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Greed’s Corrupted Culture

In the early 1700s, ambitious American men threw down their muskets in humbles exasperation, embracing freedom from New England. Founded in 1717, America began with a simple dream: freedom from tyranny. This American Dream marked the first of countless dreams to come. Throughout American history, Americans have dared to dream the impossible, and history shows that, when devotedly sought after, dreams really can come true. However, the American Dream constantly changes, and somewhere along the way Americans grew greedy. Americans spend their time wanting more, more, and more. The more items Americans possess, the more they fail to remember the values that truly matter, such as morality and family. In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the priorities of his female characters to illustrate that in the excessive period of the 1920s, as the American Dream shifted, American morals were forced to shift with it.

Daisy Buchanan appears as a classical American, family-oriented woman, but her greedy desires reveal the morally corrupted society of the 1920s. When faced with the decision, Daisy chose money over love. Money, the glue of the Buchanan marriage, never fully replaces love. Robert Wuthnow, an American sociologist and Princeton graduate, believes that wealth ends in disappointment, saying money essentially leads to an unattainable desire for more (19). Daisy marries Tom Buchanan, and the Buchanans seem as a picture perfect couple, complete with unfathomable wealth from both sides of the marriage. The couple settles down in East Egg, New York where they live comfortably in a red-and-white mansion. White, usually associated with weddings, symbolizes the Buchanan’s matrimony and the pure, perfect society they inhabit. The red signifies the actions that tainted the beauty of their marriage from the very beginning. In fact, Fitzgerald insinuates that Tom has promiscuous relationships with another woman less than a week after returning from his and Daisy’s honeymoon (77). In addition to the problems Tom causes at home, Daisy also muddles their marriage, engaging in an affair with Gatsby. Brian Sutton, a *Great Gatsby* researcher, believes that throughout the book “Daisy herself proves to be corrupt and thus perfectly suited for marriage with Tom” (p. 1, par. 1). Denying her duties as a spouse and a mother, Daisy reveals the “basic insincerity” that lies beneath her pure facade (Fitzgerald 17). Daisy Buchanan’s ignorance of love and idolization for wealth exemplify the corrupted culture of the 1920s.

Myrtle Wilson chooses materials over marriage, exemplifying the 1920’s pathetic principles. She married George Wilson believing him to be a “gentlemen” but soon learned that he “wasn’t fit to lick [her] shoe” (Fitzgerald 34). George’s car reparation shop, covered in dust, hardly receives any business; however, he works earnestly for the little money he makes and works harder to please his high-maintenance wife. Myrtle refuses contentment, constantly yearning for more money, finer possessions, and higher status. Wallowing in dissatisfaction, Myrtle waits for the days that Tom Buchanan decides he wants to take her out. Myrtle uses Tom as an escape from reality, pretending to be Mrs. Myrtle Buchanan for several hours at a time and indulging in adulterous dreams. While out with Tom, Myrtle craves the possession of different items impulsively. Literary critic James Hammerslough suggests that the “pursuit of possessions” make people believe that correcting the past is possible (42). Unfortunately for Myrtle, no matter how many magazines and puppies she wheedles Tom into buying her, the past remains unaltered. Like the past, Myrtle remains unaltered, low on the New York social hierarchy and the wife of a car repairman, lacking the right to even speak Daisy Buchanan’s name. Ernest Lockridge, an English professor at Yale, defines money as a “human abstraction” presented “upon the world” by many materialistic Americans (12). Myrtle reflects these words, representing the materialists that put money, a worthless value, above all else. Myrtle rejects her loving husband’s tenderness for bitter tastes of an unsatisfying dream.

Jordan Baker rejects the implied duties for young women, reflecting the revolutionized American woman of the 1920s. Her gender-ambiguous name stands as an example of the many manly traits Jordan Baker possesses, but Fitzgerald’s introduction of Jordan highlights her masculinity: “She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet” (11). Jordan carries herself in a manner meant for soldiers, suggesting her battle against tradition; likewise, women all across America joined Jordan in combat. Many American women spent the decade fighting for the right to vote and the right to use birth control. Betty Williams, the author of many historical books, refers to the 1920s as “the age of the flapper, a young woman who went to parties without a chaperone, smoked cigarettes, drove cars…and even swore” (36). Although no rules were set in stone, flappers, like Jordan Baker, went out of their way to rebel against the expectations established generations before them, including marriage and motherhood. For instance, at a time when women hardly participated in sports, Jordan plays golf at the professional level, lying and cheating her way to the top. Jordan’s “incurabl[e]dishonest[y]” exposes her nasty personality and possible insufficiency as a wife (Fitzgerald 58). Throughout the book, Jordan proves to be a selfish woman, believing others will “keep out of [her] way” (Fitzgerald 58). Jordan’s egotistical character reflects the careless behavior of flappers. A common flapper of the 1920s, Jordan Baker symbolizes what Rena Sanderson, a professor at Boise State University, illustrates as social change as well as social disorder (89). Flappers appear admirable for possessing the courage to transform femininity, but shameful for rejecting the common duties of a grown woman. Jordan Baker models the 1920’s transformation of a traditional American woman to the modern American woman.

Fitzgerald uses Daisy, Myrtle, and Jordan to expose the 1920s change in American morals due to greediness. The more Americans want, the more egotistical the American society becomes. The more selfish the society, the further away America drifts from true American values, such as the first American Dream: liberty. The ignorance of moral standards is evident in the modern American culture, and as greed continues to grow, America only worsens.

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