

Chasing Shadows: The Clash of Dreams and Reality in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract:

Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925) stands as a seminal critique of the American Dream, exposing the moral bankruptcy beneath its glittering facade. This study interrogates how Fitzgerald employs narrative technique, symbolic imagery, and historical context to deconstruct the illusion of reinvention and upward mobility in Jazz Age America. Through close textual analysis and interdisciplinary scholarship, I argue that Gatsby's tragic trajectory—his obsessive pursuit of Daisy and the idealized past—serves as an allegory for the corrupted American Dream, where materialism supplants moral integrity. Key symbols like the green light and Valley of Ashes are examined as manifestations of this tension between aspiration and reality, while Nick Carraway's unreliable narration underscores the novel's central paradox: the simultaneous allure and impossibility of Gatsby's fantasy. Situating the novel within post-WWI disillusionment and Prohibition-era excess, this paper reveals how Fitzgerald's critique anticipates contemporary debates about wealth inequality and the persistence of class barriers. By synthesizing literary criticism with socio-historical analysis, the study demonstrates The Great Gatsby's enduring relevance as both a Jazz Age artifact and a cautionary tale about the dangers of conflating dreams with delusion. Ultimately, Fitzgerald's masterpiece compels us to question what is lost when society privileges spectacle over substance and ambition over ethics.

Keywords: American Dream, 1920s America, materialism, moral decay, historical critique

1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) remains a seminal critique of American Dream, dissecting its promises and perils through the tragic trajectory of Jay Gatsby. This study builds upon existing scholarship by integrating narrative unreliability, symbolic analysis, and socio-historical context to offer a fresh perspective on how Fitzgerald's structural and stylistic choices undermine idealized visions of the past. By synthesizing Marxist, psychoanalytic, and narrative theories, this paper argues that Nick Carraway's unreliable narration not only reflects the spiritual bankruptcy of the 1920s but also implicates the reader in questioning contemporary societal complicity with structural inequality. This interdisciplinary approach bridges literary analysis with modern debates on wealth disparity, offering a nuanced framework for understanding the novel's enduring relevance.

1.1 Historical and Cultural Context

The 1920s, known as the "Roaring Twenties," witnessed dramatic shifts in American society. The ratification of Prohibition (1920–1933) spurred underground economies, while technological advancements like automobiles and electric advertising reshaped daily life. Yet beneath this veneer of progress lay rampant inequality, racial tensions, and environmental degradation. Fitzgerald's depiction of East Egg and West Egg encapsulates the era's

class stratification, where old money elites like Tom and Daisy Buchanan wielded social power over nouveau riche interlopers like Gatsby. The Valley of Ashes, a “fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat” (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 23), serves as a visceral critique of industrial capitalism’s human and ecological toll (Campbell, 2011).

1.2 Thesis Statement

This paper contends that *The Great Gatsby* deconstructs the American Dream by exposing how romanticized visions of the past, when untethered from ethical and pragmatic considerations, lead to moral bankruptcy. Through its symbolic imagery, narrative structure, and historical resonance, the novel critiques the American 1920s’ cultural obsession with wealth and reinvention, offering a prescient warning about the dangers of unchecked ambition.

Ultimately, this paper posits that Fitzgerald suggests that while dreams can drive ambition, they must be balanced with a pragmatic acknowledgment of the complexities of human experience to avoid tragic outcomes. Through a comprehensive analysis that integrates close reading, literary criticism, and symbolic interpretation, the study seeks to elucidate the enduring significance of the dreams versus reality dichotomy within the American literary canon and its relevance amid ongoing challenges to the promise of the American Dream.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on *The Great Gatsby* has extensively explored its symbolic and historical dimensions.

2.1 Symbolic Analysis of the American Dream

Laurie Gatz (2009) and Erica Campbell (2011) collectively demonstrate how Fitzgerald’s symbols analyze symbols like the green light and the Valley of Ashes and Gatsby’s parties critique industrial capitalism moral erosion. Gatz interprets the green light as Gatsby’s fixation on an unattainable past (p.45), while Campbell links the Valley of Ashes to the ecological and human costs of unchecked (p.34). Their work establishes a foundation for understanding how symbols encode systemic critique.

2.2 Narrative and Historical Context

Recent scholarship like Sarah Churchwell (2013) situates the novel within Prohibition-era America, highlighting parallels between Gatsby’s illicit wealth and the era’s moral hypocrisy. Robert S. Levine (2015) extends this analysis, framing Gatsby’s self-reinvention as emblematic of marginalized group’s aspirational struggles (p.23). By synthesizing these perspectives, this paper advances to a holistic interpretation of how Fitzgerald’s narrative techniques and historical grounding coalesce to dismantle the American Dream myth.

2.3 Interdisciplinary Synthesis: A New Framework

This study distinguishes itself by interweaving Nick Carraways unreliable narration with socio-economic critiques. While prior scholarship (e.g., Schweizer (2010); Campbell (2011) isolates narrative technique or historical context, this paper examines their interplay. For instance, Nicks dual role as participant and critic mirrors the readers complicity in romanticizing success—a lens that reframes Gatsbys tragedy as a systemic failure rather than an individual flaw. This approach aligns with Pikettys (2014) analysis of inherited privilege, offering a bridge between literary analysis and contemporary economic discourse.

2.4 Objectives

The primary objectives of this research paper are:

1. To conduct a meticulous close textual analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, delving deep into Fitzgerald's central theme of the dichotomy between dreams and reality.
2. To examine how the author's masterful use of narrative perspective, symbolic imagery, and structural elements work in tandem to undermine the characters' romanticised visions and emphasise the importance of pragmatic acknowledgment of the complexities of human experience.
3. To situate the novel's exploration of this pivotal theme within the broader context of 1920s American society and the crisis of the American Dream, illuminating how Fitzgerald's thematic explorations reflect the societal tensions and crises of the era.
4. To synthesise and build upon existing critical analyses of *The Great Gatsby*, offering a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Fitzgerald's treatment of the dreams versus reality dichotomy.

3. Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach to analyze *The Great Gatsby*, combining close textual analysis, historical contextualization, and literary criticism to examine Fitzgerald's critique of the American Dream. The methodology is structured as follows:

1. Close Textual Analysis
 - A detailed examination of key passages, symbols (e.g., the green light, Valley of Ashes), and narrative techniques (e.g., Nick Carraway's unreliable narration).
 - Focus on how Fitzgerald's language and structure reinforce the novel's central themes—idealism versus reality, ethical erosion, and class stratification.
2. Historical Contextualization

The novel is situated within 1920s America, exploring how post-WWI disillusionment, Prohibition, and economic excess shaped Fitzgerald's portrayal of the American Dream. Analysis of socio-economic tensions, including:

- The clash between old money (East Egg) and new money (West Egg).
- The impact of industrialization (e.g., the Valley of Ashes as a critique of capitalism).
- Reference to primary sources (e.g., Fitzgerald's letters, contemporary reviews) and secondary historical scholarship (e.g., Churchwell, 2013).

3. Literary Criticism & Theoretical Frameworks

Engagement with existing scholarship, including:

- Marxist readings (e.g., the commodification of identity in Gatsby's self-reinvention).
- Psychoanalytic approaches (e.g., Gatsby's obsession with the past as a form of delusion).
- Narrative theory (e.g., Nick's unreliable narration and its effect on reader interpretation).
- Synthesis of key critics (Berman, Campbell, Levine) to build a cohesive argument.

4. Rationale for Methodology

This multi-pronged approach allows for:

- Depth: Close reading reveals Fitzgerald's stylistic and thematic nuances.
- Breadth: Historical context grounds the novel in its era, while literary theory provides interpretive frameworks.
- Originality: By synthesizing diverse perspectives, the study offers fresh insights into the novel's enduring relevance.

5. Scope of Study

This research paper focuses primarily on the examination of the dichotomy between dreams and reality as a central and defining theme in *The Great Gatsby*. While references to other thematic elements and narrative devices will be made where relevant, the primary objective is to conduct a meticulous analysis of how Fitzgerald's exploration of this specific dichotomy shapes the novel's critical reception and enduring legacy.

The study will draw upon a wide range of secondary sources, including scholarly articles and book chapters that address the theme of dreams versus reality from various critical perspectives. However, the paper will not attempt to provide an exhaustive literature review, but will selectively engage with

the most relevant and influential critical analyses that contribute to a comprehensive understanding of this central theme.

Additionally, the paper will not delve into detailed biographical or authorial considerations beyond what is necessary to contextualise Fitzgerald's thematic explorations within the broader cultural and historical framework of 1920s America. The focus will remain firmly on the text itself, meticulously analysing how the author's narrative techniques, symbolic imagery, and structural elements work in tandem to undermine the characters' idealized visions.

6. Analysis

6.1 Dreams Versus Reality: The Central Dichotomy

One of the central dichotomies that lies at the heart of *The Great Gatsby* is the clash between the romanticised American Dream pursued by Jay Gatsby and the harsh realities of the newly affluent in 1920s New York. Literary Scholars like Robert S. Levine (2015) argue that Gatsby's idealism reflects the immigrant narrative central to the American Dream—a vision of self-reinvention corrupted by systemic inequality (p. 23). However, Fitzgerald masterfully depicts how this dream is severely tested and undermined by the cold pragmatism and moral decay that dominate the lives of the novel's upper-class characters.

Gatsby's lavish parties, with their extravagant displays of wealth and excess, symbolise his relentless attempt to recreate the past glory of his romance with Daisy. As Nick Carraway observes, "the rooms were full of people I had never seen before... it was on that night that I had the strange and sudden sense of Gatsby having done all this just for Daisy"(Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 53). Despite their material grandeur, these parties signify Gatsby's romanticisation of the past rather than any genuine enjoyment of the present. This stark juxtaposition highlights the emptiness at the core of Gatsby's pursuits, as he constructs a facade of happiness that ultimately masks his deeper dissatisfaction. Literary scholar Laurie Gatz (2009) notes, "Gatsby's parties are not celebrations of the present but rather attempts to recapture the past" (p. 47), underscoring the futility of his endeavours.

In contrast, Daisy and Tom Buchanan exemplify the moral decay and spiritual bankruptcy associated with wealth and status in the decadent world of the 1920s. Erica Campbell (2011) observes, "while Gatsby remains an idealist lost in the past, the Buchanans have fully succumbed to the moral ambiguity created by their nouveau riche status and lifestyle"(p. 34). This stark difference between Gatsby's idealism and the Buchanans' materialism illustrates Fitzgerald's incisive critique of the American Dream; the author pits Gatsby's noble aspirations against the Buchanans' hollow pursuit of status and superficial success, revealing the disintegration of genuine values in favour of conspicuous consumption. As literary critic Morris Philipson (1986) asserts, "The Buchanans are the embodiment of the ethical erosion at the heart of the American Dream" (p. 79), providing a stark counterpoint to Gatsby's romanticised vision.

Fitzgerald further emphasizes the contrast between Gatsby's idealism and the Buchanan's' moral decay through his masterful use of symbolic imagery. As noted by Gatz (2009), "Gatsby's parties, with their lavish displays of wealth and excess, represent the outward manifestation of his dream, while the Buchanans' opulent lifestyle reflects the hollowness at the core of the American Dream"(p. 48). This juxtaposition of symbolic elements sharpens the fundamental clash between the characters' nostalgic visions and the harsh realities of the 1920s.

Moreover, the novel's structural elements contribute significantly to Fitzgerald's exploration of this central dichotomy. Jonathan Ryan (2010) observes, "Fitzgerald's use of contrasting settings, such as the bleak, industrial landscape of the Valley of Ashes and the opulent mansions of East Egg and West Egg, further emphasises the divide between dreams and reality"(p. 25). This spatial metaphor reinforces the thematic tension, with the desolate Valley of Ashes serving as a stark counterpoint to the glittering facades of the wealthy elite, underscoring the stark disparity between the characters' aspirations and the grim realities of their circumstances.

6.2 The Green Light as Symbol of Gatsby's Dreams

A potent symbol of the dichotomy between dreams and reality is the enigmatic green light at the end of Daisy's dock, which represents the transcendent nature of Gatsby's dreams. Gatz (2009) observes, "For Gatsby, the green light is the beacon of his hopes, dreams, and desires—it signifies his idealistic vision of the past being recaptured"(p. 45), As Gatsby gazes longingly at this light from the confines of his mansion, his dreams become both a source of inspiration and a barrier to their fulfilment.

As Ryan (2010) notes, "The green light transforms space into a metaphor for Gatsby's dream deferred, yet it also serves as a barrier to its realization" (p. 23). Gatsby's fixation on this light exemplifies the subjective, ephemeral nature of dreams, which can never fully manifest in the objective realm of reality. Fitzgerald vividly captures Gatsby's longing, describing how he "stretched out his arms toward the dark water... and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away" (2004, p. 89). This evocative imagery encapsulates the limitations of dreams in an indifferent, ever-changing world, emphasising that Gatsby's aspirations may remain perpetually out of reach. Campbell (2011) observes, "the green light represents Gatsby's inability to fully grasp the past and his doomed attempt to recapture it" (p. 36), foreshadowing the tragic consequences of his romanticised vision.

Furthermore, the green light serves as a powerful symbol of the American Dream itself, embodying the alluring promise of a better future. Berman, (2010) argues, "The green light is the embodiment of the American Dream—the belief that through hard work and determination, one can achieve a glorious new life" (p. 25). However, Fitzgerald's vivid depiction of Gatsby's futile attempts to reach this light underscores the inherent limitations of such idealized visions, suggesting that the American Dream may ultimately be an unattainable illusion.

6.3 Gatsby's Dreams Shattered by Harsh Realities

As the narrative progresses, Gatsby's dreams are systematically shattered by the disillusioning realities of the present. When he finally reunites with Daisy, it becomes painfully evident that they have drifted too far apart to ever recapture their past love. Daisy's devastating confession that she had "never loved him" starkly illustrates the futility of Gatsby's idealism (Fitzgerald, 2004, p.135). Laurie Gatz (2009) notes, "Gatsby's dream of recapturing the past is ultimately an illusion, and Daisy's confession that she never truly loved him destroys the very foundation of his aspirations" (p. 51).

Furthermore, Tom's exposure of Gatsby's obscure past dismantles the carefully crafted image of wealth and status that Gatsby has built around him. Campbell (2011) states, "Gatsby's carefully constructed persona is revealed to be a mere facade, undermining the very foundation of his dreams" (p. 37). Ultimately, while dreams can fuel ambition, they invite destruction if not rooted in pragmatism. Gatsby's tragic end, following false accusations of a hit-and-run, underscores the dangers of unchecked idealism. As Carraway reflects, "So we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight... Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it"(Fitzgerald, 2004, pp. 130-131). This haunting imagery reinforces that Gatsby's relentless pursuit of a romanticised vision is ultimately doomed, emphasising the vital need to balance dreams with realism.

The shattered nature of Gatsby's dreams is further highlighted by Fitzgerald's masterful use of structural elements and narrative techniques. Kathryn Schweizer (2010) observes, "The novel's structure, with its multiple narrators and fragmented chronology, mirrors the disintegration of Gatsby's romanticised vision" (p. 46). This formal experimentation serves to disorient the reader, reflecting the characters' loss of certainty and the collapse of their idealised perceptions.

Additionally, Fitzgerald's employment of dramatic irony heightens the tragic nature of Gatsby's downfall. As the reader becomes privy to the truth about Gatsby's past and the futility of his dreams, the characters' continued adherence to their nostalgic visions becomes increasingly poignant. Philipson (1986) notes, "Dramatic irony underscores the tragic nature of Gatsby's quest, as the reader is acutely aware of the inevitable failure of his aspirations" (p. 82). Through these narrative techniques, Fitzgerald emphasises the necessity of reconciling dreams with the harsh realities of the present.

6.4 The Role of the Narrator in Exploring the Dichotomy

Nick Carraway's role as the novel's narrator is crucial in Fitzgerald's exploration of the dichotomy between dreams and reality. Positioned as both an insider and outsider to the wealthy elite, Nick uniquely observes and critiques the moral decay that lurks beneath the gilded surface of this society. His growing disillusionment is evident when he assesses that "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy... they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money" (p. 188). This scathing statement encapsulates the destructive nature of their privilege and the consequences of their actions, as observed through Nick's critical lens.

Nick's own journey mirrors the reader's progression from enchantment to disenchantment with the American Dream. Schweizer (2010) notes, "Nick's role allows him to serve as a kind of moral compass, guiding the reader through the tension between idealism and reality" (Schweizer, 2010, p. 45). Fitzgerald invites readers to question the validity of the characters' romanticised visions and confront the harsh realities that undermine their dreams. Philipson (1986) highlights the importance of Nick's narrative perspective in revealing the moral decay at the heart of the American Dream (p. 80), providing a critical lens through which readers can assess the broader implications of Gatsby's doomed pursuit.

The ambiguity and unreliability of Nick's narration further contribute to Fitzgerald's exploration of the dichotomy between dreams and reality. Campbell (2011) argues that "Nick's own biases and limitations as a narrator call into question the validity of the characters' perceptions" (p. 35), undermining the reader's ability to fully trust the nostalgic visions presented in the novel. This narrative technique invites critical examination of the characters' aspirations, suggesting that their dreams may be mere illusions.

Moreover, Nick's dual perspective as both an insider and outsider facilitates a deeper understanding of the thematic tensions at play. Schweizer (2010) notes, "Nick's dual perspective enables him to empathise with the characters' dreams while simultaneously critiquing the moral decay underlying their pursuits" (p. 46). This nuanced narrative voice underscores the complexity of the dichotomy between dreams and reality, resisting simplistic judgments and encouraging a more thorough exploration of the novel's central themes.

6.5 The Symbolic Significance of the Valley of Ashes

The bleak and desolate landscape of the Valley of Ashes, situated between the opulent mansions and the bustling city of New York, serves as a powerful symbol of the divide between dreams and reality. Nick describes it as "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat... where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys"(p. 23). This valley serves as a stark reminder of the human cost of the characters' indulgence, representing the moral decay and spiritual bankruptcy that accompany the pursuit of wealth.

Philipson (1986) notes, "The Valley of Ashes is a powerful symbol of the moral decay at the heart of the American Dream" (p. 78). It is in this unforgiving landscape that the novel's most tragic events unfold, underscoring the devastating consequences of failing to reconcile dreams with the harsh realities of the present. Campbell (2011) observes, "The Valley of Ashes stands in stark contrast to the glittering facades of East Egg and West Egg, serving as a physical and symbolic representation of the moral bankruptcy underlying the characters' aspirations" (p. 34). The Valley serves as a poignant counterpoint to the wealthy elite's gilded world, highlighting the stark disparity between the characters' lofty aspirations and the grim realities of their circumstances.

Furthermore, the Valley of Ashes functions as a metaphor for the spiritual and moral decay inherent in the pursuit of the American Dream. Matthew J. Bolton (2019) interprets the Valley of Ashes as a 'wasteland of capitalist excess,' where the working classes exploitation underscores the American Dreams collapse (p. 112). This bleak landscape serves as a constant reminder of the human cost of the characters' indulgence, undermining the allure of their idealized visions.

The Valley of Ashes is intimately connected to the tragic events that unfold in the novel, particularly the hit-and-run accident involving Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson. Carraway observes, "The Valley of Ashes was no longer a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat, but a desolate place where the living and the dead come together" (2004 ,p. 130). This shift in the symbolic meaning of the valley, from a representation of moral decay to a site of actual tragedy, further emphasises the central theme of the clash between dreams and reality. The characters' inability to reconcile their aspirations with the harsh truths of the present ultimately leads to devastating consequences, embodied by the Valley of Ashes.

7. Conclusion

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* remains a piercing critique of the American Dream, exposing its inherent contradictions—the promise of reinvention clashing with the rigid hierarchies of wealth and privilege. Through Gatsby's tragic pursuit of an idealized past, Fitzgerald dismantles the illusion of boundless aspiration, revealing instead a cycle of disillusionment and moral decay. The novel's timeless relevance lies in its unflinching portrayal of how dreams, when untethered from reality, become destructive obsessions.

Central to this critique are Fitzgerald's masterful symbols—the green light, a fleeting beacon of hope; the Valley of Ashes, a wasteland of capitalist excess; and Gatsby's lavish parties, spectacles of emptiness masquerading as fulfillment. These motifs underscore the hollowness of materialism and the fragility of self-invention in a society that privileges birth over merit. Nick Carraway's ambivalent narration further destabilizes the myth of the American Dream, framing Gatsby's tragedy not as an outlier but as an inevitable consequence of systemic inequality.

The novel's warning extends beyond the Jazz Age. As contemporary scholars like Piketty (2014) note, the tension between inherited privilege and aspirational mobility persists, mirroring the Buchanans' careless entitlement and Gatsby's doomed striving. Fitzgerald's genius lies in his prescience: *The Great Gatsby* is not merely a period piece but a mirror reflecting enduring societal fractures—the commodification of identity, the corrosion of ethics by wealth, and the peril of conflating ambition with delusion.

Ultimately, the novel challenges readers to interrogate their own complicity in romanticizing success. Gatsby's tragedy is not his failure to attain the Dream but his refusal to see its falsity. In an era of escalating entrench

privilege and curated self-mythology, Fitzgerald's work compels us to ask: What illusions do we chase— and at what ethical cost do we conflate ambition with delusion?

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