

**American Dream: A Comparative Analysis of Theme and  
Characters in *the Great Gatsby* and *the Grapes of Wrath***

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**Abstract**

There exist kinds of interpretations and arguments on the very term ‘American Dream’. The two American novels *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, written by Scott Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck respectively, make humanity aware of the greatest flaw that happened to the American Dream and show them the right way to achieve it: “try not to become a man success, but rather try to become a man of value”, as Albert Einstein pointed it.

Though the American Dream is narrated in the both novels with its good as well as bad ideals and in the rich and the poor people’s perspectives, they show some common features in many levels. Though the so called ‘Great’ American Dream was conceived differently in the heart of American society, its ultimate aim was corrupted either completely or partly as it could be exemplified from an comparative analysis of the both novels. The each novel was originated and narrated in the different contexts, but they had occupied a unique place in describing the very definition of American Dream.

Throughout the centuries since America was discovered, it has been the destination of hope, success and freedom for everyone. People dreamed better life there which they could achieve through hard work. However, the two American novels, *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), written by Scott Fitzgerald and John Steinbeck respectively, narrate the impossibility of achieving American Dream by its corruption of materialistic elements in its later days. There are many parts to be contrasted as well as combined between the two novels when the American Dream is focused as one of the theme in the both novels.

### **Interpretations of American Dream**

There exist kinds of interpretations and arguments on the very term ‘American Dream’ ranging from its definition, the different concepts of people about it and its ultimate aim to the doubts upon its realization. Alfonzo Reyas, a Mexican humanist, says that “America is a utopia... it is the name of human hope” (qtd. in Parrington Jr. Preface). Archibald MacLeish writes in *America Was Promises* that “America was always promises. From the first voyage and the first ship, there were promises,” (qtd. in Parrington Jr 4). Oscar Wild describes this land as “a map of the world that does not worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is realization of Utopias,” (para. 28). John Winthrop in his *City Upon a Hill* explains the American dream by making it a place of religious freedom (para.1), and Martin Luther King Jr. dreams in America a social equality for men regardless of skin, color, religion or any other differences that would make them a target for inequality (para. 1-9). James Truslow Adams, who was firstly coined the phrase in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, however, defined it as a “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...A dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” (34). whatever it may be, there derived a constant element that could be read

in the interpretation of almost all experts about the American Dream: the constant search for material wealth.

In the beginning of the concept on the American Dream, it focused mainly in attaining a true spirit in the God and achieving a sublime gratification of human's mind. It depended on uprising the human values through humanity, love and peace, thus making the whole people in the oneness under the God. They upheld an imaginary world of *Christian Commonwealth*, as depicted by George Eliot in 1659, which was "based on the two assumptions: first, the Christ is king of kings, and, second that all laws must- "arise and flow from the world of God (preface)"- There can be no question about God's ordinances; he reasoned and provided only that individuals have faith. Faith can see beauty, power and glory in any divine institution when Human Wisdom may think it weak and contemptible." (Qtd in. Parrington Jr 8). "Since the Bible was to be the only source of law, there was no need for legislative body." (Parrington Jr 8). However, this pure godliness of the American Dream was gradually transformed to the materialistic search, making it an illusion and the search for an utopian world, where they believed those who works hard will find out their land as a New Jerusalem, the land of 'honey and milk' and can live a fullest life in happiness.

In addition, the modern man approached the American Dream as it was fulfilling one's own prophecy. That, this deviation of American Dream from its spiritual quest to the materialistic way of life produced a kind of beauty and charm in its surface but resulted ungodliness in the spirit if inner mind, was the very theme when Fitzgerald and Steinbeck wrote the different stories on the American Dream through their much read novels. Both the novels make humanity aware of the greatest flaw that happened to the American Dream and show them the right way to achieve it: "try not to become a man success, but rather try to become a man of value", as Albert Einstein pointed it (Chou para. 4).

### **Illusions of American Dream in Great Gatsby**

As *The Great Gatsby* is commonly considered as Fitzgerald's masterpiece, it creatively draws the hero Gatsby despite his huge source of wealth and high life style, who finally laments and loses all his hopes by not getting the love he longed for.

As explained before, the new age American Dream was always related to money. Underlining this point, Gatsby's vision and dream in his life was implicitly merged with money,

though his dream was winning the heart of the women, Daisy, whom he loved much. For Gatsby, gaining the true love from Daisy was a dream, that he misunderstood could be attained by showing her all of his extravagant life style, for he made out her as a woman of so much materialistic attachment. He realized that Daisy would receive only a wealthy, powerful man as her “lover”. Gatsby explains the very mentality of Daisy to his friend Nick Carraway, “Her voice was full of money”, he said suddenly, “That was it. I’d never understood before. It was full of money that was 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...” (Fitzgerald 128).

Though Daisy was promised to Gatsby to wait for him when he joined the Army in the First World War, she breached her promise when she met Tom Buchanan and married him by being attracted of his extreme wealth. Expressing all his worries, Gatsby tells this to Tom “139).

Showing his wealth was the way which Gatsby selected to win the heart of Daisy from the Tom. Gatsby’s this view is specifically explained in the novel when Nick makes a remark: It was when curiosity about Gatsby was at its highest that the lights in his house failed to go on one Saturday night and as obscurely as it began his career as Trimalchio was over. Only gradually I did become aware that the automobiles which turned expectantly into his drive stayed for a minute and then drove sulkily away. (Fitzgerald 120).

Here, Nick brings ‘Trimalchio’, a character developed by the Roman Petronious who rises into rich from his bad fate but finally falls down thanks to the ostentation of his success (Wikipedia), to symbolize the condition of Gatsby who one day fell down from all his pride which he accumulated by his wealth.

Just as American Dream of Gatsby was connected with Daisy, almost every character in the novel stands for one or other concepts of American Dream which they try to achieve. Different from that of Gatsby, Tom, Daisy and Jordan seem to win their Dreams in the novel. For Tom, the American Dream was that of being able to live in the way he chooses which, for example, he achieved by keeping an immoral relationship with Mrs. Wilson maintaining the bondage of marital life with Daisy at the same time. Daisy and Jordan do not work for any dreams in the novel for they had already achieved what they wished for. They have no any other dreams. What they had dreamed was already in their possession, including a beautiful house, horses in the stable, cars, servants and loads of time. Lying “on an enormous couch, like silver idols,

weighing down their own white dresses against the singing breeze of the fans” (Fitzgerald 122), they live sinking in the materialistic comforts. Daisy even gets annoyed as she thinks what she would do “this afternoon....and the day after that, and the next thirty years.” (Fitzgerald 126).

Nick Carraway, who came from East Egg to find a better job in the New York, also stands in the materialistic worlds of the American Dream. However, though his family had wealth and prosperity which they had possessed from the old days before, Nick does not like to show like Gatsby. Nick is described in the novel as a character of wisdom and a part of reason rather than the follower of his dream to find a better job.

In contrast to all other characters in *The Great Gatsby*, George’s American Dream was quiet simple. What he dreamed was to own a shop, to find out a steady job and a happy life with his family. Even his simple dreams were shattered which proves that even some worthwhile hopes remained unfulfilled in the American Dream.

Nick grieves about the present state of his country in which the reach of a person to his dream is limited upon the status of his class and socio-economic level. In contrast to this, he reflects in the end of the novel what the concept of people about America was a long before. He briefs that America was land of many dreams for everyone and they dreamed everything in it: Most of the big shore places were closed now and there were hardly any lights except the shadowy, moving glow of a ferryboat across the Sound. 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. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (192-194)

### **American Dream and *the Grapes of Wrath***

“The depression years of thirties brought forth a good deal of undiluted utopian thinking.”(Parrington Jr 195) .Many of plans and projects were developed in America to recover the severe poverty of 1930s, some of them were Upton Sinclair’s ‘Epic (End Poverty in California) plan, ‘Share the Wealth’ plan of Huey Long. “These formulas represented the

contemporary American Dream- greener pastures, Manna from heaven and something for nothing.” (Parrington Jr 195). Raymond Gram Swing explains the situation, “Always we have progressed in two directions simultaneously, building a massive materialism which outdid anything on the surface of the earth and projecting castles in the air, like a great confession to heaven that our material life was not sound. In the heart of nearly all unweaned Americans lies the waiting Utopian, aching to believe in the New Jerusalem, certain that there must be just one wise answer to all the problems of the economic and politics if only it could be found.” (qtd in. Parrington Jr 195-196). These were the conditions when *The Grapes of Wrath* was published exploring the American Dream of farmers in Oklahoma as well as the land owners in there and California.

The Joad family in the novel lives for an American Dream, which is to have a good job and a place to live for good future of their children. But this dream of Joad family is also corrupted by the greed. The exploitations of the salesman at the dealership when Joads bought the truck at huge price and got bad tires, were the result of their utter greed to head for California to make a better life. The land owners in California exploited the Joad family as well as the all other workers by giving them only five cents for a basket of fruits as their wage by cutting it from a ten cents, resulting the lack of food of even for a time for the whole workers’ families and forcing them to work the whole day. When the Joad family was forced to get off their land, they dreamed a better life in California as they even dreamed to settle down in a ‘white house with oranges’. “An’ fruits every’ place. An’ people just bein’ in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder- that is, if we all gets jobs an’ all work- maybe we can get one of them little white houses” (Steinbeck 68).

In California, the family worked with all their efforts only to result a further miserable condition. Greed, exploitation and lack of compassion were, thus, the main flaws that caused for the corruption of Joads’ American Dream.

Despite all the dreams that Joad family hoped to achieve through their Californian life, there were a clear gap between the reality and the American Dream, as Steinbeck clears it out in the narration of the novel. A scene in the novel explains this gap when Steinbeck visualizes a roadside camp where there was no order-

Little grey tents, shack, cars were scattered about at a random. The first house was nondescript. The south wall was made of three sheets of rusty corrugated iron, the east wall a square of moldy carpet tacked between two boards, the north wall a strip of roofing paper and a strip of tattered canvas, and the west wall six pieces of gunny sacking.....and about the camp hung there a gloomy despair. (194).

Rose of Sharon's baby becomes a symbol of Joad family's shattered American Dream. The baby was a hope, a new dream, a kindle of happiness for the family. But, when the baby dies, all the hopes depended upon the family also dies, making the American Dream an inaccessible destination for the family. Ma Joad gives reply to Ruthie when she asked about the baby, "they ain't no baby. They never was no baby. We was wrong." (Steinbeck 385).

The American Dream of the family gets further destroyed when the flood water flowed to their box car home by making them threatened on the destruction of their all properties. "The family huddled on the platforms, silent and fretful. The water was six inches deep in the car before the flood spread evenly over the embankment and moved into the cotton field on the other side" (Steinbeck 389) . All these narrations in the novel point out the complete destruction of American Dream for Joad family, making their goal of a white house with oranges mere a utopia.

The dreams of many characters in the novel did not fulfill though they were not destroyed. Ma Joad, Jim Casy and Tom Joad try to live their dreams through their actions. They make their dream as the unity of family as well as of all working people for not being exploited and destroyed. Ma Joad tries her best to keep the family away from being shattered by undertaking the role a leader in the family. Steinbeck refers to the matter when the Pa Joad told Ma Joad, "Time was when a man said what we'd do. Seems like woman is tellin' now. Seems like it's purty near time to get out a stick." (Steinbeck 295). To this Ma gives the reply, "... you ain't a doin' your job, either a-thinkin' or a-workin'." (Steinbeck 295). She takes risk to do all these to keep her family united and to drag them out of all personal failures.

Jim Casy's dream relates to lead the people into God's way in the first part of the novel and making them united to struggle against the tortures and exploitations that the land owners forced upon them. As the novel goes into the end, he was murdered for his dream.

In the first part of the novel, Tom Joad hoped verily for joining with his family. After finding them, he also, like Ma Joad, was in the journey of making the family united as he

continued with them by breaching the rule of his parole. Thus, he struggled well to make his dream realized. The other farmers also wished to stay in their homes as they pleaded sympathetically to the company officers to allow them to remain in the land where they have the memories of their ancestors. When the novel ends, however, Tom changes his dream from staying in the family to join the way Jim Casy sacrificed his life, thus making his Dream the unity of all people and attaining for them all their rights from the landowners. Rather than making his dream limited to boundary of his family, he existed for the realization of the American Dream of all farmers.

In the following lines, Ma Joad expresses her willingness to be with the people in the struggle against the police and land owners.

We're Joads. We don't look up to nobody. Grampa's grampa, he fit in the Revolution. We was farm people till the debt. And then—them people. They done somepin to us. Ever' time they come seemed like they was a-whippin' me—all of us. An' in Needles, that police. He done somepin to me, made me feel mean. Made me feel ashamed. An' now I ain't ashamed. These folks is our folks—is our folks. An' that manager, he come an' set an' drank coffee, an' he says, 'Mrs. Joad' this, an' 'Mrs. Joad' that—an' 'How you getting' on, Mrs. Joad?'" She stopped and sighed. "Why, I feel like people again. (Steinbeck 254).

She understands the need for unity of all farmers, so they will be a great strength and she holds it as the true concept of American Dream.

### **Common Features of American Dream in the Both Novels**

Though the American Dream is narrated in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath* in its good as well as bad ideals and in the rich and the poor perspectives, the two novels show some common features in many levels. These common features make the both novels help to stand on a common platform whenever the American Dream is concerned in them. The more the features become in the common tastes, the closer the both novels stand on the theme of American Dream.

The novels show that in the new version of American Dream, money matters in a great level. Almost all characters in both novels see the value of material wealth as more important



rather than the value of spiritual wealth. They believed that wealth and material prosperity would certainly bring them eternal happiness, which they considered as their dream. There lie some reasons for this kind of American Dream to be uprooted in the mind of people. *The Great Gatsby* narrated the story of American people who highly suffered the hatred feeling and burdens of the First World War and their minds were filled by the frightened conditions of the war. Consecutively, what they wished most was to make their mind cool and get themselves sink in the happy moments by finding some materialistic ways of life and enjoyment. They wanted money to enjoy in the materialistic world of extreme lavish and horror free condition.

Though an outer view of the American Dream carried out by the Joad family seems a simple and, at the same time, really needed one for all American citizens, their dream was, also, beyond what they had to be contented by settling in comparatively comfortable government camp which served them adequate food, water, shelter and even “shower baths” with much better friendly approach of government officials in the camp, which were unattained for them in the private camps of Californian land owners. But, when they set off their journey from the government camp dreaming a better job and life than they had so far, it proved their inner greed and corrupted dream of mere a materialistic comfort beyond what they were needed to contend with. This analysis of Joad family’s American Dream falls in the line of the very theme of American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* that was corrupted with persuasion of mere materialistic comfort.

George Wilson’s dream in *The Great Gatsby* was a better life condition than he had in the novel, but his misfortunes such like his shop being in the Valley of Ashes, prevented him to furnish it into reality. This fate in his life becomes similar to the bad destiny of Okie farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath* as they found their lands in droughts which shattered their dream for a better cultivation.

In addition, some similarities could be searched in the dream among the people attended in the parties arranged by Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* and the government in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In Gatsby’s parties, people, most of them from the middle class, attended for being recovered from the mental depressions they bore thanks to frightening conditions after the First World War, thus to meet a mere materialistic happy moments which they considered as their American Dream. Similarly, the government camp parties in *The Grapes of Wrath* was intended

to make people in the camp overjoyed in its celebrative moments and to make their destructed hearts pleased though it was longed for some moments only.

When compared to *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath* concludes promising a fresh hope from the part of Jude family as Rose of Sharon breeds an old man in his fatal condition which underlines the never ending expectations of the family to dream a better world for the whole human kind. In contrast, the ending parts in *The Great Gatsby* tell the story of Gatsby's shattered dream related to Daisy, who still remained as a mere hope for Gatsby when he sacrificed his life for her. In this way, the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* is not realized, but in *The Grapes of Wrath* it still gives some confidants to be fulfilled even if it is not sure.

Thus, though the so called 'Great' American Dream was conceived differently in the heart of American society, its ultimate aim was corrupted either completely or partly as it could be exemplified from an comparative analysis of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. What happened to the American Dream after it was considered something moral and humanitarian accomplishment in the American people's life was almost clearly depicted in the both novels. Though the each novel was originated and narrated in the different context, both of them had occupied a unique tempt in describing the very definition of contemporary American Dream.

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