Old Money versus New:

Class Identity as a Motivational Force in *The Great Gatsby*
Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore the thesis that Gatsby’s dream in the novel *The Great Gatsby*, is to climb the class ladder and become a member of the upper class while members of that class feel threatened by the nouveau riche and tries to shut him out. Class identity is the main theme of the essay. Gatsby comes from a humble background but he decides early in his life that he wants a different life for himself and his aspirations are similar to the concept of the American dream. This essay argues that his dream undergoes a transformation when he meets Daisy and it becomes more aimed at becoming a member of the upper class, for which Daisy is a symbol. The upper class couple, Tom and Daisy, represent the old money going downhill, while Gatsby as a self-made man represents the new money that wants equal social status to that of the upper class.
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Introduction

The USA in the 1920’s was a society obsessed with rapid and easy acquisition of wealth, as pointed out by Dalton & MaryJean Gross in their book *Understanding the Great Gatsby*. People became famous for having become wealthy no matter how they had acquired their money (Gross 150). One might say that one of the messages conveyed in *The Great Gatsby* is that single-minded pursuit of wealth could lead to disaster, psychologically as well as materially. This turned out to be very accurate when the depression struck in 1929 which was one of the worst disasters in American history (Gross 150-152). It would be an overstatement to claim that Fitzgerald had foreseen the stock market collapse and the depression that followed, but perhaps he simply had a feeling that the obsession with easy financial success that surrounded him was a menace. The depression brought different attitudes to wealth as well as literature, and some people even thought that Fitzgerald’s depictions of the pursuit of wealth in the 1920’s were irresponsible (Gross 150,153).

According to Veronica Makowsky’s article in *Approaches to teaching Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald initially intended for his novel to have the title *Among the Ash-heaps and Millionaires* which would suggest that the author saw the issue of class as an important theme in the novel. Ash-heaps refers to the area of ashes where for instance the Wilsons live as well as other member of the working class. This area is a great contrast to that of the fashionable East Egg where the Buchanans and other members of the upper class live (Makowsky 75).

Throughout the story Gatsby is in pursuit of a dream. There are many claims for what that dream represents among scholars as well as readers, the most common ones being the love of Daisy Buchanan and the American dream. The concept of the American dream is closely related to the notion of class and although the American dream will not be the main focus of this thesis it will be dealt with to some extent. The American dream is a much wider
concept than class and was, according to Therése Johansson’s thesis: *The Broken Dream*, originally an expression describing the wish for a better life among the people who migrated to America. Later on it would include aspirations towards a better life for those already living in America as well (Johansson 2).

To be more precise the American dream is about anyone in America being able to become successful, earn a good deal of money and have a comfortable life. The American dream includes factors such as wealth, equality, freedom, individualism, family and ideal home. The desire for wealth and equality among American citizens may be applicable to this thesis but class identity will be the focus of it. The idea of equality in the American dream implies a wish of not being judged by your class background (Johansson 7, 11). Gatsby does not want to erase class differences and he is not sympathetic to those of lower class. There is a similarity between Gatsby’s dream and the American dream but I will not argue that the two are the same. I will instead argue that the dream started out as the American dream and still has some of its characteristics, but that it transformed into a dream of belonging to the upper class.

Jay Gatsby is presented as a somewhat mysterious character in the novel that carries his name. In the beginning of the novel he is known to the reader and the narrator, Nick Carraway, by his reputation as a man who hosts fabulous parties. Some say he is a relative of Emperor Wilhelm, which could explain his fortune, while others say he was a spy during the war. When the reader eventually becomes more acquainted with Gatsby, he is still a mystery but one that will gradually unfold itself, although only to some extent. When Gatsby has fallen and only the narrator and Gatsby’s father attend the funeral one cannot help wondering what motivated him and how such a successful man could fall so hard.

The thesis that will be explored in this paper is that Gatsby’s dream is to belong to a higher social class and that the members of the upper class, primarily the Buchanans, guard
the exclusiveness of their class identity, which is also one of the reasons Gatsby’s dream fails. The essay will take a closer look at the motives of Gatsby, Nick, Daisy, Tom and also briefly a few others. The sections in the essay have different themes although two sections deal with the characters Nick, Tom and Daisy.

**Gatsby’s background and the birth of a dream**

To begin with, Gatsby’s background will be examined. The novel presents several versions of his background and all of them will be dealt with in this analysis. His background is the foundation of his dream and the birth of that dream came to be an important part of his life. In the beginning of the novel the other characters do not know much about Gatsby but gradually we learn that he was in the war, that he went to Oxford and that he had a romance with Daisy five years earlier, before he entered the war. During a car trip with Nick, Gatsby tells him facts about his background and he begins his exposition by talking about his family. “I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West – all dead now” (Fitzgerald 71). Although he claimed that this was God’s truth it turns out to be a modified truth. In chapter 6 Nick provides the reader with the true background of Jay Gatsby whose real name is James Gatz. About Gatsby’s family Nick says:

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. (105)

Gatsby’s dream of being something other than he is and belonging to another context seems to have begun when he was a child. The quotation above makes a comparison to Jesus who used this phrase at the age of twelve. There is a passage in the Bible where Jesus has been lost for some time and is found in the temple that relates to the quote above. He then says “How is it that ye sought me? Wist ye not that I must be about my Father’s business?” (The Holy Bible – Authorized King James version, Luke 2.49). Although this varies depending on which Bible version you read (in many other versions Jesus says “in my Father’s house” instead) there is clearly a link between these passages. Although Jesus Christ was born into poverty as the son of simple people he turned out to be the son of God, divine and raised above all others. This could be a metaphor for what happens to Gatsby. He reaches out for great things and wants to be accepted as great among his “peers” but ends up being rejected and sacrificed for the benefit of others. Gatsby never gave up on his dream either but held on to it until the very end.

Jay Gatsby turns out to be a persona made up by the 17-year-old James Gatz long before Daisy entered the picture. He wanted to create an identity of his own far away from where he came from and began by becoming the protégé of a millionaire by the name of Dan Cody (Fitzgerald 105). “My family died and I came into a good deal of money” (71), Gatsby told Nick on the car trip. This was perhaps not a lie but an exaggeration. When Dan Cody, who he viewed as a father in a way, died, he did inherit some money although he never actually received the money due to legal reasons he did not understand (107). Gatsby believed in the identity that he had invented for himself so strongly that it became the truth.
The fact that he is an Oxford man is something Gatsby often mentions and likes to emphasize. The first time in the novel that Oxford is mentioned is on one of Gatsby’s parties. Jordan Baker says Gatsby told her he was an Oxford man but Jordan for some reason does not believe he went there (Fitzgerald 55). The second time Oxford is mentioned is when Gatsby himself brings it up during the car trip to New York with Nick. He then says he was educated at Oxford and that it is a tradition in his family to be educated there. Like Jordan before him Nick doubts that Gatsby is telling the truth about being educated at Oxford because “He hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford’, or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before” (71). This makes Nick believe that Gatsby is lying but a moment later Gatsby shows him a group picture of some young men, among them Gatsby himself, he claims to be a souvenir from his time at Oxford. After seeing this picture Nick has no doubts that Gatsby went to Oxford. The fact that he went to Oxford is confirmed by Gatsby’s business associate, Mr. Wolfshiem, who says that “He’s an Oggsford man” (78). Wolfshiem probably received this information from Gatsby and is either participating in Gatsby’s lies or a victim of them. Either way Wolfshiem’s confirmation is not particularly trustworthy.

The assertion that Gatsby was educated at Oxford turns out to be an exaggeration. When Gatsby is interrogated by Tom Buchanan about his past Gatsby is suddenly very humble about calling himself an Oxford man. In contrast to what he told Nick during the car trip he now says that he only went there for five months and that “it was an opportunity they gave to some of the officers after the armistice” (Fitzgerald 135). The claim that it is a tradition in his family to attend that university turns out to be a complete lie. Later Gatsby reveals to Nick that ending up at Oxford after the war was a mistake and that he in fact had wanted to get back to Daisy. Gatsby decides to tell the truth because he now realizes that
Tom has been doing some investigations into his past and he understands that it is pointless to go on lying in that situation.

The question is why Gatsby chose to lie about and exaggerate the part Oxford played in his past earlier in the story. As Wolfshiem says to Nick about Oxford: “It’s one of the most famous colleges in the world” (Fitzgerald 78). One reason Gatsby wants to emphasize Oxford in his past is that it plays a part in his illusion and his dream of belonging to a higher social class than the one he was born into. Another reason is that he wants others to believe that he is upper class, since he went to Oxford, and be viewed upon as an equal to those of higher class. Gatsby turns out to have exaggerated and lied about much more about himself than going to Oxford.

How Gatsby came to be a man of fortune is another fact Gatsby does not want to be honest about. Gatsby cannot quite control his lies and he is not consistent in his lying. When Daisy visits his house for the first time he lets his tongue slip when he says it took him three years to earn the money to buy the house. When Nick expresses confusion over this statement since Gatsby earlier told him that he inherited his money, Gatsby quickly says that he did inherit money but that he lost it all in the panic of the war (Fitzgerald 97). He told Nick all about his background with a rich family and inherited money and so he has to make up a quick lie that does not come off as credible to Nick. “I think he hardly knew what he was saying, for when I asked him what business he was in he answered: ‘That’s my affair’, before he realized that it wasn’t an appropriate reply” (97). He continues his lie by saying that he has been in both the drug store business and the oil business. When Tom and Daisy attend one of Gatsby’s parties Tom raises suspicion about Gatsby’s fortune and where it comes from. He expresses his suspicion that Gatsby is a bootlegger which Nick denies. When Tom says he intends to find out where Gatsby’s money comes from, Daisy says they come from a drug-store company Gatsby built up and sold (115).
In the end Gatsby does turn out to be a bootlegger, a fact he has worked hard to hide. Bootlegging was a criminal offence and not something the crème de la crème wanted to be associated with. Gatsby wants people to see him as someone born into fortune at the same time as he wants to come off as a successful business man. To be born into fortune would mean that he is an equal to people like Daisy and Tom but being a self made man as well would mean that he is better than Tom. When Gatsby retells to Nick the story of how he met Daisy he admits that he made her believe that he came from a similar background to her (155). If he can manage to prove himself better than Tom, Gatsby sees a possibility that Daisy will leave Tom and marry him instead. If he can get Daisy that would mean that he would have finally reached his goal of belonging to a higher social level. All these lies and attempts to come off as something or someone he in fact is not, is a mean of reaching Gatsby’s dream.

The transformation of Gatsby’s dream

Gatsby’s dream first began to take shape when he was a child and blossomed after meeting Dan Cody. At that time the dream was more or less the same as the American dream but his dream transformed and took a different direction after meeting Daisy. Daisy is not the dream in itself but represents something far greater that he began to strive for before he met Daisy. Gatsby’s view of Daisy when they first met suggests that what she represents is more important than who she actually is which is also the opinion expressed by Marius Bewley in his article Scott Fitzgerald’s criticism of America (46). Gatsby says that Daisy was the first “nice” girl he had ever known. Nice is probably to be interpreted as upper class. The first thing he was impressed by was the house:
It amazed him – he had never seen such a beautiful house before. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was that Daisy lived there – it was as casual a thing to her as his tent out at camp was to him. There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms upstairs more beautiful and cool than other bedrooms, of gay and radiant activities taking place through its corridors, and of romances that were not musty and laid away already in lavender but fresh and breathing and redolent of this year’s shining motor-cars and of dances whose flowers were scarcely withered. (154)

When seeing Daisy’s home he gets a glimpse into a new world. He is mesmerized by it and he begins to desire it. Daisy is one part in this vision of a new world and at this moment she becomes a part of his dream. Daisy becomes the symbol of the life he wants for himself, the Holy Grail as he calls it. Until then he had only wanted a good life for himself and to be a self made man like Dan Cody.

By meeting Daisy and getting a glimpse of her extravagant upper class life he finds himself wanting that as well. Since Gatsby was afraid of being revealed as an imposter at any moment he “made the most of his time” and he “took her” (Fitzgerald 155). Initially he did not intend for him to become attached to Daisy but soon found himself committed “to the following of a grail” (155). At that moment a more explicit dream began to take shape and the person representing this dream of his was Daisy. Before, his dream was more like that of the American dream and was fuelled after the meeting with Dan Cody. That dream did not die but it took a different direction and altered after meeting Daisy and getting a glimpse into her world. The dream transformed into a dream that was more than the wish for a comfortable life. His dream became a dream of wealth and above all to be a part of the
exclusive club, the upper class, of which Daisy is a member. Since it is when meeting Daisy his dream transforms it becomes closely linked to her but she is not the dream.

As mentioned earlier Marius Bewley argues that Daisy is nothing more than a symbol to Gatsby. He presents the idea that Daisy exists as her-self but also as Gatsby’s vision of her. Bewley says that “The true question is not what Gatsby sees in Daisy, but the direction he takes from her, what he sees beyond her” (Bewley 46). Furthermore he claims that for Gatsby, Daisy does not exist in herself but that she is the green light on the other side of the sound. “For Gatsby, Daisy is only the promise of fulfilment that lies beyond the green light that burns all night on her dock” (46). This is a credible interpretation of the green light and why Gatsby spends his evenings watching it from his garden. Bewley also says that Daisy fails to realize that Gatsby’s gestures and yearning towards her is in fact a part of his strive for the possibilities of life (Bewley 45). James E. Miller has a similar interpretation in his article *Boats Against the Current*, as he claims that Daisy is the material symbol of Gatsby’s dream (Miller 22). All these claims that Daisy is not as important as what she represents are logical and are in line with my own analysis.

Originally Gatsby’s dream was more or less the same as the American dream which is in line with Bewley’s opinions. He compares Gatsby’s dream to the dream shared by immigrants who came to America to start a better life. “His aspirations have been rehearsed, and his tragedy suffered, by all the generations of Americans who have gone before. His sense of the future, of the possibilities of life, he had learned from the dead.” (Bewley 49). The link between Gatsby’s dream and the American dream descended from immigrants, is supported by a quote from Nick in the end of the novel. “And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes – a fresh, green breast of the new world” (Fitzgerald 187). As I will examine more extensively further on, the colour green plays an
important part but this time it merely functions as a symbol of hope for a better life. According to Ornstein Gatsby is a spiritual descendant of these sailors in that “he set out for gold and stumbled on a dream” (Ornstein 57) but even if Gatsby’s dream started off as the American dream it changed and transformed into a dream of belonging to a higher class. Nick talks at one point about Gatsby’s extraordinary gift for hope. The green light could be the symbol of hope that he carries with him even in the end of the novel when everything seems lost and he sits for hours outside Daisy’s house waiting for a sign that she wants him.

Gatsby’s dream, the dream of belonging to the upper class and living a perfect life with Daisy, was actually doomed almost from the start. Before Gatsby met Daisy he had come in contact with upper class people “but always with indiscernible barbed wire between” (Fitzgerald 154). No matter how magnificent Gatsby’s house may be or how fabulous parties he can host he is simply not a member of the upper class. His house is not even located on the more fashionable of the two eggs, which probably is used to symbol of the fact the he is not a part of the same world as the upper class. There is still a difference between Gatsby and the exclusive club. That is why Daisy is so important. She is his key to membership.

David L. Minter speaks of Gatsby’s dream as the “last and greatest of all human dreams – the dream of building a new and perfect life in a new and perfect world” in his article *Dream, design and interpretation in The Great Gatsby* (82). Yet again one can see a link to what is popularly referred to as the American dream. Gatsby’s dream initially was more or less the same as the American dream but it became his very own dream of winning Daisy and thereby becoming a member of the upper class. Gatsby however does not see any signs that his dream is bound to fail. When Nick tells him that one cannot repeat the past he simply replies “Why of course you can!” (Fitzgerald 117). He believes Daisy to be the girl he once met and fell in love with and thinks that he can continue to woo her as if nothing has happened since he left for the war five years earlier. This to some extent proves Gatsby’s
naivety about his pursuit. Roger Lewis says in his article *Money, love and aspiration in The Great Gatsby*, that “because the dream is unrealizable, the past becomes increasingly important to the book, for it is in memories that the dream can live” (54). Deep down Gatsby must have realized that Daisy would never leave her husband and her daughter but he ignores this by living in the past and treating Daisy almost as if five years had not passed. He cannot abandon his dream yet the dream cannot live in the present since it is doomed to fail. He therefore takes his escape to the past since that is the only place where his dream can be nourished.

On one occasion Gatsby says that “Her voice is full of money” (Fitzgerald 126). By saying this he reveals himself, his intentions and his view on Daisy. Nick comments on this by saying “That was it. I’d never understood it before. It was full of money – that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it . . . High in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl . . .” (126). According to Lewis this proves that for Gatsby money and love hold similar attractions (Lewis 50). Gatsby is enchanted with the romance and splendour of money more than the money itself. Lewis furthermore says that Gatsby “knows himself well enough to see that his own attraction toward wealth is tied to his love for Daisy. The fact that Gatsby’s money, like his love, should be self-made gives his description of her voice authority and depth” (51). Lewis argues that Tom could never say something like that of Daisy’s voice since he is so accustomed to having money. It does not have the same meaning to him as to Gatsby since it is not something he has to chase after. He has already got money, old money, and it is just there to be used. Gatsby, however, represents new money and the newness gives it purpose: to win Daisy (Lewis 51).

What Daisy then represents and what his dream is actually all about can be hinted in the following sentence:
She had caught a cold, and it made her voice huskier and more charming than ever, and Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud among the hot struggles of the poor. (155-156)

This passage makes it clear that Gatsby became obsessed not only with wealth but with the upper class and their luxurious lifestyle. He has a romanticized view of the upper class and their lifestyle as something mysterious, almost mythical, and well-nigh divine. To Gatsby wealth and high social status is glamour but also safety and the utmost happiness available. When he began to follow his dream after meeting Dan Cody it had close resemblance to that of the American dream. He wanted a good life for himself without being held back by his class background. When meeting Daisy he steps away from the American dream and no longer wants a good life for himself. He wants the best and to be at the top of society. He is craving membership in the exclusive club called the upper class.

Gatsby intended to marry Daisy but the war came between them, Daisy got impatient of waiting for Gatsby and married Tom Buchanan instead. At least this is how Gatsby sees it and perhaps Nick as well, but it seems unlikely that Daisy’s parents would have allowed their daughter to marry Gatsby who has neither class nor money. Daisy however does not know this since Gatsby has made her believe that they have similar backgrounds. Although the war separated him from Daisy and she married someone else, Gatsby refuses to give up his dream that easily. He is determined to win Daisy and attempts to do so by showing her how successful and wealthy he is, although sometimes taking desperate measures to do so. He is the host of grandiose parties in the hope that she will show up for one of them and see his magnificent house, his house being his main tool to show off
his wealth. When Daisy fails to show up he decides to use Nick as a mean of getting closer to Daisy. When he does get the chance of showing his house to Daisy he goes out of hand and begins to throw out shirts from his wardrobe so that she will see the high class clothes he can afford (Fitzgerald 99). It is as if he wants to say that she could have fine clothes as well if she were to marry him.

While Gatsby and Daisy are apart, Daisy becomes a legend in Gatsby’s memory according to Bewley (48). This is supported by Lewis who says that the love for Daisy grew the most intense while they were apart and that this love largely is a result of his imagination (Lewis 49). After all those years Gatsby is bound to be disappointed since he expects her to be the way he remembered her not realizing that people change. “‘I feel far away from her’, he said” (Fitzgerald 116). He continues by saying “‘And she doesn’t understand . . . She used to be able to understand. We’d sit for hours – ’” (117). He is disappointed when she is not the same as he imagined her to be. Gatsby does not realize it himself but Daisy is just a minor detail in his dream and works primarily as a symbol for it. The Daisy he knows is a creation of his mind that only has some things in common with the real Daisy. It is not Daisy as a person that he desires but what she represents, although he does not spot the difference.

Gatsby’s dream fails in the end for a number of reasons. One of them is that he fails in winning Daisy. According to Ornstein’s article Scott Fitzgerald’s fable of East and West, it was never Daisy’s intention to leave her husband but perhaps have an affair, which bored rich wives in the east sometimes had (58). When Tom reveals that Gatsby is a bootlegger an affair is impossible as well. A woman of her position cannot afford to “wink at the illegal and the criminal” (Ornstein 59). Thomas A. Hanzo says in his article, The theme and narrator of The Great Gatsby, that Daisy is repelled by Gatsby’s illegal connection which is a quite credible claim (Hanzo 66). Daisy would never have left her husband for Gatsby and Gatsby
would never have been accepted as an equal to Tom and his peers since his money is the wrong kind of money.

In writing *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald wanted to have a theme of embracing the notion of dreams in a general way, according to Lewis. In letters Fitzgerald wrote that the novel is about “those illusions that matter so much that you chase after them, because even though they are illusions, nothing matters as much as they do” (Lewis 55). No one except Fitzgerald could know for certain what he meant but perhaps he wanted to say that without dreams, no matter how unrealistic they are, life would be quite empty. Even though Gatsby’s dream lead him to a tragic death he at least had a dream and a rich life in comparison to the Buchanans and their peers who live rather empty and dreamless lives as I will examine further in the upcoming sections.

**Gatsby and money**

Money is an important theme in *The Great Gatsby* and it is not a coincidence that Fitzgerald chose the colour green for the light on the opposite side of the sound near Daisy’s house. The colour green represents money as the American dollar bill is green. According to Ornstein, money is a crucial motive in *The Great Gatsby* although never the final goal for any of the novel’s characters (Ornstein 55). The colour green occurs on numerous occasions in the novel, for instance they are about to drink mint juleps at the moment when Tom reveals Gatsby to be a bootlegger.

There is a difference between money and money. According to Ornstein it does not matter that Gatsby is good for millions of dollars since his money is not the type of respectable money that can be perceived in Daisy’s voice (Ornstein 56). Gatsby’s money is not inherited and its source is illegal affairs, which would mean that Gatsby has cheated his way into wealth. Lewis says that Gatsby fails to understand that the criminal source of his
fortune compromises his vision of a life with Daisy. Furthermore he says that “You cannot
win the ideal with the corrupt, and you cannot buy integrity or taste with dollars” (Lewis 52).

Lewis argues that Gatsby has something in common with Wilson who kills Gatsby
in the end. They have both attempted to marry above their social status. Wilson borrowed a
suit for his wedding to hide his low economic status while Gatsby wore his military uniform
while courting Daisy for the same reason (Lewis 53-53). What Gatsby is trying to do is
actually not too common in American literature. He is trying to marry into a class higher than
the one he comes from and he is in love with the woman he wants to marry. At least he
thinks he is. Usually only women are portrayed as trying to the same thing according to
Lewis (54).

Gatsby is not just naive in the pursuit of his dream. He is also ruthless. He turns into
a criminal and a liar as well as becoming increasingly ignorant. According to Gross, Gatsby
is “too raw to understand that the money he acquired as a criminal does not bridge the gap
between his world and that of the Buchanan’s” (Gross 5). Furthermore, Gross claims that
Gatsby has a corrupted as well as romanticized vision of the American dream. Gatsby thinks
that as long as you have a lot of money you are a wonderful person who lives a wonderful
life and Daisy is the ultimate symbol of that life says Gross (5). Money and a carefree
existence he already has. If he can get Daisy as well he will have reached his goal and
fulfilled his dream. When Daisy rejects Gatsby, knowing he is a bootlegger, Gatsby’s dream
is fatally wounded and beyond recovery.

Daisy and Tom Buchanan

Gatsby and his equals’ aspirations to become members of the upper class is not popular
among the actual members. Therefore it is now time to take a closer look at the Buchanans
and their representation of old money as well as their relation to the other characters of the
novel, primarily Gatsby and his dream. Their motives are another thing that will be examined.

The wealthy people from nice backgrounds in the novel lack the will and capacity to pursue dreams according to Ornstein (55-56). As Daisy says “You see I think everything’s terrible anyhow’, she went on in a convinced way. ‘Everybody thinks so – the most advanced people. And I know. I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything” (Fitzgerald 24). Since Daisy and her peers have been everywhere, seen everything and done everything, they have nothing more to strive for. There is nothing to have dreams about. They do not see the value of the life they live since they have never had to fight for it. However, those who see the promises of life and allow themselves to dream do so because they are barred from the white palace of the king’s daughter.

Tom Buchanan went to college with Nick where he was a successful athlete. He comes from a family of enormous wealth. Daisy and Tom lived in France for a year and are described as drifting here and there, wherever people can play polo and be rich together. When Daisy says they will be settling down for good in East Egg, Nick does not believe her. About Tom, Nick says that he “would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game” (Fitzgerald 12). Tom and Daisy come across as rather empty and dispassionate people, incapable of having dreams. They do not take anything seriously and are in a way like children which Nick also concludes by saying “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made” (186). Nick’s image of Tom and Daisy is one of two very selfish people who are so caught up in their own lives that they fail to see that others are hurt by their actions and they move on as if nothing has happened. Tom and Daisy do not realize how the whole situation with Gatsby being
rejected and killed, has hurt Nick. They fail to realize that Nick has become fond of Gatsby and that he is very upset about how they have treated both Gatsby and himself. Nick was the one who had to take care of the mess they had created in arranging a funeral and so on.

Early in the novel when Nick is first invited to dinner at the Buchanan’s house Tom wants to tell him about an article he has read that has made him believe that civilization is going to pieces.

The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be – will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved . . . . This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It’s up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.

‘We’ve got to beat them down,’ whispered Daisy, winking ferociously towards the fervent sun. (13)

This is a metaphor for the view of the lower classes from those of a higher social status such as the Buchanans. They find themselves threatened by self made men and the nouveau riche because they make the upper class less exclusive. They have not created their wealth and live from the idea inherited from Europe that old money is better than new money. This menace of the nouveau riche means the Buchanans and their peers feel threatened by Gatsby and reject him although Daisy does not do so until quite late in the novel. According to Jonathan Schiff’s book *Ashes to ashes*, Fitzgerald suggests that “while the old money members of society remain caught up in underlying grief for their decline in society, those who are ethnic, racial, or economic outsiders, such as Gatsby, struggle to receive acceptance” (101). In a way it is not even Gatsby himself who is struggling to be accepted. They do not have anything against him personally, even if Tom dislikes the idea of him running off with his
wife. It is his dream they reject most of all. There is another metaphor with races which functions as an illustration of Tom’s view of class and the importance of keeping the classes separated.

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. (137)

Jordan replies that they are all white but she is ignored since race is not actually his point. His point is that he feels threatened by people of lower class challenging his life style and his position in life. To him class identity is extremely important and marriage to a person of lower class is by his views completely out of the question in the same way as interracial marriage would be unacceptable at the time. The blood has to remain pure.

Tom and Daisy, who are both heirs of fortunes, and their peers feel threatened by self-made men like Gatsby. The upper class pond is not big enough for everybody to swim in and would everybody have access to it, that pond would cease to be exclusive and desirable. This is perhaps the first sign that Gatsby’s dream will remain unfulfilled. Schiff claims that “the East Eggers are a dying class” (Schiff 113) which can be linked to Klipspringer’s song about the rich getting richer and the poor getting children (Fitzgerald 102). The poor have more children while the rich do not and are on their way of becoming extinct. According to Schiff it is implied in the novel that Tom and Daisy have separate bedrooms and so it is not likely that they will have more children than the daughter they already have. Furthermore
Schiff says that “West Eggers must struggle for acceptance from the East Eggers, whose fortunes are on the wane” (Schiff 113).

Like many of his peers Tom has a mistress. According to Ornstein, Tom has “assumed the role of Long Island country gentleman who keeps a mistress in a midtown apartment (Ornstein 59). He has brought excitement and luxury into the life of Myrtle Wilson who lives with her husband on top of his garage. She dreams of a better life and shares a dream with Gatsby to some extent of belonging to the upper class. Tom has no intention of leaving his wife for Myrtle but lets her believe that he would if he could by saying that his wife is a catholic and would never agree to a divorce. Nick receives this information from Myrtle’s sister Catherine and is very surprised when hearing it since he very well knows that his cousin Daisy is not a catholic. Obviously Tom does not want anything serious with Myrtle. She is simply his mistress, his toy that he can amuse himself with.

For Tom, Daisy is like a trophy that he has won. She is his pride of fine breeding and they make a wonderful couple among their society peers. Had they married for love, it is unlikely that Tom would have got himself a mistress. One could argue that Daisy represents almost the same thing for Tom as for Gatsby. Neither of them is actually interested in Daisy the person but rather Daisy the status symbol, the glamour girl from an upper class family in Louisville. When Myrtle mentions Daisy’s name it is to Tom as if she is tarnishing Daisy’s impeccable name, dragging it in the filth as if she were an equal of Daisy. Tom cannot tolerate that and he hits her publicly to shut her up. By hitting her, he is saying that she should not believe that she is an equal of him and his wife.

Tom lets Myrtle believe that they are equals when they are together but Daisy is not involved in their game and Tom feels the need to put Myrtle in her place. An example of Myrtle pretending to be an equal of Tom is when she complains about a servant during their party in the apartment: “I told the boy about the ice,’ Myrtle raised her eye-brows in despair
at the shiftlessness of the lower orders. ‘These people! You have to keep after them all the
time.” (Fitzgerald 38). Nick continues his narration by saying that she “swept into the
kitchen, implying that a dozen chefs awaited her orders there.” (38).

Like Gatsby, Daisy is often nostalgic and reminisces about her “white years” when
she was young, used to dress in white, had a white roadster and was the most popular girl in
Louisville. Jordan says to Nick about Daisy’s white years that “all day long the telephone
rang in her house and excited young officers from Camp Taylor demanded the privilege of
monopolizing her that night” (81). Gatsby entering her life again enables Daisy to come
closer to the past. But things have fundamentally changed and she ends up having to face
reality. She is married and leaving her husband would cause a scandal she is not at all willing
to experience. Although it is only mentioned a few times in the novel, Daisy is a mother. She
has a daughter now that cannot be made undone and who makes it impossible for her to go
back to what could have been. She can afford to have an affair and escape reality with Gatsby
for a few occasions only but she cannot escape the present more than that.

A few days before Daisy and Tom go to one of Gatsby’s parties Tom and two
friends of his pop in for drinks at Gatsby’s house. They have come on horseback and Gatsby
wants them to stay for dinner. The woman of the company suggests that he come with them
instead which he becomes very enthusiastic about and goes to have a change of clothes. The
following dialogue then takes place between Tom and Nick.

‘My God, I believe the man’s coming’ said Tom. ‘Doesn’t he know
she doesn’t want him?’

‘She says she does want him.’

‘She has a big dinner party and he won’t know a soul there,’ He
frowned. ‘I wonder where in the devil he met Daisy. By God, I may be
old-fashioned in my ideas, but women run around too much these days to suit me. They meet all kinds of crazy fish’. (110)

The three quickly depart by horse asking Nick to tell Gatsby that they could not wait for him. This is a scene where it is quite clear that Gatsby is unwanted. The woman’s invitation may be her idea of a joke but Gatsby of course takes it seriously being eager to become their equal. Tom is the one most skeptical about him and the fact that Gatsby knows Daisy clearly bothers him. His comment on women running around too much is a probable reference to flappers who were the new type of women who smoked, drank alcohol, flirted with men, danced daringly and were outspoken. They were not limited by class in their relations unlike the majority of the upper class women (Gross 20). Fitzgerald’s wife, Zelda, is said to have been a prominent figure of the flapper lifestyle according to Christian Ekvall’s afterword to the Swedish edition of The Great Gatsby (198-201).

Class identity is always present with Tom and Daisy in everything they do such as what people they associate with, what parties they attend and so on. Before establishing contact with someone new they need to determine whether that person is an equal, and thus worthy of their company, or not. Daisy is just as class conscious as Tom although that is not made as clear in Nicks’ narration. On one occasion she does however reveal her class consciousness. It is when she on Gatsby’s party says to Nick that a girl at the party is “common but pretty” (Fitzgerald 113).

Tom suspects rather early that Gatsby is not one of them and does not want too much contact with him. He for instance says “A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers, you know” (Fitzgerald 115). When it is finally certain that Gatsby is a bootlegger he wants Gatsby to know that he knows about it in order to put pressure on him and as a way of threatening him. When Gatsby says that he not sure that his car has enough
gasoline Tom replies by saying “if it runs out I can stop at a drug-store. You can buy anything at a drug-store nowadays” (127). It is uncertain whether Tom would have exposed Gatsby as a bootlegger had he not on his way to town spoken with Mr. Wilson and heard that Wilson wants to move west with his wife. At the same time Daisy is in a car with Gatsby. He realizes that both his wife and his mistress are slipping away from him and he decides to act. In order not to lose his wife he stabs Gatsby in the back in a figurative sense. To get rid of Gatsby once and for all he makes sure Mr. Wilson knows that it was Gatsby’s car that ran over Myrtle Wilson. Wilson being very unstable, it seems very unlikely that Tom was unaware of what Wilson would at least attempt to do. Nick blames Tom more than Wilson for Gatsby’s death in his narration and he almost refuses to shake hands with Tom in the end of the novel. Tom has no guilty conscience and justifies his actions by saying “That fellow had it coming to him. He threw dust into your eyes just like he did in Daisy’s . . .” (186).

Tom is confident that Daisy would not leave him for Gatsby would she know that he is a bootlegger. He knows that they did not marry for love first and foremost but because they make a good couple and because they are the same kind of people. They are both members of the upper class and possessors of inherited fortunes. When Gatsby attempts to break them apart by making Daisy say that she had never loved her husband, Tom says to Gatsby: “there’s things between Daisy and me that you’ll never know, things that neither of us can forget” (Fitzgerald 139). This claim could function both as a proof that they share a class background that Gatsby does not know anything about but it could also suggest that things have happened in the past that weigh on their conscience. Possibly something that happened in France since they only stayed there for a year. The quote is probably linked to the scene where Nick sees Daisy and Tom together for the last time when they sit in the kitchen the night when Myrtle was killed. Nick then says:
They weren’t happy, and neither of them had touched the chicken or the ale – and yet they weren’t unhappy either. There were an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together. (152)

The scene sums up Tom and Daisy’s marriage quite well. Neither of them is happy nor unhappy with the other. There is something there that keeps them together. The intimacy comes from the idea they share of them being the ideal couple and that is a strong image for both of them. The conspiring is another thing that keeps them together. They are tied to each other both by class and by things that possibly have happened in the past as well as that very evening. They are partners in crime.

**Nick Carraway**

Finally I shall look at the narrator Nick Carraway and his relation to Gatsby and his dream, as well as the other characters. His narrative will be examined with focus on his view of Gatsby. Since Nick is both the narrator and a character his narration will be reviewed and questioned.

Nick Carraway is the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* as well as one of the main characters. Nick being the narrator means that the reader automatically will see Nick’s view of things even if he has misinterpreted things, exaggerated or if he is a victim of wishful thinking. Therefore it is important to be critical and question his conclusions and depictions of things. Gary J. Scrimgeour says in his article *Against The Great Gatsby*, that a reader is forced to be more alert when a narrator is also a character (71). The narrator may be unreliable and may for instance have special interests, or in this case perhaps class prejudices, which could make him/her conceal the truth. In conclusion the accuracy of the narration must be questioned.
“Whenever you feel like criticising anyone’, he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.”(Fitzgerald 7). This quote comes from the very beginning of the novel and is a piece of advice Nick received from his father when he was young. This makes Nick reluctant to judge others to a large extent. For once, no matter how cruel, self-absorbed or unstable Gatsby becomes he does not judge him and the reason for this could be Gatsby’s modest background. The quote early sets the theme of class in the novel. Gatsby has not had the advantages Nick has had and he has had to work hard to get somewhere in the world although that work is illegal.

Tom and Daisy on the other hand had all those advantages and more. They have had everything and so Nick has nothing holding him back from judging them. He calls them irresponsible children. His judgement of them is also present when he says: “Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” (Fitzgerald 8). By saying this Nick expresses bitterness towards all the people that came to Gatsby’s parties and enjoyed them but did not bother to show up to his final party, his funeral. The same thing goes for his business associates such as Wolfshiem, and Klipspringer who parasitized Gatsby’s hospitality. However, the quote is perhaps directed most of all to the Buchanan’s and their peers, who ruthlessly rejected him and initiated his death. Gatsby himself does, despite all of his faults, turn out to be the best person of them all in comparison and he receives the sympathies of Nick. This is perhaps even clearer in Nick’s retelling of his last conversation with Gatsby. “They’re a rotten crowd,’ I shouted across the lawn. ‘You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together” (160).

Nick is a man in his late twenties when the story begins. He comes from a quite wealthy family in the Mid-West and he is the second cousin once removed of Daisy Buchanan. Coming home after World War I he felt restless and decided to move east in order
to learn the bond business. His accommodation is a house in West Egg and the neighbour is someone who will turn out to be of great importance for the story: Gatsby. He also meets Jordan Baker, a successful athlete, at Daisy’s house and although it is not explicit, it is implied that he and Jordan were romantically involved but that Nick ended it. Unlike Gatsby, Nick is treated as an equal by the Buchanans. This is probably because he comes from a prominent family and Nick also says that he had the impression that Tom approved of him and wanted Nick to like him. Tom also proves Nick to be an equal in his outline about races when he says “This idea is that we’re Nordics. I am, and you are . . . “(Fitzgerald 20).

“I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (66), Nick tells the reader at the end of chapter 3. But can Nick’s narration be completely trusted? Although Gatsby in many ways is a quite unpleasant person he wins the sympathy from the reader long before his sad ending. The reason readers like Gatsby and dislike the Buchanans is because that is how the narrator wants us to think of them. Nick tells us about Gatsby’s humble background, his romantic dreaminess and him being very much a nice guy. His criminal background is not treated with severity by Nick and Gatsby is never judged for his acquaintance with the mafia-like Wolfshiem. Tom and Daisy however, are almost constantly described as unpleasant and insincere people, yet Nick continuously spends time with them. His choosing to do so is a bit strange considering that he appears not to get anything out of spending time with them. Either he has not managed to make any other friends or he actually enjoyed their company but does not want to admit that in his narration.

Scrimgeour argues that Gatsby is a romantic dream of Nick’s and that the only real difference between the world Nick despises and Gatsby is that the latter is more spectacular (Scrimgeour 74-75). Furthermore he claims that Nick is very much the subject of wishful thinking and that he is willing to accept only those parts of reality that please him. Since he wants Gatsby to be different from the rest of the world, Gatsby is different in Nick’s
narration (75). Scrimgeour claims that Nick is not at all as honest or high-principled as he wants to seem, based on his not treating Jordan in a nice way and that she accuses him of being careless. The very same word is used by Nick to describe the Buchanans (Scrimgeour 75). It is also worth pointing out that Nick does not do anything to prevent any of the unpleasant events in the novel. Perhaps Nick had a greater part in the unfortunate events than he wants to admit and that he out of guilt took charge of arranging Gatsby’s funeral. If that is the case the whole novel can be seen as Nick’s way to plead not guilty and erase any part he may have had in Gatsby’s death.

Scrimgeour compares Nick’s narration to that of Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness* who like Nick is the narrator at the same time as he is a character. “The difference between Marlow’s and Carraway's words is the difference between a man who cannot deny reality and a man who cannot face it” (77). Nick does not want to face reality but for what reason is the subject of speculations. One thing that is for sure is that Gatsby is not as great as the title of the novel wants to suggest.

**Conclusion**

Throughout the novel Gatsby has a dream that he is trying to make come true. This dream is to become an equal of the Buchanans and their peers who belong to a higher social class. He began his aspiration towards a higher social class before he met Daisy but she came to symbolize his goal and by winning her he would have reached that goal.

Apart from Daisy, the colour green is an important symbol for Gatsby’s dream and represents money and hope. Gatsby’s dream began before he met Daisy and started off being much like the American dream. However, when he met Daisy his dream transformed and became something more. After getting a glimpse into Daisy glamorous life his dream moved towards the aspiration to become a member of the upper class, and to have a big fortune. The
latter could still be interpreted as the American dream. When he has succeeded with this he expects life to be carefree and perfect. Daisy is the main symbol of the dream and by winning her he will fulfil the dream. Gatsby has lied about a lot of things such as his family, education, being a bootlegger and those lies caught up with him in end. What Gatsby has not realized is that he cannot win Daisy and he cannot be accepted as an equal by those above him on the class ladder.

The reason his dream fails is that he is exposed as a liar and a bootlegger making Daisy turn her back on him. Although Gatsby did not realize it Daisy would probably never have left her husband for him anyway. She is too class-conscious and she is no longer the young girl he once knew. She is changed and she is a mother. Gatsby has not realized either that his money is not good enough to those of the upper class since it is not old money. They feel threatened by self-made men as him and do their best to keep him out. Hence his dream was bound to fail from the very beginning.

The accuracy of Nick’s narration of the novel can also be questioned. There is a possibility that he romanticises Gatsby and that Nick has a greater part in the novel’s unfortunate events that he wants to admit. It is possible that he was not as honest as he claimed he was and there are clues that he may not have been as high-principled as he wanted to seem. The great Gatsby was probably not so great after all.
Works cited


