17BAE01 GCE English Literature

Folder 2

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"Despite being the fundamental triad of the American Dream, 20th century literature presents the reader with the impossibility of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." With reference to wider reading of The Great Gatsby by Scott Fitzgerald and The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck, compare how they present the impossibility of the American Dream.

The American Dream is perceived to be the ideal by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest aspirations and goals to be achieved, these goals are subjective to the individual yet are never completed. Both Fitzgerald and Steinbeck present the impossibility of the American Dream through their main characters yet have different interpretations of what their American Dream ultimately is. Similarly, Fitzgerald and Steinbeck present their novels in early 1900's America, near the time of The Great Depression, meaning due to this low point in history some people became hopeful for the future, to which involved financial stability ('The Grapes of Wrath'). Contrastingly, the figures who were already wealthy and not affected too harshly through the Great Depression ('The Great Gatsby') had other perceptions of their American Dream, for instance being reunited with the love of their life. "Happiness" is a side effect that is hoped by the individuals to occur after their believed American Dream has happened, yet through both novels presenting the opinion that the American Dream is impossible, this feeling is just presented as wishful thinking.

Both Fitzgerald and Steinbeck present the impossibility of the American Dream through it never being achieved by either characters. Fitzgerald presents Jay Gatsby's American Dream as impossible because it didn't exist. Gatsby is shown to be a man who lives in the past and who longs to stop time, in a meeting between Nick Carraway and Doctor Eckleburg Nick describes Gatsby to be a "little boy[1]", creating a theme of childishness and displaying Gatsby as naïve and child-like could represent Fitzgerald's opinion of how gullible American citizens were when it came to their belief in the American Dream. By Gatsby being seen in this light could make him appear as a weak character who has become overwhelmed by his past love and cannot see past his loss from her, therefore living in the past seems like his only coping mechanism. Nick then goes on to describe Gatsby as "running down like an over-wound clock", [2]again wanting to reverse time back to his youth with Daisy because reality knowing that she isn't the same person he fell in love with is too much for him to handle, presenting his adolescent mind frame and how unstable it has become leading from his grief of his and Daisy's relationship. Gatsby after being a solder has devoted his life to becoming successful and rich meaning he shows knowledge and initiative which represents how deceitful the American Dream can be on anyone and how easily it can affect people's mind state. Fitzgerald has moulded Jay Gatsby to have many similar features to himself as alike Gatsby, he became a second lieutenant in the army during World War I and during this time he fell in love with a 17 year old named Zelda Sayre. Fitzgerald and Zelda Sayre's relationship proved quite unstable at times as she agreed to marry him yet threatened to delay the wedding until Fitzgerald could prove his success. This mirrors Daisy and Gatsby's relationship as Daisy married Tom because she felt as though she would be safer with him due to his wealth rather than risk it with Gatsby. Even though Fitzgerald did end up marrying Zelda as he proved himself to her creating a different ending in the novel compared to his in real life, this may be because he wanted to show himself what could have happened to him and through presenting Gatsby as being childlike highlights Fitzgerald's strengths as a person as he was living in the present with his wife as Gatsby was living in the past with the memory of Daisy.

Similarly, Steinbeck presents the impossibility of the American Dream through the Joad's family's hopes of becoming economically and financially stable through finding jobs in California, yet having to face the realisation of suffering from the hardship suffered due to the Great Depression. For migrant workers during the 1930s (alike the Joad family), the American Dream was blocked by the rich landowners and bankers that disenabled workers to have a chance to become involved in the rising society. However, jobs being advertised in California for migrant workers who had lost their jobs elsewhere, characterised their American Dream through solidarity and stability. Money was seen as a necessity in America during the Great Depression for all individuals who ranged in financial stability, especially the Joad's family who had nothing to fall back on except the hope of finding jobs in California. The Joad's seemed to be envious of upper class individuals and banks

[1] Great Gatsby, page 87
[2] Great Gatsby, page 92

who had found their stability and used other people's time of weakness to their advantage as to them "they breathe profits; they eat the interest in money"[3]. If they don't get it, they die the way you die without air, without side-meat." Here Steinbeck has associated objects with human traits such as profits and by having these monetary values having this personification it brings to light the importance of money and how much of an impact it has on society just like an individual would have. Through money being described as something you can "eat" and breathe like you do with "air" to keep you alive it represents how important this factor was to make sure you had a good life making it the easy option for many Americans to see that having money lead to their American Dream being achieved. However, with the Joad's struggle to not find jobs and ending up in a "rain soaked barn" because they had no shelter to live in due to the lack of money they had through having no jobs shows represents their impossibility to achieve the American Dream.

Collectively, Fitzgerald and Steinbeck show how the American Dream can be subjective to the individual, depending on their beliefs and surroundings. Fitzgerald demonstrates the range in opinions of the American Dream through his characters aims and actions, yet the main reason for these differences may be due to the character's background. Fitzgerald creates the setting of the roaring twenties by presenting the division of society in this time through creating the "West Egg[4]" and the "East Egg"[5], to which the Buchanan's live on the East and Gatsby lives on the West. These two opposing sides are presented as completely opposite when it comes to the accumulation of wealth as "West egger's" are seen to be newly rich individuals who worked hard to earn their money that they accumulated in a short amount of time, whereas "East egger's" [6]have attained their wealth through inheritance. These opposing sides appear to give the characters two different American Dreams. Gatsby's dream as previously mentioned includes to be reunited with his love Daisy, he attempted to achiever this planning out nearly every part of his life as he though "elocution, practice, poise and how to attain it" came through "read[ing] one improving book or magazine per week"[7]. Through his hard work it enabled Gatsby to attain his wealth which he then believed would win Daisy back. Gatsby's American Dream is based emotionally on his love for something that he wishes to gain back through changing his whole lifestyle to achieve. Contrastingly Tom Buchanan, an East egger, seems to have a rich and beautiful life on the outside making it appear as though he is living the American Dream. However, with his infidelity towards Daisy with Myrtle Wilson presents how he is still chasing his American Dream. Through Tom flaunting his mistress "wherever he was known", [8]proves he does not have a guilty conscience and is open about feeling as though he has not completely achieved his American Dream, therefore possibly presenting Tom as greedy. This is due to how he never seems completely content with his life and always feels like he is worthy to have or achieve more. By presenting these two juxtaposing characters that had different backgrounds it presents how individuals upbringings can affect how they see or achieve the American Dream, as Gatsby alike his hard work to accumulate his wealth he tried hard to get Daisy back whereas Tom had his wealth given to him and through that his chasing of the American Dream was never having enough.

Steinbeck also proves the American Dream to be subjective within The Grapes of Wrath, yet it contrasts to The Great Gatsby through how it is perceived because Fitzgerald presents the characters American Dream to be based on achieving what they want emotionally, whereas Steinbeck presents the achievement of the American Dream to be materialistic as The Joad's family's s financial stability. Ironically before the Joad family moved to California they had an economically secure life through owning a home, land and some money however with the advertisement of California where "there's work there, and never gets cold"[9], seemed like an irresistible chance for them to take. Exotic descriptions of California in advertisements that insisted "you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange" persuaded the Joad's family which could present them as appearing greedy because they are already somewhat economically stable through their assets yet they risk that in the chance of becoming rich. However, you could argue that the Great Depression during the 1930's affected all American

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[3] The Grapes of Wrath, page 98
[4] The Great Gatsby, page 7
[5] The Great Gatsby, page 7
[6] The Great Gatsby, page 12
[7] The Great Gatsby, page 135
[8] The Great Gatsby, page 25
[9] The Grapes of Wrath, page 34

citizens no matter how financially or economically stable they were and therefore the Joad's just wanted to secure that stability which they thought they would achieve through moving to California. Through the Joad's family abandoning their farm in Oklahoma which was already stable, Steinbeck may be presenting that their American Dream has already been destroyed and is inevitably impossible the moment they start travelling to California as the materialistic American Dream that they had perceived for themselves was one that they were already living, yet they abandoned it in hope for more money. Similarities here can be seen through the Joad family and Tom Buchanan in a faint way as even though they have complete different backgrounds, the Joad's worked for the money they had earned yet Tom's was given through inheritance, they both base their American Dream on wanting more for themselves and not feeling fulfilled or safe with what they have now. With this quality of greed being presented through both authors it shows how the American Dream can bring out the same qualities in opposite characters yet they both have the outcome of their American Dream never being achieved.

The American Dream brings a bad influence on people's lives as it is giving the American public unrealistic hopes and dreams that will in time lead for them to be disappointed. Fitzgerald displays this opinion through Gatsby never being completely happy or living in the present because he is without Daisy and constantly trying his hardest to impress her with hope that he will win her back. Gatsby thought that he could win Daisy through his possessions as this is what he thought was the only reason she married Tom. The first time Fitzgerald writes about Daisy visiting Gatsby's house he tried to impress her with his shirts, "shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green"[10], as through describing his luxurious clothing Gatsby believed Daisy would be so impressed that it would enable her to fall in love with him again, enabling Gatsby to achieve his American Dream. It could also be perceived that Gatsby thought Daisy's American Dream is based on money and living the luxurious life through her marrying Tom because in his mind she still loved him yet needed financial support. This can be seen as logical thinking in a way for Gatsby as women during this time were perceived as lower to men in the social hierarchy and so the easiest way for Daisy to have a good life is for her to marry a man of wealth. Gatsby's American Dream is a bad influence on his life because it has lead him to become infatuated with this theory as believing what Daisy wants through this and then trying to adjust his life from it. Gatsby also lives his life through lies as he explains his past when saying he was an Ivy League Graduate yet he never graduated anywhere, showing how much of a negative impact the American Dream has on people's lives and mind state and how far they will go so that in their mind they believe they can achieve it.

Steinbeck also agrees with this belief which is predominantly presented through the journey to California as almost immediately after the journey begins two family members die. Here Steinbeck could have created a warning for the reader that the risk of moving to California was a bad idea or foreshadowing that further deaths may occur. Steinbeck is presenting the importance of the American Dream for the Joad family as it appears they have sacrificed their family members in order to possibly, in their minds, achieve their American Dream of becoming financially stable again. This presents how dangerous the American Dream can become for some families or individuals as they are risking lives in hopes for a theory that is never achieved in the end.

To conclude, both Fitzgerald and Steinbeck present the impossibility of the American Dream similarly in an obvious way because it is never achieved in either novel yet together they also present individuals in completely different surroundings, having financial stability compared with having to search for it, yet they both want a better life and are pictured to be naïve about their future. During the early 1900s the American Dream was an important factor in many American's lives ranging from occupations, backgrounds and state of stability financially and economically, which is presenting through two juxtaposing novels that show two sides of the American lifestyle yet both have the same endings. From this being shown by both authors they depict how harmful the American Dream actually was on the American public despite its initial positive connotations of believing or hoping for a better life in the future.

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[10] The Great Gatsby, page 117

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