BIRTH, LIFE AND DISILLUSIONMENT OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN THE GREAT GATSBY

Ivan Štrba

Abstract: Gatsby’s dream might be described as the American dream of success. It is the dream of rising, of amassing a great fortune that will assure a life of luxuriant ease, power, and beauty in an ideal world untroubled by care and devoted to the enjoyment of everlasting pleasure with nothing to intervene between wish and fulfillment. It is a naïve dream based on the fallacious assumptions that material possessions are synonymous with happiness, harmony, and beauty. The dreamer overlooks or is unaware of the fact that the fullest kinds of please come from the cultivation of sensibilities, the development of understanding, and the refinement of taste – accomplishments that have little to do with the acquisitive powers by which a fortune is amassed. Gatsby is a man who equates quantity with quality, cost with value.

Key words: American Dream, Birth, Fitzgerald, Gatsby

Introduction

American culture, though often ‘involuntarily’, is defined and determined by its characteristic, not seldom even dogmatic and charismatic symbols that have always placed it in a rather distant and unapproachable notch of one’s world of perception. American Dream is no exception, and if it is to be something at all, since I suspect few elusive entities to grow along the nation’s progress and thus being hardly separable from its ‘womb’, American Dream being one of them, then only the very logo of the significance of the American nation. It has always existed, in its very special substance, simultaneously with the existence of America as the undefined country – the land of promises, hopes, and desires, the substance Martausova calls “a social construct of a mythic character, highly dependable upon changes in society.” (Martausova 47)

The Dream is born

The land of the first settlers, land open as a ‘virgin’ to be fertilized and cultivated, nevertheless, not only that; the land of the endlesness achievement and human fulfillment, or, as J. Steinbrink has put it, “The New Jerusalem envisioned by our Puritan Fathers” (315-342). It was not only the first settlers’ confession which forced them to abandon their motherlands, but also the Dutch sailors’ profit motive which sent them out across the Atlantic Ocean to the distant and unknown shores. It was the land, as Nick nostalgically notes down in his mind, “that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes – a fresh green breast of the new world.” (p. 143)†

However, unlike the self-preserved and rigidly scrupulous Puritans, influx of ‘hungry’ people from Europe generated a group of the ‘fate-seekers’ and ‘boarder-pushers’, and The Frontier (line) was inevitably to be pushed west-wards. The Frontier – a major theme of American history; the myth of the seemingly limitless opportunities offered by the vast, unknown American continent waiting to be conquered and developed – a myth which operated as a powerful stimulus to the American imagination. Ever since the first settlers voyaged to the Eastern seaboard to begin a new life, the New World presented a place of hope, and an unknown interior of vast proportions – a dream “of a land in which life should

† All citations of the text are from The Great Gatsby, ed. Ruth Prigozy (OUP, 1998). Page numbers following citations from the text are keyed to this edition.
be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability and achievement” (Parkinson 124).

The very document of the democratic system – The Declaration of Independence is primarily based on the notion of the American Dream’s ideology, claiming “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (Declaration of Independence: A Transcription) Such a claim, though, would have proved simply invalid and impugnable, had it not been supported by a real life experience as its testimony. It was nobody else but a leading American figure in the eighteenth century, Benjamin Franklin, who made a fortune as a printer by hard work and enterprise before becoming a diplomat, thus silencing the eternal voice of concealed skepticism and simultaneously became the contemporary exponent of the ‘rags-to-riches’ stories.

Jean de Crevecoeur, a French-American writer, one of the representatives and true fathers of the frontier literature, in his ‘Letters from American Farmer’, constructed the very concept of American Dream – the model of success – and praised the hard work, determination and devotion as the inner qualities, viewed by the Puritans as the ‘goodness’ virtues, through which the dreams of wonderland were realized.

With Europe being scourged by its tight consciousness and its consequences, such as various persecutions, shortage of jobs, the possibility of new beginnings continued to be epitomized by the Frontier as it was extended westwards towards the Pacific coast. Citizens from the Old Continent were more than ever before willing to take risks and head for what might have appeared only an adventure, or simply a craziness and no awareness, though, in its subconscious substance must have been the inner drive for freedom and completion of a self. Parkinson demonstrates this by quoting an American journal from 1839 that announced with an extraordinary degree of high-flown rhetoric:

_The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space... We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? ... The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the arena of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest the excellence of divine principles._ (qtd. in Parkinson 124)

Another popular writer who endorsed the notion that effort is in itself a virtue that will be rewarded by wealth and success was Horatio Alger. Through charitable work in the late nineteenth century, he came to know something of the ragged street boys of New York before proceeding to sentimentalize the theme of getting ahead in a series of popular novels. It has been said of Alger that he “left a deeper mark on American character than the work of many a greater mind!” (Long 174)

**Disillusionment of the Dream**

America, as it has been doing ever since discovered by Europeans, was offering something ‘else’. She possessed the possibility that maybe fairytales were not just something

53 These stories offer hope that cannot be truly realised and thus inevitably leads to frustration or even death. However, they tend to be apparent and popular only in societies with a space for shift up the social ladder, thus creating a sense of national identity and value.

54 For closer reading, [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/crev/home.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER/crev/home.html) is a great on-line source, containing all the letters.

55 Alger captured the essence, emotion, soul and especially the spirit of an emerging America. His books all had the same message: no matter who they were, poor, orphaned or powerless, that if they would persevere, if they would do their best, if they would always try to do the right thing, they would succeed.
of the past, maybe in America they were something of the future. Fitzgerald, the sensitive observer and objectively subjective registrar of the course of both his own life and life of the Jazz Age which subjugated him, identified other peculiarly American characteristics of the 1920s:

"We were the most powerful nation. Who could tell us any longer what was fashionable and what was fun? War, brusquely shouldered my contemporaries out of the way and danced into the limelight. This was the generation whose girls dramatized themselves as flappers, the generation that corrupted its elders and eventually overreached itself less through lack of morals than through lack of taste. May one offer in exhibit the year 1922! That was the peak of the younger generation, for though the Jazz Age continued, it became less and less an affair of youth... A whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure... The word jazz in its progress towards respectability has mean first sex, then dancing then music. In any case, the Jazz Age now raced along under its own power, served by great filling stations full of money... It was borrowed time anyhow – the whole upper tenth of a nation living with the insouciance of grand dukes and casualness of chorus girls..." (Fitzgerald 1965: 9-19).

In other words, Fitzgerald thus asserts that jazz is an authoritative and authentic voice of the period which not only has a place in history but is the modern art form to express it. It was an essentially American one. The questioning of tradition coming from Europe helped America to be able to flout the old rules of convention that the civilized world had, for so long, embraced and respected.

American Dream, as a driving concept of human behavior and action that had moved the masses has turned into rather a myth, or shall I say ‘American hope’. Fitzgerald was sensitive and brave enough to seize its deadly doubleness and ambiguity, as he had to face one himself. Jay Gatsby, his main protagonist, thus bears not only his literary but also personal regret for the unattainable dream, for his “extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again” (p. 6). Like the American Dream, the meaning of Gatsby’s dream remains ambivalent. His idealizing dream can never be divorced from the wealth which history has created. He becomes a figure of tragic intensity helplessly enmeshed in his environment and contributing to its ugliness even while he is creating an evanescent beauty in order to transcend it. Gatsby is ‘great’ in his role as representative contemporary hero corrupted by new opportunities for wealth, yet aspiring to escape their consequences by his imagination.  

“At once a tragedy and an extraordinarily convincing love tale and an extravaganza,” as Eble employs Thomas Caldecott Chubb’s remark from his writing in the Forum (1925), The Great Gatsby embodies a criticism of American experience – not of manners, but of a basic historic attitude to life. (qtd. in Bruccoli 1985: 88) The theme of the novel is the withering of the American Dream. Gatsby, the ‘mythic’ personal embodiment of the American dream, is shown to us in all his immature romanticism. His insecure grasp of social and human values, his lack of critical intelligence and self-knowledge, his blindness to the pitfalls that surround him in American society, his compulsive optimism, are realized in the text with rare assurance and understanding. And yet the very grounding of these deficiencies is Gatsby’s goodness and faith in life, his compelling desire to realize all the possibilities of existence.

56 The very brief section on the novel by Malcolm Bradbury in The Modern American Novel, makes illuminating comments on this aspect.
Conclusion

The Great Gatsby can be seen not so much as an illustration of the decline of the Western world in general, or of American civilization in particular, but that of individuals. After all, luck, rather than system sustains Buchanan’s carelessness and Gatsby’s death is due to sheer accident, and not because he is too weak to continue his fight against Buchanan. The whole novel is pervaded by ambiguity as regards the idea of decadence of the West. Thus, as C. W. Bigsby comments, New York in the novel represents “corruption and graft but, with its towering white buildings, it seems to contain the essence of that pure dream of national and self-fulfillment” (134).57

References

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Author

Ivan Štrba, Mgr. Institute of British and American Studies of the Faculty of Arts, Prešov University, Slovakia, strba@unipo.sk

57 The image of New York in the novel has been studied by Roland Bergman in The Great Gatsby and Modern Times (1996, 83-111).