American dream in The Great Gatsby

Educators and lay readers alike often describe *The Great Gatsby* as a novel about the American dream—the opportunity for individuals to achieve economic independence and succeed in areas that are most important to them. Does the American dream exist in the 21st century? While opinions may vary as to whether America continues to offer those from beyond its shores the possibility of prosperity and a comfortable homeland, this novel, with its emphasis on reinventing oneself and its celebration of the Roaring Twenties, clearly focuses on themes of opportunity and possibility. While the story's end is a tragic one that gives readers pause about the American dream and alludes not only to its possibilities but also to its limitations, the title character, Jay Gatsby, embraces the American dream on his terms and throughout his life.

Born into a humble midwestern family, Jay Gatsby longs for all the material comforts given to a person of means. He works at various occupations—some of questionable integrity—to amass substantial wealth. Believing that money is necessary to attract the object of his desire, Daisy Fay Buchanan, he remakes himself into a corporate magnate who acquires a great fortune. He relives the years when he and Daisy dated, thinking that his new money will return him to the happiness of his youth and to the woman of his dreams.

Gatsby's ability to reinvent himself comes from his belief in the American dream: He embraces the economic opportunities afforded to him by a nation based on a free-enterprise system. Further, he welcomes the idea of a fluid society—one in which individuals enjoy the opportunity to succeed financially. However, the novel itself poses interesting questions about the American dream. It celebrates the American dream by emphasizing Gatsby's financial prowess, which he hopes will impress Daisy enough for her to return to him. He knows one of the reasons they were unable to marry years ago was that Daisy's family and social class frowned on an engagement between a wealthy woman and a young man of modest means. However, the novel portrays the great financial disparity between the upper and lower classes of New York City and its environs—a setting that serves as a microcosm of the socioeconomic class distinctions that can be found throughout the United States. For example, George Wilson, who owns a service station, represents America's working class. While George works diligently for his piece of the American dream, he will never achieve the status of Tom Buchanan (Daisy's husband) or the wealth of the title character, Jay Gatsby. George Wilson was not born into a prominent family, such as the Buchanans of Chicago, Illinois—nor did he follow the way of Jay Gatsby by remaking himself into someone else.

While F. Scott Fitzgerald draws on characters of various backgrounds who interact with one another in an attempt to show the spectrum of class dynamics in America, the author also uses various settings in the novel to highlight the complexity of the American dream. While some of the scenes are set in New York City, much of the novel takes place either in East Egg or West Egg, New York; the distinction between the two towns on the north shore of Long Island is made clear to readers early in the story. Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator, points out that his rented summer cottage is located next door to Gatsby's mansion, but is still located in less fashionable West Egg. Those with "old money," such as the Buchanans, live in East Egg. This not-so-subtle reminder of class distinction underscores Gatsby's humble background and suggests the challenges of moving beyond one's origins. Regardless of Gatsby's financial success, he is still considered "new money" and, therefore, not quite up-to-par by the established families in the area.

Another setting that calls the American dream into question is the Valley of Ashes. This is a desolate and abandoned strip of land that people travel through on their way to New York City. It functions to remind readers of the disparity between not only those with old and new money, but also those who enjoy a comfortable living in America and those who struggle to attain one. The Valley of Ashes juxtaposes the magnificence of Gatsby's lavish parties and the comfort of the Buchanans' lifestyle.

*The Great Gatsby* gives readers an opportunity to reconsider the American dream and whether it serves, or indeed could ever fulfill, its supposed purpose. Also, the novel investigates themes of social class and social justice through the prism of a single man who longs for the happiness of his youth.