



***The Great Gatsby* and the ‘Roaring 20’s’ of the US: An Exploration of the Materialistic Self of Modern Man**

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**Abstract:**

Modern man is seeped in materialistic pleasures and desires for more and more. With the capitalist and consumerism tendencies becoming more prevalent in the twentieth century, the materialistic demands and luxuries of life have created a spiritual void in him, leading to the modern man being forever dissatisfied. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* represents the spiritual void of the protagonist even though he is one of the most successful men according to materialistic standards. Even though the novel was published about a century ago, still its relevance can be seen as men are still after the same materialistic desires without caring for their spiritual needs.

**Keywords:**

Jay Gatsby, Materialism, Modern Man, Spiritual Void, *The Great Gatsby*, The roaring 20s, The United States.

*The Great Gatsby*, a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald and first published in 1925, did not receive a favorable reception upon its initial publication. Nevertheless, it has piqued people’s curiosity ever since the 1940s. Since then, and even until the current day, many individuals continue to believe that the novel is the best example of American life and culture during the Roaring Twenties. The 1920s were a time in the United States that is often referred to as the “Jazz Age.” At this time, people of all ages lived intending to seek pleasure as their primary motivation in life. The urge to indulge in hedonistic pleasures, participate in a materialistic

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culture and accomplish one's goals and dreams all played a part in this phenomenon. The concept of the “great American dream,” ingrained in American soil since the days of the colonial settlers, is said to be demystified in the novel *The Great Gatsby*, which is believed to be a critique of all of these aspects of American culture. This research paper examines how far society has progressed since the roaring '20s and compares and contrasts the era with the present day to demonstrate how materialistic culture has been a part of human lives in the United States and worldwide and how it has affected human civilization and culture.

Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, born and raised in the Midwest, uproots his life and moves to West Egg, situated on Long Island. He moves in with the enigmatic and affluent Jay Gatsby's next-door neighbor, a woman named Daisy Buchanan, and they start a new life together. The story focuses on the strange connection between Nick and Gatsby and Gatsby's pursuit of a married woman named Daisy, ultimately leading to Gatsby's death due to his being revealed as a bootlegger. Nick and Gatsby's relationship is at the center of the story. The novel is Fitzgerald's best work because of the charming manner in which it relates the story of a millionaire and his purportedly immoral love for married Daisy, who was formerly his lover before she got married. The work also places itself in the ideal position to represent the Jazz Age, emphasizing materialistic trends and the relentless pursuit of the American dream. Since the advent of capitalist culture, the globe has been plagued with problems traced back to the said culture's promotion of materialistic impulses. This problem is still present in our modern world because, amid our consumerist frenzy, we tend to ignore all the other facets of life and pursue a life centered on our material possessions, which often results in a spiritual void. This typical tendency has been a part of the modernist culture and one of the reasons for its deep-rooted metaphysical anguish.

In the novel, Nick observes Gatsby standing at the end of Daisy's dock, staring at the green light across the bay. Nick first thinks that whatever Gatsby does on Daisy's dock is secret because he is standing there. Nick realizes that Gatsby's intense staring at the light symbolically suggests his unrequited love for Daisy and the emptiness he suffers despite being a millionaire. After Gatsby has passed away, Nick goes to Gatsby's estate for the last time and realizes how Gatsby was always perturbed by his unrequited love even though he had all the materialistic pleasures of the world. The world's pleasures can be bought, but genuine contentment and pleasure cannot be obtained with monetary gain. In his work, Fitzgerald examines and critiques this aspect of the American Dream: achieving success

through material means, though this success does not satisfy the soul. Thus, one is always thirsty even though one supposedly has all.

Even though it has been almost a century since *The Great Gatsby* was written, the novel is still relevant to our lives because, for some reason or other, we continue to pursue the same illusory aims in our materialistic desires. Because of this, the novel depicts the era known as the “Roaring Twenties” of the US and an in-depth analysis of modern man and his materialistic pursuits. We continue to evaluate the quality of our lives based on the number of square feet of the bungalow or flat we live in and the make and model of the automobile(s) we drive. We still strive to live our lives to have the most cutting-edge technological advances and the most expensive equipment in the world. Even though most people do not have these with them and want them, those who have all these things are not even satisfied with themselves.

For a hungry stomach, the dream will always be of a loaf of bread because his drive for life is to exist. For a billionaire/ millionaire, the pursuit is much more than concrete commodities because he can afford to stare up at the moon and admire its beauty. Gatsby's pursuit of a life that is materialistic in all of its expressions and is devoid of any spiritual search makes him appear to be a pitiable character, which elicits empathy from the readers as a result of his misery, anguish and eventual death. Even though Bewley considers Jay Gatsby a heroic representation of the American romantic hero and the real heir of the American dream (Bewley 226-227), some people believe that Gatsby possesses a certain greatness of spirit.

The individual wandering around in search of food is not looking for the joys that can be had from acquiring worldly items; instead, he is searching for the things required to sustain life. On the other hand, the aspiration of becoming a millionaire is shared by the vast majority in this world. They are under the impression that their dreams and goals would only come true if they collect a great fortune and put it to use in a way that satisfies all of their materialistic needs and desires. As long as a person does not stop chasing after such hedonistic pleasures, his inner being will continue to look at the void created due to his efforts. This form of materialism ultimately results in the enjoyment that comes from the items themselves and the luxury of living. However, having these things does not ensure a person's life is meaningful. Gatsby brags about his courage in the war, but he will never be content with showing his bravery because he has lost the love of his life, Daisy.

It is also a fact that in this world where money decides everything, where the wealthy are thought to be the most cultured and valuable people, people like Daisy are also very dubious; even though she is married, she goes along with Gatsby in his rendezvous because it is a pleasurable experience. Money dictates everything, and the wealthy are considered the most cultured and valuable people. Gatsby has a few things to say about Daisy, and one of them is, "Her voice is full of money." That was all. I would never understand previously. It was flush with cash, and that was the unending allure that floated up and down in it, the jingle of it, the tune that its cymbals sang... The king's daughter, the golden girl, was said to be high up in a white palace." (Fitzgerald 92).

Gatsby's tragedy lies in the principles that make human beings appear "humane" and pursue spiritual and human aspirations, which almost entirely vanish due to contemporary civilization's materialistic pursuits. We now live in a world where existential angsts and stresses combine to make our lives a living hell. We eventually try to escape this hell by being lost in the world's superficial pleasures. However, this only leads us deeper into the same hell over and over again, until one day we realize, like T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock, that we need to stop measuring out our lives with coffee spoons and instead make an effort to awaken our "human voices" and drown the anguish that we have caused for ourselves by building mansions that are not homes. In other words, we must stop measuring our lives with coffee spoons and start fashioning our selves to fulfill the spiritual demands of our souls rather than pleasing our materialistic selves.

How we have dealt with nature and how little care we have shown for the long-term viability of the environment is another aspect of the consumerist society and the drive for material items. In the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, there is a longing for a return to the pastoral setting; however, in his efforts to become wealthy, Gatsby neglects nature and destroys the Valley of Ashes. Gatsby believed wealth was essential to his happiness, so he destroyed the Valley of Ashes. Even today, we exhibit a surprising disrespect for the environment, contributing to the ecological crisis that wreaked havoc on our lives. Not only did we create hell within ourselves, within the mansion we built, but we also created hell on mother earth when we used all-natural resources without considering sustainable development. We fail we realize that man is not the master of nature but that man is a part of nature.

There is nowhere else for us to go if the natural world decides to turn against us. People like Gatsby are to blame for turning mother nature into an ecological hell. We are just beginning to realize the implications of their acts now, during the epidemic, due to their actions. However, instead of changing our ways, we continue, much like Satan and his fallen angels, to boast about our aspirations, disdain the order, and then cry, "the mind is its place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven." The human mind is to blame for the existence of hell on earth due to its insatiable need for financial wealth, callous disregard for the natural world, and narcissistic pursuit of pleasure. When we consider how we have created a world of pleasure and hobbies for ourselves, we look at the picture-perfect Garden of Eden and consider how we have cut ourselves off from our version of the picture-perfect Garden of Eden.

In the book, F. Scott Fitzgerald states that "life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all" (Fitzgerald 6). If *The Great Gatsby* is looked at through the prism of the American Dream, it holds that every person living in the "land of opportunities" can pursue their goals and see them through to fruition. Gatsby is a classic example of the American Dream. We can discern that his being a millionaire contributes to his success. Gatsby is in a position where he can afford to talk about heroism in combat and can show himself as someone who is living for the ideals that America stands for. Despite this, he is wreaking havoc on himself and mother nature in pursuing these goals. He is the embodiment of the modernist aspect of our culture, which demonstrates how, in our vain pride and glory, we have misjudged our pursuits and continue to do the same thing despite repeated warnings from authors such as F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* or Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt*.

Gatsby is also the personification of the modernist aspect of our culture. Because he personifies the ideas of modernism, he exemplifies that component of our culture that is considered modernist. The lessons we should have gained from *The Great Gatsby* have yet to be internalized by us, even though we should have. We are probably waiting for environmental disasters to suffer so that we can finally understand that unrestrained materialism and consumerism can only lead to a life filled with anguish, emptiness, abyss, and ultimately hell.

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