

## The Vanishing of the American Dream in 1920s' America: An Analysis of the Deep Meanings of the Image of Green Light in *The Great Gatsby*

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**Abstract:** Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* depicts the whole tragic life of Gatsby and unravels the vanishing of the American Dream in 1920s' America. In this novel, the image of green light serves as an important clue and carries deep meanings with its own. Through the analysis of those deep meaning—especially the symbolic meanings—of the image of green light, it will be easy to comprehend the author's purpose, the theme of this book and its practical significance reflected by the novel.

**Keywords:** *The Great Gatsby*, American Dream, green light.

### INTRODUCTION

American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) is widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century. Living in 1920s' America when it was the Jazz Age, F. Scott. Fitzgerald was regarded as a member of the "Lost Generation" and a spokesman of the Jazz Age, whose works largely illustrate that period. Also as a social historian, Fitzgerald became identified with the Jazz Age: "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire," as he wrote in "Echoes of the Jazz Age"[1]. The Twenties gave Fitzgerald the settings for his greatest works, among which *The Great Gatsby* is the most famous one. By depicting the whole life of a mysterious upstart millionaire Gatsby and his quixotic passion and romance in this book, Fitzgerald creates a portrait of the Jazz Age that has been described as a cautionary tale regarding the American Dream, and sketches the process how one's American Dream vanishes.

The American Dream is a faith that everyone in America can gain independence and the ability to make something of one's self with hard work, but actually it ends up being more about materialism and selfish pursuit of pleasure [2]. What was the real American Dream of individuals at that time? Did the American Dream die in 1920s, or did it never really existed at all? To give his answer to these questions, Fitzgerald carefully designed the plot and set a few clues, and the image of green light is a well-marked one. Appearing three times throughout the whole text, it serves as a significant hint and a meaningful symbol. Through the analysis the deep meaning behind the green light, Fitzgerald's concerning for the process of the rising, harboring and collapse of the American Dream by Americans at that time is clearly unraveled.

### Future Happiness

The image of green light appears at the end of Chapter One for the first time, when Nick is back from his cousin Daisy's house, he sees Gatsby standing in front of his mansion, looking at the distance. The fragment is as followed:

But I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock [3, 22].

As this is the first time when the image of green light appears, it need to be explained in a more detailed way.

First, it is a very interesting point about the reason why Fitzgerald designs the color as green. When the color "green" occurs to people's mind, it easily reminds them of the image of "nature". Therefore, traditionally green is the color of vitality, hope and youth [4]. In other words, it also stands for beautiful dreams—the American Dream according to the Americans' comprehension. To some extent, the image of green light throughout the whole book can all be

generally regarded as the American Dream, but is attached with different specific deep meanings under different contexts.

On one hand, here green light is the one burning at the end of Daisy's dock, meaning that Gatsby's American Dream is about Daisy. Or at least, Daisy as his Love Dream forms an indispensable part of his American Dream [5]. This point is further illustrated by Gatsby's motion. From the excerpt, it is written that "he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling." (22) His stretching arms and trembling can be deciphered as his wants for Daisy, as well as the desire for achieving his American Dream. He thinks he could achieve them as easy as possible, dreaming a bright and happiness future.

On the other hand, in Gatsby's eyes, the green light is also the incarnation of Daisy, who he loves deeply. Daisy's face "was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget..." (10). Daisy is so passionate, vital and energetic that greatly stirs his heart. So it is appropriate to set a green light to stand for her. Gatsby stretches his arm because he wants to harbor his lover, though she is across the river, and he even does not know whether she still remembers him. From this perspective, American Dream does give them motive power, but lots of Americans chase it blindly.

There is another detail that worth attention. In this initial part, Fitzgerald describes the green light as "single", "minute and far away" (22). As it is analyzed above, in this passage green light symbolizes the future happiness, which, Gatsby believes, can be grasped as long as he gets Daisy. So Fitzgerald wants to emphasize that happiness is not definitely within reach—the process may be long and hard, and the dream is unreliable and uncertain. From another aspect, the dim and remote light also serves as a foreshadowing from the very first chapter that Gatsby's Dream will never be realized, which means that the tragic tone of this novel has been set from the very beginning.

### Temporary Realization

The image of the green light appears for the second time in Chapter Four, when Gatsby and Daisy reencounter in his mansion and Gatsby shows her around. "Outside Gatsby's window it began to rain again" (94), so they stands in a row looking at the corrugated surface of the sound:

"If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay," said Gatsby. "You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock."

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it

had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one (94).

The hiding of the green light here serves a turning point in the text. Previously, green light is Gatsby's faith. It is this faith that Daisy will be back and she can support him to struggle. But presently, the sudden realization of his dream makes him confused. Further evidence suggests this: "As I went over to say good-bye I saw that the expression of bewilderment had come back into Gatsby's face" (97). The hiding of the green light implies that as Gatsby has gotten what he wants, the faith in his heart has gone as well. The green light is stilling shining at the dock, but the American Dream is not a dream anymore; it is forgotten. Not only Gatsby, but also millions of thousands of Americans suffered spiritual wilderness at that time: they thought they have achieved what they wanted, so they became confused without their life goals as the American Dream emphasizes success in materials, instead of in spirit. However, sadly, they got nothing actually. Therefore, Gatsby's reaction is within expectation—he does not know what to do next for the realization, which exactly reflects the void of the "Lost Generation" at that time. Here, Fitzgerald vividly portrays the psychological states of those lost people harboring the American Dream and the current situation existing in that nation.

There is another reason why the significance of the green light vanishes. As the image of green light is somewhat an incarnation of Daisy, it means that Daisy is no longer like what she likes as before. While Gatsby shows her his fortune, she acts as a crazy money-lover.

As the passage suggests:

"That huge place there?" she cried pointing.

"Do you like it?"

"I love it, but I don't see how you live there all alone." (92)

And when Gatsby takes out a pile of shirts to show her, Daisy also reacts as followed:

Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.

"They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before." (94)

That is another reason that makes Gatsby confused—Daisy is not like previous Daisy no more. She is now an egoist, showing great interest toward money. When Gatsby holds her, touches her and hugs her, he feels himself holding, toughing and hugging a stranger. That is what Fitzgerald wants to implicate. Along with the realization of his American Dream, his

dream of Daisy vanishes. He needs to walk out from his own illusion and accept a new Daisy. Although there is a huge gap between him and his lover, he has to face the reality. So in this part, for Gatsby, the image of green light symbolizes his goal and direction, being hidden in the fog.

What is worth paying attention to is the reason why the green light “seemed very near to” Daisy. It should be noted that green is the color of the American dollar bill [6]. It stands for fortune, the kind of thing that was haunted by piles of Americans at that time. For Daisy, all she wants is wealth, and she has gotten it when she marries to Tom Buchanans, her present husband. That Fitzgerald designs the details that the green light is always hanging at her dock has such an implication, which means that Daisy’s dream has already been realized at a very early time. And now, as she reencounters Gatsby, a “silly” man who loves her so much and more importantly, is rich, she walks near to her Dream—money. That’s why the green light seems near to Daisy in this part.

### Final Collapse

At the end of the story, Gatsby dies for his immovable love Daisy. This is a great shock for Nick, forcing him to give up his taken-for-granted hope which that is everyone can realize his or her American Dream if they work hard. The tragic ending also encourages readers to reflect more. Before Nick leaves Long Island in the end, he recalls his first acquaintance with Gatsby: “And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock” (187). This sentence echoes with Chapter One, making this story coherent. This passage serves as a reflection for those witness as Nick. When Gatsby first picks out the “green light”, which is the American Dream, he is enjoyable and proud. But he ends up with death. So what will other strugglers be like? And what Nick feels deeper is as followed:

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning— So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (187)

In the end, Nick cannot find the green light any longer in the dark. The external reason seems to be Daisy’s leave, but there are three layers of deeper meanings. Firstly, the vanishing of green light echoes with the death of Gatsby, together with his vanishing dream and hope. The symbolic meaning of the image of the green light is Gatsby’s American Dream. As he dies, the light is out. But actually, the light should have been out a little earlier, because Gatsby is destined not to win back his lover. It is a tragedy for both Gatsby and the society.

Secondly, it means that the dream in Nick’s heart vanishes as well. Nick appears as a passionate youth throughout the whole book. For him, “there was so much to read, for one thing, and so much fine health to be pulled down out of the young breath-giving air” (4). However, experiencing such a series of incidents, he finally figures out those ugly features of the so-called upper-class people and the essence of the American Dream. “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...” (185) And he also realizes that American Dream cannot be realized for everyone in spite of the hard struggle. Usually the society status determines everything [7]. Nick finally narrates:

He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” (187)

Paying the price of Gatsby’s death, Nick knows that a fair American Dream does not exist at all. That is why Nick ends up with going back home.

Thirdly, the vanishing of the green light stands for the vanishing of the American Dream in the society. This is a larger metaphor for post-World-War-I America. Merit and hard work are not enough, and no amount of hard work can change where Gatsby comes from. He as an upstart can never compete with his rival in love—Buchanan who inherits from his family [8]. This cruel fact leads to the collapse of the American Dream. It will never be realized, and chasing a future dream just ends up mirroring them in the past.

However, Fitzgerald still wraps this story with a relatively positive attitude, which echoes with the beginning again. Wanting to encourage the Americans to work hard and struggle to have a better life, Fitzgerald employs the color of green here to emphasize hope again. People need to “beats on, boats against the current” to hold their destiny. Even though the American Dream is not so real, working hard can lead to happiness. In the last chapter, the image of green light on one hand means the collapse of the Dream, but on the other offers the hope [9].

### CONCLUSION

Playing a significant role, the green light is marked with complex deep meanings in *The Great Gatsby*. It is a symbol of Daisy for Gatsby; it also stands for the faith, the hope, and the bright future—all in all, the American Dream. However, as the unattainable green light, the American Dream is

unattainable as well and is doomed to vanish. Fitzgerald creates the character of Gatsby to illustrate his opinion. This is Fitzgerald's sarcasm toward the 1920s' American society, on behalf of the "Lost Generation", that the rich are always rich and the dreamers usually are only dreamers.

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