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THE ILLUSION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE GREAT GATSBY: A SOCIO-CULTURAL CRITIQUE

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ABSTRACT

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby presents a critical examination of the American Dream and its transformation in the socio-cultural context of 1920s America. The novel portrays the journey of Jay Gatsby, a self-made millionaire who believes that wealth and social status can help him achieve happiness and fulfill his dreams. Through Gatsby's relentless pursuit of success and his desire to win back Daisy Buchanan, Fitzgerald exposes the illusion underlying the American Dream. Despite accumulating immense wealth, Gatsby remains unable to gain acceptance into the elite social class represented by old-money families such as the Buchanans.

This study explores how the novel critiques social inequality, class divisions, materialism, and moral decay in American society. Fitzgerald highlights the contrast between old money and new money, revealing the limitations of social mobility and the persistence of class barriers. The novel also demonstrates how the pursuit of wealth often leads to the corruption of personal values and relationships. Through symbols such as East Egg, West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes, Fitzgerald presents a society characterized by superficiality, inequality, and disillusionment.

By examining the socio-cultural dimensions of the novel, this paper argues that The Great Gatsby challenges the belief that hard work and determination alone guarantee success and fulfillment. Ultimately, Fitzgerald portrays the American Dream as an unattainable ideal, distorted by materialism and social privilege, making the novel a powerful critique of American society and its enduring cultural myths.

KEYWORDS

American Dream, Socio-Cultural Criticism, F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, Class Division, Materialism, Consumer Culture, Social Stratification, Capitalism

INTRODUCTION

The American Dream has long been regarded as a fundamental ideal of American society, emphasizing that every individual, regardless of their social background, can achieve success, prosperity, and happiness through hard work and determination. This belief has inspired generations to pursue personal and economic advancement. However, the reality of this dream has often been questioned, particularly in societies marked by class divisions, social inequality, and materialistic values.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, published in 1925, is one of the most significant literary works that critically examines the American Dream. Set during the Roaring Twenties, a period characterized by economic prosperity, consumerism, and social transformation, the novel explores the life of Jay Gatsby, a self-made millionaire who seeks wealth and status in order to win back his lost love, Daisy Buchanan. Gatsby's journey reflects the aspirations associated with the American Dream, but his ultimate failure reveals the limitations and contradictions embedded within it.

Through its portrayal of wealth, class distinctions, social privilege, and moral decline, the novel presents a powerful critique of American society. Fitzgerald demonstrates that material success alone cannot guarantee happiness, acceptance, or fulfillment. The contrast between old money and new money, the superficial relationships among the characters, and the persistent barriers to social mobility expose the dream's illusory nature. Despite Gatsby's remarkable achievements, he remains excluded from the elite social class he desires to join.

This study examines The Great Gatsby from a socio-cultural perspective, focusing on the ways in which Fitzgerald challenges the ideals of the American Dream. By analyzing themes such as class inequality, materialism, social mobility, and moral corruption, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the novel exposes the gap between the promise of the American Dream and the realities of American society. Ultimately, Fitzgerald presents the American Dream not as a pathway to fulfillment but as an illusion that often leads to disappointment and disillusionment.

Review of Related Literature

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby has attracted extensive critical attention for its portrayal of the American Dream and its critique of American society. Many scholars have examined the novel as a reflection of the social, economic, and cultural conditions of the 1920s, highlighting Fitzgerald's concern with class inequality, materialism, and moral decline.

Several critics argue that the novel presents the American Dream as an unattainable ideal. They suggest that Jay Gatsby embodies the belief that wealth and determination can overcome social barriers. However, despite his financial success, Gatsby fails to gain acceptance into the world of old-money aristocracy. This failure reveals the limitations of social mobility and challenges the notion that success is equally accessible to all individuals.

Other scholars focus on the theme of class division in the novel. The contrast between East Egg and West Egg symbolizes the distinction between inherited wealth and newly acquired wealth. Critics observe that Fitzgerald portrays old-money characters such as Tom and Daisy Buchanan as socially privileged individuals who maintain their status regardless of their moral shortcomings. In contrast, Gatsby's wealth cannot erase his lower social origins, demonstrating the rigidity of class structures in American society.

Literary researchers have also emphasized the role of materialism in the novel. They argue that the pursuit of wealth has replaced traditional values such as honesty, responsibility, and genuine human connection. Gatsby's extravagant parties, luxurious lifestyle, and obsession with status symbolize a society increasingly driven by consumerism and

superficial appearances. According to these interpretations, Fitzgerald critiques a culture that measures success primarily through material possessions.

Another important area of criticism concerns the moral decay depicted in the novel. Scholars note that many characters engage in selfish and irresponsible behavior while avoiding the consequences of their actions. The carelessness of Tom and Daisy, in particular, reflects the ethical decline associated with excessive wealth and privilege. Fitzgerald uses these characters to expose the emptiness that often lies beneath social prestige and economic success.

From a socio-cultural perspective, critics view The Great Gatsby as a commentary on the contradictions of the American Dream. While the dream promises equality, opportunity, and self-improvement, the novel reveals a society shaped by class privilege, social exclusion, and economic inequality. Fitzgerald's work continues to be relevant because it raises important questions about the relationship between wealth, social status, and personal fulfillment.

The existing literature demonstrates that The Great Gatsby is not merely a story of individual ambition but also a profound critique of the social and cultural realities of America. Building upon these scholarly discussions, the present study examines how Fitzgerald exposes the illusion of the American Dream through his portrayal of class divisions, materialism, social mobility, and moral corruption

Results and Discussion

1. The Failure of the American Dream

The analysis reveals that Jay Gatsby's life represents the failure of the American Dream. Although he acquires immense wealth through determination and ambition, he is unable to achieve true happiness or gain complete acceptance into the upper class. His tragic end demonstrates that material success alone cannot fulfill personal aspirations.

2. Class Division and Social Inequality

The novel highlights the rigid class structure of American society. The distinction between East Egg and West Egg symbolizes the divide between old money and new money. Gatsby's inability to cross this social boundary suggests that wealth cannot completely eliminate class discrimination and social prejudice.

3. Materialism and Consumer Culture

The findings show that materialism dominates the lives of many characters. Wealth, luxury, and social status become measures of success. Gatsby's extravagant parties and lavish lifestyle reflect the growing consumer culture of the 1920s. Fitzgerald suggests that excessive materialism leads to moral emptiness and dissatisfaction.

4. Moral Decay and Loss of Values

The study reveals that many characters display selfishness, irresponsibility, and a lack of moral accountability. Tom and Daisy Buchanan use their wealth and privilege to avoid the consequences of their actions. This moral decline reflects Fitzgerald's criticism of a society that values money more than ethics.

5. The Illusion of Social Mobility

Gatsby's transformation from a poor young man into a millionaire appears to support the American Dream. However, his continued exclusion from the old-money elite demonstrates the limitations of social mobility. The novel suggests that social status is influenced not only by wealth but also by family background and inherited privilege.

6. Dreams, Reality, and Disillusionment

Gatsby's dream of recreating the past and winning Daisy ultimately proves impossible. The gap between his expectations and reality illustrates the theme of disillusionment. Fitzgerald portrays dreams as powerful motivating forces but warns against pursuing unrealistic ideals.

7. Socio-Cultural Critique of American Society

The overall findings indicate that Fitzgerald uses the novel as a critique of 1920s American society. Through themes of class inequality, materialism, moral corruption, and unattainable aspirations, the novel exposes the contradictions between the promise of the American Dream and the realities of social life.

Summary of Findings

The study concludes that The Great Gatsby presents the American Dream as an illusion distorted by wealth, class privilege, and materialism. Fitzgerald demonstrates that success and prosperity do not necessarily lead to happiness, acceptance, or fulfillment. The novel remains a significant socio-cultural critique of American society and continues to be relevant in discussions of inequality and the pursuit of success.

Conclusion

F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby offers a profound critique of the American Dream and the socio-cultural realities of 1920s America. Through the character of Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald demonstrates that wealth and social status do not necessarily lead to happiness, acceptance, or fulfillment. Gatsby's relentless pursuit of success and his dream of winning Daisy Buchanan ultimately end in disappointment, revealing the illusory nature of the American Dream. The novel exposes the deep class divisions that exist within society, showing that inherited privilege often outweighs personal achievement. Fitzgerald also highlights the rise of materialism and consumer culture, illustrating how the pursuit of wealth can lead to moral corruption and the loss of genuine human values. The contrast between old money and new money, along with the moral carelessness of characters such as Tom and Daisy Buchanan, reflects the inequalities and ethical decline of the period.

From a socio-cultural perspective, The Great Gatsby challenges the belief that hard work alone guarantees success and social advancement. Instead, the novel reveals a society shaped by class barriers, privilege, and superficial values. Fitzgerald suggests that the American Dream, once associated with hope and opportunity, has been distorted by materialism and social inequality.

In conclusion, The Great Gatsby remains a timeless literary work because of its powerful examination of the gap between dreams and reality. Its critique of wealth, class, and social ambition continues to resonate in contemporary society, making it an important text for understanding the enduring complexities and contradictions of the American Dream

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