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The Dream and all its Promise — Where Fitzgerald Faltered: Marxism in *The Great Gatsby*

The view of life as a culmination of our hard-earned efforts and deservedness is the same as viewing it through rose-colored and gold-rimmed glasses -- a view that is all-too myopic, dismissive, and earthbound, ignorant of the processes that shape privilege and ideology. The American Dream embodies this exact view, due in part to the manner in which it is described. The American Dream in its very wording is one big euphemism, and similarly, many more euphemisms are used to describe it. Terminology ranging from “rugged individualism” and “tabula rasa”, to “pulling oneself up by their bootstraps” and “reinventing oneself” all function to seduce the average working American into becoming entranced by the allure of the folly unattainable. It would be prudent to point to capitalism in discussing the folly of the American Dream, as it is the work of capitalist processes that render the Dream futile for the oppressed, and advantageous for the self-satisfied. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* explores the tenets of the American Dream and the capitalist processes that shape it, and critiques them in a manner that is well-intentioned and grave, while operating as an exposé of class inequality, questionable moral values, and the illusory magnetism of the Dream. Invoking the euphemistic qualities of the American Dream, the style and diction employed by Fitzgerald evoke romantic feelings within us -- feelings that arouse sympathies resulting from the vivid imagery used to describe lavishness

and Nick's compromising attitude towards Gatsby -- and feelings that elicit reproachful attitudes in judging the Wilsons. The means by which language and plot structure function in the novel serve to invalidate Fitzgerald's attempts to situate the novel in an anticapitalist realm of thought. Lois Tyson in her essay "You are what you own: a Marxist reading of *The Great Gatsby*" asserts that "... a Marxist perspective shows us the ways in which the novel fails to push its critique of capitalism far enough, falling an unwitting prey to the very ideology it tries to undermine." (69). In situating the novel within the context of Marxist theory, I posit that Fitzgerald ultimately falls prey to and condones capitalism and the American Dream, with language and plot structure being a double-edged sword in evoking sympathies and nullifying the anticapitalist message Fitzgerald seeks to put out. In discussing the power of linguistic determinism in our reading of the novel, I will be referencing Janet Giltrow's and David Stouck's essay "Style As Politics In 'The Great Gatsby'", along with sections from Tyson's essay. Consideration of Marxist elements and how they intertwine with plot structure is central to a discussion about the magnetic appeal of the American Dream, and how the novel uses commodification and the romanticization of tradition in order to make the readers espouse the ideology of the Dream. Scott Donaldson's "POSSESSIONS IN THE GREAT GATSBY: READING GATSBY CLOSELY" and Jacqueline Lance's "Driving to Destruction with the Rich and Careless at the Wheel" essays both detail the destructiveness of consumerism and commodification that are key points in a discussion of capitalism. *The Great Gatsby* when understood wholly on the basis of language and plot structure seems to offer an astute societal critique -- however, both of these elements betray the overarching purpose of the novel, the novel paralleling the tragic demise of the characters in the misguided message it puts forth.

In analyzing *The Great Gatsby* within the precepts of capitalism, Lois Tyson breaks down some of the essential elements of it in aiding our understanding of Marxism. She proceeds to offer a clear-cut Marxian definition of the American Dream, which is “...the acquisition of a wealthy lifestyle for a few— [which] rests on the misery of the many.” (58). She argues that the traction gained for the American Dream is a result of our complicit acknowledgment of it as a “natural” societal force. It veils its inaccessibility by taking advantage of the naiveté of the masses, forever estranging them from attaining a solid understanding of privilege and opportunity while championing values that lead to the breaking of backs in the name of success. She pinpoints this falsity by citing the Marxian principle of “false consciousness”, which is “...when an ideal functions to mask its own failure...a false ideal...whose real purpose is to promote the interests of those in power.” (58). Moreover, she proceeds to discuss consumerism and commodification as particularly problematic forces within Gatsby’s world and society as a whole. Consumerism, she argues, allows one to believe that they are only as good as the items they own -- a principal flaw that leads to the material compulsiveness with which so many characters in the novel operate. Commodification is too a destructive force -- Tyson places emphasis on an item’s exchange and sign-exchange value, and argues that, “For Marxism, a commodity’s value lies not in what it can do (use value) but in the money or other commodities for which it can be traded (exchange value) or in the social status it confers on its owner (sign-exchange value).” (62). The point she is making is that commodification -- (the process by which an object gains exchange or sign-exchange value) is rampant within the novel, and that not only inanimate objects are commodified, but humans are, too. Lastly, the temptation of the

Dream is irresistible and self-affirming -- “[It] opens the possibility that anyone can win, and, like gambling addicts, we cling to that possibility.” (58).

Linguistic determinism is the process by which language affects our thinking -- this thinking can be reflected in our attitudes, memory, and understandings, and Fitzgerald utilizes language as a means to communicate his own sentiments about class and gender. There is a distinction to be made between the diction employed in Fitzgerald’s discussion of the affluent, well-mannered characters and their possessions and the destitute characters in their less-than-desirable settings. Myrtle Wilson and George Wilson exemplify what it means to be painted as unsavory characters, ranging from Myrtle’s promiscuity to Wilson’s patheticism. Lois Tyson’s initial point in her essay includes the idea that it is easy to disparage characters like the Wilsons due to their character flaws. We objectify Myrtle, viewing her as a product of raunchy dress and personality, rather than a victim fallen prey to an unyielding socioeconomic status quo or failed ideology whose splendors are beyond reach. Fitzgerald deliberately paints her promiscuity in the way that he does as a way to undermine the social processes that shape her personality and physique. As Tyson keenly points out, “Indeed, one might argue that George and Myrtle are negative stereotypes of a lower-class couple: he’s not very bright; she’s loud, obnoxious, and overtly sexual.” (74). Fitzgerald described Myrtle as “...faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face...contained no facet or gleam of beauty but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering.” (28-29). In his immediate objectification of Myrtle, she is rendered nothing more than rump and bosom, forever stripped of agency in the rest of the novel, when she is overtaken by heteropatriarchal forces -- these forces being Tom, George, capitalism,

and her eventual deathly demise from them. Nevertheless, the sequence of events that position Myrtle as the white-trash mistress of Tom place her at odds with dainty, subordinate, child-bearing Daisy, with whom we are initially forced to sympathize -- “Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth—but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion...” (12). Myrtle’s voluntary commodification of her body translates into her initially being “whorish” -- as a means to survive and take back her dignity, both made impossible by her being wed to George Wilson. It is here that Fitzgerald falters in his ability to deliver a truly anti-capitalist message, given the inherent classism of the language used to describe the Wilsons.

George Wilson is similarly depicted unfavorably by Fitzgerald -- “He was a blonde, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome. When he saw us a damp gleam of hope sprang into his light blue eyes.” (28) Yet, apart from the pity we may feel for him, we are also innately critical of his inability to provide. We shake our heads with scorn as his own wife berates him, yet we question his status as the rightful “breadwinner” and make him out to be exactly what Myrtle and company see him as -- a cuckold. As Tyson puts it: “...instead of feeling sorry (or angry at the system) that he is a victim of class oppression, we feel sorry (or angry at him) that he doesn’t have what it takes to pull himself up by his bootstraps and better himself, as the American dream tells us he should: we blame the victim instead of the system that victimizes him.” (76). In Jacqueline Lance’s interpretation of George Wilson in her essay, “The Great Gatsby: Driving to Destruction with the Rich and Careless at the Wheel”, she argues that “Fitzgerald portrays George Wilson as an ineffectual man who is trapped underneath the grim reality of his life in the valley of the ashes...Wilson is described as an almost lifeless shadow of a

man, and his despondency is reflected in the characteristics of the only car that he owns, ‘the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner’ (29). This dilapidated vehicle represents the physical, emotional, economic, and marital deterioration present in Wilson's own life.” (27). Much like how he is defenseless against the ills of capitalism and labelling in the novel, he is also defenseless against Fitzgerald’s scrutiny. He is to be interpellated, be it against his will or not, as the “other”, and we are forced to recognize him as such, juxtaposing with him the gorgeousness of the rich and the musicality of the flow of language in their descriptions.

There is a stark difference between the unflattering and flattering descriptions of the poor and rich, respectively. As discussed by Janet Giltrow and David Stouck in “Style As Politics In ‘The Great Gatsby’”, flowery and poetic diction evokes dreamlike images for the reader -- “The most evocative sentence endings...adumbrate the poetry of wealth and possessions.” (480). Nick describes Daisy’s house upon Gatsby’s stay there, and it surely elicits a different mood than does the imagery of the Valley of Ashes -- “There was a ripe mystery about it, a hint of bedrooms 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.” (158). There is an observable pattern with which Fitzgerald paints houses and parties and opulence and decadence -- and it is all lovely and undeniably charming, especially for a narrator as deliberately unreliable as Nick Carraway. The excesses of capitalism are not rebuked nearly enough as they are praised, and this points to a greater lapse in Fitzgerald’s judgment, as Nick Carraway is arguably a manifestation of Fitzgerald’s own emotional findings and perspectives on class.

Coupled with this idea of elaborate language used in order to highlight class difference, Fitzgerald also romanticizes Gatsby -- a human testament to the failure of the American Dream -- and despite this fact, Nick Carraway (or perhaps, Fitzgerald in character form) STILL pines over him, enchanted by his charisma and lust for hope...paralleling the eerily similar Dream, which wins over the hearts of many as if it embodies human qualities. Ostensibly, Gatsby is a mere embodiment of this Dream -- and Nick just does not do a sufficient job at denouncing it... "On the level of plot then the sophisticated narrator seems to impugn the American dream, its illusions and excesses-he refers scornfully to Gatsby's 'appalling sentimentality' (p. 118) and to the 'foul dust' that 'floated in the wake of his dreams' (p. 6). But syntactically, in some of the most beautifully wrought and memorable lines of the novel, Nick Carraway demonstrates not scorn but, rather, ready sympathy for Gatsby and for those ideological presuppositions that underlie his ambitions. Nick tells Gatsby's story in what Bakhtin would describe as a lyrical style, 'poetic in the narrow sense,' without dialogue, the words sufficient unto themselves..." (Gitlow and Stouck, 480). And despite Gatsby's misdeeds in accruing wealth through exploitative and dishonest means, despite Gatsby's flouting of the laws in attempting to claim what is not rightfully his, despite his dishonesty with himself and others, despite his commodification of everything and everyone in existence -- Nick Carraway, unreliable narrator extraordinaire, STILL renders him and his personality "...a[n] unbroken series of successful gestures" with which "there was something gorgeous...some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if [Gatsby] were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away." (4). Fitzgerald is especially vindictive in dignifying Gatsby's commodification of Daisy, which readers are meant and left to construe as "love", in its

most twisted and obsessive form. Although Fitzgerald intends to make a commentary on the sheer catastrophe that this commodification induces, Nick and Fitzgerald are, oddly enough, permissive of this catastrophe and of Gatsby -- despite Gatsby's dehumanization of Daisy, his servants, and Nick -- treating them all as means for his own ends. In Nick's attempt to sway Gatsby, Gatsby correctly pinpoints the sound of her voice as being "full of money" (128), in full admission of the fact that he is commodifying her -- "Nick immediately sees that Gatsby is right and leaps from the now totally commodified voice—for Marx, money was the most magical commodity of all—to the physical origins that made it possible: 'High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl . . .' (93–94)." (Donaldson, 88). Donaldson posits that "The magic for Gatsby, in this commodified universe, is inevitably linked to expensive objects, just as Daisy herself, the gleaming golden girl, is repeatedly depicted as dressed in white, driving her white roadster, living in a white palace." (92). Nick is not the only one who adopts a lax attitude about the commodification -- the golden girl "...herself is most deeply moved by Gatsby's spectacular display of his many expensive shirts... This near orgy of commodity celebration is too much for Daisy, who sobs into the folds of his beautiful shirts (Posnock, "A New World," 208)." (88), thereby rendering her commodification acceptable and even desirable in Fitzgerald's play on sympathies, coercing the reader to marvel at the silky exotictness of the shirts while deeming this gesture as one originating from a place of love. Sadly, the aggrandization of Gatsby reigns supreme in its dismissal of the materialism and individualism-turned-selfishness of (the "Great") Gatsby's very own American Dream -- which involves nothing more than being part of the same old-money strata as Daisy Buchanan -- a Dream which he himself is, and which he will, paradoxically, never achieve nor become.



In considering the fateful events that occur over the course of the novel, we as readers are inclined to interpret the deaths of the Wilsons and Gatsby as tragedies that symbolize the inevitable crumbling of the American Dream. The revolutionary hope that Gatsby displays as reminisced on by Nick is one that is directly linked to the luscious promise of hope offered by the Dream. In Nick's attempt to vindicate Gatsby, he is fanning the small flames of the inextinguishable Dream in a mighty attempt to keep it alive, thereby ending the story on an optimistic note: a note that presents and concludes the idea of Gatsby with flattery and reverence. In showcasing his distinctly American grit, Mr. Gatz flaunts Gatsby's diary -- "'Study needed inventions'; 'Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it'; 'No more smokeing or chewing'. 'It just shows you,' Mr. Gatz declares, in a surge of pride for his son's not quite successful attempt to reinvent himself.'" (Donaldson, 96). This pride is almost contagious, cutting through the solemnity of the moment and upholding the rugged individualism that the American Dream purports, with Fitzgerald's discretion. Fitzgerald is rekindling the American fire — a fire that evokes in many the fervency of competition, eventually resulting in a feverishness that has blinding and deluding effects. During the novel's end, Nick pays his homeland a visit, reflecting on the Midwest as his moralistic self typically would, disillusioned by the impressive, gaudy pretentiousness of the East -- "That's my middle west — ...the thrilling, returning trains of my youth and the street lamps and sleigh bells... I am part of that, a little solemn with the feel of those long winters, a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name. I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern

life.” (187-188). In advocating for Western humility, the desire for a return to tradition is made evident through Fitzgerald's longing, and the Dream is founded on exactly this. This return to tradition hinges on the dangerous rhetoric of bootstraps ideology. The book ends on a weighty yet hopeful note, in which “...we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” and are made to feel like our efforts are not futile, but worth striving towards, if it means that we become as beautiful a human as Gatsby. (193). The gravity of this message is indeed inspirational, yet subliminally destructive, in that it purports the very Dream it decries, and blankets us in the lofty greatness of stagnation, amounting our worth to what we have and how we slave.

Applying the lenses of Tyson, Donaldson, Glitrow and Stouck, and Lance in their Marxist and stylistic analyses of *The Great Gatsby*, I am able to conclude that the novel cannot be hailed as a thoroughly anti-capitalist and critical work, due to the fact that Fitzgerald falters in his ability to offer an unbiased narration of the novel in a way that does not stylistically uphold classist attitudes nor glorify the walking embodiment of the American Dream: Gatsby. The nostalgia experienced by Nick Carraway for the Midwest in his departure from the East is indicative of Fitzgerald's own moralism and elitence, in his assertion that the simplicity and quaintness of the West outmatches the decadence and moral decay of the East — an innately aspirational and traditionalist narrative, often cited by proponents of bootstraps ideology. Although the story may very well be read as Fitzgerald's attack of the Dream and of all its (un)fulfilling promise, bitter as he might be, his moralism poses a threat unto itself, likening itself to the self-destructing timebomb that is the American Dream, forever ticking into the future of its own implosion.

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- Tyson, Lois. "Marxist Criticism." *Critical Theory Today: a User-Friendly Guide*, by Lois Tyson, Second ed., Routledge, 2015, pp. 53–80.

## Annotated Bibliography

Bewley, Marius. "Scott Fitzgerald's Criticism of America." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 62, no. 2, 1954, pp. 223–246. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/27538346](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27538346).

Marius Bewley adamantly argues that Fitzgerald offers a scathing critique of the American Dream, while giving insight into Fitzgerald's crafting of Gatsby as a character. Fitzgerald, he believes, intended to make Gatsby an embodiment of all of the social ills associated with America during the Roaring 20s -- "His insecure grasp of social and human values, his lack of critical intelligence and self-knowledge, his blindness to the pitfalls that surround him in American society, his compulsive optimism, are realized in the text..." (245). The tragedy of the story is symbolic of the crumbling of the Dream, which is defenseless against the evils of class inequality. The position held by Bewley can be compared to that of Weinstein in his understanding of Fitzgerald's opinion of the American Dream, however, they differ nonetheless. Weinstein presents the American Dream as being fueled by belief and hope, and conducive to fictional "greatness" -- something that is seen as naive and foolishly optimistic by Bewley.

Donaldson, Scott. "POSSESSIONS IN THE GREAT GATSBY: READING GATSBY CLOSELY." *Fitzgerald and Hemingway: Works and Days*, Columbia University Press, 2009, pp. 76–97. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/dona14816.7](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/dona14816.7).

In Scott Donaldson's analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, an examination of character's extravagance as expressed through their housing, clothing, and spending is made and likened to certain aspects within the American Dream that allow a person to "reinvent

themselves”. Scott argues on Fitzgerald’s behalf that this is all a lie, and that the characters find it “impossible to throw off ‘the cluster of appurtenances’” (77). Such modes of expression made possible through grandeur often try to mimic semblance of wealth, but ultimately fail in doing so. This connects to Marxian precepts of consumerism and class struggle that disallows a person to achieve mobility. In contrast to Tyson’s thesis, however, Donaldson argues that Fitzgerald was apt in intuitively grasping Marxian precepts. Despite the novel failing to completely resist capitalist conception, Donaldson believes that Fitzgerald is disillusioned by capitalism and in turn does a sound job at upholding Marxian principles.

Fine, Ben, and Alfredo Saad-Filho. “Commodity Production.” Marx's 'Capital' - Sixth Edition, 6th ed., Pluto Press, London, 2016, pp. 13–27. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ddr6c7.6](http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ddr6c7.6).

Ben Fine and Saad-Filho Alfredo in their critical analysis and explanations of Marx’s ‘Capital’ seek to break down the nature of Marxian processes in a chapter of their book. This specific chapter deals with commodity and describes the differences between use value, sign value and sign-exchange value while placing importance on the historical and social processes/implications that determine the sign-exchange value of an object. The authors state that, fundamentally, all commodities are products of labour, and that a specific mode of production must exist in order for this exchange to hold any meaning/sustain itself and society. Capitalism is laid out therefore as being characterized by “the production of social use values...and the exchange of...concrete labours that

exist...” (20). This essay is crucial to my definition of capital in *The Great Gatsby* within my thesis, and within in my discussion of the commodification of characters like Gatsby and Daisy. This essay, along with Tyson’s essay as mentioned above serve to explicate the underpinnings of Marxist theory, and I will be using this essay to expand on Tyson’s descriptions of commodification

Lance, Jacqueline. “The Great Gatsby: Driving to Destruction with the Rich and Careless at the Wheel.” *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2000, pp. 25–35. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23414542](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23414542).

Jacqueline Lance in her analysis of automobiles in *The Great Gatsby* finds that they play a central role in the novel, as they are indicative of social and economic class, the social ills associated with excess, and personality as a trope. The automobile as a commodity gives rise to the idea of technological presence in literature as a result of living in a highly industrialized and advancing world. More importantly, Fitzgerald’s choice to include gaudy, flashy automobiles in the story as a way to develop certain characters functions as an attempted critique of capitalism, but yet falls prey to it due to the romanticized elevation of such commodities in their descriptions by Fitzgerald. This essay especially coincides with Donaldson’s essay cited earlier, as they both deal with the “show of possessions” as a way of affirming social status and class. The essay deals with the Marxian principles of consumerism and commodification, as reflected in the spending habits and exhibitionism of characters Myrtle Wilson and Jay Gatsby.

Tyson, Lois. "Marxist Criticism." *Critical Theory Today: a User-Friendly Guide*, by Lois Tyson, Second ed., Routledge, 2015, pp. 53–80.

Lois Tyson in her comprehensive guide on critical literary analysis discusses the various critical lenses through which literature can be analyzed. Citing the section of Marxist Criticism, she illuminates some of the fundamental components of Marxist theory in effectively breaking Marxism down. She cites Marx's theories about class systems, the role of ideology, patriotism, religion, rugged individualism, commodification and consumerism, which are all influential subjects in her discussion of the *The Great Gatsby* through this lens. In her essay, "You are what you own: a Marxist reading of The Great Gatsby", she posits that although the novel seeks to defy the promise of the American Dream and critique capitalism, the novel still falls prey to and condones these same practices due to the practice of commodification and false idealism. This work has proved especially necessary in the formulation of my thesis regarding *The Great Gatsby* failing to fully protest capitalism and resist the temptations of the American Dream as a result.

Weinstein, Arnold. "Fiction as Greatness: The Case of Gatsby." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1985, pp. 22–38. JSTOR, JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1345714](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1345714).

In Arnold Weinstein's critical analysis of *The Great Gatsby*, the American Dream is invoked as a kind of metamorphic force by which characters in the novel (primarily Jay Gatsby) shape and change their identity, despite the limitations of class, proof, time and space, and reality. As argued by Weinstein, belief is the principal drive in manifesting

dreams into reality, and this is precisely what dictates “fiction as greatness”, in both a literal, literary sense and a metaphorical sense. Gatsby operates strictly from said fictions. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald is said to understand the enormity of the American Dream as not only being about the pursuit of money, but also about the fulfillment of the spirit and the identity. Weinstein seeks to measure Gatsby’s “greatness”, and finds that it is unquantifiable, but he does contend that his greatness hinges on belief. This essay is relevant to my discussion of the American Dream as it is achieved or not achieved by Gatsby, and the question of whether the novel is critical (enough) of this Dream, given Fitzgerald’s stance on the breaking of social barriers to become actualized.