

# Contesting the American Dream in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and  
Croatian Language and Literature

Fabijan Vujić

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Full Professor

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## Table of Contents

Abstract .....	1
Introduction .....	2
1. The American Dream.....	3
2. <i>Fight Club</i> .....	8
3. <i>The Great Gatsby</i> .....	13
Works Cited.....	18

## **Abstract**

This paper deconstructs and questions the idea of the American Dream in Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* (1996) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925). It juxtaposes two characters from different eras who face similar issues and go through similar situations, focusing on their spiritual incompatibility with the society of their time and the norms it imposes on an individual. Another problem it addresses is the feasibility of the American Dream and what an individual must sacrifice in order to succeed. The paper also deals with the dark side of the American Dream, pointing out its flaws and the details its pursuer should pay attention to. It argues that happiness comes from within, not through material gains, and that material possessions only make life difficult and hollow. In addition, the analysis highlights the concepts of existence, mortality, and morality in order to show that even though the two novels' settings and time frames are completely different, some issues regarding human nature simply cannot be changed. The paper also tackles the idea of nihilism, which is mostly apparent in *Fight Club*, where characters undergo a change due to their realization that life might be worthless.

**Keywords:** The American Dream, nihilism, material possessions, sacrifice, alienation, male characters, success



## **Introduction**

Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* (1996) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) share some features. Their main characters are men who go through a psychological crisis that, by challenging their willpower and determination, gets the better of them. This paper will compare these characters' situations and the ways in which they cope with the immense pressure that is put on them by society. Even though the novels were written seven decades apart, there are numerous similarities that connect their ideas. Social themes in *The Great Gatsby* are like an overture to the economic changes that finally occur in *Fight Club* in all of their glory and hint what the American society is going to be like in the future. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald depicts the shift in economy when people turned to overconsumption, and Palahniuk finally completes the circle with *Fight Club*, in which consumerism is at its peak. It can be concluded that what Fitzgerald predicted would happen, Palahniuk confirmed in an ironic and satiric way.

The first chapter of the paper provides the context to the idea of the American Dream in general. It explains how the Dream was born, who contributed to it throughout history, and which people are examples of the correctly executed Dream. The second chapter discusses Palahniuk's novel within the context of the American Dream, analysing its characters and their ideas. It introduces the contemporary "doomer" phenomenon and shows how it correlates with the mental states of Tyler Durden and the Narrator of *Fight Club*. The third chapter focuses on the life of Jay Gatsby, the hero of Fitzgerald's novel, showcasing his commitment to the success and his futile pursuit of happiness that ends tragically.

## 1. The American Dream

From its beginnings in the eighteenth century, the United States has always been labelled as a country of freedom. That characteristic has always been very attractive to young people, in particular because it is not essential for an individual to have a strong social and financial background in order to attain economic opportunities and social well-being. These circumstances led to the development of the American Dream, a set of ideals concerning equality, liberty, opportunity for success, right to vote, and other important social features that define the progressive Western world, whose part the United States is of. In theory, the American Dream should be achievable by anybody, regardless of their race, origin, or social status, giving literally everybody an equal chance to succeed. One of the important traits of the American Dream is that it is achieved through sacrifice, hard work, and persistence. The idea behind the American Dream has been embedded in the American society from the beginnings, and to find the evidence of that, we need to look no further than the American Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, which claims that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The idea of the American Dream has been particularly tempting to immigrants fleeing from their countries full of oppression and tyranny. Giving some sort of a shelter to those people, the New World has attracted newcomers who struggled to find success and happiness in their countries. Such an example is presented by F. W. Bogen:

The German emigrant comes into a country free from the despotism, privileged orders and monopolies, intolerable taxes, and constraints in matters of belief and conscience. Everyone can travel and settle wherever he pleases. No passport is demanded, no police mingles in his affairs or hinders his movements. . . . Fidelity and merit are the only sources of honor here. The rich stand on the same footing as the poor; the scholar is not a mug above the most humble mechanics; no German ought to be ashamed to pursue any occupation. . . . [In America] wealth and possession of real estate confer not the least political right on its owner above what the poorest citizen has. Nor are there nobility, privileged orders, or standing armies to weaken the physical and moral power of the people, nor are there swarms of public functionaries to devour in idleness credit for. (qtd. in Ozment 170)

One of the advocates of the American Dream, the American historian James Truslow Adams, had a similar idea of what the American Dream ought to represent. In his book *The Epic of America* (1931), he defined it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (Adams 16). While the most attractive feature of the American Dream is acquiring material possessions and financial gain, Adams warned that those qualities should never overshadow other, more important characteristics that actually contribute to the construction of one's character. Adams wanted Americans to become richer but not only financially; more importantly, he wanted them to be spiritually richer. In *The Epic of America*, he claims that America

is a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. . . . [The Dream is] not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Adams 14)

Expectedly, the idea behind the American Dream quickly disintegrated, and a new idea was formed, the one that James Adams feared so much – people started treating money as the main value in their lives instead of using it only as a tool to make a decent living. The Dream pursuers became so obsessed with money and monetary power that they simply forgot about the importance of character building and started to neglect the real values that make the whole point of the idea behind the American Dream. Adams expressed his concern about this and his dissatisfaction with the wrong comprehension of the American Dream. Already in the 1920s and 1930s, Adams realized the jeopardy in which the Dream found itself due to the increased rate of consumerism in society. He claimed that moral virtues, spiritual values, and the overall quality of life, including happiness of the individual, should never be overshadowed by mere extensions of existence such as material things. Adams warned that people forget what the main purpose of the American Dream is, and that is to live your best life *while* giving your best to succeed in society. He showed resentment to what the Dream became, seeing all the people who are “in struggle to ‘make a living’” (Adams 406) while forgetting to actually live.

Throughout the American history, the idea of the American Dream in general has been

in jeopardy. After many centuries of oppression and slavery, the African American part of population finally gained enough strength to ask for their rights. The great turnaround regarding civil rights occurred in the mid-twentieth century assisted by many activists, such as Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Marcus Garvey, and other important individuals. The most important activist, who used to refer to the American Dream in his speeches, was Martin Luther King Jr. He showed great commitment for the equalization of rights between all people regardless of their race. In his most famous speech, "I Have a Dream," he said:

So even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. . . . I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. (King)

From that moment, it became apparent how flawed the American Dream had been from its beginning. While the "Founding Fathers" of the United States swore that everyone had an equal right and chance to succeed in their perfect heaven-on-earth country, they completely excluded social minorities such as Native Americans and African Americans, who were completely stripped off of their rights. Somehow, this does not surprise considering that African Americans at the time were not even considered as people but were rather thought of as animals. By that, the American Dream lost most of its credibility, violating common sense and basic ethical principles that it used to advocate so much from the very beginning. By that, the United States showed a comical level of hypocrisy and ignorance.

It is obvious that the American Dream found itself in danger, losing the very much needed integrity and honour – two very important characteristics that define the United States. Now, being on shaky ground, it needed a miracle to redeem itself and justify its importance and reliability. Fortunately, the Dream managed to get back on its feet by the end of the twentieth century, gaining back the popularity that was once lost.

When talking about the American Dream and famous people, one individual, a man who utilized and used every bit of what the Dream offers, simply cannot go unnoticed – Arnold Schwarzenegger. He is the perfect example of a migrant who found his place in the United States and achieved more than most people can even imagine. Originating from a

small village hidden in the Austrian Alps, he left his home country at the age of nineteen and moved to the United States in order to pursue his life-long dream of becoming the world-class bodybuilder. By the age of 34, not only did he become the most successful bodybuilder of his era but he also decided to continue his career as an actor, starring in some of the most famous and successful movies of all time. Later on in his life, he tried his luck in politics, which resulted in him being elected for the Governor of California in 2003. Schwarzenegger is very much famous for his motivational speeches in which he claims that he owes everything to America. In one such speech, he stated:

To think that a once scrawny boy from Austria could grow up to become Governor of the state of California, that is an immigrant's dream! In school, when the teacher would talk about America, I would daydream about coming here, I would daydream about living here. . . . I was so proud that I walked around with the American flag around my shoulder all day long. Everything about America seemed so big to me, so open, so possible. . . . I remember I arrived here with empty pockets. But full of dreams. Full of determination. Full of desire. To all my fellow immigrants listening tonight, I want you to know how welcome you are. We encourage your dreams. We believe in your future. Everything I have, my career, my success, my family, I owe to America! In this country, it doesn't make any difference, where you were born, it doesn't make any difference who your parents were, if you're like me, and couldn't even speak English until you were in your twenties. America gave me opportunities and my immigrant dreams came true. I want other people to get the same chances I did, the same opportunities. And I believe they can. ("35 Years As a Citizen")

All things considered, Schwarzenegger fits all the requirements regarding the American Dream. He used to be an immigrant, did not know the language, and did not have any connections. The only thing he had was a vision and a dream that he managed to achieve with hard work, determination, and persistence. Schwarzenegger, who is rarely in the spotlight for his luxurious way of living but more often for his character and spiritual development, is a prime example of what the real American Dream should represent. More importantly, he never forgot where he came from and always gave back to the community that enabled such a wonderful life for him. Schwarzenegger went from barely knowing the English language to the highest-paid actor in Hollywood in a span of ten to fifteen years, proving that America is

the only country in the world capable of giving such opportunities to immigrants and helping them make such progress as individuals. His life is a proof of the American Dream and how to utilize it in the best way possible, going from rags to riches against all naysayers and becoming successful.

Judging by the theory that supports the American Dream, there is literally no reason for anybody to suffer in their country; everybody is invited to live in the United States, but is there a catch? Is it truly like that in reality and does everyone have an equal chance to succeed like Schwarzenegger did? What are the downsides of the Dream? Is it even achievable, or is it just a farce? All these issues are questioned in both F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, and each novel represents a unique stance on the feasibility of the Dream.

## 2. *Fight Club*

The novel *Fight Club* is Palahniuk's first major fictional work and the one that has left the deepest mark in his career. His inspiration by minimalist authors and philosophers guided his style of writing in a peculiar way which was not very conventional in the late nineties and noughties. A number of his works carry strange vibes and a specific note that can be perceived as distasteful and off-limits, one of them being the short story "Guts" from his novel *Haunted* (2005). *Fight Club* is an overture for all his later, very much bizarre works. Palahniuk really makes us dig deeper into our personal fears, obsessions with the physical, material world, and our seemingly deviant desires. *Fight Club* not only questions the idea of consumerism but also analyses certain personality disorders, such as schizophrenia, which might be apparent in the main character's personality. The narrator is often struggling with delusions of reality, severe hallucinations, and his life in general is terribly disorganized. To make things worse, he struggles with insomnia, which is only an additional burden to his life.

The time frame for the novel is mid-nineties. It is set in a much more contemporary period than *The Great Gatsby* and is thus more relatable for the contemporary audience, which is essential for understanding the idea behind it. Many themes are discussed in the novel – morality, mortality, sex, the existence of a divine being – but one theme is definitely in the centre, and that is the idea of consumerism, or better, anti-consumerism. Palahniuk takes a critical standpoint regarding spending money on useless, material things and advertisements of the products that can be found on every corner of the street: "Advertising has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need" (Palahniuk 98). The main character in the novel, a nameless man who is at the same time the narrator of the story<sup>1</sup> is in a mid-life crisis, working a boring 9–5 job that does not bring him any joy whatsoever. His life comes down to surviving each day, not actually caring if he will see the light of another day, which introduces the theme of nihilism in the novel. His frustration grows stronger each day, making it unbearable to live in his own skin. The constant need to acquire physical possessions further contributes to his frustration and the downward development of his character, making it more and more difficult to cope with immense stress that is put upon his shoulders. All those psychological struggles make *Fight Club* overwhelmingly filled with another theme, and that is one's competition and mental struggle with oneself rather than with

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<sup>1</sup> The main character of *Fight Club* will be referred to as "Narrator" throughout the thesis.

the other members of society. Palahniuk shows how exhausting an inner battle within a person can be if it keeps getting fueled with bad emotions, anger, intrusive thoughts, and harmful stimuli in general.

Later in the novel, the Narrator finally meets another protagonist called Tyler Durden, who ends up being just the Narrator's alter ego. Tyler is something and someone who the Narrator strives to be all of his life, an individual who is willing to make a change regardless of the consequences. Unlike the Narrator, Tyler advocates destruction and anarchy, which he believes is the last resort of our generation, which he calls "God's middle children": "We are God's middle children, according to Tyler Durden, with no special place in history and no special attention. Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope of damnation or Redemption. Which is worse, hell or nothing?" (Palahniuk 91). Tyler is filled with resentment and rage for everything in this world and claims that the only way to receive justice is to get vengeance on everything and everyone that made us suffer in life. This is personified by the Narrator's employer, who keeps nagging him all the time and is a real struggle to work with. Tyler takes care of that by killing him: "The three ways to make napalm. I knew Tyler was going to kill my boss. The second I smelled gasoline on my hands, when I said I wanted out of my job, I was giving him permission. Be my guest. Kill my boss. Oh, Tyler" (Palahniuk 124). That part in particular indicates the movement in society that motivates people to break away from mundane and ordinary jobs and actions that are imposed upon us by social norms. Tyler's main goal is to create a whole new generation of hard, masculine, and purposeful men full of great dignity and self-respect, men who would never bow down in front of authority such as a "boss." Those men know their purpose and place in this world; they do not waste their lives wandering around and doing what someone else told them to do in fear of getting fired; they are fearless but also noble and righteous. The idea motivates individuals to take the matter into their own hands and make a change regardless of how immoral and selfish it might be. Those are the cases through which the idea of the American Dream is implemented into the novel. Palahniuk dares the readers to get out of their comfort zone and start doing something that actually fulfills their desires, and that is the gist of the Dream. Tyler wants us to become egotistical because that is the only way to find our true self and purpose in life full of adversities. By finding one's true self, one is obliged to fight for one's spiritual freedom, knowing that nothing good comes without a sacrifice: "Tyler said, 'I want you to do me a favor. I want you to hit me as hard as you can.' I didn't want to, but Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars . . ." (Palahniuk 31). The addition to that theory is



that one has to have a clear vision of what one wants to be in life. The worst you can do is to just go with the flow and let the currents of life carry you randomly through life: “The doorman leaned into my shoulder and said, ‘A lot of young people don’t know what they really want.’ . . . ‘If you don’t know what you want,’ the doorman said, ‘you end up with a lot you don’t’” (Palahniuk 26). The main stress of Tyler’s philosophy is taking matter into our own hands and not expecting anybody else to do anything good for us. Palahniuk successfully gets his point across by implementing another secondary character called Raymond Hassel, who is not important at all for the story but is very important for what he represents. Raymond is a twenty-three-year-old man who works at a job that he obviously despises. The Narrator knows that and decides to convince Raymond to turn his life around and threatens to kill him unless he does so. With a gun on his cheek, Raymond manages to utter a few words through tears and starts sobbing, saying that his dream is to become a veterinarian. The Narrator spares his life under one condition – that he get back to school and start working on his dreams. He redeems his life by offering him another chance in life, a new life, the one he will actually enjoy living. The Narrator says in the end: “Get out of here, and do your little life, but remember I’m watching you, Raymond Hessel, and I’d rather kill you than see you working a shit job for just enough money to buy cheese and watch television” (Palahniuk 104). Seemingly, it might appear that the Narrator’s method is too cruel and harsh, but Palahniuk expresses his feelings in such a way that puts an emphasis on the importance of life quality, claiming that a bad life is not even worth living, that being dead is better than living a boring life full of disappointments.

Another important motif in the novel is nihilism, which Tyler preaches so much throughout the novel. While the Narrator follows the line of least resistance, Tyler chooses to put himself through torture in order to achieve full freedom, making him in some way “more of a man” and macho figure than the Narrator. The idea behind the *Fight Club* is entirely Taylor’s; his obsession with pain and destruction is the root of his anger: “Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer, maybe self-destruction is the answer” (Palahniuk 29).

The gist of the *Fight Club* theme can be interpreted and projected in today’s modern society through a specific internet subculture meme that actually goes much further than most of the other memes, and that is “doomer.” What makes the “doomer” meme special is the relatability of it and not necessarily a humorous nature, as is characteristic of most of the other content on the Internet. The “doomer” is an archetype of a specific profile of people that

share a similar outlook on the life and its values. A “doomer” is usually a man in his twenties who feels a sense of aimlessness, loneliness, and is constantly reminded of the desperation that this life brings. For him, humanity is unescapably doomed by ignorance, voracity, and futility (“Who Is the Doomer?”). The “doomer,” just like the Narrator, retreats from society into indifferent solitude where he preoccupies his mind with existential questions and issues. This character is often connected to pessimistic moods and the causes that lead to it, such as working a dead-end job, engaging in excessive drinking, doing drugs, or struggling to maintain healthy relationships with friends, family, and romantic partners (“Who Is the Doomer?”). Just like the mental state of the Narrator in *Fight Club*, the “doomer” paradigm resonates within a current generation of young adults who feel alienated from society, experiencing hopelessness and pessimism. As mentioned before, this meme goes deeper into philosophy than most of the other ones that we encounter, so the mention of Arthur Schopenhauer is inevitable while talking about this topic. Schopenhauer, a man who is usually regarded as the philosopher of pessimism, or the “original doomer,” believed that this life is full of pain and unavoidable suffering. For him, we are the victims of an unconscious instinct to survive, pushed through life by this unreasonable force in order just to live a life void of any other purpose and meaning (“Who Is the Doomer?”). His ideas support the ideas of nihilism in *Fight Club*, which in this context can be described as the ultimate “doomer” novel:

There is only one inborn error, and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy. . . . So long as we persist in this inborn error . . . the world seems to us full of contradictions. For at every step, in things great and small, we are bound to experience that the world and life are certainly not arranged for the purpose of maintaining a happy existence. . . . (“Arthur Schopenhauer”)

This proves that individuals really want to believe that our existence is sacred, that our lives are predetermined for happiness and success, and that our existence has a higher purpose. Unfortunately, many of us, just like Tyler Durden, find out that life is just that – living and surviving without any function that would benefit us in the end. Schopenhauer’s solution for this issue is asceticism – a disciplined avoidance of pleasure that forces us to avoid finding happiness in material things, money, and social status. He claims that an individual’s chances of finding happiness and inner peace drastically increase by controlling one’s desire to possess absurd amounts of useless possessions (“Who Is the Doomer?”). In *Fight Club*, it is

apparent that characters, especially Tyler, take that advice and try to make the best out of it by focusing more on the spiritual values rather than on material possessions. This attitude towards the American Dream is what makes *Fight Club* a good example of what the Dream should be – prioritizing the nonphysical values over raw, physical possessions that are susceptible to time and obsolescence. To confirm this, the novel takes transcendental and ethereal values from the individuals and puts them on the pedestal of existence, making those values irreplaceable and precious.

### 3. *The Great Gatsby*

Unlike *Fight Club*, which is set in the contemporary era, *The Great Gatsby* was published at a turning point in history, an era when the middle class struggled and gained ascendancy more than ever before, creating a big gap between socioeconomic classes. That very distinctive period was in the 1920s, just before the 1929 Great Depression, when a society full of individuals who gave their best to compete with the other members of the society was formed. The state in which the society of Gatsby's time found itself in was an indication of what would happen in the future if the values of the American Dream did not stay preserved. In the 1920s, global consumerism gained momentum; new forms of luxury were imposed on the Western world; people could buy cars, land, luxury mansions with electricity, and many more lavish commodities.

While *Fight Club* focuses more on the fictional side of the American Dream, *The Great Gatsby* is an extraction of Fitzgerald's personal experiences transfused into literature. Living in that era, the author witnessed the shift from the culture of production to the culture of consumption. Furthermore, by being a profound observer of the social economics, Fitzgerald had a great understanding of the social dynamic and its setting. The idea of the American Dream, more precisely, the corruption of it, is presented differently and less conventionally in *The Great Gatsby* than in most other fiction. The main difference is that Fitzgerald deconstructs the whole idea by finding the holes and omissions in the idea of the Dream, making *The Great Gatsby* an unsuccessful and futile story about the American Dream, whereas most of the other novels, stories, and movies display a successful story. From this comparison alone between *Fight Club* and *The Great Gatsby*, it is apparent that both novels keep the same realistic and more truthful vision of what the American Dream actually is by showcasing both its advantages and disadvantages. Fitzgerald portrays the American Dream as a process whose sole purpose is to become financially rich, neglecting other important elements of existence that make the life worth living. Such cases occur when the protagonist, Jay Gatsby, realizes that money cannot buy real love and friendships. Jay relies so much on his wealth, thinking it is a solution for all his concerns, which later takes a toll on his character and reputation.

One of Gatsby's friends, Nick, who is also the narrator of the story, is aware of Jay's background story. He realizes that Jay created his whole identity and persona based on something that is artificial, but he still respects his commitment and hustle:

His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that and he must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty. So 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. (Fitzgerald 52)

This passage is an example that further explains Gatsby's dishonesty about his identity. Nick's analogy when he describes him as a Platonic conception of himself is something constructed by Jay – an alter-ego, a projection he created in his mind of his ideal self that he decides to follow and chase throughout his life. Gatsby's need to always show-off his wealth might be rooted more deeply than firstly thought. In his younger days, he was a poor man with nothing material to offer to Daisy, a girl he fell in love with a long time ago, and now, when he has power, he tries to compensate for his poor past. It is possible that his insecurities are Gatsby's main source of motivation and drive:

"I've got something to tell you, old sport." began Gatsby. But Daisy guessed at his intention. "Please don't!" she interrupted helplessly. "Please let's all go home. Why don't we all go home?" "That's a good idea." I got up. "Come on, Tom. Nobody wants a drink." "I want to know what Mr. Gatsby has to tell me." "Your wife doesn't love you," said Gatsby. "She's never loved you. She loves me." "You must be crazy!" exclaimed Tom automatically. Gatsby sprang to his feet, vivid with excitement. "She never loved you, do you hear?" he cried. "She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me!" (Fitzgerald 71-72)

It is apparent that being poor really impacted Jay to the point of losing the girl of his dreams, making him furious and extremely motivated to pursue his dreams of becoming rich, so that one day he could win her back.

Even though *Fight Club* and *The Great Gatsby* are fairly different in their stances on the American Dream, they share some similarities. Nick contemplates his existence in some cases just like the Narrator of *Fight Club* does. After turning thirty, Nick undergoes an existential crisis and becomes depressed for a moment:

“No . . . I just remembered that to-day's my birthday.” I was thirty. Before me stretched the portentous, menacing road of a new decade. . . . Human sympathy has its limits, and we were content to let all their tragic arguments fade with the city lights behind. Thirty the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning brief-case of enthusiasm, thinning hair. . . . So we drove on toward death through the cooling twilight.” (Fitzgerald 75)

In her analysis of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and *Fight Club*, Suzanne del Gizzo points out that their response to the existential crisis is one the similarities between the narrators of these two novels:

Nick Caraway and the narrator of *Fight Club* envision themselves as nice, normal men, who may even be considered a bit prudish given the insistently progressive standards of their particular societies. Both are in their early thirties, engaged in employment that is impersonal, and to varying degrees, dehumanizing; both live lives generally devoid of meaningful relationships and intimacy. As a result, both narrators feel alienated from the world around them and cling to outside forms of validation for their sense of self. Although they live nearly seventy years apart and thus the specifics of their lives differ significantly, both men seem uncomfortable in the mass, urban environments of the twentieth century with their emphasis on impersonal, commercial exchanges. (Del Gizzo 72)

This analysis shows that the same issues disturb young men regardless of the era in which they live, revealing the truth behind their personalities that are seemingly stoic and calm. Both men sacrificed their happiness in order to pursue a lifestyle that is not suitable for them – the Narrator of *Fight Club* is stuck in an ordinary life devoid of any changes and excitement, whereas Nick is “shooting for stars” and setting a bar very high, higher than he could ever reach.

Meanwhile, Jay Gatsby is much more successful in his aspirations but soon his need for wealth starts ruining his life. Jay becomes so desperate for success and accomplishments that he gets lost in his fantasies, making commodities his primary goal in life:

Gatsby relies on commodities—car, house, clothes—to buttress his self-made identity. He believes that the right mix of objects (with Daisy as the crowning

piece in the collection) will magically open the gates to the highest level of the American upper class for him. (Del Gizzo 84)

This shows that Gatsby is delusional and struggles to comprehend the concept of the upper class, thinking that the only gateway to it is to possess as much money as possible: “Once an object is possessed, its magical qualities begin to diminish” (Del Gizzo 85). To become a part of the upper class, one needs to have honour and respect that goes back many generations. In Gatsby’s case, the issue is not the quantity of his money but its quality and the style in which he acquired it. It takes significantly more to be in those few percent of the elite society than Jay could offer. An individual must have a higher purpose for becoming a part of the upper class, unlike Gatsby, whose main inspiration is the woman who rejected him when he was poor. His pursuit of the American Dream ended before it even started because he sought after wrong goals that would never lead to the improvement of his spirituality, making his Dream less successful than that of the *Fight Club*’s Narrator, who eventually managed to understand the purpose of it. Gatsby’s lack of understanding and awareness leads him to tragedy, whereby he not only fails in his pursuit of the American Dream but also pays with his life: “Gatsby’s ambitions, after all, lead him into a life of crime and unsavory ‘gongnegtions’ that end with his dream denied and his death” (Del Gizzo 80).

Even though Jay Gatsby is a tragic character in the novel, he still represents the spirit of the American Dream, showcasing immense persistence and willpower so he could make his dreams come true. It can be said that Gatsby follows that “fake it till you make it” motto, and while it can be true, others have nothing to take away from him because he really did whatever it takes to succeed, which is the essence of the American Dream in general. Gatsby even goes an extra mile and proceeds to lie about his education, calling himself an Oxford Man, thinking it might help him climb the social hierarchy ladder and build his reputation up among high class. Unfortunately for him, he gets exposed:

“By the way, Mr. Gatsby, I understand you’re an Oxford man.” “Not exactly.”  
 “Oh, yes, I understand you went to Oxford.” “Yes I went there.” A pause. Then Tom’s voice, incredulous and insulting: “You must have gone there about the time Biloxi went to New Haven.” “I told you I went there,” said Gatsby. “I heard you, but I’d like to know when.” “It was in nineteen–nineteen, I only stayed five months. That’s why I can’t really call myself an Oxford man.” Tom glanced around to see if we mirrored his disbelief. (Fitzgerald 70)

That evening, Gatsby realizes that his reputation and status are in jeopardy; people finally start to see through his insincerity, and he starts realizing that he does not have things under control anymore.

All things considered, Gatsby ends up giving a “try-hard” impression of himself, belittling his actual success and wealth, showcasing how the American Dream can be corrupted if not executed properly and with fair purpose. The idea behind the American Dream just keeps getting blurrier. On the one hand, Gatsby is a good example of the Dream because he did not give up; he gave everything he could in order to succeed, but on the other hand, he used shady tactics and schemes to achieve his fortune. This goes to show that the American Dream is not a simple concept; it is an idea that does not have clear boundaries and can easily be misinterpreted and abused.



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