

THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE DESTRUCTIVE INFLUENCE OF DISTORTED VALUES IN AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY AND THE GREAT GATSBY**Valiyeva Irodakhon Xafiz kizi**

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Abstract: This article analyzes the transformation of the American Dream into a distorted system of values in *An American Tragedy* and *The Great Gatsby*. Through the analysis of Clyde Griffiths and Jay Gatsby, the study demonstrates how ambition detached from moral responsibility leads to personal and social tragedy. Drawing on literary criticism and socio-economic context, the paper argues that both novels expose the illusionary nature of success when it is defined solely by wealth and status.

Keywords: American Dream, distorted values materialism, moral collapse, social inequality, illusion and reality, consumer culture, social mobility, tragedy, literary analysis

Introduction

The concept of the American Dream has historically symbolized equality, opportunity, and upward social mobility. Initially defined as a vision of a better and fuller life for all individuals regardless of their social origins, it has played a central role in shaping American identity. However, with the rise of industrial capitalism and consumer culture in the early twentieth century, this ideal underwent a significant transformation. Success gradually became associated not with moral integrity or personal growth, but with wealth, status, and external validation. This shift resulted in what can be described as distorted values, where material success overrides ethical responsibility. Such transformation is critically explored in *An American Tragedy* by Theodore Dreiser and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The early twentieth century in America was characterized by rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and the emergence of consumer-oriented culture. These socio-economic transformations significantly altered public perceptions of success and individual identity. Literature of this period increasingly reflected the psychological consequences of material ambition and social competition. Both Theodore Dreiser and F. Scott Fitzgerald portray characters who internalize society's materialistic expectations and gradually lose their ethical stability. Their novels criticize not only individual moral failure but also the broader cultural environment that encourages the replacement of spiritual and moral values with economic achievement. Therefore, the American Dream in these works functions not merely as a personal aspiration, but as a cultural mechanism capable of generating alienation, illusion, and tragedy.

The present study aims to examine how distorted values reshape the American Dream and influence the tragic outcomes of the protagonists Clyde Griffiths and Jay Gatsby. The central research question is: How does the transformation of the American Dream into a materialistic ideal lead to moral collapse and tragedy?

Methods

This research employs a qualitative literary analysis combined with a comparative method. The study is based on close reading of selected passages from both novels, focusing on character motivation, social context, and narrative outcomes.

The theoretical framework integrates:

- Social determinism (Dreiser) — individuals shaped by socio-economic forces
- Symbolic critique (Fitzgerald) — illusion vs reality. Additionally, secondary scholarly interpretations are used to support the analysis. The comparative approach allows identification of both structural similarities and conceptual differences between the two texts.

Results

1. Social Position and Structural Limitations

The analysis shows that Clyde Griffiths represents an individual constrained by structural inequality. As a member of the lower class, his ambitions are shaped by deprivation and social exclusion. His desire for upward mobility reflects a survival instinct rather than pure ambition. In contrast, Jay Gatsby appears as a self-made wealthy individual. However, despite his financial success, he remains socially excluded from the established elite. His position reveals that economic success does not guarantee social acceptance. The American Dream provides economic mobility but not full social integration.

2. Motivation and Value Distortion

Clyde's primary motivation is to escape poverty and achieve social recognition. However, this goal evolves into an obsessive pursuit of status, leading him to compromise his moral values. Gatsby's motivation is centered on reclaiming Daisy Buchanan, who symbolizes not only love but also wealth and prestige. His dream is fundamentally idealized and detached from reality.

Result: Both characters are driven by distorted motivations:

Clyde → material necessity becomes moral corruption

Gatsby → emotional desire becomes illusion

3. Moral Failure vs Illusion

Clyde's central flaw is moral weakness. He consciously avoids responsibility and ultimately commits murder to protect his social ambitions. His actions demonstrate a collapse of ethical judgment.

Gatsby, on the other hand, is characterized by idealistic illusion. He constructs a false reality in which the past can be recreated. His inability to distinguish between illusion and reality leads to his downfall.

Result:

Clyde's failure = ethical breakdown

Gatsby's failure = cognitive illusion

4. Outcomes and Consequences

Clyde is executed as a result of his crime, reflecting a deterministic system where actions lead to punishment. His fate reinforces the idea that individuals are both shaped and judged by society.

Gatsby's death, however, is meaningless and unjust. He becomes a victim of misunderstanding and social carelessness. His death highlights the absence of moral accountability within the elite class.

Result:

Clyde → punished by the system

Gatsby → abandoned by the system

Discussion;

The findings demonstrate that the American Dream, when distorted by materialism, becomes inherently destructive. Both novels reveal that success defined solely in terms of wealth leads to moral disintegration.

In *An American Tragedy*, the tragedy is rooted in social determinism. Clyde is not entirely free in his choices; his actions are shaped by economic pressure and societal expectations. As noted by Richard Lehan, individuals in Dreiser's works are often controlled by forces beyond their will¹.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the tragedy is symbolic. Gatsby represents the illusionary nature of the American Dream. His belief in the "green light" reflects an unattainable ideal that continuously recedes into the future. As Lionel Trilling argues, Gatsby is "a hero of possibility corrupted by illusion"².

Moreover, the original definition of the American Dream by James Truslow Adams emphasizes equality and personal fulfillment³. However, both novels illustrate how this ideal has been reduced to material success, losing its ethical foundation.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *An American Tragedy* and *The Great Gatsby* reveals that the American Dream, when detached from moral values, becomes a destructive force. Clyde Griffiths and Jay Gatsby represent two different paths:

- one shaped by external pressure and moral weakness
- the other by illusion and unattainable ideals

Despite these differences, both narratives lead to the same conclusion: success without ethical integrity results in tragedy.

Thus, the American Dream, in its distorted form, fails to fulfill its original promise and instead contributes to individual and societal decline.

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