ethic that leads to success is what differentiated the Americans from their English ancestors who in most cases inherited their wealth rather than worked to achieve it. The notion of a "self-made man" can be put right next to the Dream as it exemplifies that everybody can go from rags to riches if they work hard enough.

Even though the "American Dream" has always been one of the leading principles in the American society, the term itself was popularized in 1931 by an American writer and historian James Truslow Adams in his book *Epic America*. According to Adams, "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement regardless of social class or circumstances of birth" (407). Adams' work was published during the time of a severe economic crisis in the 1930s, which was caused by the stock market crash, and the term was a way of motivating people to achieve greater things and fight the crisis.

This paper will focus on describing the American Dream and how it affected the characters in the novel *The Great Gatsby*, a novel that was chosen as a representative work of the period. Exploring the influence of the characters' family background on shaping their lives is a crucial part of the thesis.

The first section of this paper depicts the origin of the term "American Dream" and its various definitions as well as the ways it affected the American society from its beginnings. In addition, Jim Cullen's classification of the various types of dreams is presented with an emphasis on the dream of upward social mobility that is especially relevant for Jay Gatsby. The second section explores American families with a particular focus on the so-called old and new money families. The third section of the paper exemplifies the American Dream by describing the characters of F. S. Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* with regard to their family background and their social status.

1. The Emergence of the American Dream

The first Puritan settlers, whom Arnold-Lourie describes as “those few but heroic men and women who sailed from the Old World and founded an Empire” (39), saw America as the ideal land of happiness and opportunity. Morison writes how they first arrived in America in 1620 and founded the New England colony of Plymouth Plantation which they considered to be a haven for religious freedom and a new life (150). Colonial America saw a movement toward unity for these assorted groups of people, each seeking their own version of liberty in America. Their dream, though not explicitly stated, was to find a new and better life in a new country.

The Pilgrims, as well as the other explorers of the New World who came to America, did not, as Sontag notices, have an “ideal or dream (that) could have been thought of as peculiarly ‘American’” (67). As the colonies developed, so did their sense of identity. Each colony gained more sovereign power and started thinking outside the confines of European governments. But what they needed were goals; as Sontag says, “there was no history in the land, and so the new arrivals lived for the future” (72). This is why hard work and religious practices were always at the forefront of the American way of life. It contrasts especially with the notion of idleness that the English nobility followed at the time – while in America men had to work and become “self-made,” the nobility in England tried not to work, as they believed they were above it. As Wagner points out, “tradition in America has identified the Puritans with the ‘detestation for idleness’ (41). Even writers who came much later, such as Emerson in his essay “Self-Reliance,” emphasize the importance of working hard:

And we are now men, and must accept in the highest mind the same transcendent destiny; and not minors and invalids in a protected corner, not cowards fleeing before a revolution, but guides, redeemers, and benefactors, obeying the Almighty effort, and advancing on Chaos and the Dark. (2)

This example shows the notion of creating the future, coupled with the religious background of the Pilgrims and other religious groups. With Emerson’s self-made man, everything is in their own hands. Men are “guides, redeemers and benefactors” and nothing will come to them from being idle. This connects to Franklin’s ideas of working to accomplish your dreams, as well as many other prominent figures, such as Walt Whitman. His poem “*I Hear America Singing*” celebrates the working

class, not just the men, but the women and children too – everyone shapes their future with work, not just grown working-class men.

1.1. The Concept of the American Dream

In order to fully understand the concept of the American Dream, we must turn to the original definition formulated by James Truslow Adams in *The Epic of America*. He states that:

The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404-405)

Adams wrote and published the book during the worst years of the Depression. He coined the phrase which became the message of hope during times of complete social turmoil. Under the influence of the social situation at that time, the American Dream soon became a catchphrase. George O’Neil and Michael Foster used it, as well as the governor of Massachusetts, in their speeches before the monument on Bunker Hill. It was also part of the patriotic pamphlet that had quotations from *The Epic of America*.

Many people use the term in different contexts, so naturally it has become somewhat vague. Even its founder was not capable of giving a precise definition of it. Nevertheless, the following definition describes its essence:

Perhaps the best way to define the American Dream is as a kind of origin myth. The Romans have Romulus and Remus, the English Brutus and his survivors from the fall of Troy; even new nations sometimes develop extra historical explanations for who they are and how they got that way. One thinks of the “Australian Legend,” the “French-Canadian Spirit.” We have the American Dream. The name somehow defines us, grants us an identity. But it is not really a myth of origins. That we cannot have; our beginnings are too recent, too factual, too diverse

to admit of mythologizing. What we have instead is a myth of the future. Our meaning lies not in who we are but in whom we shall become. Such a myth is necessarily vague and without specific content; to be too specific would entail setting limits to the Dream, reducing the range of possibilities, and the governing idea is that we are—America is—all possibility. (American Heritage)

Jim Cullen historicizes the American Dream (38). By giving an overview of the types of dreams as defined by Jim Cullen, the dreams of the protagonist of the novel, Jay Gatsby, are also discussed following his classification. Cullen divides the American Dream into six categories: the Puritan dream, the dream of the Declaration of Independence, the dream of upward social mobility, the dream of homeownership, Martin Luther King's dream and finally the dream of "the Coast." For this thesis, the category of the Dream of upward social mobility is the most significant because Jay Gatsby represents the perfect example of a man who climbed up the social ladder. From his perspective, the American Dream represents exactly that: going from extreme poverty to being extremely rich by using any means necessary.

Alexis de Tocqueville noted that Americans despite living in the most prosperous and egalitarian society in history, were restive and melancholy, "grave and almost sad even in their pleasures" (163). Tocqueville said that one sometimes finds in Europe a small population totally isolated from the revolutionary turbulence sweeping the Continent. These people are often ignorant, politically apathetic, and oppressed. But despite their wretchedness, "they ordinarily show a serene countenance and they often let playful humor appear." Not so with the rich, free, and equal Americans. The reason, says Tocqueville, is that the ignorant people don't think of the evils they endure, while the Americans constantly dream of the goods they do not have. For the acquisitive and free Americans, says Tocqueville, life is too short to get a hold of all the possessions and comforts that are possible to be had. And one's station in life, whatever it is, always is bested, however marginally, by another's. As death hurries us along, and as we become more equal, the remaining inequalities, small as they might be, grate far more than the massive inequalities unnoticed in aristocratic societies. The two things the American wants most and in principle can have—prosperity and equality—always recede, just out of reach.

2. The impact of the American Dream on the American Family in *The Great Gatsby*

The ideal American family is often portrayed in works of fiction as a “relatively stable, close, extended kinship” consisting of, as stated in an issue of *Winston Quarterly*, “husband and wife and raising children in an atmosphere of love” (147). The number of children varied through time and the ideal number is hard to define, although TV shows and movies that focus on the lives of American families often historically settled for two or three. In addition, the culture dictated that a woman’s place was in the home, and her fulfillment was found there, where she served her husband and raised her children. In post-industrial America, the public perception of women changed. They went from being perceived as gentle, sentimental, and intellectually inferior to men, to being recognized as legally equal humans just as capable of voting, working, and aspiring to greatness beyond the home. Now, like men, women are “sent out into the world” to “ask for its smiles and favors.” Since gaining the world’s favors isn’t easy, there’s less time for kids and families have dwindled. Women, Ferrante writes, began to consider their personal advancement in a new society, and that of their children. They became more strategic about childbirth. “Not only did the number of children born in the average family decrease, but the average age at which women had their last child decreased” (260) says the sociologist.

The image of the American family today is changing even in its portrayal in the mass media. Montoya writes about a TV series “*Big Love*” which portrays a polygamous family in which one husband has three wives and seven children among them (74). Another sitcom, appropriately named “*Modern Family*,” follows a family in which the father marries a much younger, immigrant wife while his son from the first marriage is a homosexual and has a husband and an adoptive daughter. The fact that these series didn’t cause outrage for their portrayal of families shows the extent of changes to the American family as a strict unit.

No matter how abstract and somehow vague the notion of the American Dream is, in the past it had much to do with monetary values. However, that has changed. The survey shows the change in people’s opinions. People used to have different goals in life. Nowadays people consider personal freedom and a good family life as the main components in life. Material success and wealth have lost

their significance when we discuss the American Dream. Things that are valued are freedom and family.

Pearson says that “Fitzgerald’s unique expression of the American dream lacks the optimism, the sense of fulfillment, so evident in the expressions of his predecessors” (638). *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, after the history of the world had been irretrievably changed in the First World War, which has influenced mankind to a great extent. Hart observes that Fitzgerald, as a member of the Golden Youth, also had the opportunity to experience many youthful dreams of fame and fortune, and the turbulent social life that he led with his chosen one has certainly influenced the content of his literary works (198). He was personally well acquainted with the habits and rituals of social gatherings in the civil and intellectual circles of society, which he could then accurately depict. Apart from the primary desire for excitement and entertainment, people of this society tried to form a certain style and draw the attention of the so-called ordinary world, but ultimately it is revealed that there is still a big void behind that entire opulent splendor, their exhibitionism and self-promotion.

The proof of this statement is shown in the way *The Great Gatsby* ends. At the funeral of Jay Gatsby, none of the people who praised him, who went to his parties and even spent time with him during his life appeared to pay their final respects. When it suited them to exploit his wealth everyone wanted to be close to him, everyone wanted to be a part of his luxurious house parties and not even their talking behind his back prevented them from drowning in streams of expensive champagne served in his sumptuous home. However, when the curtain fell, it was extremely inconvenient for them to come and pay tribute to the deceased. Apparently, the curtain was not the only thing that fell – their masks fell too.

The light depicting family life in this novel is in a certain way obscured, because it is dominated by descriptions of nightlife, dissolute house parties, drinking as well as of vulgar and unacceptable behavior, while parts of the novel presenting the family are reduced to a minimum. For example, Daisy’s daughter, who was born in her marriage with Tom, is always in the company of her governess, who cares for her both qualitatively and quantitatively, much more than her own parents. It may be true that such a way of upbringing was common in the higher levels of society at that particular time, but it should not be welcomed as the best possible, regardless of the fact that it was generally accepted and considered as normal back then.

The Wilson family is also presented in the novel. Myrtle and George Wilson are a married couple but their family does not represent the type of ideal American family. She lives only formally with her husband, while emotionally and physically she is more attached to Tom, Daisy's husband, which is hypocritical regardless of the liberal way of life and the development of certain sexual freedoms which were present in America's society at that particular time. Perhaps the only quality family relationship was the one between Myrtle and her sister Catherine, because the two of them mutually respect and support each other. However, there is also a dilemma about how correct it is to cover for someone even though one is aware of the kind of unacceptable and immoral acts they are involved in. The sister's relationship as such is desirable, to protect and be there for one another in times of crisis and problematic situations, but it is by no means right to support one in doing something that can destroy a person's marriage, future, and even life.

In the novel, two different kinds of rich families are depicted with regards to their family background. On the one hand, there are characters belonging to old money families who inherited their wealth and were never forced to work for their money. On the other hand, new money characters are the ones who managed to rise from the bottom to the very top of the social ladder.

2.1. The American Dream & Old Money Families

The characters in the novel are divided into two categories with respect to their family background: old money and new money. Whilst some of them, like Gatsby, George and Myrtle, come from poor roots, there are those who were born with money. Tom and Daisy play an important role in the life of Jay Gatsby. When talking about their relationship to the American Dream, they are the main antagonists. They are not passionate about it because they have had financial stability and status ever since they were born.

In general, people that came from old money families had a lot to offer. They had principles and integrity, which means they were good role models for the children. Their class and manners were best shown in their behavior toward the money. They were quite the opposite of snobs. It was not obvious that they had money and that they were in high positions, because they didn't brag. Their goals were to be productive and to expand their wealth.

Tom and Daisy come from well-off families, except that Tom is incomparably richer. Either way, they are accustomed to having money; they don't need to chase after it. That goes for status and position in society, too.

However, even though Tom Buchanan represents a perfect example of old money, he does not possess any of the above mentioned qualities. His main characteristics are arrogance, pettiness and egoism. Wealth and status give him the privilege that others don't have. After the tragedy, he just walks away, avoiding the consequences just because he is a wealthy old money aristocrat.

Daisy is also an example of old money; she was born with it and has had it her whole life and that is why she does not appreciate it anymore. She takes it for granted and has never learned to appreciate it.

Daisy directly opposes the Dream by refusing Gatsby, whereas Tom drags the Wilsons into a tragic end. This can be applied to their spirit, as well. They are bored, careless, and seem to have no aspirations and dreams.

However, even though he has everything, Tom, as well as other members of the old money, are deprived of something that is very important: dreams. Nonetheless, dreams are one of the things that characterize the new money, especially Jay Gatsby.

2.2. The American Dream & New Money Families

As opposed to the old money families, the members of new money families were not born rich, but made their way to high society. They want to fit in and become part of the old money world. However, that plan does not work because the difference between them will always be visible. Their past and the way they were raised cannot match the old money families' old ways. The excessive showing off of their wealth seems rather tacky and disapproving. Just like Tom Buchanan belongs to the old money but has bad manners, Jay Gatsby is representative of the new money, even if he became rich by doing illegal things.

The difference between Gatsby's and Tom's wealth is the way they obtained it. As Ornstein puts it, no matter how many millions Gatsby has, that is not the type of respectable money that can be perceived in Daisy's voice (Ornstein 56). He cheated his way into that high-class society.

However, it seems like Gatsby does not see how much that fact affects his relationship with Daisy. Lewis makes a comparison between Gatsby and Wilson. He argues that both Gatsby and Wilson tried to marry above their social status. Wilson borrowed the suit for his wedding and Gatsby wore his military uniform while courting Daisy. They did this to hide their low economic status (Lewis 53-53).

People like Gatsby who didn't come from prominent families seem to be ruthless in their pursuit of the American Dream. According to Gross, Gatsby is "too raw to understand that the money he acquired as a criminal does not bridge the gap between his world and that of the Buchanan's" (Gross 5). Furthermore, Gross claims that Gatsby has a corrupted as well as romanticized vision of the American dream. Gatsby thinks that having a lot of money makes a person and his or her life wonderful and Daisy is the ultimate symbol of that perfect life (5).

3. Reflections of the American Dream in the American Families Depicted in the Novel *The Great Gatsby*

As already mentioned, the American Dream and the way of obtaining a certain social status and money have greatly affected the characters of *The Great Gatsby*. A closer look at the individual characters examines the characters' efforts to achieve the American Dream and their respective success or failure in doing so.

Jay Gatsby was born "James Gatz," in North Dakota as the son of poor farmers. However, his ambition and determination led him to become rich and successful. After changing his name to "Jay Gatsby," he aspired and attempted to be like the higher class and made great efforts to adopt their ways. After World War 1, Gatsby started getting involved in illegal business transactions in order to get rich (e.g. bootlegging). He managed to obtain a significant amount of money in just three years. He moved to the elite part of town, bought a large house and an expensive car and started throwing parties just to maybe someday meet Daisy again. Even though he manages to acquire enormous material wealth, Daisy is the ultimate status symbol that he yearns to attain. In a way, Daisy is his ultimate American Dream. The narrator figures as much: "Then it had not been merely the stars to which he had aspired on that June night. He came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendor" (62). Gatsby's less than wealthy past makes him like someone in pursuit of the American Dream, and for Gatsby the personification of that dream is Daisy.

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

"Can't repeat the pas" 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.

"I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before" he said, nodding determinedly. "She'll see."

He talked a lot about the past and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered since then, but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was... (Fitzgerald 88)

Jay, in his efforts to renew their former relationship, may seem honest, but the question of how realistic this renewal of love that he is trying so hard to achieve is raised. His vision of eternal, one and only true love is engaging, but he actually sees Daisy as another status symbol. Even though he got everything he dreamed of, there was still something missing, and Daisy fits this missing puzzle piece perfectly. So, like any hard-working American dreamer, Gatsby tries his best to succeed in achieving his Dream, and Daisy's husband seems to be just an obstacle in his way to achieving it.

Furthermore, Daisy seems like an answer to another part of the Dream – family. Although not directly stated in Cullen's overview of the American Dream, family correlates to the homeownership dream, and while Gatsby has a mansion of his own, Daisy and possible children are needed to fulfill the ideal, romanticized version of the Dream that Gatsby follows. Schudson writes "(t)he romantic – and that is what Jimmy Gatz, aka Jay Gatsby, was at his best – simply misinterprets the dream by believing he can live life inside it. The actual American dream, in contrast, is very much about living in reality" (572). This means that Americans who live the Dream realize who and what they are, and live the best lives they can in order to achieve their goals.

Gatsby denies his past; he thinks that one's past can be erased by literally making a new person of yourself, instead of fostering your character and developing yourself through living. A problem in this idealized version of himself is in Daisy's marrying another man while he was away. Instead of moving on, instead of growing as an individual from this experience, he denies it. It looks as if he himself is much more eager to return to the old times, to what was happening before the beginning of the war and before the moment in which the two of them had to go separate ways. Since Daisy is now a married woman and has a child with her husband, it can be assumed that it is more difficult for her to take drastic steps in order to reestablish their relationship than it is for Jay who is single and still living in the past.

The love between Jay and Daisy is not non-existent, it is present, but it is still a part of some illusion, which is illustrated through the deliberations of Gatsby's fictionalized Dream of being a different person which is the main driving force behind their relationship. Gatsby explicitly ties Daisy and her magnetic voice to wealth: "'Her voice is full of money,' he said suddenly" (Fitzgerald 96). This particular line is crucial, since it explicitly ties Gatsby's love for Daisy to his pursuit of wealth and status.

3.1. Daisy Buchanan

Since Daisy belongs to the higher class and comes from a prominent family, she lacks the will and capacity to pursue dreams (Ornstein 55-56). “‘You see I think everything’s terrible anyhow’, she went on in a convinced way. ‘Everybody thinks so – the most advanced people. And I know. I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything’” (Fitzgerald 24). She has experienced so many things, and it seems like she has nothing to strive for. She has never fought for something in her whole life, nor has she ever fulfilled some dream of hers and that’s why she doesn’t see the true values in life.

Daisy is the ultimate goal for Jay Gatsby. That’s why he does everything for her and because of her. It is evident that for Gatsby the American Dream and Daisy are the same. According to Handley, Gatsby’s: “own dream for himself is modified somewhat when, as an officer waiting to go overseas during the war, he meets Daisy Fay and falls in love with her, while realizing that she lives in a rather different social world” (33). “The officer looked at Daisy while she was speaking, in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at some time, and because it seemed romantic to me I have remembered the incident ever since” (Fitzgerald 48). Because of Daisy’s need for money, she doesn’t marry Gatsby. Since then, Gatsby is driven and obsessed by the concept of his love, Daisy. So, the wealth and the money serve just as paths to her heart. He is driven by one reason only and that is to win back Daisy. Maybe because of his dreams and aspirations, he doesn’t survive in her materialistic world. It appears that his Dream is too frivolous and superficial for him. Daisy is regarded as Gatsby’s distorted American Dream.

I looked back at my cousin who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth--but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered “Listen,” a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour. (Fitzgerald 11)

Everyone seems to be amazed by Daisy. On the one hand, there is this gorgeous, sweet girl that looks like a dream, and on the other hand, she has all the negative features of the Dream. She is selfish and careless – she is one of the “careless people” who “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 114). Gatsby didn’t see her for a long time and during all those years he created a vision of her. Unfortunately, that vision was far better than reality. “There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion” (Fitzgerald 61). As mentioned above, Gatsby was obsessed with her and that led him towards his downfall.

3.2. Tom Buchanan

Tom comes from a wealthy family. However, the material things are all that he has. He gives an impression of a rather empty and dispassionate man. “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – 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 186).

At the mere beginning of the novel, Nick is at Buchanan’s house because he is invited to dinner. His attitude and character are revealed soon after, when he discusses the article he read:

The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be – will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved. (...) It’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things. ‘We’ve got to beat them down,’ whispered Daisy, winking ferociously toward the fervent sun. (Fitzgerald 14)

The explanation is best examined and formulated by Jonathan Schiff. In *Ashes to Ashes*, he suggests that “while the old money members of society remain caught up in underlying grief for their decline in society, those who are ethnic, racial, or economic outsiders, such as Gatsby, struggle to receive acceptance” (101). It is obvious that Tom feels superior because he belongs to old money and disrespects everyone else, especially the new money.

I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well if that’s the idea you can count me out . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they’ll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white. (103)

In this context, he compares “black and white” races but to upper and lower social classes, and it is inferred that it is the lower class that bothers him.

Tom has a mistress, Myrtle. He doesn’t want to leave Daisy for Myrtle because he doesn’t want anything serious with her. Daisy is like a trophy for him that perfectly fits his upper class world. Tom shows another display of his superiority as an aristocrat when he hits Myrtle because she pronounces Daisy’s name. He doesn’t tolerate that and wants her to know that Myrtle is not equal to him and Daisy.

3.3. Nick Carraway

Nick Carraway is the narrator of the story and one of the main characters. Nick’s narration is sometimes biased and maybe that is the reason why readers like Gatsby and justify his actions and dislike and criticize the Buchanans. Nick doesn’t criticize Gatsby’s criminal background. He puts emphasis on his romantic dreaminess and love towards Daisy. Scrimgeour (74-75) argues that Gatsby is a romantic dream of Nick’s and that the only real difference between the world Nick despises and Gatsby is that the latter is more spectacular. Although Nick stands between two worlds, he is more in favor of Gatsby. According to Mizener, Nick is “torn between the superficial social grace and the unimaginative brutality of the wealthy and the imaginative intensity and moral idealism of the socially absurd and legally culpable self-made man” (135). He does not approve of Tom’s and Daisy’s behavior, which is visible when he is having dinner at the Buchanan’s and does not feel comfortable talking to them. He can understand why Tom and Daisy behave the way they behave because Nick is, as Mizener explains, “in manner and in superficial feeling, an Easterner, but his moral roots, though he does not fully realize it until the end of the novel, are in the Middle West” (131). Nick is the only character that changes throughout the novel. In the end he is neither part of Daisy’s nor Gatsby’s society.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be stated that each and every one of the characters was influenced by the American Dream to a certain extent. Whereas old money families strived to keep their social status and not to let “intruders” into their lifestyle, the new money families’ only goal was to become a part of the higher class in every way.

The main difference between old money and new money families is their understanding of the Dream itself. Jay Gatsby as a representative of the new money class is a dreamer and a romanticist and makes a new man out of himself and rebuilds his life completely just to achieve what he considered to be his American Dream. On the other hand, members of the old money class had no dreams and no ambitions to improve themselves. They just kept the lifestyle they inherited from their ancestors and never tried to do better. It can be said that they had every opportunity to do good in life, whilst the members of the new money class had to fight for everything they had.

However, the different views of the term “American Dream” led the characters to make certain decisions in life. Even though Gatsby did not choose the means of achieving his dreams, he never stopped trying to improve and do better. He experienced life as a part of both social classes and was well aware of the upsides and the downsides of both. On the other hand, Tom and Daisy as the representatives of the high class were only interested in making their lives as easy as possible. The only important thing for them was their own wellbeing and they never stopped to think about other people, including their own daughter.

To sum up, it can be concluded that it is possible for everyone to fulfill their dreams, but doing so does not guarantee happiness.

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