



AQA English Literature A-level

The Great Gatsby: Themes Idealism

All page numbers are from to the Wordsworth Classics edition (1993)

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IDEALISM THROUGH THE AMERICAN DREAM

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is often as a **pessimistic** critique of the idealism of the American Dream. The American Dream is commonly defined as **“the belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary or social”** [Roger L Pearson, 1970]. This promotes the belief that America is a **meritocracy** whereby anyone can achieve or obtain anything if they work hard enough. This is an idealised, rose-tinted view of the opportunities available in America. The American Dream is an ideology that gained momentum following the end of the First World War, and the economic boom of the Roaring Twenties. The American Dream presumes **mythical equality** of opportunity as well as the absence of a **class hierarchy** and aristocratic **privilege**. This ideology treats the entirety of the nation as a collective of equal individuals whose only **limit** is their ambition.



The Unveiling of the Statue of Liberty, Enlightening the World, painting by Edward Moran (1886)

Image source:

<http://19thcenturyusapaint.blogspot.com/2012/05/edward-moran.html>

This obscures the reality of America, which is microcosmically presented by *Gatsby*'s world, in which different classes inhabit different settings ('No Money' = Valley of Ashes, 'Nouveau Riche' = West Egg, 'Old Money' = East Egg). Whilst the motif of the American Dream was popular in 1920s American literature, Fitzgerald adopts a **“unique expression of the American dream...[one which] lacks the optimism, the sense of fulfilment”** [Roger L Pearson, 1970], allowing him to assess how **realistic** the American Dream is.

Fitzgerald repeatedly questions the **reality** of the American Dream, yet at times appears to endorse it instead of explicitly writing it off as a **reckless fantasy**. The context of the American Dream during the **Jazz Age** (a term coined by Fitzgerald to describe the period) allows a measure of the social values and morals and ethics of the period. Nick's statement of **“A new world, material without being real”** [chapter 8, p.103] describes the emergence of a new era after the First World War, whereby the **morals and values** of the old world have disappeared as people increasingly pride themselves with their material possessions, leaving them **lost** and **empty**.

The label **Lost Generation** has been applied to adults of this period in America's Roaring Twenties - a generational cohort of **disoriented**, directionless and wandering individuals whose spirit had been tainted by the First World War. This label pertains to Fitzgerald himself, whose literary work is often considered a **mythologised** version of his own life, and whose writing



frequently reveals the **decadence** and **frivolous** lifestyles of the wealthy. This aids his exploration of the American Dream with its death and decline, which he exhibits through the character of Jay Gatsby as well as Nick Carraway, who realises its **over-idealistic** elements and **corrupting** abilities.

The American Dream as an essential **motif which drives Gatsby's journey towards acquiring his wealth.**

Gatsby's character is motivated by the different **opportunities** offered by the concept of the American Dream. Historically, the Roaring Twenties fueled the idea that anybody could make it on Wall Street. This wild confidence led to the Wall Street Crash later on in 1929. The provenance of the novel, having been set in 1922 and published in 1925, foreshadows this crash through its depiction of **unrestrained hedonism** and the tragedy that follows.

The dream of wealth projected by the American Dream is **ephemeral** and **unreachable**. The historic moment of the economic boom met by the economic crash is created by the **extended metaphor** of Gatsby's rise as he **thrives**, and **falls**. The transition from his **lavish** parties which were characterised by enormous amounts of wealth and the **fruits** of 'hard work' to the dark, empty, haunted-like view of the mansion shows the unravelling of Gatsby's American Dream, although he remains wealthy. Furthermore, Tom Wilson, a garage mechanic, works hard all his life and remains poor, thus indicating that **fantastic wealth** is only (temporarily) available to those who become involved in shady dealings, like Gatsby, or those whose wealth is inherited, like the Buchanans. Fitzgerald therefore presents a pessimistic view of the monetary aspect of the American Dream; realising the Dream economically depends on luck or crime and is otherwise unattainable.

Chasing the American Dream.

Nick also showcases life in 1920s America in a nutshell: **"They moved with a fast crowd, all of them young and rich and wild" [p.50]** - living the American Dream of money, consumerism, partying and **temporary happiness** invokes a **race-like feeling** in New York - **"I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it" [chapter 4, p.37]** - which pushes everyone towards the same things. Nick makes it clear that happiness is the subject of their **quest**, yet they are all aiming to acquire it in the same way: **"Imagining that I, too, was hurrying towards gaiety and sharing their intimate excitement, I wished them well."** [chapter x, p.37].

The fact they all believe they should be living the same **criteria** in their life and everyone else to catch a **glimpse of gaiety** and the American Dream is precisely what encourages the same **rakish** behaviour, making it a prominent feature of 1920s American society. This is what makes the inter-war period **'Roaring'**, in the sense everything is **energetic** and fizzing about. This should be contrasted with the dull, slow lives in the Valley of Ashes. Between the **serenity** of East Egg and the trapped lack of motion in the Valley of Ashes, people like Nick and Gatsby are chasing their American Dreams and running towards gaiety.



Different characters embody different ideas and beliefs.

Gatsby and the American Dream are intertwined, almost indistinguishable. Alongside him, Myrtle also appears to be in **active pursuit** of the American Dream, while Wilson reveals the brokenness of its promise, reflected by his broken spirit. They all share the same poor, lower-class **origins**. However, Gatsby is the only character who is not explicitly **trapped**, mingling for a time the millionaires of West Egg before the novel's **tragic denouement**. **Gatsby's rise and fall** questions the American Dream's posited ideals of the equality of 'upward' mobility. Gatsby's transition from James Gatz to the glamorous Jay Gatsby appears to be the **verification** of the success of the American Dream as he **transforms** his humble origins by accumulating huge amounts of wealth. However, his entire life and pursuit of monetary gain are the **expense** of living an **honest** life; he lives a life of **pretence** and **involvement in crime** in order to attempt to finance a **luxurious lifestyle** and fit in with elitist American society. However, he does not manage to fully achieve this; 'old money' people like Tom and Daisy see through his pretence ("“**An Oxford man!**”. He [Tom] **was incredulous**. ‘**Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit.**’” [chapter 7, p.77]) and he remains spatially separated from the 'old money set' by a body of water (the bay). Nevertheless, from an economic perspective, Gatsby is able to temporarily live the ideals of the Dream, becoming the dream himself.

On the other hand, George Wilson's exhausted complacency can be studied as an inability to aim for the high standards of the American Dream. He does not successfully transcend these social **barriers** like his **foil** character - Gatsby - does, and he is not **satisfied**, so he remains trapped in the ashy realm of the Valley of Ashes (the binary of what the American Dream represents). Wilson's poverty stems from pursuing blue-collar work, which in the corrupt society of 1920s New York, bars him from the riches Gatsby is acquiring through his involvements with **criminal** business dealings.

“Making a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand.”
[chapter 2, p.25]

In order to **attempt** (rather unsuccessfully) to **rise** above her social station. Myrtle subjects herself to abusive **treatment** at the hands of Tom. A Marxist criticism of this would highlight how Myrtle's American Dream commodifies her as Tom freely treats her like an object whose **value** decreases in his eyes when he sees fit. This **violence** is the price she is willing to pay in attempt to rise above her class, yet her gory death, in which her breast is ripped off, extinguishes her vitality and communicates to the reader that attempting to rise above your station is impossible. As the song that Daisy and Nick sing in Chapter Five, goes, **“One thing's sure and nothing's surer the rich get richer and the poor get — children”** (“poorer” replaces “children” in Percy Bysshe Shelley's original aphorism).

An unreliable narrator, Nick does not explicitly expose the dark aspects of American society easily, nor does he show consistency when narrating the story. Nick expresses his **resentment** of 1920s America yet appears to be a **passive third party** in most of the scenes he narrates on the **decay of moral values**. He himself is **complicit** in the morality of 1920s American society,



so much so that he **glamourises** and **romanticises** the settings around him, yet he critiques the characters throughout.

Nick's expressions when describing wealth vary and our view of Gatsby and Daisy changes throughout. At first, Daisy is described as this **thrilling** beauty, a **femme fatale** which captures the hearts of many, but by the end of the novel, it is clear that Daisy's main source of attraction is her wealth (symbolised by her voice) and status which others, like Gatsby, **prey** on and **dream** of. The depiction of a ghostly world posits a connection between the American **myth** and the empty desire of acquiring **material** possessions. Gatsby builds his "**castle**" (indicative of **wealth**) on a "**fairy's wing**" which stands as a metaphor for laying his **foundations** and immense wealth acquisitions on the **fantasy** of the American Dream. Gatsby's failure suggests the breaking of the fairy's wing (the American Dream) and only people like Tom and Daisy (East Eggs) are allowed by society to "**retreat back into their money**" because of their **upper-class status**.

Therefore, it is safe to classify Tom, Daisy and Jordan too as the **antithesis** of the American Dream, and the harsh **reality** of the **blockade** presented by 'old money', the elite class that resides in East Egg. They represent everything which the other characters **want**, essentially what is above that **glass ceiling** yet their status is **unattainable** through hard work. Even someone like Gatsby will forever be an **outsider** in their company, with his gaudy pink suit and affected mannerisms (e.g. 'Old Sport') which are seen through by 'old money' society. For the other characters, Tom and Daisy and the **echelon** of society they represent, may be tantalisingly close ("**just across the bay**") but ultimately always out of reach.

THE AMERICAN DREAM AS A FACADE

Through the novel, Fitzgerald is able to communicate to the reader that the American Dream is a **facade**, an **unattainable** 'dream', hence its name. He poses difficult questions instead of providing solid answers. For Gatsby and Myrtle, does the end (wealth) justify the means? Gatsby's **illegal** ways of making money and Myrtle's extramarital **affair** with Tom both force the characters to adopt a sense of pretence to reshape their identity. This could be evidence of the **corrupting effect** of the overly idealised American Dream, which twists the individual's morals as they partake in **immoral** activities which were widespread in 1920s America. This shows how morality and core values are **sacrificed** in order to reach the American Dream, a journey which is not only **futile** but deadly.

The Valley of Ashes and the American Dream.

This setting is an explicit **metaphor** for the impossibility of the American Dream. The inhabitants of the Valley of Ashes are the **embodiment** of the unfair **predicament** which **traps** the poor like George Wilsons, who lose their **vivacity** for life in the face of such stubborn poverty.



“This is the valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.”



The Valley of Ashes set in Baz Lurmann's (2013) film adaptation.

Image source:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Great_Gatsby_\(630911494\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Great_Gatsby_(630911494).jpg)

The death of Wilson's American Dream was much more **piecemeal** than Gatsby's **climactic** fall from grace. He slowly crumbles across his life as he remains **stationary** in this place of **toxicity** - not just physically but metaphorically.

The Valley of Ashes gives connotations of **wasteful** life and lack of **value**; the inhabitants as well as the ashes are waste **products** of the Roaring Twenties' economic industrial boom, although the proletariat who live here service the rich, as seen in Chapter 3 through the gardeners and servants **“toiling”** to repair the **“ravages”** of Gatsby's parties. The Valley is Ashes is

“bounded on one side by a small foul river, and, when the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour.” In describing this squalid river, Fitzgerald makes an allusion to the River Styx, a mythological river which one crosses to enter the realm of the dead. Thus, we can infer that the inhabitants of the Valley are, like George, ‘undead’, physically alive but spiritually dead, in a living purgatory due to the crushing conditions of life for those born without luck or inheritance.

Despite the aims of the American Dream: equality, justice and democracy - the 1920s promoted the importance of **acquiring individual wealth** which resulted in quite the opposite result. Widespread inequality of opportunity, wealth and of freedom to shape one's identity. Those in the Valley of Ashes remain trapped in this **decaying lifestyle** and die in their hopeless position, whilst people like Gatsby who transcends into the perimeters of wealth and the growing middle-class lifestyle also do not reach the **respectable status** of people like the Buchanans or even Nick Carraway's inherited upper-classness.

Critical theory - AO5:

Social **inequality** in Gatsby's world is of particular significance to Fitzgerald's message to society and his readers, amidst the **implications** of the Roaring Twenties' economic **boom**, perceptions and evolving **culture** of the American Dream as well as the social **changes** which characterised this inter-war period. Structuralist literary theory, which emerged later in the



1950s, would argue that the **behaviour** of the characters should be best understood within the **context** of larger social, cultural, psychological **structures**. This can be clearly seen in the **interrelationship** between the different **settings**, **locations** and portrayal of different characters; George, in particular, matches his setting perfectly; he is a pale, “**spiritless**” man colourless appearance and hopeless demeanour is the perfect complement of the grey, purgatorial Valley. The colours and nature of the Valley of Ashes **contrast** with Gatsby’s **colourful** lifestyle and the white and gold which surround Daisy.

Baz Lurhmann’s cinematic production of *The Great Gatsby* (2013) provides a dramatic illustration of the **disparities** between the different layers of society in 1920s America. The atmospheric **transitions** between Long Island and the Valley of Ashes, or even between the Buchanans’ and Gatsby’s home, **depict** the clear **contrasts** between the different **worlds** inhabited by the different characters and the effect it has on their **relationships** or decisions.

The symbols and changing the meaning of the green light at the edge of Daisy’s dock.

The colour green is **traditionally associated with money**, while the green light also symbolises the wealth Gatsby believes he can win over Daisy with.

“...he [Gatsby] gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone - he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way...I could have sworn he was trembling...I glanced seaward - and distinguished nothing except a green light” [chapter 1, p.x]

Gatsby’s commitment to his American Dream makes him reach **further** than he can **grasp**. The imagery of yearning showcases his **desperation**, with the verb “**trembling**” presenting his **vulnerability**. The climax of the novel occurs in chapters 5 and 6 upon **reuniting** with Daisy and almost convincing the readers that Gatsby has a **chance** at success. Here water symbolises the American Dream as if Gatsby attempts to touch it, with the close **proximity** of the green light and water giving him **false** hope. His colossal effort versus the unworthiness of its object, Daisy, is neatly summed up by this image; Gatsby is exerting himself for almost nothing “**nothing except**”.

“If it wasn’t for the mist we could see your home across the bay,” [chapter 5, p.60]

“You always have a green light that burns all night...” [chapter 5, p.60]

Both of these lines said by Gatsby to Daisy and Tom highlights his **obsession** with the green light and distance between himself and his Dream ‘**destination**’, as it were, as he aims to become one of East Egg society. This shows his attempt to **impress** the East Eggers of his awareness of the green light’s **significance**, and the physical closeness between them, which they do not acknowledge. What is a dream to Gatsby is nothing but a **discardable** object to these upper-class elites, with little symbolic significance:

“Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the





moon. Now it was again a **green** light on a dock. His count of **enchanted** objects had **diminished** by one.” [chapter 6, p.60]

Gatsby's ability to **connect** with the green light and Daisy withers away as he is faced with her outside of his 'dream', but in reality. This shows the anticlimax of the story as his dream of “**enchanted objects**” begins to **unravel** and almost **crumble**. The facade which was uplifting him and driving him all these years finally **disappeared** and he was faced with the **harsh reality** of Daisy Buchanan, not the Daisy he remembers from Louisville, nor the one which **stars** in his unruly dream.

“He too stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real.” [chapter x, p.59]

Once again, Gatsby is **confronted** by the fact that he placed himself in the **facade** of the American Dream. He is so carried away by his ideal world that the actual events which he was waiting for all his life **frighten** him. It appears he did not expect everything to be so **downplayed** in reality as opposed to the **heightened esteem** of his dream. His overidealisation only goes to flaw the reality and create an anti-climatic effect which **destroys** him in the process.

Gatsby builds himself in his **own** image, **mythologising himself** and his entire lifestyle.

“The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God...he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end.” [chapter x, p.x]

Gatsby himself is his own **creator**, as living up to a fantasy conceived as a teenager. The assertion that “**He was a son of God**” signifies his ability to create himself in his image, as Jesus was basically God but taking up his human form. The quote also reveals Nick's enormous **reverence for and idolisation of** Gatsby; the claim that he is a “a son of God” likely would seem so hyperbolic to a reader as to be laughable.

“If one brick was removed the whole library was liable to collapse” [chapter x, p.x]

The library, with Owl Eyes' assertion that the books “**are real**”, becomes a **metaphor** of Gatsby's entire dream, as well as his **reputation** and social **image**. Doubt and rumours surround him and his name as he is tested by those around him and placed under the **microscope** by both West Eggers and East Eggers alike. It appears Gatsby's dream and pretence self is hanging merely by a **thread**. This shows how risky the American Dream is, with no **guarantees** to the dreamer nor his future if he enters the ‘**game**’. Gatsby risks everything as he enters the game **wholeheartedly**, ready to make it or break it.

“A sudden emptiness seemed to flow now from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell.” [chapter x, p.x]

This quote signifies correctly the “**emptiness**” which inhabits Gatsby's world. After the people leave his mansion, he is faced with the dark **isolatory** gloom of **nothingness** which is the reality



in which he lives. Apparently, everything is merely a **distraction** from his dream until he reaches it, which he never does because it is precisely that: a **dream**. The last part of this quote shows Gatsby as this **robotic figure**, who carries out **rehearsed behaviour** and actions, through his standard formal gestures. This is important to the themes of deception. Gatsby is forced to **change** himself to fit the **criteria** of East Egg in order to reach his American Dream. This therefore shows that the dream itself is not attainable through **honourable** ways, but one has to enter the field of **deception**, **immorality** and **corruption** to reach this **falsified** level of idealism.

“He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy’s” [chapter x, p.x]

This line of Tom’s directly points out Gatsby’s **deception** as he conceals his original identity, it is more significant in the way the American Dream promotes this **facade**, allowing an individual to **reshape their identity**, feeding on lies to reach a certain status or position. Gatsby’s **pretence** and falsehood regarding his background, class and way of acquiring his wealth by illegal, criminal means form a part of the dust he throws around to shield his real identity. Even his mansion and everything in it are part of this deceptive dust. The **unsolid** nature of dust means Gatsby is unable to rest on a solid **base**, which is why he fails in the end.

“for a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing” [chapter x, p.x]

THE EMPTINESS OF WEALTH

Ambition at the expense of substance.

“[Gatsby] had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed **starlight to casual **moths** so that he could “come over” some afternoon to a stranger’s garden.” [chapter x, p.x]**

This **anticlimactic** section signifies the point whereby Gatsby loses his greatness in Nick’s perception: Gatsby’s modesty shocks Nick and his excessively **romantic plot** appears **purposeless** and insignificant as his plan appears well-constructed but executed casually: **“He came alive to me, delivered from the womb of his **purposeless** splendor.” [chapter 4, p.51]** Nick creatively deploys a **biblical** link to Jesus’s divine role on earth [Luke 2:49] - **“he must be about His Father’s Business”** - which serves as a binary to Gatsby’s **“service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty.” [chapter x, p.x]**. These references romanticise Gatsby in a binary way as he appears to be on his own holy **mission**, yet the mission - to get a girl who is named after a throwaway flower - through shady dealings, is laughable.

East Egg as the antithesis of the American Dream.

“The only **completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were **buoyed** up as though upon an **anchored balloon**... their dresses**



were **rippling** and **fluttering** as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house... the two young women **ballooned** slowly to the floor” [chapter 1, p.7]

The similes of movement and **floating** suggests Jordan and Daisy are so **lightweight** and “...**completely motionless**” that they do not inhibit a physical heaviness. This reinforces the reader’s sense of the aimlessness of their lives; their wealth allows them to live ethereal, purposeless existences, ungrounded by real obligations or cares. The female characters are passive and accordingly move “**languidly**” [chapter 2, p.9], while Tom’s purposelessness manifests as **restlessness** in the first chapter:

“Tom Buchanan, who had been hovering **restlessly about the room, stopped and rested his hand on my shoulder”** [chapter 1, p.8]

“His eyes flashing about **restlessly”** [chapter 1, p.7]

Both these examples signify his **boredom** because he is so wealthy, **accomplished** and famous that there is little more he could do. All the characters of East Egg display this sense of **dissatisfaction** with their lives, which leads to their **reckless** attempts to occupy themselves with different things and be “**rich together**”. Jordan’s overly dramatic statement - “**I’ve been lying on that sofa for as long as I can remember**” [chapter 1, p.9] - points to the way her luxurious life is preventing her from “**get[ting] anything done**”, due to her privilege.

Daisy’s **despair** with her life activates her **carelessness** and her **impulsiveness** - her marriage to Tom and affairs with Gatsby. Her **misery** is enacted by her inability to leave Tom and her **socialite** life in order to pursue her own happiness, leading to a temporary stream of thoughtless, **rash** actions. Both Daisy and Jordan are motionless characters, due to their status, whilst Myrtle - whose economic status is lower - is described as much more **active** and **restless** in her active **quest** to attain wealth and upper-class status.

Myrtle’s acquisitiveness is displayed by her frequent mention of all the purchases she requires - “**I’m going to make a list of all the things I’ve got to make. A massage and a wave and a collar for the dog and one of those cute little ashtrays...**” [chapter 2, p.x]. This elaborate listing of items points to the **simplicity** of her character and how easily she is **satisfied** with **materialism**. American consumer culture is under significant **scrutiny** through Myrtle’s character.

Fitzgerald’s critiques more than just the American Dream: he criticises the **social atmosphere of the Roaring Twenties**. The growing affluence and changing morals of the nation created a materialistic culture. However, the American Dream was initially concerned with the **pursuit of happiness**, not explicit **materialism**. Characters of the novel can be said to have achieved (or inherited) American Dream through their access to the items **consumer culture**. Nevertheless, they do not particularly seem to be happy.

“His bedroom was the **simplest room of all.”** [chapter x, p.59]

This quote shows the real Gatsby when the **facade** of wealth is stripped away. Here the readers can see his **vulnerability** as he is **exposed** in his most private room. The **simplicity** which



comes with this Gatsby highlights how he is unable to live completely in the enlarged glittery golden rooms of his mansion. The simplicity of his bedroom recalls the simplicity of his adolescence, in which he worked as a “**clam digger**” and “**salmon fisher**” when he slept with the moonlight upon his “**tangled clothes [on] the floor**” [chapter 6].

Critics point to the gory images of drowning which Nick uses a few times to show how Gatsby is **drowning** in his dream and is unable to maintain both himself and his dream. By sacrificing himself for his dream of wealth and class, he resolves to live the life of **hollow emptiness** instead.

THE DEATH OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Marxist critics take the view that Gatsby is a **personification** or extended metaphor of America's path towards the American Dream, and with his death we see the failure of this idealised concept which **motivates** many of the novel's characters.

“Jay Gatsby had **broken up like glass against Tom's hard malice” [chapter 8, p.94]**

This quote is of importance because it **directly** places Tom against Gatsby, just as they symbolise old and new wealth, respectively. Tom, the East Egg aristocrat, he has everything, while Gatsby, the dreamer from a poor background, but attempts to pass himself off as a West Egger from old money. Tom is threatened by Gatsby and the threat to his privilege that he represents; this is revealed when he says “**“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.”** [chapter x, p.83]. However, privilege and snobbery reign and people like Gatsby cannot **compete** nor overtake people like Tom in any situation, and they **crack** under the **futility** of the process.

The image of glass in the initial quote points to Gatsby's **fragility**; he is not standing on solid ground, due to the **deceptive facade he wears** as well as the **boom-bust** nature of 1920s economics (*The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925; the Wall Street Crash happened in 1929, unleashing the Great Depression). Critics also point to the theme of the **glass ceiling** which Gatsby is actively aiming to **transcend** to reach Tom's **status**. By aiming too high, Gatsby **sacrifices** everything and he meets with the **hard malice** of Tom's world.

“So the whole **caravansary had fallen in like a **card house** at the **disapproval** in her [Daisy's] eyes” [chapter 6, p.71]**

This quote symbolises the **hollowness** of Gatsby's dream, a dream which he spends his entire life building to capture Daisy, only for her to disapprove. This moment is **pivotal** as it signifies the beginning of Gatsby's **fall from greatness**.



Gatsby's death and its implications

“Gatsby, pale as death, with his hands plunged like weights in his coat pockets, was standing in a puddle of water glaring tragically into my eyes.” [chapter 5, p.55].

The death simile and the drowning imagery is a cataphoric **foreshadowing** of the tragic ending of Gatsby. **Drowning** and **water** are recurring images in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby drowning represents the failure of the American Dream, and his failure to survive in a **grotesque reality** for which he is **ill-equipped**.

Gatsby's death is precisely the result of his **own actions**. By chasing Daisy, he makes him vulnerable in more ways than one, as he refuses to accept she is out of his **reach**, even after she leaves him for Tom once again. The swimming pool scene plays more than just a role in being the location of his death. It also shows his **refusal** to accept **new beginnings**. Whilst the gardener tells Gatsby he intends to drain the pool because **“Leaves’ll start falling pretty soon” [chapter 8, p.97]** signifying the coming of Autumn, Gatsby tells him otherwise because he did not use the pool all summer. This not only shows Gatsby missing out on **basic luxuries** and activities because he was too busy dreaming and chasing Daisy, but also his **reluctance** to accept it is time to move on. He wants to stall the passing of time and so attempts to halt the changing of the **seasons**. Uncoincidentally, he dies the same day he decides not to leave and attempt to move on from Daisy.

Gatsby's car

“As it happens, the car proves to be a murder weapon and the instrument of Gatsby's undoing” [Leo Marx, critic]

This view of Gatsby's car brings forth the argument that Gatsby becomes the **victim** of the American Dream. His car represents **all-things-money** and he subjects himself to the **destruction** which takes place at its hands. Gatsby, Myrtle and Wilson are the **collateral damage** of the American Dream.

Myrtle's death and its implications

“So we drove on towards death through the cooling twilight” [chapter 7, p.87]

This quote foreshadows Myrtle's death, which happens only moments later as she runs towards Gatsby's car thinking Tom is inside. The romantic imagery of driving towards the twilight is cooled by the reference to death.

“...when they had torn open her shirtwaist, still damp with perspiration, they saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen to the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped a little at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long” [chapter 7, p.88]

Myrtle's **“vitality”** is often referred to by Nick, who appears to measure how much life she carries through her actions and energy. The gory image of her dead body concretises the





reader's sense of her vitality, which is described as trapped, as having no channel for in life. The Valley of Ashes had no place for her sensual vitality, neither did the high society she clung to the fringes of. It is only through death this vitality can be released.

“They’re a rotten crowd...You’re worth the whole damn bunch together” [chapter 8, p.98]

This quote is significant as it is the last time Nick speaks to Gatsby, and it appears he has come to a conclusion that Gatsby is better than his East Egg counterparts. He not only points to the **corruption**, **greed** and **lies** of society, but the **emptiness** which rots their core and makes them hollow..Fitzgerald poses a complex question: How is Gatsby better than the rest despite his **attachment** to money and aspirations for a higher status? After many encounters, Nick concluded that Gatsby used money and status as a **means** to win Daisy over, rather than an **end** in itself. Thus, his intentions are more honourable than the others, who live simply to enjoy their money and privileges. Furthermore, he commits a final act of love, accepting the blame for Myrtle's death in order to protect Daisy. This is a direct contrast with the moral-less Buchanans, who possibly **“conspir[e]”** together [chapter 7, p.x] to pin the blame on him. This act redeems Gatsby, and the reader is likely to agree with Nick's final assessment of the **eponymous character**.

The use of the general pronoun 'they' and the signal to a 'crowd' is of significance as Nick does not allude to the main characters only, but the entirety of East Egg or those living in **money-driven superficiality** without a goal or dream other than their wealth. Nick appears to carry the Marxist tongue here as he **condemns** such a lifestyle, which he was exposed to over the course of the entire novel. This **selfish** desire which drives people is what takes them to Gatsby's parties, **uninvited** and **unacquainted** with the host himself. This came to the fore when nobody attended Gatsby's funeral as even his closest **affiliations** did not want to get **“mixed up”** in the entire affair.

To Nick, Gatsby appears to be the **epitome** of the American Dream, signified by the **grandeur** of the name Nick gives him - **“The Great Gatsby”**. Nick in **retrospect** looks back at Gatsby's fraudulent and criminal activities with an understanding. Yet the most interesting aspect is that it was this character who had a true dream and purpose is the one to die **tragically**, whilst the rest are left to their own devices and **corrupt** lives.

“Gatsby himself didn't believe it [Daisy's phone call] would come, and perhaps no longer cared...he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass” [chapter 8, p.103]

This quote summarises Gatsby's last thoughts. He must have realised that his entire life, dream and journey had been in **vain** as he swims alone in that pool. His new lack of **faith** in Daisy reveals that the spell has finally been broken; he can see reality and it is “raw”. Gatsby's death is a price he must pay for his **disillusionment**. Here the **rose** symbolises the gulf between **appearance** and reality of the American Dream: whilst it is **beautiful** to look at and **valuable**



with many promises, it is covered in **thorns** - just like the flower-like Daisy. Gatsby takes on the American Dream without weighing up the **consequences**.

THE IDEALISM OF LOVE

Complete and unrealistic devotion

Daisy and Gatsby's courtship in Louisville before Gatsby goes to war appears to be more than just a summer 'fling'. For Gatsby, it becomes his version of the commercialised American Dream. Nick writes that Gatsby has **"committed himself to the following of a grail"** [chapter 8, p.95]. A grail is an object, concept or idea which is eagerly sought after and pursued with dedicated desperation.

Context (AO3):

Biblically, the **Holy Grail** was also the cup or platter **used by Jesus** to drink from in the Last Supper, as well as by Joseph of Arimathea when catching the blood of Jesus when he hung on the Cross. The legends of King Arthur, and Sir Galahad's are both shaped by the search for a sacred vessel and the Grail. A theme of **chivalry** and elevated **devotion** is prominent in all these examples. Gatsby himself pursues Daisy in terms of an invaluable item, a questlike legend, creating a dream which influences all his choices and actions and in which he is completely immersed. His dedication to this dream presents itself in different ways. The romantic, chivalrous, legendary imagery of knighthood is fairytale-esque and does not fit the fast-paced, harsh reality of 1920s America. Gatsby is doomed because **he pursues an ideal which does not fit the world he inhabits**, nor is he praised for it, but is punished and dies tragically.

Gatsby **idealises** Daisy, placing her on a pedestal

Gatsby is driven by his **undying** love for Daisy. However, this **"unwavering devotion"** stems from his **idealisation** of her, to the point where she is no longer the lady married to Buchanan, human with flaws like everyone else.

"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. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative fashion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart." [chapter 5, pp.61-62]

In this quote, Daisy is reduced from a human to a **factor** in Gatsby's dream, signalled by the repetition of the pronoun "it" rather than "her". The **objectification** of Daisy here calls forth a feminist perspective. Women are always forming a part of men's stories, secondary objects whose feelings are silenced. Daisy is objectified by Gatsby; she becomes a projection of his



desires. Gatsby does not stop for a second to Daisy what her real feelings are for him, yet he is wholly convinced that she should leave Tom for him. While Gatsby's investment in his illusion may seem a little **pathetic** to a reader, contrasted with the amoral Buchanans, Nick's semi-dislike for Jordan and Tom's indifference towards Myrtle, Gatsby's devotion could also been considered **refreshing**.

This quote also illustrative the cumulative nature of his investment; he "add[s] to it all the time". By the end of the novel, when he sees "raw" reality and realises the vastness of his illusion, **death is the only ending possible** for Gatsby; the huge psychological shock from the death of his dream must be paralleled by physical death.

"He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable death, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God... At his lips' touch she blossomed for him like a flower and the incarnation was complete." [chapter 6, p.71]

This represents Daisy as the unobtainable **inamorata**, a **femme fatale** - **"She's like a Kardashian"** [Carey Mulligan in Baz Luhrmann's film] - who becomes the object of desire for many men. It implies that his love for Daisy fueled his **ambition** in the same way a relationship with her **limited** his dreams: instead of perceiving Gatsby's **tragic devotion** to Daisy as romantic, readers can denote another perspective - Gatsby's devotion to money and Daisy's **monetary**, elite **symbolism**. The biblical image of **incarnation** symbolises Daisy as an otherworldly object of perfection in Gatsby's eyes; incarnation means "the human form of a spirit, or the human representation of a principle or idea". For Gatsby, Gatsby does not just *exist*, she *represents* or is a **receptacle for his projections**, and this is encapsulated in the word 'incarnate'. He is ready to **sacrifice** everything for her, making him **vulnerable**, yet at the same time he **controls his dream** of her.

"...his career as Trimalchio was over." [chapter 7, p.71]

Trimalchio is an **arrogant former slave** who has become quite wealthy by tactics that most would find distasteful, who features in Petronius' *Satyricon* (c1st AD). Nick's acknowledgement of Gatsby's Trimalchioic role gestures to his involvement in crime but also shows how his **extravagant** West Egg status was purely to lure Daisy in, after which none of it matters to him. The ending of his role is also indicated by the fact that he stops throwing his **lavish** parties.

Context - AO3:

Trimalchio's attempt to achieve immense wealth through **devious** means is analogous with Gatsby's rise to West Egg from his humble roots. One of Fitzgerald's working titles for the novel is 'Trimalchio in West Egg' as both characters build their **idealised self-made** lifestyles and dress themselves in **pretentious** robes. The final title, 'The Great Gatsby', has quite a different feel to 'Trimalchio in West Egg'. The former title is **laudatory**, while the latter intimates that Gatsby is arrogant, when in reality he is a simple man immersed in a dream.





“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...” [chapter 6, p.71]

This quote shows how Gatsby himself aches for the same vitality he had when he first met Daisy and decided to live his dream of her and for her wholeheartedly.

““Well, there I was, way off my **ambitions**, getting deeper in love every minute, and all of a sudden I didn’t **care**. What was the use of doing great things if I could have a better time telling **her** what I was going to do?”” [chapter 8, p.95]

Gatsby admits that he did not care whether or not his love or his actions weighed down on him. He **immersed** himself completely by his dream and love for Daisy to the point he could not see **reason**. However, a Marxist reading might closely examine the moment when Gatsby appears to prioritise love over money. The ambiguity of this passage leaves the reader **uncertain** whether **ambition** has really been **abandoned** or whether Gatsby has found a way to incorporate his relationship with Daisy into his ‘business’?

