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Study the Illusion vs. Reality of the American Dream in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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ABSTRACT:

The Great Gatsby offers a very strong criticism of the American Dream as it contrasts the dream with the reality of the 1920s American society as presented by F. Scott Fitzgerald. It is a project on the illusion versus reality of the American Dream as reflected in the characters, themes, and symbols in this novel. The up-and-down career of Gatsby, who starts out poor and ends up rich because of a romanticized view of success and love, illustrates the aspiring nature of the dream. However, the moral as well as social root inherent in material success after all comes out in his ultimate downfall. The story illustrates the gap between the meaning of the American Dream, the idea of equality of opportunity, self-made prosperity, and the realization of personal fulfillment, and the reality of the American Dream in daily life, the superficial quest for status, wealth, and recognition. The following paper also examines, through setting, comparisons between characters, and such symbols as the green light and the valley of ashes, how Fitzgerald calls into question the unsustainable nature of the dream. Looking at the novel through the lens of history during the Jazz Age, the present research emphasizes how *The Great Gatsby* is a classic evaluation of the relationship between hope, illusion, and disillusionment in American life.

Keywords: American Dream, Illusion vs. Reality, Disillusionment, Jazz Age, symbolism, social class, Materialism.

Introduction:

The concept of the American Dream has always been discussed as one of the principal features of the cultural and ideological self-understanding of the United States. In essence, it is a benchmark of the attitude that the possibility of everyone, despite his or her descent, being able to secure his or her success, happiness, and social mobility through the power of hard work and determination. Nevertheless, this ideal has been, in many various cases, questioned, reinterpreted, or even shattered in the field of literature and, above all, in history. The most insightful literature analysis of this phenomenon is seen in the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald titled *The Great Gatsby*, which was written in 1925. The novel is set in the wild and drunk years of the Jazz Age that dealt with the contradiction between the promise and reality of the dream. The story written by Fitzgerald is an account about a rich man, Jay Gatsby, who appears to live the American Dream. Using materialistic greed and romantic infatuation of Gatsby towards Daisy Buchanan, Fitzgerald builds an image of the dream that is dazzling on the outside and hollow on the inside. The society that is described in the novel seems highly uneven, hollow, and depraved. Along with the upward social climb, Gatsby also falls into the trap of illusion, thinking that you can use money and a change of status to relive the past and be happy. This research undertaking aims at critically analyzing the application of characters, setting, and symbolism by Fitzgerald to create a distinction between illusion and the reality of the American Dream. The project is reflective of the personal drives of Gatsby and how they represent the overall trends of society in 1920s America, whereby earnings and money became common substitutes for pursuing goodness. It also looks at how other characters like Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Nick Carraway, and Myrtle Wilson facilitate the dream to reveal the moral contradictions and social boundaries that inevitably weaken it. This study is intended to provide a subtle insight into the American Dream as a notion that is contradictory in its nature, as inspiring and delusional at the same time, using the novel as a historical relic of the past and literary critique. Doing so, it is going to discuss how *the Great Gatsby* remains a warning story about ambition, identity, and the divide between the dream and the life in contemporary society.

The American Dream: Origin and Evolution:

The American Dream originated in the root ideology of the United States. Based on the Enlightenment ideas and the potential of the New World, it was formulated in the first place in the Declaration of Independence in 1776 that stated that all male citizens were created equal and had the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The historic version of this was also spread in the 20th century by a historian, James Truslow Adams, in his book in 1931, *The Epic of America*, where he referred to the American Dream as that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone. The dream at the beginning was organized around the concept of democracy, equality in opportunity, and the belief that people could create

their own future through hard work and correctness. It was opposite to the fixed classes in Europe and was attractive to the immigrants who hoped to be free of oppression and poverty. To most people, it was a way not only to material improvement but also to personal development, self-identification, and good character. But by the 1920s, in which *The Great Gatsby* by Fitzgerald was written, the American Dream had changed greatly. The aftermath of the First World War resulted in an economic boom and the rapid expansion of the cities, and the latter was accompanied by the changing values, which emphasized consumption, leisure, and social prestige. The American Dream that was based on moral and spiritual ideals was becoming gradually even more tightly substituted by the desire to feel rich, stylish, and successful on a superficial level only. It was also during this time when there was increasing social tension and class divisions. Most people did not get this upward mobility, particularly the immigrants and working classes, who hardly got the privileges experienced by the elite. In such an atmosphere, the American Dream had started to develop its two-faced character: it was both a motivating, potent image of opportunity and a deceptive mirage of equality and greed. Fitzgerald has weird accuracy in chronicling this change in *The Great Gatsby*. The constantly driven ambition and romantic wish of Gatsby to live his life with Daisy can be correlated with the national desire to reinvent itself and get wealthy. However, he never enters old-money society, and this lack of success indicates the existence of unseen obstacles and paradoxes present in the dream. Fitzgerald gives us a world that has lost its dream, not through the abandonment of individuals but through a system that screams about image rather than content and wealth more than ethics. In such a way, the American Dream, which is implied in the novel, ceases to be an encouraging promise, being nothing but rather a wavering illusion, which is too tempting to be true. This development prepares the way to the comprehension of the motivation of the characters and social commentary, which runs across the whole Fitzgerald work. It is also useful in the context of the main question of this project whether this American Dream, as an ideal promoted by society, is achievable or in fact, it is the myth that hides some fundamental inequalities.

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD AND THE JAZZ AGE

F. Scott Fitzgerald is perhaps the most renowned American writer of the 20th century, commonly referred to as the voice of the Jazz Age, a term he coined as well. Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, to a family with a rich cultural and economic heritage, in 1896, during the era of dramatic cultural and economic transformation in America. Sixty years ago, the 1920s, or the Roaring Twenties, was the time of post-war boom, jazz music coming out, mass consumption, prohibition, and shifting of social standards. His personal experiences, observations, and struggles with his identity, ambitions, and wealth formed the focus of his writing, and Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, which was an extremely popular book. The Jazz Age was the epoch when conventional values came into conflict with the new outlooks. Having been devastated because of World War I, the urge among people was to forget the past and to enjoy freedom, fun, and individualism. It is during this time that we saw the emergence of the flapper culture, jazz music, dance halls, and the consumerism economy. It was glamour and excitement on the surface yet underneath lay an increasing emptiness and moral disillusion. Fitzgerald was a critic and a person who lived in this epoch. He and his wife, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, became the famous celebrities of America of the 1920s, who like the time had their own share of the thrill and liveliness. Most of those traits that mark his characters Fitzgerald shared himself in receiving fame and enjoying the comforts of luxury on one hand and the financial debts and personal anxieties on the other hand, coupled with an abundant understanding of the temporal essence of success. His work shows contradiction between the alluring power of money and the ugly reality of social disparity and lack of emotion. *The Great Gatsby* not only mirrors the essence of the Jazz Age in its glamorous surroundings and hurly-burly but also reflects more on the emptiness of the American Dream epitomized in the novel. The parties that Gatsby throws, thinking only of excess and spectacle, are the image of success that marked the times. The raw undertones of the novel (treason, loss, and social partition) show, meanwhile, the effect of a materialistic and luxurious world. Using his book, Fitzgerald criticizes the truth about the depreciation of the American Dream and the increasing distance between richness and virtue. He introduces us to a generation that, despite their attempts at having a happy life, ends up being lost, disillusioned, and disconnected. The characters that he creates who seek out idealized dreams and then are disappointed and inspired by tragedy reflect the keenest contradiction of the Jazz Age, its brilliance, and its lost promises. Here the key point is that in order to interpret *The Great Gatsby*, it is not only important to know about how Fitzgerald lived but also his close association with the 1920s. The novel is more than a tale of love and ambition; it is a kind of portrait of the world, which was filled with glittering illusions and shocking realities, and it is an ideal setting to examine the most significant issue of this study.

The Illusion of the American Dream:

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is an interesting proposal of the illusionary American Dream of the Jazz Age. An ideal of freedom, opportunity, and pursuit of happiness lies at the heart of the American Dream, which guarantees the American people that diligence and ambition will deliver achievement and social advancement. The dream is, however, in the novel, turned into an empty mirage, corrupted by the over-materialism, hierarchic social culture, and libertinism of the America of the 1920s. *The Great Gatsby*'s world is full of decadence, with Gatsby throwing lavish parties and the rich life of occupants of East Egg. The abundance of wealth becomes one of the major symbols of success, and however Fitzgerald does not praise prosperity using it; on the contrary, he criticizes the superficiality of it. The vision of the self-made man is reflected in who comes out of nothing to become outrageously wealthy. However, his money is gained in dubious ways, and although he makes profits materially, he lives outside the mainstream and is unabashedly unfulfilled in life. The fact that he is in love with Daisy Buchanan, who symbolizes a way of both lost love and the eventual social prize of upholding the elite social order, proves that money cannot buy true happiness or authentic belonging. The characterization of the novel's setting is illusionary. The mansion owned by Gatsby, his parties, and his clothing all depict an image of wealth and prosperity, but all this is a cover-up of a lonely man, one full of insecurity and desperation. The novel demonstrates how things can look different, and there would be hard truths behind the exotic faces. Especially the opposition of East Egg with that of West Egg marks such tension. The East Egg, with a population of Daisy and Tom Buchanan, represents inherited fortune and the established social status. By way of contrast, West Egg, where Gatsby and other nouveau riche creatures have their residences, is a recently acquired money that has no historical legitimacy. By creating this vision of space, Fitzgerald distances himself from the rigidity

of American society that implies that the American dream of upward mobility is tightly succeeded on the boundary of the specific classes. In addition, the novel reveals the ethical vacuum of people who apparently succeeded in the American Dream. Careless, privileged characters Tom and Daisy Buchanan, despite the wealth they possess, are shown to be too cavalier, callous, and unfeeling. They use their social capital and shun their dollars when faced with the effects of their acts. The rendering negates the virtuousness or merit as a rich or successful notion.

The image of an illusory wealth and glamour helps Fitzgerald to contrast and elaborate on the strong discord between the visions of the American Dream and the reality of 1920s America. Instead of being an epitome of equal opportunity, the dream turns into a mirage, a mirage that gives hope of fulfillment but brings with it despair. By exposing the tragic search of Gatsby to achieve an unrealistic dream, Fitzgerald is attacking the myth of self-determination and revealing how the classes exist even beneath the glittering surface of American society.

The Reality of the American Dream:

The Great Gatsby is marvelous with its displays of money, riches, and prosperity; Fitzgerald finally reveals a more grim and somber truth behind all the glamour that surrounds the story. This novel breaks the myth of the American Dream to remake it into a hollow chase after material and superficial pleasure. The hope that was supposed to be a representation of individual success can be turned into one of disillusionment, corruption, and spiritual bankruptcy. Jay Gatsby, as the main character of the story, frames this tragic reality. The story of his rise from a poor boy in a Midwestern farm community to become a rich man with a huge mansion and lavish parties would depict the American Dream in the first place. But the progress of Gatsby is marred by crime, mystery, and deception. The dream has been perverted through this expression of his endless and obsessional chase of Daisy, who symbolizes not just the love he has towards her but also the wider aspirations of status and acceptance. Gatsby pursues validation in terms of material goods and social status instead of striving toward self-improvement or trying to achieve something good. The fact that his supposed good fortune did not allow him to regain the woman he loves, Daisy, highlights how meaningless it is to pursue something that is merely an illusion and created by the unusual demands of the society. Disaffection can also be traced in the character of Nick Carraway, a narrator in the novel. Attracted by the charms and wealth of Gatsby, Nick slowly loses faith in the hypocrisy, the lack of care, and the corruption he observes in the rich upper crust. He goes back to the Midwest in the end to signify his rejection of the Eastern world ruled by materialism and moral poverty. The geographical trek symbolizes an overarching longing to go back to the purer and more humane ideals to rid oneself of the debased ideals that Easternism embodies. The environment in the story with the Valley of Ashes adds more strength to the rot in the American Dream. This wasteland of industry between West Egg and New York City is a metaphor used to illustrate the effects of greed unrestrained and misunderstood by the society. It is a symbol of the existence of people who work and are not paid, the one which is not seen but is the driving force of those who enjoy luxuries and face the denial of dreaming themselves. Such characters as George and Myrtle Wilson represent this element of the story. The tragic consequences of their destinies illustrate the fact that the dream is unattainable, as well as harmful to the people who stand on the edge of the society. The American Dream in the portrayal steered by Fitzgerald is therefore flawed. It stops being an absolute guarantee of success and becomes a property of social privilege, looks, and wealth. The dream has much more to leave out than put in, and in the end, it disappoints and causes moral collapse to those who thought so much of it. The plot twist in Gatsby, the selfishness of Daisy, and the irresponsible nature of the Buchanans all help in delivering the grim message of the novel that the American Dream as it was carried out in the Jazz Age was not a way to happiness but a way to tragedy.

Symbolism and Imagery in *The Great Gatsby*:

The novel has earned a reputation not only due to the nature of its narrative and social criticism but also due to its prevalence in the usage of symbolism and imagery. Using selective symbols, Fitzgerald further develops themes of illusion and identity, disillusionment, and the fall of the American Dream. All these repetitive motifs serve to color the emotional, moral, and psychological topography of the characters and the world that they live in. The green light at the end of the Daisy Buchanan dock can be considered as some of the most important and debated symbols in the novel. In the case of Gatsby, this light symbolizes his future goals and aspirations, especially his dream to see Daisy once again, to relive a perfect past. The green light is far away and unreachable, blazing on the bay, right before our eyes. Its shade (a shade that involves money and jealousy) connects the love dream of Gatsby and the material dream. But as the novel unfolds, the green light turns out to be a sign of delusion and delusive hopes of the American Dream. The paradox of the dream, despite its strength, it is not fulfilled, can also be felt in the reflections of Nick at the conclusion of the novel, when he, in response to the final words of Gatsby, says, "I know it was afterwards. They all used to say it was afterwards." I lost track of time. Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us.

The other prominent symbol is the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg, who is a faded billboard that overlooks the valley of ashes. These eyes, spray-painted on an old billboard, form an image of the concept of the all-seeing, deity-like figure in a world devoid of morals. Others see them as divine judgment or loss of spirituality in a society that is all obsessed with materialism and consumption. Based in a spot of poverty and industrial ruin, the eyes appear to look down on the corruption and callousness of characters such as Tom and Daisy, who can exploit others with no penalty. Even the Valley of Ashes itself is a strong impression of the devastation and social irresponsibility. It is the shadow of the American Dream, the place where all the flaws of the society and capitalism are most evident. This gloomy, grey scenery is juxtaposed to the elite of East Egg and West Egg, and it is highlighted how far apart the lives of the rich and poor and the successful and hopeless are. The characters of the working classes are caught up in this space, and their existence is that of the tough and unfulfilled dreams characterized by George and Myrtle Wilson. Gatsby, as well as his lavish parties and mansion, has his symbolic meaning. They express success and abundance on the outside, but in fact, they are superficial and lonely. The magnificence of the parties, which are full of strangers and noise, is opposed to Gatsby's personal vacuity and desire. His mansion is not a home anymore but rather his theatre to

impress and hide his jibes to attract Daisy to him. After she visits, the house also becomes devoid of its magic to Gatsby, who realizes that it was never the possession of wealth but what he believed wealth would make him gain back.

Lastly, weather and seasons are mentioned in passing to provide reflections of emotional changes in the story. The scene of reuniting Gatsby and Daisy occurs in a rainstorm, which implies the disturbance of their emotions, but the weather calms down and clears up as the lovers start to love again. The same goes for the death of Gatsby, who is killed on a summery eve when everything begins to cool down and when things start to decay further an analogy of the passing dream and an anticipation of the loss. Utilizing these symbols and images, Fitzgerald adds some complexity to the criticism of the American Dream. Instead of sticking to the direct statements, he inserts meaning in objects, places, and visual images, which might be discovered by the readers who find the emotional and moral truth under the glittering surface of 1920s America.

Conclusion:

The Great Gatsby focuses on Jay Gatsby, who is an archetypal, assessed dreamer whose ideals at the same time cause his destruction. Gatsby, whose real name is James Gatz, remoulds himself with undeterred determination to escape his humble background by hoping to become somebody up in the world. He is dreaming of the possibility that money and prosperity can bring with them a past that he had lost, especially his time with Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby is obsessed with Daisy, and he idolizes her so much that he makes her an ideal person and the embodiment of the American Dream and not the person he sees her as. Such romantic idealism leaves him unable to see the moral and material void of the world he is trying to enter. Although Gatsby is richer than anyone in the whole world, he is still a foreigner to the high-society street life of the East Egg, revealing the division between the freshest money and the oldest. His infamous house parties with people he does not know in them are better measured by his sadness and desire than by satisfaction. The illusion seen in Gatsby is also revealed when Gatsby learns that Daisy, whose life has become so uncomfortable with passion as an option, goes back to Tom. The irony of the situation is that Gatsby could not believe that the dream he pursued was a creation of a lie and a memory. He holds on to the notion that he can repeat the past, and this notion later drives him into seclusion against reality. Gatsby is mostly forgotten by the society he appeared to be after impressing, even in his death, and his only companion is Nick. However, the ultimate thought in Nick places Gatsby as a symbol of pure hope, a person who was not afraid to stretch and overtake what he could not catch. It is this complexity that makes Gatsby so heroic yet so pathetic a creature, a man obsessed with a greater vision. Fitzgerald employs Gatsby to express his criticism of the American Dream as a compromise, spoiled by money and class distinction. The novel challenges the idea that everybody can achieve success in America, as represented by Gatsby, or that it is the preserve of the rich. Against this background, the tragedy of Gatsby proves not only personal but also a sign of illusions lost by a generation. At the end, Gatsby serves as the dramatic lesson of what it costs to dream too much in a world of reality and social standing.

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