

The American Dream, as it arose in the Colonial period and developed in the nineteenth century, was based on the assumption that each person, no matter what his origins, could succeed in life on the sole basis of his or her own skill and effort. The dream was embodied in the ideal of the self-made man, just as it was embodied in Fitzgerald's own family by his grandfather, P. F. McQuillan. Fitzgerald's novel takes its place among other novels whose insights into the nature of the American dream have not affected the artistic form of the novel itself. The Great Gatsby serves as Fitzgerald's critique of the American dream.

The Great Gatsby embodies a criticism of America and the American experience, more radical than any other author has attempted. The theme of the novel is the destruction of the American dream during the 1920s, a period when the vulgar pursuit of material happiness has corrupted the old values that gave substance to the dream. The characters are Midwesterners who have come East in pursuit of this new dream of money, fame, success, glamour, and excitement. Tom and Daisy must have a huge house, a stable of polo ponies, and friends in Europe. Gatsby must have his enormous mansion before he can feel confident enough to try to win Daisy. Fitzgerald does not criticize the American dream itself but the corruption of that dream. What was once for Ben Franklin or Thomas Jefferson a belief in self-reliance and hard work has become what Nick Carraway calls ". . . the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." The energy that might have gone into the pursuit of noble goals has been channeled into the pursuit of power and pleasure, and a very showy, but fundamentally empty form of success.

Fitzgerald's critique of the American dream is developed through certain dominant images and symbols. Fitzgerald uses the green light as a symbol of hope, money, and jealousy. Hope signifies the center of the dream, but jealousy and lure of money pollute it. Gatsby is a noble man whose vision is fouled by his dream because he remains in a "wonder" at Daisy's presence throughout the novel. He is unable to see the carelessness and self-centeredness of Daisy whose "foul dust" destroys him. Fitzgerald also uses the contrasting images of the East and Midwest to develop his critique. The East denotes the place where the corruption of the American dream has occurred. Finally, at the end of the novel, Nick decides to move back West. Nick learns that this place of dishonesty, lack of morale, and lack of values is not the place for him.

In the novel, The Great Gatsby, Scott F. Fitzgerald gives some severest criticism of the American dream ever written. That dream has been destroyed and polluted by the pursuit of material success. Fitzgerald is successfully able to identify the deficiencies of the American vision itself. Fitzgerald shows that the secret of life happiness is to fulfill the American dream purely and faithfully.

