

## **EXTENDED ESSAY**

A comparison of the theme of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

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## Abstract

How does the theme of the American Dream differ in the novel *The Great Gatsby* written by F. Scott Fitzgerald when compared to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*?

Throughout this extended essay the theme of the American Dream has been analyzed in both the novel *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*. It is through this study of the theme that I was able to then compare its use and relevance, and how this differs in both books.

This essay commences by investigating the use of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* where its main character personifies the dream by rising far above his own class to become the host of the most renowned get-togethers around. This is something he does to attract his true dream, the love of his life.

It follows up by exploring the theme of the American Dream in *Of Mice and Men*, a novel set in the era of the Great Depression, where nothing seems possible anymore and optimism is long gone. Here the American Dream symbolizes hope and is what keeps the protagonists going.

It then moves on to a comparison of this recurring theme in both books, in which we see the American dream as a ray of hope following Steinbeck's interpretation. In contrast we observe Fitzgerald's character soar into the upper classes, despite his initially humble background.

As a conclusion, it is observed how this theme is fundamental in the novels studied, although its use differs in each of them, whilst reaffirming just how important it is to have a dream in life. At the same time, it explores the meaning and significance the American Dream has come to have nowadays.

## Contents:

- Page 4: Introduction
- Page 6: The theme of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*
- Page 9: The theme of the American Dream in *Of Mice and Men*
- Page 12: A comparative study of the theme of the American Dream present in both novels
- Page 15: Conclusion
- Page 16: Bibliography

## Introduction:

*The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men* are two classic novels that are of great literary significance to our time. Both novels are based around the time after the First World War, albeit *The Great Gatsby* is set in the The Roaring Twenties, an era of prosperity for the American economy whereas, *Of Mice and Men* is set just after the The Great Depression at a time where poverty and despair reigned supreme.

The Jazz age has been described as an era where anything seemed, and in most cases was, possible. The lively vivacious dancing with women ,wearing shorter dresses than ever seen before ,added dashes of colour, glitz and sparkle to the countless parties that where held around this time. The war had ended and America was on the rise. That however, all changed. With the end of the decade came the end of the American economy, owing to the Great Depression, a worldwide recession that affected everyone, originating in America. The carefree parties gave way to scenes of desperate people selling cars for pittance to put food on the table, lines with no end of people waiting for some kind of nourishment. Everything gained, lost, and with it all hope. These are to two very different times that the authors chose to relate to the different sides of the American Dream.

In the novels I have chosen to study the theme of the American Dream is of the utmost importance. This is shown as the main characters in both books live by this dream and represent it. The phrase the American Dream was first coined by James Truslow Adams and I quote: “It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but 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”.<sup>1</sup> Jay Gatsby represents this dream, thus he rose in social class and fortune despite being from a humble background.

On the other hand, Lennie and George never give up hope of achieving their ambition, despite their circumstances therefore personifying this idea. Both the importance of dreams and achievement, topics present in the novels, represent the two meanings that the American Dream has come to signify nowadays. The first is the sense of limitless possibility that many have come to associate with the new start that America has always symbolized. Among the novel opportunities were fresh job prospects and therefore the chance of gaining fame and fortune which is the second slightly more materialistic side of what the American Dream has come to mean.

The purpose of this Extended Essay is to explore how the use of the American Dream is fundamental in both of the novels and how its use differs in each story.

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<sup>1</sup> HARPER, Douglas. *American Dream*. <<http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=American+dream>> [accessed 05.02.12]



### **The theme of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*:**

F. Scott Fitzgerald, an author from a privileged background who reached his peak in the 1920s depicts to perfection the era in which he lived in the novel *The Great Gatsby*. Through this tale we are presented with the life of Jay Gatsby, narrated to us by Nick Carraway. In this story, we are shown the seemingly perfect and extravagant lifestyle lead by Gatsby. Gatsby throws countless parties, so famous that people travel from all over the country to attend, in his impressive mansion.

“The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard – it was a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby’s mansion.”<sup>2</sup>

It is through Gatsby’s extravagance that we come to understand that he has, without a doubt, achieved the wealth and fortune that so many have come to associate with the American Dream.

However, throughout the novel, although details of Gatsby’s background are given, Nick seems reluctant to believe them.

“ ‘I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West – all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years, it’s a family tradition’ He looked at me sideways – and I knew why Jordan Baker believed he was lying.”<sup>3</sup>

It is only towards the end of the book, after Gatsby’s death, that we meet his father. It is through him that we learn that Jay Gatsby’s real name was Jimmy Gatz, and that his father seems to be from a humble background.

It is in this way that Jay Gatsby comes to be a representative of the other side of the American Dream, rising from having very little, to having a great deal.

Nick Carraway puts it down to “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again”<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, although the Great Gatsby was able to come into fortune, we learn later on in the book just exactly how it is done. At the time this novel was set, America had just set a new law which stated that drinking alcohol was prohibited. This gave plenty of opportunity for “bootleggers” who sold alcohol on the black market and so they joined the ranks of the “new money”. It is through Daisy’s husband Tom Buchanan that we

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<sup>2</sup> FITZGERALD , F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Marshall Cavendish. 1988. pp 4

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp51

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* pp 2

learn that Gatsby is such a dealer and that all of his money is in fact “black” money. Owing to this revelation we discover that maybe Gatsby’s life isn’t the dream it appears to be.

But, what about Jay’s life beyond the money? It is made perfectly clear in the novel that Jay doesn’t seem to revel in his role as host of an oversized fashionable party. So, what other opportunities did the Great Gatsby aspire to?

“As I watched him he adjusted himself a little, visibly. His hand took hold of hers, and as she said something low in his ear he turned towards her with a rush of emotion. I think that voice held him most, with its fluctuating feverish warmth, because it couldn’t be over-dreamed – that voice was a deathless song.”<sup>5</sup>

Daisy Buchanan is the height of Gatsby’s dreams and aspirations. She is the reason for all the parties, the wealth and the flamboyant nature of Gatsby’s new lifestyle. When Daisy and Gatsby first met in the tale, it is clear that Daisy is above Gatsby as far as social standing is concerned. Despite her genuinely falling in love, Daisy continues to court men of her own social class. It’s this social snobbery that drives Gatsby to earn a higher income therefore placing himself into a similar status as that of Daisy.

We follow Gatsby’s story and we see how he and Daisy start a love affair. Nevertheless, even though they are both happy, and it is here that Gatsby has achieved his dream of being with Daisy again, it seems not to be enough.

It is sad to say that rather much like Gatsby’s wealth, based on illegal means, Jay’s love for Daisy was based on the past and what had been rather than what was. It is because of this that Gatsby insists on Daisy’s leaving Tom Buchanan, Daisy’s husband. It is because of Gatsby’s persistence of having Daisy all to himself that Tom Buchanan starts to delve deeper into Jay’s past trying to understand how he came into such wealth and fortune, therefore uncovering Jay’s criminal offence and putting his name to shame.

*“‘She’s not leaving me!’ Tom’s words suddenly leaned down over Gatsby. ‘Certainly not for a common swindler who’d have to steal to put the ring on her finger’<sup>6</sup>*

“‘I found out what your “drug stores” were’. He [Tom Buchanan] turned to us and spoke rapidly. ‘He and Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street-drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That’s one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and wasn’t far wrong.’”<sup>7</sup>

Gatsby is then accused of running over Myrtle, Tom Buchanan’s lover. It is in fact Daisy who was responsible as she was driving at the time. However, Jay lets everyone believe it was him to protect Daisy. It is because of this that Gatsby is killed by Myrtle’s husband George Wilson who is tricked into believing Gatsby was having an affair with his wife.

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<sup>5</sup> FITZGERALD, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Marshall Cavendish. 1988. Pp 76, 77

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp 106

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* pp 107

This is the end which befalls *The Great Gatsby* , a man who was able to, in part, achieve his dream.

### **The theme of the American Dream in *Of Mice and Men*:**

*Of Mice and Men*, a novel written by John Steinbeck, an author from a working class background, follows the story of two ranch workers in the time of the Great Depression. The theme of the American Dream is very much present and is of vast importance as it is what keeps the main characters Lennie and George going.

The dream is part of the novel from the very beginning, and it is told to us by George, who tells it to Lennie at his request.

“Someday – we’re gonna get the jack together and we’re gonna have a little house and a couple of acres an’ a cow and some pigs and - ”

‘An’ live off the fatta the lan’” Lennie shouted. ‘An’ have rabbits’

[...]

‘Well’ said George ‘we’ll have a big vegetable patch and a rabbit hutch and chickens. And when it rains in the winter, we’ll just say to the hell with goin’ to work, and we’ll build up a fire and set around an’ listen to the rain coming down on the roof - ’<sup>8</sup>

The height of Lennie and George’s aspirations is to be able to live in their own home and work for themselves and to do so together. Most ranch workers move on, listlessly, from one place to another, never settling, unable to work for themselves let alone buy their own ranch. They were condemned to live on solitude. This however has not yet happened to Lennie and George, hence they intend to achieve their dream and do so together.

In the novel, it seems clear that the main characters have had this dream for some time now. This is apparent as Lennie, who seems to have some kind of mental disability and can’t remember most of the instructions given to him, knows the story of their own farm and tending the rabbits by heart. It is in fact the only ambition Lennie seems to have throughout the novel.

It is in this sense of having a dream and never giving up hope on it that which relates to what the American Dream is. However, one does wonder how it is that having such a small dream Lennie and George seem unable to accomplish it.

The most prominent reason is the historical context in which the novel is set. Owing to The Great Depression, opportunities became scarce and people looked out only for themselves. Once the American economy dried up, it left masses homeless, unemployed and penniless. This is how ranch workers came about, people who worked on a ranch that was not their own to be able to have a place to live, a bed to sleep in and food on the table. It is this fate that our main characters wish to escape, therefore becoming their dream through out *Of Mice and Men*

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<sup>8</sup> STEINBECK, John. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group. 2000. pg16

Another factor seems to be Lennie's love for stroking soft things, such as rabbits, as it gets him constantly into trouble. We are told from the very beginning that Lennie and George had to leave their last job due to Lennie having stroked a girl's dress, and then not letting go when she started screaming. We also see George tell Lennie off for having a dead mouse in his pocket, which could of course be filled with disease, something that Lennie is unable to see. Towards the end of the tale, Lennie strokes Curly's wife's hair and that is what leads him to his downfall.

“ Feel right aroun' there an' feel how soft it is’

Lennie's big fingers fell to stroking her hair.

‘Don't you muss it up,’ she said

Lennie said, ‘Oh that's nice,’ and he stroked harder. ‘Oh that's nice.’

‘Look out, now, you'll muss it.’ And then she cried angrily. ‘You stop it now or you'll mess it all up.’ She jerked her head sideways, and Lennie's fingers closed on her hair and hung on. [...]

Lennie was in a panic. His face was contorted. She screamed then, and Lennie's other hand closed over her mouth and closed over her mouth and nose.

[...]

‘Don't you go yellin'’, he said and he shook her; and then her body flopped like a fish. And then she was still for Lennie had broken her neck.”

It seems to be Lennie's great size in addition to his lack of awareness that constantly stop George and him achieving their great dream.

They are, unfortunately, unable to complete their “American dream” of owning a piece of land together, as we see George have to make the agonizing decision of letting Lennie be murdered mercilessly by Curley, who had set out to avenge the murder of his wife, or killing Lennie himself. This is the heart wrenching end to which the tale closes.

“ Lennie said, ‘Tell how it's gonna be.’

George had been listening to the distant sounds. For a moment he became almost business-like. ‘Look across the river, Lennie an' I'll tell you so you can almost see it.’

[...]

‘We gonna get a little place,’ George began. He reached in his side and pulled out Carlson's Luger; he snapped off the safety, and the hand and gun lay behind Lennie's back.

[...]

We'll have a cow,' said George. 'And maybe a pig an' chickens... an' down the flat we'll have a... little piece of alfalfa'

'For the rabbits,' Lennie shouted.

[...]

Lennie begged, 'Le's do it now. Le's get that place now.'

'Sure, right now. I gotta. We gotta.'

And George raised the gun and steadied it, and he brought the muzzle of it close to the back of Lennie's head. The hand shook violently, but his face set and his hands steadied. He pulled the trigger.<sup>9</sup>

It is in this scene where we witness George not only give up his best friend and only companion in life, but also relinquish his dreams of future happiness.

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<sup>9</sup> STEINBECK, John. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group. 2000. Pp 103-105

## **Comparison between the theme of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*:**

*The Great Gatsby* paints a world of extravagant soirées of the upper classes.

“There was music from my neighbour’s house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars”<sup>10</sup>

In strong contrast, *Of Mice and Men* shows us the poverty-stricken times of the Great Depression:

“There is a path among the willows and among the sycamores, [...] a path beaten down hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle-up near water. In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore there is an ash pile made by many fires; the limb is worn smooth by men who have sat on it.”<sup>11</sup>

Without a doubt at first glance, the former seems much more inviting than the latter, nevertheless as we delve deeper into both stories it is clear that neither is better than the other.

Whilst Jay Gatsby has fame and fortune Lennie and George could never even dream of, it is all a farce. Gatsby has created a charade of a life, one which he doesn’t even particularly enjoy, simply to lure the love of his life back to him. Meanwhile, in a similar manner, Lennie and George aren’t living their life in the present but rather living for the moment when they will finally fulfill their dreams.

It is in this way that both novels are linked, thus all protagonists are living for their dream and not for the present moment. This way of life can be summed up perfectly by the quote “Life is what happens to you whilst your busy making other plans.”<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, both titles have a common perception regarding the American dream concerning the unceasing hope that the characters portray. Lennie and George only have their hope and faith that they will one day own land of their own to cling on too, as they have nothing else. Similarly, Gatsby hangs on to the belief that Daisy will one day return, and their love will be rekindled.

There is, nonetheless, a great difference in the level of achievement of their vision for the future. Whilst Lennie and George never seem to be able to save enough to grasp their ambition, Gatsby soars into the upper classes of his time. This is, in part, due to

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<sup>10</sup> FITZGERALD, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Marshall Cavendish. 1988. Pp 31

<sup>11</sup> STEINBECK, John. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Group. 2000. Pp 3-4

<sup>12</sup> LENNON, John. *Quotes*. <[http://thinkexist.com/quotation/life\\_is\\_what\\_happens\\_to\\_you\\_while\\_you\\_re\\_busy/171775.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/life_is_what_happens_to_you_while_you_re_busy/171775.html)> [accessed 05.02.12]

what each character is willing to do to achieve their respective dreams. Whilst Lennie and George struggle along, trying to make a living, saving what little they can to put towards their dream, Jay Gatsby has other ideas. In *The Great Gatsby*, its protagonist comes into a great deal of money through illegal means.

This presents us with the question, which is more important, reaching our goal? Or the means we use to reach it?

If we go by the characters level of success, the answer would seem to be that reaching our aim by whatever means is more profitable, as Gatsby actually achieves his objective in the novel. However, his achievement is cut short as once he is rich and reunites with Daisy, his ambition takes over and he wants even more, thus he wants Daisy all to himself. This is that which brings him to his downfall.

On the other hand, Lennie and George never achieve their dream, although they never give up hope, reciting this dream all through the book. It is sad however, that they were unable to accomplish their wishes.

So is it true what they say, that it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all? If so, could it not simply be that Gatsby achieved his dream and then had it snatched away from him?

Although there are different levels of achievement as far as their dreams are concerned both novels come to a pitiful end, death. Jay Gatsby is murdered by the husband of Tom Buchanan's lover. Nobody attends his funeral except for Nick Carraway and Gatsby's father. In a similar manner, Lennie is killed at the end of the novel *Of Mice and Men*. It was George who had the misfortune of having to murder his only friend in life. As George killed Lennie, he not only killed his friend, but also his dream.

Another important aspect of both novels concerning the American dream is that of equal opportunities. Nick Carraway opens *The Great Gatsby* with:

‘Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all people in the world haven't had the advantages that you've had.’

It seems that opportunities and physical capabilities play a fundamental role in obtaining the American Dream. Although America is the land of opportunities for all, it is made perfectly clear in both titles that awareness of one's own power is fundamental. We see this portrayed in the character of Gatsby as he is perfectly aware of all of his charm.

‘He smiled understandingly – much more than understandingly. It was one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, that you may come across four or five times in life. It faced – or seemed to face – the whole eternal world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favour.’

This understanding of his own abilities and strengths is also portrayed in the character of Tom Buchanan, a man who gets whatever he wants whenever he wants it.

‘Now he was a sturdy straw haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward.’<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand in the novel *Of Mice and Men*, one of the main characters, Lennie is described as a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, with wide, sloping shoulders.<sup>14</sup>

It seems to be Lennie’s lack of consciousness of his huge size and the damage that he is capable of causing that hinders him the most. Whereas it is Gatsby’s controlled charm and amenity which allows him to fulfill in part his dream.

It is through this difference of opportunities that we are able to observe that maybe it is not enough to simply have a dream, but we must also have the capacity to fulfill such a dream and the means to achieve it. If we don’t have them, then we may just be setting ourselves up for failure.

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<sup>13</sup> FITZGERALD , F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Marshall Cavendish. 1988. pg6

<sup>14</sup> STEINBECK, John. *Of mice and men*. Penguin Group. 2000. Pp 4

### Conclusion:

‘Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning –

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.’<sup>15</sup>

It is through both of these journeys that we can see the importance that a dream can have in someone’s life. The American Dream is no exception; it is the dream that we all have to lead a happy life. America is the land of hope, the new world, a fresh start. Even in times of poverty and sadness it has become a symbol of opportunity and remains to be so till this day. Through the stories of Lennie, George and Jay we learn never to give up hope, to keep on dreaming and to reach for the stars. Particularly the story of Gatsby, a man who had nothing and wound up having everything, even if it was only for a short period of time. I believe that we can also learn from these novels that we must all have a dream, but we must also appreciate what it is we have in front of us. Although the characters that I have chosen to study did not manage to obtain the light at the end of the tunnel, they never gave up, they were the ever believing and the never doubting. I am of the opinion that this is a fundamental message to carry with oneself throughout life, eternal perseverance, as one will never achieve anything without first trying. That is what the American Dream truly is, and will always be. As the very famous author Samuel Smiley once said, ‘where there is a will, there is a way’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> FITZGERALD , F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Marshall Cavendish. 1988. Pp 145

<sup>16</sup>SCOTT, Samuel < <http://quotationsbook.com/quote/250/>> [online]

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