THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE GREAT GATSBY

Course: American Literature
Mentor: dr.sc. Lovorka Gruić-Grmuša, doc.
Student: Siniša Smiljanić
Academic year: 2010/2011
Study name: English and Croatian language and literature

Rijeka, April 2011
Since its publication in 1925, F. S. Fitzgerald's novel The Great Gatsby has become one of the most cited, criticized and analyzed pieces of fiction in the history of American literature. It has often been depicted as “perhaps the most striking fictional analysis of the age of the gang barons and the social conditions that produced them” (Sculley, 1965:1088). Without a doubt, it is a fantastic representation of an age in American history when everything was possible, or at least people thought it was. In his novel, Fitzgerald doesn't simply describe the social, historical and economic conditions which drive his characters, but he also provides us with an insight into the souls of his characters and the interior motives which they use to justify their behavior and actions. The underlying cause for everything that happens in the novel is an idea, an idea towards which everyone strives and dreams of. This idea is none other than the omnipresent notion of the American Dream. In The Great Gatsby this dream has suffered a decline through the immoral actions of Fitzgerald's characters, but its foundation is the same as it was when the first settlers explored the new promised land. After reading Fitzgerald's novel, we cannot help ourselves wondering how much of this dream is reality, and how much of it is an illusion. In his book Achieving Our Country, Richard Rorty says: “You have to describe the country in terms of what you passionately hope it will become, as well as in terms of what you know it to be now. You have to be loyal to a dream country rather than to the one to which you wake up every morning. Unless such loyalty exists, the ideal has no chance of becoming actual” (Rorty, 1998:55). I believe that he described the actual nature of the concept of the American Dream perfectly. The actual nature of this dream and the manner in which people try to achieve it, as well as the moral implications their actions bring, are some of the main themes explored in The Great Gatsby.

The American Dream is an ideal that has been present since American literature’s onset. But what exactly is this famous American Dream? Some might say that it is a quest for wealth, prosperity and generally a high position in society, while others might say that it is nothing else but the act of settling down, having a family, being able to provide for them, and basically having a good life. What is true is that all of these notions can be ascribed to the fundamental idea of the American Dream. Through the passing of time, the original quest for settlement and freedom has evolved into a continuing struggle to achieve a big house, a nice car, and a life of ease. This materialistic aspect of the American dream is the one presented in The Great Gatsby. “Fitzgerald portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed, and empty pursuit of pleasure. The reckless jubilation that led to decadent parties and wild jazz music—epitomized in The Great
Gatsby by the opulent parties that Gatsby throws every Saturday night—resulted ultimately in the corruption of the American dream, as the unrestrained desire for money and pleasure surpassed more noble goals”(SparkNotes Editors, 2002) The fundamental presupposition that the American Dream can be achieved by anyone as long as they work hard turns out to be nothing more than a mere illusion, a lie intended to give people something to live for. In the novel, there is a strong division between the rich and the poor. This division is clearly and somewhat witfully summed up in Mr. Klipspringer’s song:

One thing’s sure and nothing’s surer
The rich get richer and the poor get – children (Fitzgerald, 2003:101)

This is further more developed in Fitzgerald’s juxtaposition of the West and East, which can be applied both to geographical concepts, as well as to the social ones.

On one side there is West Egg, and on the other there is East Egg. This division can be seen not merely as a division between the haves and the have-nots, since some people in West Egg are also rich. It’s meaning is that of a symbolic representation of two sets of moral values. “When the early explorers first came to America, escaping the corruption of their old world in search of the promise of a new world, they traveled from east to west. Now, America itself is corrupted, so the characters in The Great Gatsby travel from west to east - in search of wealth and sophistication - leaving the moral values and stability of the west behind. It is this eastern part which is called a ”valley of ashes” by Fitzgerald, a place where morals are left out and only superficial, material-driven people can live in peace. Fitzgerald uses this change in direction as a symbol for the deterioration of American ideals and the American Dream, helping to prove that our quest for wealth and sophistication is corrupting our culture, and causing us to live in a wasteland of morals - an ash heap of civilization. “(Millett, n.d.) The famous image of the valley of ashes is not only a symbol for the corrupt society of East Egg, it also symbolizes the wasteland of humanity in a godless age. This is evident from “the haunting image of an optometrist’s advertisement featuring the enormous eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg”(Cullen, 2003:181) – which is in a way a metaphor for God who watches over people who have fallen from his grace. Furthermore, the West is usually associated with traditional values like raising a family and providing for them, and in a sense that is still the American Dream for many people who strive to nothing more than a secure and a fairly good life. However, the East, especially in the 1920s, represents the corruption of the original notion of the American Dream. “The lure of the East represents a profound displacement of
the American dream, a turning back upon itself of the historic pilgrimage towards the frontier which had, in fact, created and sustained that dream” (Bloom, 1985:75). Everything concerning the lives of the people living in East Egg is connected with money and material possessions, the purpose of which is to ensure the easiness of their lives. In The Great Gatsby this obsession with material possessions becomes absurd. It doesn’t matter whether a thing is actually necessary, as long as it can be bought. This absurdity becomes obvious when the narrator describes Gatsby’s house and says: “There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour, if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler’s thumb“ (Fitzgerald, 2003:44). The fact that Gatsby owns such a gadget and actually makes his butler press a button two hundred times for simple orange juice shows how much have his morals and vision of good life become distorted. Fitzgerald’s characters like Jay Gatsby, Daisy and Tom Buchanan, as well as the people who attend his parties (except Nick Carraway), are all driven by a powerful desire to climb the social ladder no matter what it takes. Once this goal is achieved, preserving it becomes the only important thing in life. The only way to gain reputation and wealth, especially if you have a poor social background, is to reinvent oneself. This notion of reinvention has been present since the very beginning of the American Dream, and the manner in which it is explored in The Great Gatsby provides us with an insight into the deepest secrets and motivations of Fitzgerald’s main characters.

Perhaps the most prominent example in the novel of how a person reinvents oneself in order to achieve a certain goal is the life of Jay Gatsby, who is actually James Gatz. Coming from a modest family in North Dakota, as a seventeen year old boy James Gatz drifts from one place to another, working his way to a better life. However, he comes closer to his goal only when he comes in contact with shady people who introduce him into the way of making a fortune through shadowy means – it is later revealed that Jay Gatsby’s wealth actually comes from his bootlegging activities. In that period, even though he acquired some money, he is rejected by Daisy Fay, whose background is far more distinguished than his. Even though she does feel some sort of affection towards him, the fact that he had to go to war and his poor background represented a serious financial and social obstacle. After that, Gatsby had even more reason to become a completely different person. “He has lived not for himself, but for his dream, for his vision of the good life inspired by the beauty of a lovely rich girl” (Fahey, 1973:71). Because of his obsession with Daisy, Gatsby deludes himself into thinking that he can buy love with money. Regardless of his riches, he is not a happy man because the love of his life is married with another man, and she seems to ignore him despite all of his
achievements. The reason why he throws his lavish and flamboyant parties is not to make friends or socialize, it is to attract Daisy. Even though his house is full of people we learn that he is in fact lonely even when among the very people who visit his parties. The nature of Gatsby’s parties provides us with a symbolic representation of people’s values and lifestyle characteristic of the age in which the novel is set.

People come to Gatsby’s parties, often uninvited, for the sole purpose of being seen in the company of rich men. By participating in such extravagant parties they see themselves as members of the elite to which they wish to belong, and they deceive themselves into thinking that they could improve their social status if they meet the right people. Anyone who has money is immediately seen as welcome. This is apparent from Nick Carraway’s words when he attends the party for the first time. He says: “They were, at least, agonizingly aware of the easy money in the vicinity and convinced that it was theirs for a few words in the right key”(Fitzgerald, 2003:46). The mere fact that they thought Nick had money was enough for them to accept him as their own. Through this, Fitzgerald demonstrates how empty and rotten have become the lives of people who devote themselves to nothing more than accumulating money and social standing. Nick Carraway, perhaps the only person in the novel who hasn’t fallen victim to this corrupt set of values, ironically comments on his surroundings when he moves across Gatsby’s mantion. He describes his own house an “an eye-sore with a partial view on his neighbour’s lawn in the conforming proximity of millionaires”(Fitzgerald 10). The fact is that to him the proximity of wealthy people is not comforting at all, in fact it makes him even more anxious. In a way, this is because Nick just recently came from the West, and he hasn’t yet been much influenced by the corrupt society in the East. He still represents the old, traditional values which lost all of their meaning in the age when the size of one’s bank account and the number of cars a person owned became the principal things according to which success in life was measured. Nick’s dream is closer to the original American Dream, which was focused more around family than wealth and an unending quest for success. Nick represents the opposite path that Gatsby could have taken from the Midwest. “It is the counterpoint to Gatsby’s sustaining dream, which it frames and interprets, a dream of aspiration that moves Gatsby to follow it to imagined glory and unforeseen defeat” (Fahey, 1973:79).

Much more than Gatsby, who is ultimately recognised as a good person by Nick, the baseness of the American Dream in the novel is represented by Daisy Buchanan and her husband Tom. Even as a young girl, Daisy was heavily influenced by false splendour of a life in rich society. “For Daisy was young and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and
pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes” (Fitzgerald, 2003:158). It is in these words that the narrator describes Daisy Buchanan when she was young, and throughout the novel she doesn’t seem to be much changed. The only thing that is different about her is that she has become even more absorbed in her own world filled with money, parties, fast cars and new dresses. She has become completely insensible to other people’s emotions, which is evident in the manner in which she plays with Gatsby’s and her husband’s feelings. Daisy is the symbol of all that Gatsby strives for; her voice is full of money, as Gatsby describes it. Her voice was “full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song in it” (Fitzgerald, 2003:127). "For Gatsby, Daisy is his American Dream. From then on he does everything he can to achieve her. Gatsby refuses to see Daisy’s faults and she can do no wrong.” (Galley, 2008) The fact that Gatsby isn’t able to realize that his dream, which mostly includes Daisy, is nothing more than the product of his misconceptions about the things which are really important in life will be the main cause for his untimely demise. Because Gatsby still retains some aspects of morality and goodness, and Daisy seems to be the epitome of both material success and corruption that wealth can bring, they cannot have a future together. She can only stay with her unfaithful husband with whom she shares the same vision of an affluent and corrupt life. Both her and her husband’s true characters are described by Nick: "They are careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness of whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made”(Fitzgerald, 2003:187). Their selfish insensitivity culminates in their undisturbenneness and readiness to pass on the guilt to someone else when Daisy caused Myrtle’s death. "Any plausible hopes we might have for Gatsby’s dream of Daisy evaporate when Nick advises him not to "ask too much of her” because "you can’t repeat the past.” To which Gatsby responds: "Can’t repeat the past? Why of course you can! "(Cullen, 2003:181) We can see how Gatsby continues to delude himself until the very end. In the penultimate chapter of the book, Nick ponders on whether Gatsby actually realised the futility of his actions, as well as the unachievability of his dream, and says: “I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe it would come and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream”(Fitzgerald, 2003:169) Fitzgerald uses Gatsby and his dream as a symbol of the American Dream. "Gatsby genuinely believes that if a person makes enough money and amasses a great enough fortune, he can buy anything. He thinks his wealth can erase the last five years of his and Daisy's life and reunite them at the
point at which he left her before he went away to war.” (Singer, 2008) In a similar fashion, all of the Americans at the time have a tendency to believe that if they have enough money, they can manipulate time, staying perpetually young, and buy their happiness through materialistic spending.

Indeed, in his novel Fitzgerald gave a striking representation of the American society in the 1920s – the era of infinite possibilities. Almost all of Fitzgerald’s characters represent a certain aspect of the great idea of American life in general, namely, the idea of the American Dream. While there was a time when caring for one’s own family and living a peaceful and quiet life in one’s own home was the pinnacle of what a man could achieve in his life, in The Great Gatsby, the definition of success is everything but this notion. There is no limit to the greed and self-centeredness of the novel’s characters. In a way, what was once a dream became a nightmare. In Jordan’s words: ”There are only the pursued, the pursuing, the busy and the tired” (Fitzgerald 85). This is in fact a very accurate description of the people of that age. In The Great Gatsby everyone is trying so hard to keep up with the Joneses that even their original goals have slipped from their sight, and their struggle for wealth and a higher social position became a purpose in itself. The corruption is not only limited to those who already have money, it also spreads to all those who come in contact with this world of opportunities and eventually lose themselves. Those who manage to resist the temptations of money and power are few and far between. The American Dream in The Great Gatsby is mostly presented as a decayed and corrupt shadow of what it used to stand for in the past. However, we might ask ourselves whether Fitzgerald is portraying the American Dream as corrupt and deceitful in itself, or is it that the people of that time are the ones who corrupted and twisted the dream? Regardless of how we understand the notion of the American Dream in The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald effectively offers a powerful critique of a materialistic society and the effects it can have on one’s hopes and dreams.
BIBLIOGRAPHY:

BOOKS:


INTERNET SOURCES: