

THE GREAT GATSBY AND THE FAILURE OF WEALTH AS AN IDEAL

Chung Chin-Yi

Teaching Assistant

National University of Singapore,
Singapore

Abstract

Fitzgerald and Allen have critiqued what is essentially the hollow and morally barren nature that is at the heart of the pursuit of the American dream which is to grow in wealth and accumulate property and possessions in a consumer society. At the heart of their critique is the morally bankrupt nature of material pursuits and the morally empty characters who inhabit the sphere of great wealth. It is apt then that T S Eliot had written to Fitzgerald that his novel was the first advance in the American novel since Henry James, because the idea of a spiritual wasteland very much informs Fitzgerald's critique of capitalist society and the empty nature of the American dream of attaining and amassing wealth. To this end the critique holds of modern capitalist society and the hollow, meretricious ideals that underpin much of it.

Much has been written about the corruptibility of Gatsby's dreams in pursuit of a vulgar and meretricious beauty. I would like to suggest however, that the failure of Gatsby's dream, aside from being a shattering of the myth of the American dream is also about the incommensurability of the ideal with the real. Indeed, Gatsby's dreams arise from a Platonic conception of himself, it is essentially a transcendental ideal of wealth as material fulfilment of himself that he pursues. Gatsby views himself as the Platonic opposite of Daisy and in order to fulfil this dream of being Daisy's ideal lover essentially Gatsby reinvents himself as a fabulously wealthy person to match Daisy's social status. That Gatsby seeks to realize a Platonic conception of himself in service of something as vulgar and meretricious as wealth and material success is where his dreams fall short as the ideal is incommensurable with the real and no amount of vast wealth will ever buy him the happiness he seeks as it is a meretricious beauty he serves and thus a hollow and empty success that he realizes as Daisy while wealthy is also immensely shallow and hollow as a person herself, her loyalties remain to a life of old money and comfortable privilege rather than any magnificent romance with Gatsby as the depth of Gatsby's transcendental love for her far exceed the limits of her hollow, shallow and superficial self interest and her carelessness.

The fundamentally material nature of Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy is seen in his comment when he says "Her voice is full of money"(Fitzgerald 1926:120) Indeed it is the allure of wealth as a resplendent beauty Gatsby seeks as if wealth itself were able to confer the Platonic ideal upon himself. Fitzgerald's comment, however, is that wealth is meretricious beauty, it is a hollow ideal and superficial without any moral depth to it. It is indeed the amoral nature of wealth that Fitzgerald seems to condemn. When Nick Carraway tells Gatsby that he is worth the whole bunch of the wealthy Buchanans and Jordan Baker put together it is an expression of the admiration of the idealism of Gatsby and his transcendental Platonic pursuits that separate him from the hollow cynicism and amorality of the Buchanans. Indeed Nick first gestures to this view when he expressed distaste towards Daisy's insincerity when she had boasted about knowing and seeing everything and hence becoming sophisticated and worldly. While the Buchanans are wealthy, they are also shallow and careless, using their wealth to exploit and then abandon people for their own selfish ends, as we see with Tom's affair with Myrtle Wilson. Daisy is temporarily drawn to Gatsby for his fabulous wealth but as soon as she discovers its origins in the underworld she is quick to withdraw into herself and abandon Gatsby for her shallow relationship with Tom in which she puts up with his affairs and philandering in order to preserve her superficial life of privilege and comfort.

The tragedy of Gatsby is that he invests his Platonic ideals and pursuits in something as superficial as wealth and material gain which is exposed to be ultimately an illusion. All the wealth in the world is not sufficient to draw the shallow Daisy away from her comfortable world of old money, inherited wealth and privilege. Gatsby's new money and the origins of his new money in the underworld have Daisy quick to abandon Gatsby and whatever novelty their newfound romance had been. Indeed the amoral nature of the wealthy is seen in Fitzgerald's referencing of the eyes of T J Eckleberg overlooking the valley of ashes as an indictment of American society as a spiritual wasteland. Money has no moral ground, this is seen in the corrupt means by which Gatsby amasses his wealth through "gonnegsions" with Meyer Wolfsheim and bootlegging and bucket shops and the utter lack of morals Tom Buchanan has in utilizing his status of being wealthy to have an endless string of affairs and adultery outside his marriage. Indeed it is the carelessness of the wealthy that Nick Carraway is critical of. Jordan Baker, Tom and Daisy Buchanan are described as careless drivers. Their wealth is the source of their contemptuous and condescending attitude toward the people around them, indeed being wealthy is the access to a 'secret club' to which Daisy and Tom belonged, leading them to trample on those not as privileged as themselves and dispense and dispose of them when they had outlived their usefulness to their hollow self interests. This is seen in their destruction of Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson. The car is a metaphor for the use of wealth to oppress those poorer than them in the description of Tom, Daisy and Jordan as careless drivers. The car is essentially an instrument and status symbol, and is used as an instrument to subordinate and destroy others as they smash people up carelessly with their careless driving. It is a metaphor for the way in which Tom, Daisy and Jordan, from the domain of old money, utilize their wealth as a weapon towards those around them whom they destroy with their careless driving.

Gatsby is described as son of God, and it is the misguidedness in which he makes wealth his religion that Fitzgerald condemns, wealth has no moral depth or allegiance or soul to it, as we see in Daisy's eventual abandonment of Gatsby and Tom's shabby treatment of Myrtle Wilson and Gatsby. A film which made in recent years which has some parallels with *The Great Gatsby* is Woody Allen's film *Blue Jasmine*. Jasmine, the protagonist of the film, experiences a series of nervous breakdowns after she loses her wealth when it is exposed that her fabulously wealthy

husband had amassed his wealth through corrupt means and illicit businesses and transactions. She discovers that all her wealthy friends are quick to abandon her and snub her when she works as a shoe shop assistant at Park Avenue. She almost ensnares another wealthy man, a diplomat, who is quick to abandon her as soon as he discovers the truth about her past. Her son is one of those who abandon her as well as he discloses that he holds a grudge against her for bringing her husband down when he threatened her with divorce for a new and younger woman, just one in a string of mistresses he has had outside their marriage which Jasmine had to turn a blind eye to. The corrupting effect that wealth has on its owners is thus seen in *Gatsby* and *Blue Jasmine*.

The essential hollowness of the American dream of amassing wealth and being materially successful is thus exposed in *Gatsby* and *Blue Jasmine*. Indeed what Fitzgerald and Allen have to comment on the nature of this dream is that pursuing wealth as a religion is essentially morally groundless and superficial, as Jasmine discovers through the superficial nature of her friends who abandon her, including her son, when her money evaporates and Daisy's quick abandonment of Gatsby when she discovers the illicit nature of his wealth shows. social status that wealth bestows is ultimately exposed to be transient as riches may not last with a turn of events as we see with Jasmine's husbands downfall with the FBI and Gatsby's trouble with one of his bucket shops towards the end of his life shows. Superficial friends abound when one is wealthy and successful but as we see with Gatsby's desolate funeral only attended by Nick and his father wealth can buy you friends only as long as you are successful and all the splendid parties that Gatsby threw were just hedonistic shows to which superficial pleasure seekers thronged without owing him any sense of loyalty and allegiance when he runs into trouble or at the point of his death.

I have earlier brought up the incommensurability of the ideal with the real. Indeed the colossal vitality with which Gatsby had invested his dream, described as something which went far beyond Daisy and anything materially attainable is his tragedy as something as fallen and meretricious as Daisy will inevitably be inadequate to the vast expectations of his ideal and dream. Daisy's shallow mind can only appreciate wealth and Gatsby's new money and splendid mansion and shirts as long as Gatsby sustains the illusion that he is truly self made and legitimate but as soon as Daisy discovers that his wealth is derived from shady underworld "gonnegsions" she is quick to retreat to the safe world of Tom Buchanan and the realm of old money and inherited wealth. Indeed the very idea of attaining Daisy is something that would have eluded Gatsby and remained eternally out of his reach had he pursued a legitimate career rather than one that involved crime because there would be no possibility he could have amassed such sheer wealth so rapidly. Daisy, the golden girl, the princess in the castle thus remains out of his reach by virtue of their social disparity and origin from different classes in society. Fitzgerald's novel is an indictment of the inequality that capitalism creates and the way it allows morally bankrupt people like the Buchanans to go around smashing and destroying people's lives simply because they belong to the domain of old money and inherited wealth. Indeed Fitzgerald's novel is an indictment of the moral vacuum that lies at the heart of the very wealthy and the careless way in which they dispose people around them and possessions.

In conclusion, both Fitzgerald and Allen have critiqued what is essentially the hollow and morally barren nature that is at the heart of the pursuit of the American dream which is to grow in wealth and accumulate property and possessions in a consumer society. At heart their critique is the morally bankrupt nature of material pursuits and the morally empty characters who inhabit the sphere of great wealth. It is apt then that T S Eliot had written to Fitzgerald that his novel was the first advance in the American novel since Henry James, because the idea of a spiritual

wasteland very much informs Fitzgerald's critique of capitalist society and the empty nature of the American dream of attaining and amassing wealth. To this end the critique holds of modern capitalist society and the hollow, meretricious ideals that underpin much of it.

Works cited:

Fitzgerald, F .Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Penguin, London. 1950.
Allen, Woody. *Blue Jasmine*. 2013.