

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

The American dream stands as a symbol for hope, prosperity, and happiness. But F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, examines the American dream from a different perspective, one that sheds light on those who contort these principles to their own selfish fantasies. Fitzgerald renders Jay Gatsby as a man who takes the Dream too far, and becomes unable to distinguish his false life of riches from reality. This 'unique' American novel describes how humanity's insatiable desires for wealth and power subvert the idyllic principles of the American vision.

Jay Gatsby is the personification of limitless wealth and prestige, a shining beacon for the aspiring rich. Nick Carraway declares that there is "something glorious" about Gatsby, and that he is filled with "some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life"(8). It appears to mere mortals who are not blessed with riches, that Gatsby fulfills the American dream of achieving fame and fortune. But instead of being content with his greenbacks, Gatsby believes that he can replicate the "Platonic conception of himself" (89) and become the flawless god of wealth that he depicts. The American dream has many interpretations, but Gatsby latches onto the concept of wealth alone, failing to see that he can improve his character through hard work and toil as well. One understanding of the American dream, bettering oneself to achieve a higher social status, sadly spurs people like Gatsby to achieve social superiority through money, but never finding true happiness. Gatsby believes in this "unreality of reality" that "the rock of the world [is] founded securely on a fairy's wing" (89). Embedding himself within his dreams, Gatsby finds solace in his fantasy of wealth and the false joy of having it. Taking pleasure from such a materialistic item dulls Gatsby's soul until it is as cold as the cash he covets so much. For Gatsby, like many upper class Americans, fails to realize that the American dream is not merely about wealth, but finding contentment in living, one luxury that Gatsby never achieves.

Instead of following the American dream of 'pursuing happiness' Gatsby focuses on using his assets to bring consummation to an otherwise empty life. This perversion of the American dream serves only to improve his 'image' to a society that initially rejects him when he is impoverished. It is Gatsby's belief that wealth makes him a "son of God", a deity that carries out his "Father's business" through the "vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty" (89) of possessing material objects irrelevant to happiness. To get these earthly treasures, he exploits the 'Land of Opportunity' and dabbles in illegal activities, a practice akin to modern corporate scandals. The true purpose of the American dream is lost upon Gatsby, as it makes "no sound" of warning upon his conscience, fading into an omen that becomes "uncommunicable forever" (100). Jay Gatsby's indecent ascension as a king of society depicts America as a land of the affluent, instead of the land of the free. In this counterfeit America, Gatsby's dream "must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it" (159). But since he "[does] not know that it [is] already behind him" (159), Gatsby continues to seek contentment in fattening his purse. Unable to see past his warped reality, he tries to procure any object that could possibly satisfy his desires. But unable to find happiness through his quest for wealth, Gatsby turns inward to the past, a time when opulence was but a dream, not a harsh reality.

Gatsby attempts to rectify his failures from the past with his money, not knowing that this is impossible. He endeavors to 'purchase' the love of Daisy Buchanan, who he had been unable to woo due to his lack of considerable income. But even though it seems that Gatsby's "number of enchanted objects [have been] reduced by one" (84) with the possibility of winning Daisy, he is foiled by her greater attraction to a secure life of luxury. Ironically, Gatsby is unable to comprehend that Daisy's obsession with material possessions mirrors his own fixations with such objects. Though Gatsby is aware of the "youth and mystery

that wealth imprisons and preserves" (132), his inability to sacrifice his wealth and embrace simplicity breaks his spirit. Rich on earth, but poor at heart, Gatsby thus "[pays] the price for living too long with a single dream" (142), as he learns that his life is superficial and lacks meaning. But instead of attempting to reverse this misfortune, Gatsby takes it apathetically, wishing only to live this leisurely path. Gatsby wallows in his suffering, unable to see America as a land where he can be revitalized. Hereafter, he becomes a "a boat against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (159). According to a classic nursery hymn, 'life is but a dream', a fact that Gatsby silently acknowledges in the end.

If one does not achieve happiness, life may appear meaningless and empty. So is the fate of the 'Great' Jay Gatsby, a man who has been destroyed by the very riches he covets. But Gatsby does not merely represent the extravagance of the Roaring 20's, but serves as a metaphor for the people of today, as evidenced by a survey featured on the BBC. This study "appears to confirm...that money can not buy happiness" (Nigeria tops Happiness Survey, BBC News), and that wealthier nations like the United States rank far lower than third world countries like Nigeria. The study shows that consumerism is a factor that happier nations lack, while the lust for money and possessions still hinders countries like America from basking in bliss. Hopefully, America does not take its materialism to extremes, in such a way that its fate is linked to Fitzgerald's Gatsby. For "the mass of men lead lives in quiet desperation" (Thoreau, Walden), waiting to awaken from the American Nightmare that they have brought upon themselves.

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Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Victor Frankenstein has created a monster, an "abhorred devil" (Shelley 90) who torments him throughout Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Indeed, the creature commits several horrid acts, which drives Frankenstein to pursue him into the Arctic. Yet the creature does not inspire the same fear or revulsion in the reader; instead he garners sympathy. While Frankenstein may beg to differ, the reader connects with the monster because he is isolated from the world and-surprisingly-has a gentle heart.

The monster is certainly not blameless. He kills William, Clerval and Elizabeth - people who are dear to Frankenstein - within a short period of time. These deaths drive Frankenstein to near-madness. He calls on the "spirits of the dead" and "wandering ministers" so that the "cursed and hellish monster drink deep of agony" and feel "the despair that now torments me" (179). The monster is also capable of wanton destruction when he burns down the DeLaceys' house and dances "with fury around the devoted cottage" (123) like a savage. Finally, the monster seems to enjoy the pain he causes Frankenstein: "your sufferings will satisfy my everlasting hatred" (181) he writes to Victor. Were these pieces of evidence taken out of context, the reader would surely side with Frankenstein. But Shelley prevents such one-sidedness by letting the monster tell his version of the story. The monster's first-person narrative draws the reader in and one learns that the creature is not the abomination his creator claims.

The creature first gains the reader's sympathy because he is utterly isolated. While articulate and emotional, the creature has no one with whom to interact. Alone from birth, Victor flees at first sight of him, the creature's first memories are painful. "I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept," he says (92). Were he human, the creature would likely benefit from the "hearts of men" which De Lacey says are capable of "brotherly love and charity" (119). Unfortunately, regardless of where the creature goes, his grotesque features inspire only fear and revulsion. His first interaction with humans is violent: in search of food, the creature enters a village and soon finds himself "grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons" (95). Likewise, the De Laceys, whom the monster admires for their "grace, beauty, and delicate complexions" (102) assault the creature when he is discovered in their home; Felix strikes him "violently with a stick" (120). Notably, the monster does not retaliate against these actions. He admits he could have torn Felix "limb from limb as the lion rends the antelope" but his "heart sank . . . with bitter sickness and [he] refrained" (120). Indeed, the monster feels disgusted just by looking at himself. When he sees his reflection in a pool of water he is "filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification" (102). Abhorred at his appearance and shunned by humanity, the creature seeks out the only person with whom he has a connection - his creator.

The creature's isolation from Victor is especially painful to read. Since no other human will interact with him, the monster is forced to seek out the man who "endowed [him] with perceptions and passions, and then cast [him] abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind" (124). When they first meet, the creature does not ask much from Victor. "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous," (89) he implores Frankenstein. He even offers to be "mild and docile to [his] natural lord and king" (89) if Victor were only to stop his suffering and create a female companion. For a brief moment, Victor feels sympathy for his creation - he admits he is "moved" by the creature's tale and understands that "the feelings [the monster] now expressed, proved him to be a creature of fine sensations" (130). Perhaps, if Victor had continued to feel this way, *Frankenstein* may have ended here; indeed, the creature promises that "if you consent, neither you nor any other human being shall ever see

us again" (130). However, Victor recants on his promise, and the monster is denied a final chance at happiness. Yet he cannot part from Frankenstein - the creature says Victor is "bound by ties only dissoluble by the annihilation of one of us" (89). Yet curiously the monster does not kill Victor, though he certainly has ample opportunity to do so. Instead he forces Victor to pursue him by killing Elizabeth. It seems as if the monster would rather have an enemy than no connections at all. The monster leads Victor into "places where human beings [are] seldom seen" (180), so that both scientist and creature suffer together in isolation. But even though he is pursued by Victor, the monster makes an effort to connect with his creator. He leaves "marks in writing on the barks of trees, or cut in stone" that antagonize Victor and force him to continue his hunt. This twisted relationship finally ends when Victor dies aboard Walton's ice-locked boat. But the creature does not rejoice, indeed he feels like Satan from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation. I am alone" (195).

If the creature were inherently wicked, then perhaps readers would not be so sympathetic. But although Frankenstein's creation has a good heart, he is still rejected by humanity. The creature, contrary to Frankenstein's assertions, is not a "demoniacal corpse" (52) from birth. In fact, the creature is quite gentle. He is awed by sunlight and delights hearing birds sing (92-93). Likewise, he enjoys educating himself. After discovering that the DeLaceys spoke words that "sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers . . . [he] ardently desired to become acquainted with it" (100). The creature even becomes familiar with morality, and admits he "felt the greatest ardour for virtue rise within me, and abhorrence for vice," and ultimately comes to admire "peaceable lawgivers [such as] Numa, Solon, and Lycurgus, in preference to Romulus and Theseus" (115). Yet when the creature begins to apply what he learns, he is driven away. While he "observed with pleasure" (100) that the DeLaceys benefit from his secret logging activities, the creature is eventually shunned by the family. In a more heroic example, the creature even saves a young girl from drowning:

She continued her course along the precipitous sides of the river, when suddenly her foot slipped, and she fell into the rapid stream. I rushed from my hiding-place and with extreme labour, from the force of the current, saved her and dragged her to shore. She was senseless, and I endeavoured by every means in my power to restore animation (125).

Despite this selfless act, the creature is rewarded with violence. A man who was following the girl sees the creature and shoots him. This moment marks a turning point for the creature. He had "saved a human being from destruction, and as a recompense . . . now writhed under the miserable pain of a wound which shattered the flesh and bone." In light of this, the creature's vow for a "deep and deadly revenge" (125) can be seen as understandable. But even after he commits several heinous crimes, the monster at least understands that he has been corrupted by his resentment of humanity. Even though "evil thenceforth became [his] good," (194) the creature has deep-seated regrets. "When I run over the frightful catalogue of my sins, I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness," he says (195).

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