



## Dream

A Review of

*The Great Gatsby* (2013)

by Baz Luhrmann (Director)

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Reviewed by

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1925) *The Great Gatsby* has long been considered a Great American Novel. The film of *Gatsby*, directed by Baz Luhrmann with screenplay by Baz Luhrmann and Craig Pearce, follows the book closely and does its best to let viewers know why the book is so esteemed. Fitzgerald had fallen in love with the poetry of John Keats, and passages of his novel were written with a high lyricism, redolent of Keats, to depict surfaces: white net curtains that billow in the breeze, the shimmering water of Long Island Sound, the fabric of women's dresses.

In the film, visual lyricism is supported by frequent voice-overs by the novel's narrator, Nick Carraway (Tobey Maguire), a bond salesman on Wall Street. He has rented a house on Long Island and finds that it is next door to the palatial home of Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio), whom he comes to know.

The story takes place in the summer of 1922, at the height of the era that Fitzgerald called the jazz age. It was an inspired idea of the filmmakers to intersperse the story's action with cuts to a clinic of the kind that the chronically alcoholic and occasionally depressed Fitzgerald might have attended, in which Carraway recounts to a psychotherapist some of the novel's memorable lines as he tries to make sense of that summer's events.

The setting of *The Great Gatsby* is the fictional East Egg and West Egg, on Long Island. There are journeys, too, in powerful sports cars to Manhattan with visits, on the way, to a gas station that is near some ash pits. In his beautifully appointed house, Gatsby hosts ostentatious parties, full of lights, live music, dancing, attentive servants, and beautiful people wearing beautiful clothes. No one is invited, but everyone who is anyone in New York comes. The partygoers enjoy themselves. It's a dream world. The question is, is it the American dream?

Across the bay from his house, Gatsby can see another huge house belonging to Daisy Buchanan (Carey Mulligan), a second cousin of Nick's. She is married to Tom Buchanan (Joel Edgerton), who is well established but has proclivities that, in Europe at that time, were turning into fascism. In Louisville, in 1917, the then-penniless Gatsby fell in love with Daisy and was charmed by her and her money, but then he went to Europe to fight in World War I.

While Gatsby was away, Daisy married Tom. Gatsby hoped that perhaps she would come to one of his parties and that her appearance would enable him to take up with her again. She doesn't come to a party, but Gatsby persuades Nick to invite her to tea so that he can drop in. Tea goes according to plan. Gatsby and Daisy take up with each other again. Their love is renewed, and the parties cease.

*The Great Gatsby* is about money and love, in that order. Love may not conquer all, but money might. Novel and film also hit a number of other buttons. They include alcohol, of which there is a great deal. It is a device that has become a cinematic trope for having a good time. Then there is mystery. Who is Gatsby? And how did he make his money? Was it by bootlegging or by being involved in fixing the 1919 World Series? Then there's a gun. Of course, there's a gun.

Psychologically *The Great Gatsby* is about projection: Gatsby's projection onto Daisy, Nick's projection onto Gatsby, our projection onto what we experience as the glamorous. In Gatsby's dreams of Daisy, he thinks he can pick up where they had left off five years before and that she will divorce her husband, marry him, and move into his opulent house. He thinks she needs only to say to Tom, "I've never loved you."

Nick suggests that he is asking too much of her and says, "You can't repeat the past."

"Can't repeat the past?" says Gatsby. "Why, of course, you can!"

In the central scene in the story, Gatsby looks Tom in the face and says that Daisy doesn't love him. He then presses Daisy to tell Tom that she has never loved him. She tries, but Tom appeals to moments in their past, and Daisy finds she can't say what Gatsby demands.

Romantic love involves projection, but here is projection in the large, not only in Gatsby causing this improbable scene but with him having no idea what it must be like for Daisy. He seems entirely without what we psychologists call theory of mind, understanding what another thinks and feels.

Is it adoration that people feel when they are in love? What happens to this feeling? In two studies, Neff and Karney (2005) recruited a total of 251 couples who had applied for marriage licenses in Florida and followed up on them for four years. Although to start with, the couples were "almost uniformly happy with each other at the level of their global perceptions, spouses varied significantly in the extent to which they agreed with their partners' self-perceived specific traits" (p. 494). Positivity toward the partner early on did not predict long-term satisfaction in the relationship. For the women, but not the men, accurate perception of the partner's traits of personality was associated with a lower rate of divorce two years later. Gatsby would have been low in the accuracy of his perception of Daisy's specific attributes.

Whereas Gatsby's dream of Daisy is of adoration, Nick's dream of Gatsby is of admiration. He is impressed by how Gatsby's hope to have Daisy back in his life became so solid that his house and his elegance have become more real than reality. Schindler, Zink, Windrich, and Menninghaus (2013) made an interesting distinction between *adoration* and *admiration*. Although both change people, adoration works to create expectations of the adored person, who can seem more than human. By contrast, admiration makes for emulation. So, Nick, too, tries to live by hope. He doesn't find much to hope for on Wall Street or at the clinic,

but he does have hopes for the book he is narrating, which in the film becomes the book he is writing.

And what of our dreams of glamor, yours and mine? In 1920, two years before *The Great Gatsby* was set, John B. Watson, founder of American behaviorism, was forced to resign his faculty position at Johns Hopkins University because of an affair, discovered by his wife, with a 21-year-old student, Rosalie Rayner, whom he later married.

Watson was the principal force in applying behaviorist psychology to advertising, with effects that now pervade the industrialized world. For him, as his biographer Cohen (1979) related, the public became participants in experiments on learning to buy things. One of his campaigns was for Maxwell House coffee. Cohen described how Watson's advertisements depicted mansions in which beautiful women asked for Maxwell House. Butlers didn't serve coffee; they served Maxwell House. In continuity with the world of *Gatsby*, Cohen cited a passage from the *New Yorker* in 1928, in which it was observed that "It was not a drink that the advertisements were selling, it was a dream. . . . Drink Maxwell House and project yourself into a world of superb elegance and gorgeous glamour. Sip Maxwell House. Slip into the dream" (p. 185).

In this same era, E. M. Forster (1927) famously distinguished two kinds of characters in fiction: flat characters, whose single attribute can be summarized in a phrase, and round characters, who—like living people—have many, sometimes contradictory, attributes. Fitzgerald peopled *The Great Gatsby* with flat characters, and Luhrmann peoples his film in the same way. Jay Gatsby expresses his love for Daisy through money. Nick Carraway admires Gatsby. Daisy Buchanan looks and sounds desirable. Tom Buchanan is a thug. They are characters in a dream.

## References

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