Rattling Society’s Cage in *The Great Gatsby*  
A Marxist Analysis of Character motivation in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract


The Great Gatsby is a famous novel first published in 1926, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel frequently criticizes the American dream, a concept which has become strongly linked to capitalism. As such, the text lends itself very well to Marxist theory despite not mentioning Marxism in the novel. This C-essay will focus on what motivates the characters of this novel. Since the novels main character Jay Gatsby has been analyzed in many articles and essays he will not be analyzed in this essay. Instead it will focus on the other prominent characters such as Daisy, Tom, Myrtle, George and Nick. When their motivations are analyzed through a Marxist analytical perspective it becomes very clear that these characters have realized that society is not fulfilling their needs, and that their commercialized society is the cause of their unhappiness.
Before I begin my analysis of my chosen characters I will define some concepts that will recur throughout my essay. The first of these is “socio-economics”. Marxism defines this as social and economic power, such as and the power and status that comes with the wealth of an individual (Tyson 52). Another important term is “consumerism”, which means that a person's worth is determined by his or her possessions (Tyson 58). Yet another term is “commodification”, which is when a person starts to see other people as commodities that can be bought and social interactions as nothing more than opportunities to flaunt ones socio-economic status (Tyson 60). A example of this would be if an employer stopped seeing his employees as people, but instead as machines which he could trade and remove to maximize his profit. Marxism also uses some familiar words in a different way. The ones that I will be using are “ideology” and “value”. Ideology in Marxist theory is any form of belief system (Tyson 54). Most often, this set of beliefs serves "to legitimize the power of the ruling class in society" (Eagleton 5). This ideology "is the product of the concrete social relations into which men enter at a particular time and place; it is the way those class-relations are experienced, legitimized and perpetuated" (Eagleton 6). In other words whatever ideology exists in a particular society came about through the class relations of that society. In The Great Gatsby this ideology is the American dream which promises success to hard workers but actually exists to cover up society’s unfairness. Now, in Marxism there are three different kinds of value: use value, exchange value and sign-exchange value. Use value is what an item or person can do, exchange value is determined by what you can trade an item or person for, such as money or goods, while sign-exchange value is the status that an item or person gives its owner.

Now that I’ve defined the terms I will move on to the characters, starting with Daisy. She is the wife of Tom Buchannan and the love interest of Gatsby, the novel’s main character. Her husband is often used to personify commodification in the novel, and she often takes the back seat when he is around due to his louder personality. Despite this she is one of the major characters in the novel. Critics such as Mamaduo Dieng and John W. Bickwell view Daisy as a victim of the men around her. However, if looked upon with a Marxist analytical lens, she is revealed to instead be a very shallow woman who only wants a comfortable life at the very top of the upper class. As a very wealthy woman, Daisy has never had to work for any of her money and never will. This puts her in the upper levels of the American upper class. With the privileged upbringing that comes with such wealth she has never had to strive for anything beyond more wealth and social status, both of which she has plenty of. She seems to have reached the top in American society. She is as mentioned very wealthy and married, her family is from Eastern America and she is a mother. Nevertheless she strives to improve her standing in society, but in more subtle ways than other characters like Gatsby and Myrtle. Daisy already has a huge amount of socioeconomic power and could spend her life going to parties and enjoying life, but there is one thing she believes she lacks, and that is being a good
mother. Being a good mother would, to her, mean to have a clever and obedient child who looked more similar to Daisy than Tom. This would then make the child’s sign-exchange value transfer onto Daisy which would give her more socioeconomic power. At the time the novel is set, the 1920s, it was viewed as very important for both men and women to start a family and raise good children. This can be seen when Daisy introduces Nick and Gatsby to her daughter:

“Bles-sed pre-cious," she crooned, holding out her arms. "Come to your own mother that loves you.”

The child, relinquished by the nurse, rushed across the room and rooted shyly in her mother’s dress.

“The bles-sed pre-cious! Did mother get powder on your old yellowy hair? Stand up now and say How-de-do.” [...] “I got dressed before luncheon.” Said the child, turning eagerly to Daisy.

“That’s because your mother wanted to show you off.” Her face bent into the single wrinkle of the small white neck. “You dream you. You absolute little dream.”

“Yes,” admitted the child calmly. "Aunt Jordan’s got on a white dress too.”

“How do you like mother’s friends?” Daisy turned her around so that she faced Gatsby. “Do you think they’re pretty?”

“Where’s Daddy?”

“She doesn’t look like her father,” explained Daisy. “She looks like me. She’s got my hair and shape of the face.”

Daisy sat back upon the couch. The nurse took a step forward and held out her hand.

“Come, Pammy.”

“Good-bye, sweetheart!”

With a reluctant backward glance the well-disciplined child held to her nurse’s hand and was pulled out the door. (Fitzgerald 122-23)

Daisy clearly does not bring her daughter in to introduce her to her friends, but to show her off. Brought in by the nurse, Pammy is questioned by her mother to show how smart and loving the young girl is. When she has served her purpose, Daisy sends her away with the nurse and continues to socialize with her friends over cold drinks. Notice how Daisy ignores Pammy when asked where Tom is, instead pointing out how similar she and Pammy look. After this the nurse steps in and leads Pammy away. This is to stop the child from ruining the image that Daisy wants to present. It is possible that Daisy thinks she is being a good mother because this is how her mother raised her, but it is equally likely that she uses her child as a means of gaining more status.

Her desire to gain more status can also be seen in her marriage to Tom. She accepted it because she wanted the pearls and other commodities that he can offer. One could say that she sold
herself for 350,000 dollars, increased status and financial security. This is a steep price but based on her social status and wealth she knew that she could easily set a high price for herself. However, this leads her into a love-less marriage, an indication that it is the commodified system that causes the pain. Tom does mention a few tender moments that they shared when he tries to win her back from Gatsby, but overall he has been unfaithful several times. He is even quite open with his latest affair. Unlike Tom, Daisy is not allowed to go outside her marriage on search for love and excitement. This naturally upsets her and makes her much more susceptible when Gatsby shows up as she used to love him fiercely and he offers a love-filled marriage.

Another clear example of her need of status, i.e., her dependence on the system, is when she indicates her supposed superiority: “In a moment she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged” (Fitzgerald 24). Here she tries to assert herself as superior to Nick by appearing more intellectual, similarly to Tom. However, as with Tom, it is merely an attempt to cover up her discontent with her place in society. Daisy does not strive for more wealth; instead she strives for more social status. This kind of fake intellectualism is merely to give her the appearance of a clever individual.

Daisy’s affair with Gatsby is also based on a commodified view of life. In addition to being new and exciting and providing a more loving marriage, he offers her potentially even more wealth than Tom. While she was in love with Gatsby before getting married, that Gatsby was not the same as he was when they met again. Now Gatsby has a lot of expensive possessions to show off to Daisy. With the help of his newfound wealth and charm he then hopes to win her over, which he does. Daisy clearly loves Gatsby’s possessions; a good example of this is when he tours his mansion and shows her his many shirts. Daisy starts crying and when asked why she replies that they are just so beautiful: “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’” (Fitzgerald 99). She is crying with joy because the shirts, combined with the mansion, show how wealthy Gatsby is. She thinks that she can have another marriage with the same financial security she is used to, but also with emotional fulfillment. This also makes her regret her decision to marry Tom even more. When she and Gatsby were separated due to Gatsby being sent to war he promised her that he would return and they would get married. However, Daisy gave in to her family and Tom’s wealth before Gatsby could return. In essence, she realizes that she could have had all of this a lot sooner if only she had been more patient.

However, when Tom reveals to Daisy that Gatsby’s fortune comes from crime and may not be as big as she thought it would be her love fades quickly. As Person Jr. puts it, “…Daisy’s own count of
"enchanted objects" also diminishes by one. "Person means that to Daisy, Gatsby was worth more than Tom because not only did he have more "enchanted objects", he himself was the biggest one as he embodied her dream. When Tom shatters that dream Gatsby ceases to be an "enchanted object" with great sign-exchange value and socioeconomic power and becomes a criminal. Despite this commodified view of their relationship there was some emotional attachment from Daisy. In response to this sudden pain she withdraws from the world around her: “with every word she was drawing further and further into herself” (Fitzgerald 141). This seems to be a kind of mental exercise to isolate herself from the pain she can cause. This also shows that while she does act based on a commodified view on life, she does still have emotional attachments to people and is unable of cutting them off completely. Instead she hides in her shell until whatever is bothering her goes away. This behavior is noted by Nick in the end of the novel as common whenever Daisy created a problem and indicates that this is not the first time she has done this.

When speaking to Nick she mentions that according to her women are lucky if they are not smart: “I turned my head away and wept. ‘All right,’ I said. ‘I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool’” (Fitzgerald 23-24). This shows that she is aware of her social situation and how it affects the world around her. By extension Daisy also understands how society allows Tom to cheat on her quite frequently while she would face severe social stigma if she did the same as an upper class woman. Marius Bewley argues for a very negative understanding of Daisy’s situation: “no critic has ever given Fitzgerald credit for his superb understanding of Daisy’s vicious emptiness. Even Fitzgerald’s admirers regard Daisy as rather a good, if somewhat silly, little thing; but Fitzgerald knew that at its most depraved levels the American dream merges with the American debutante’s dream—a thing of deathly hollowness” (7). To save her daughter from this “deathly hollowness”, Daisy wishes that she would grow up to be too dumb to realize how society works.

So ultimately Daisy’s fate is not determined by Tom, or her family, but by society itself. She has at some point in her life become aware of how unfair society is towards women and that knowledge makes her desperate. To escape from this she tries to be a good mother and a good wife as that would allow her to advance in society and possibly reach a point where she will not feel sad anymore. This also motivates her to pursue her affair with Gatsby, following his promise of more wealth and a love-filled marriage. Ultimately this comes to nothing and she instead ends up losing status as she moves away from New York so she does not have to face the pain of Gatsby’s death. This pain could have been avoided if Daisy had seen the world through a purely commodified perspective. This would have allowed her to cut her emotional ties easily, but alas she still has emotional connections to the people around her.
Tom for his part relates to the world around him only through the monetary value of things and people. To him, they are all commodities with which to advance his standing in society. Even his marriage to Daisy is not based on love, but had been an exchange of money and power for Daisy’s beauty, social standing and the image of stability and completeness which the marriage gave him. A clear sign of this “exchange” is the 350,000 dollar string of pearls that Tom gave to Daisy before their marriage. Similarly to how he bought his wife, Tom also buys Myrtle Wilson’s affection, as well as that of the chambermaid he had an affair with three months after marrying Daisy, and the “common but pretty” woman he picks up at one of Gatsby’s parties (Fitzgerald 113). Tom’s consistent choice of lower-class women can be easily understood by looking at them through his commodified view of human interaction. One could say he “markets” his socioeconomic status where it will give him the greatest advantage, which is amongst women who are the most desperate for and/or most easily awed by his wealth and status. However, the price Tom pays for this commodification is that it robs him of a sense of self-respect in his marriage. When Daisy and Tom interact she frequently sends him off to fetch drinks. This must humiliate Tom who wants to be the one in charge of the relationship. To compensate, he manipulates the lower-class women he has affairs with so that he can make them do whatever he wants. If they do not comply, he will simply find someone else.

Tom’s acts of commodification are not limited to his relationships with women however. Because capitalism promotes the belief that “you are worth what you own”, he values human beings in general only as much as the value of their possessions. Much of Tom’s satisfaction in his luxurious possessions comes from their sign-exchange value, that is, how much social status they give him. As a man who bases his value on his possessions he is of course eager to show them off. An example of this is when he walks Nick around his house and says “I’ve got a nice place here. It belonged to Demaine, the oil man” (Fitzgerald 13-14), as if the status of the previous owner had been transferred onto him. He manipulates people very coldheartedly to get what he wants. He is able to do this without remorse because in a commodified world people and objects are placed on the same level. Since the people around him become objects to him, he can use them up and toss them away when he is done with them as a spoiled child would a teddy bear.

This attitude can also be seen in his relationship to Myrtle. As mentioned, he “buys” Myrtle’s affection. This can be seen when he buys her a dog. He knows that she cannot afford a dog, so to give her an extra incentive to stay with him he buys her one. However, his uncertainty, i.e. the sign that he too suffers under the system, can be seen in his need to decide the dog’ gender:

“Is it a boy or a girl?”

“That dog? That dog’s a boy.”

“It’s a bitch,” said Tom decisively. “Here’s your money. Go and buy ten more dogs with it.” (Fitzgerald 34)
Given that Tom was born into enormous wealth, seemingly more than he could ever spend, why does he need the socioeconomic ego-boost provided by this kind of behavior? The answer is simple: he likes to control people. Not just as in being in charge of them as their employer, but toying with their emotions and by teasing them with something. The best example of this is how he promises Myrtle that he will marry her and then dangles this promise in front of her, knowing that she will follow. Of course, Tom has no intentions of ever fulfilling that promise since marrying Myrtle would lower his standing in society, in other words he would lose socioeconomic power. We again see this manipulation when Myrtle dies in a car accident where Daisy was the driver. Here, Tom tells George Wilson who the car belonged to but not who drove it. He then sends George off to Gatsby’s house to shoot him and thereby eliminating a rival. With Gatsby dead, he alone has Daisy’s affection.

The irony of commodification, however, is that it not only fulfils desire, but also creates new desire. Because the sense of self-worth comes from external standards such as fashion trends, Tom can never feel secure in his possessions. Something new and better is always being sold, or others may purchase something he does not have which will make them seem better than he is. His insecurity is further increased by his awareness of the one type of social status he desperately wants but can never have: being born in Eastern America. The “Easterners” look down on him, even though his inherited fortune matches theirs as does his possessions, since his family is from Chicago and not from the East Coast. Despite not having earned his fortune in his lifetime, Tom is still viewed as “new money” by the Easterners. As a former student of Yale University, Tom is painfully aware of this social requirement that he can never meet due to the circumstances of his birth. This is not stated directly in the novel, but can be seen when one looks to how the other rich people in the novel treat him, as well as the context of the author and when the novel was written. Firstly Daisy remarks to Nick that Tom is not very popular amongst the upper class because of his affair with Myrtle and his manners. Secondly, one can look at the culture of America in the 1920s. Just as not having inherited your fortune gave you status; the older that fortune was the more status you would get. Thus, even though Tom inherited his fortune, it comes from his family in Chicago which puts him underneath the old money class in New York who can trace their fortunes much further back and closer to the original American settlers. This insecurity explains his rudeness, his lack of discretion with Myrtle, and his overall loud aggressive behavior. This kind of behavior are attempts to reassure himself that his money and power are all that counts, that his wealth puts him above class and refinement.

Tom’s uncertainty can also be seen in the “intellectualism” he adopts when referring Nick to a book he has read about Western civilization. It not only clearly shows Tom’s racism, but is another way in which he tries to make up for not being born on the East Coast, claiming that he is part of a bigger and more important group, namely the Aryan race. That the racial theme is connected to class can also be seen in the latter half of the novel when Tom finds out about his wife’s affair with Gatsby
and that Myrtle wants to leave New York. He realizes that he might lose his two most valuable possessions, the women in his life. When he confronts Gatsby about Daisy's affair with him he makes several remarks on how Gatsby is not proper upper class, which shows how in his mind class is another sort of race:

I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well if that’s the idea you can count me out . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white! (Fitzgerald 136)

This strong connection between class and race again shows how important class is to Tom, and is yet another way in which he tries to compensate for not being who he wants to be. While he is not at the top, he is still far above criminals such as Gatsby, which makes him feel good about himself. Another reason for Tom adopting this kind of racism may be because he feels that he needs to defend his social position. Alberto Lena argues that Tom pretends to be "a vigorous individual who embodies the creativity of the Nordic race" (14) to hide that he really is "a millionaire lacking in imagination and intellect who owes his privileged position in society to the efforts of previous generations" (14). This argument relies on Tom actually being aware of his flaws, a trait which he only shows when he confronts Gatsby. So while there is not much evidence in the novel, there is enough to give this view some merit. This would then mean that Tom's racism comes from him justifying his social and economic position in American society as he feels that his class is under threat from "new money".

So while Tom can easily be seen as the epitome of an arrogant American upper class, he is in actuality not content. He wants to be recognized as belonging to the very top layer of American society, he wants to be more dominant in his relationships with women, and he wants people to be envious of him. It is to accomplish this that he acts quite racist, has affairs with lower class women and brags about his possessions. But that has not made him popular, especially after his public affair with Myrtle: “His acquaintances resented the fact that her turned up at popular cafés with her and, leaving her at a table, sauntered about, chatting with whomsoever he knew” (Fitzgerald 30). While this does show that other members of the upper class disapprove of Tom's affair, it is more about how public it is than the affair as such. This lack of recognition then frustrates Tom, who instead of changing his ways simply continues doing the same as before even more.

Now that I have covered the people at the top of society, I want to move on to those in the novel who are at the bottom of society. Here we find Myrtle and George Wilson. Both of them want to advance in society, and although they have different end goals they do it for roughly the same reasons. Bell Hooks, herself raised in a lower working class environment, explains the feelings of people raised in such an environment:
Everyone who grows up in a household where there is a lack of material resources knows what it feels like to want things you cannot have, to want what money can buy when there is no money to spare. Poor people know these feelings intimately. And so do individuals who are raised in homes where material resources could be available but are withheld because of avarice or domination. (57)

Myrtle and George simply want to have a better economic and social status. And they both want this because they have either grown up not having enough money or having had that money withheld by their parents. Another factor in creating this motivation is the wealth they have around them. As they live not too far from West and East Egg they have both seen the wealth of the upper class. This contrast between their own poor lives and rich lives of the upper classes creates a desire to reach that wealth. However, George and Myrtle take different paths to that end.

George runs a car shop in an area between the rich neighborhood West egg and New York called the valley of ashes. It is described as an extremely bleak and hopeless place:

This is a valley of ashes – a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. Occasionally a line of grey cars crawls along an invisible track, gives out a ghastly creak, and comes to rest, and immediately the ash-grey men swarm up with leaden spades and stir up an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight. [...] The valley of ashes is bounded on one side by a small foul river, and, when the drawbridge is up to let barges through, the passengers on waiting trains can stare at the dismal scene for as long as half an hour. (Fitzgerald 29)

According to the ideology behind the American dream that motivates the people in this society, their place is supposed to be the starting point of success. Also, according to the American dream, George’s business will eventually succeed if he’s persistent and hard working enough. However, the way the narrator describes the place makes this seem highly unlikely given the bleak setting. Nothing is described as alive, and nothing is even described as fully human. This can be seen as in “the ash-grey men swarm up” (Fitzgerald 29). These men are representations of the working class, and they are described as dim, crumbling and swarming. The use of the word “swarm” indicate that they are acting more like a hive of bees than humans. They might, like bees, be well organized, but still the comparison makes them inhuman, thereby lowering their perceived status.

Myrtle is George’s wife. She’s also Tom’s mistress, and it’s made clear in the novel that she is not the first woman who he has cheated on his wife with. When she is introduced in the novel she is described quite sensuously:
She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine, contained no facet of gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smoldering. (Fitzgerald 31)

She knows that she has an attractive vitality and thus tries to move up in society by, in a way, selling herself to the highest bidder. This is similar to how Daisy sold herself to Tom, but with a key difference. Tom and Daisy both belong to the same social class, while Myrtle belongs to the lower class, which puts her at a huge disadvantage. Instead of setting a high price she has to set a low price for herself and hope that someone will pick up on it. To then keep Tom to herself Myrtle cannot afford to make any large demands and must instead go along with whatever Tom wants.

Tom realizes that Myrtle is offering herself to him and “rents” her. He gives her gifts and takes her to parties, but he never fully “buys” her. He tells her that he will marry her, claiming that it is his wife’s Catholic family who’s stopping him. In reality, however, he has no intention of ever fulfilling that promise, for if he did he would lose a lot of socioeconomic power. This loss would come from the divorce and him marrying below his own class. This does not mean that Tom does not have feelings for her. When Myrtle dies he is clearly saddened: “I heard a low husky sob, and saw that the tears were overflowing down his face” (Fitzgerald 148). Now, Myrtle herself does not give any hint as to seeing through Tom deception. Instead she seems to view it as a matter of time. If she can just market herself better or deepen his infatuation with her she can change her place society. This does not mean that she is not frustrated as she does start yelling Daisy’s name when at a party with Tom, this angers Tom who breaks her nose to silence her after she refuses to stop. Another reason for hitting her is that her saying his wife’s name reminds him that he’s cheating and has to do that because his own marriage is not what he wants. Myrtle who was intoxicated at the time, must have said Daisy’s name out of frustration that Tom still wouldn’t marry her. Tom however, was simply reminded of a marriage he regularly tried to get away from.

Myrtle is only trying to improve her own social status and wealth and does not care for her husband. If viewed from a Marxist perspective one could interpret her lack of attachment to her husband as a matter of socioeconomic status. She probably married him because he promised her a life that followed the American dream as well as financial security and the status that came with marriage. Since he failed that promise Myrtle now seeks another way to reach more wealth for herself. Despite being lower class, due to her exposure to the upper class lifestyle, Myrtle makes a list of all the things she wants to get: “I’m going to make a list of all the things I’ve got to get. A massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, and one of those cute little ash-trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother’s grave that’ll last all summer. I got to write down a list so I won’t forget all the things I got to do” (Fitzgerald, 42-43). This shows that she has plans that go
beyond just marrying Tom, she has clearly thought about what she wants to do afterwards as well. When she is confronted by her husband about her affair with Tom she realizes that she cannot stay anymore and rushes out, hoping for Tom to “save” her. Instead she gets run over by Daisy driving Gatsby’s car. The novel does show this as a sad event, but without dwelling on it enough to make it into a tragedy. Instead, it takes a back seat to Gatsby’s murder later in the novel. This shows that Myrtle, as a lower class woman, does not matter as much to the narrator, Nick Carraway, as Gatsby, revealing that Nick too is ensnared by the American dream (we shall return to him below).

The novel’s description of Myrtle can be summarized as a person driven by selfishness. She is only looking out for herself and does not care if her husband stays in the valley of ashes. She is only concerned with getting out of there herself. She is not supportive of her husband’s business either, instead only seeing him as a temporary home and source of security until she can marry Tom. Myrtle has in fact limited herself to marriage as a strategy to gain more socioeconomic power. She could have started participating in some sport like Jordan Baker, a professional golfer, or have helped her husband out with the car shop to improve their chances of leaving. However, instead she markets herself to rich people in the hope of marrying one of them. This could stem from her viewing herself as being above her working class environment, or her having been raised to believe that a woman’s place is in the home as a wife and should only strive to be a wife. Neither is stated in the novel.

While Myrtle wants to marry herself up, her husband George wants to work his way out of the valley of ashes. He is described as a small and thin man, and not very energetic: “He was a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome. When he saw us a damp gleam of hope sprang into his light blue eyes” (Fitzgerald 31). This puts him in stark contrast to his loud and sexy wife Myrtle. Possibly due to this he adores her, as she is more beautiful and full of energy than he is. He has been promised a car by Tom and believes that if he can just get that car he can tune it up a bit and then sell it for a profit. With that profit he then intends to move westward with his wife to a better place. The reason he believes things will be better out west is never stated outright in the novel, instead it is suggested at the end of the novel, where Nick reminiscences over people’s dreams and compares Gatsby’s dream to the dreams the first American colonists had hundreds of years ago. George himself is a dreamer too, so his desire to go west can be linked to the settlers desire to set out west as it was “the land of opportunity”. That short phrase in and of itself is also connected to the ideology of the American dream.

George is never said to be dumb, but he seems to be quite naive when it comes to Tom selling him a car:

“When are you going to sell me that car?”

“Next week; I’ve got my man working on it now.”

“Works pretty slow, don’t he?”
“No he doesn’t,” said Tom coldly. “And if you feel that way about it, maybe I’d sell it somewhere else after all.”

“I don’t mean that,” explained Wilson quickly. “I just meant – ”

His voice faded off and Tom glanced impatiently around the garage. (Fitzgerald 31)

The dialogue shows that he does not question whether Tom will actually do it. It is also evident that he has been waiting for a response for some time as he comments: “Works pretty slow, don’t he?” However, whenever Tom threatens to sell the car elsewhere George backs down as he does not want to risk losing an opportunity to make money. Rather than risk losing the car he instead puts up with Tom’s arrogance and near bullying. This combined with his description as thin and lifeless makes George seem like a very weak and desperate person. Beyond being a dreamer, the novel does not try to shed a positive light on him, which causes the reader to not sympathise with him as much as the protagonist Gatsby.

Towards the end of the novel, George discovers an expensive dog collar on Myrtle’s dresser. This makes him suspicious as she could not have bought it on her own; someone must have given it to her. Besides Tom, none of Myrtle’s friends belong to the upper class, instead sticking to the lower and middle class. George starts suspecting that his wife is having an affair, but he does not know with whom. After he begins to suspect his wife he gets paler and thinner as he realises that he might lose her: “He had discovered that Myrtle had some sort of life apart from him in another world, and the shock made him physically sick” (Fitzgerald 130). Meanwhile, Myrtle realizes that she might lose her home. This would be a loss for both of them. Firstly for Wilson who adores his wife and wants to create a better life with her, and secondly Myrtle who would lose the economic and emotional safety of marriage. Both of them would in other words lose a lot of socioeconomic power and status in their society.

Bicknell argues that because George is “[d]eluded by his obedience to the rich” he seeks help from Tom when he needs help to get out of the valley of ashes and with finding who killed his wife. This subservience to the rich is very different from the view of the rich that Bell Hooks grew up with in the 1960s. In her book Class Matters she makes it very clear that the working-class and the poor she grew up with believed that you could not become rich without exploiting others. One was allowed to want money so one could live comfortably, but not to be rich as that would make one selfish. (71) If George had shared this kind of mindset it is possible that he would never have trusted Tom as much as he does in the novel.

While never stated outright, the narrator believes that Tom said Gatsby was the driver, which takes a now deranged George to Gatsby’s house where he shoots him and then himself. The reason for him doing something that extreme is his grief. He had just lost his wife whom he adored as she
was his greatest socioeconomic asset and superior to himself. He also knew that he wasn’t very attractive as a husband due to his appearance and lack of wealth so it was highly unlikely that another woman would marry him. Since his dream of a better life with his wife out west has now become impossible and he cannot start over with another woman he feels that the best thing he can do is to kill whoever killed Myrtle.

Finally we have Nick Carraway, the narrator of the novel. Not much is written about him, yet he is crucial to the novel as it is through his perspective that the reader experiences the story. Thus, we can find out a lot about him by how he describes the world as well as by examining his actions. Nick introduces himself in the beginning of the novel, saying he is from a “well off family” (Fitzgerald 7) and giving a brief personality sketch: “I’m one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (Fitzgerald, 66) and “I’m inclined to reserve all judgments” (Fitzgerald 7). From these statements we can see that Nick has a high opinion of himself as someone pure and honest. This notion is not entirely wrong as Nick is quite honest to everyone around him when he talks to them. Yet sometimes he holds back and he initially has no qualms with the lavish parties and the economic inequality in New York. He does not see the unfairness in the world until the end of the novel, after Gatsby’s death.

The reason he moved from the Mid-west to New York on the east coast was simple: he wanted money. He could have had money back home if he had stayed and worked in his family’s company, as his father could have given him high positions without him needing to work much to get them. However, due to American culture, he wants to go east as this is viewed as more prestigious. Also, in line with the American dream, he wants to make his own money, i.e., he wants his fortune to come from his own work. After describing how his home had become boring and rugged to him, Nick mentions how “[e]veryone I knew was in the bond business, so surely it could support one more single man” (Fitzgerald 9). To go into the bond business was yet another way for him to set himself apart from his family, but he did still have friends who were in the business and could therefore maintain a social network. To do this Nick rents a small house in West Egg and buys several books on the selling of bonds. By not formally educating himself Nick can later claim to be self-taught. This would then bring him more status if he can sell just as well as the formally educated bond salesmen as he would seem more talented than them. He describes how the books stood on his shelves, “waiting to bestow their secrets unto me” (Fitzgerald 10).

After a few weeks in New York Nick gets invited to visit his “second cousin once removed” (Fitzgerald 11), i.e., Daisy. Tom, whom Daisy lives with, Nick has known since college. Nick describes Daisy in a very positive light, while he mentions many of Toms flaws. This shows how he values Daisy over Tom. He goes on to describe how Tom looks and briefly how he acted in college:
Tom was sturdy, straw-haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining, arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face, and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward ... you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body. ...We were in the same senior society, and while we were never intimate I always had the impression that he approved of me and wanted me to like him with some harsh, defiant wistfulness of his own. (Fitzgerald 13).

His description reveals how Tom is physically intimidating to people around him and seems to seek Nick’s approval. A possible reason for this could be that Nick was unclear on his opinion of Tom and thus made Tom uncertain on whether to approve of him or detest him. At Daisy’s house, Nick is also introduced to Jordan Baker, a female professional golfer. Daisy tries to match-make them. Nick is at first hesitant but later in the novel he tries to court Jordan a few times, eating lunch with her and going to parties with her. Ultimately their relationship goes nowhere and they drift apart. Nick ends their relationship at the end of the novel when he chooses to distance himself from East egg society as he has come to view it as hollow and false.

When Nick meets Gatsby for the first time he is very intrigued by him and the two become close friends as the novel progresses. Nick is one of the few characters who learns who Gatsby really is, including his true parents, what he did during the war, how he learned to act like upper class people and how he earned his fortune through crime. While this does initially tarnish Gatsby’s image, Nick quickly sets it right by mentioning how Gatsby’s hopeful dreams put him above the other members of the upper class. This is caused by his bias in favour of Gatsby. Since Nick admires Gatsby’s qualities as a dreamer he is willing to overlook flaws that he might not overlook in other people. For example, both Tom and Gatsby boast about their possessions in an attempt to have the possessions sign-exchange value transferred unto them. When Tom does this Nick describes it in a negative light. However, when Gatsby does it Nick compares it to a play or a performance which catches his attention.

Nick is an odd person in this society as he frequently mingles with the upper class despite not belonging to it. Max Weber comments on this kind of situation: “The class position of an officer, a civil servant or a student may vary greatly according to their wealth and yet not lead to a different status since upbringing and education create a common style of life” (36). This exemplifies the fact that there are other factors involved in determining status in addition to social class. So while Nick is technically middle class, due to his status of upper class heritage and upper class friendship he is allowed to mingle with them. This could explain why he favors Gatsby so heavily, as neither are from the upper class.
Towards the latter half of the novel Nick becomes weary with Gatsby’s and Tom’s affairs. This causes him to work less and drains him of energy, which leads to his relationship with Jordan failing. After Gatsby’s murder Nick grieves because the man he saw as the greatest dreamer in the world died without fulfilling his dream. This goes against Nick’s belief in the ideology of the American dream, because to his mind the greatest dreamers are born to succeed, yet Gatsby did not. Daisy and Tom’s lack of interest in Gatsby’s death makes Nick bitter and he indirectly accuses Tom of manipulating George into murdering Gatsby. Tom denies this, saying he “told him the truth” (Fitzgerald 185), but Nick remains sceptical. He realises that Tom does not know that it was Daisy, not Gatsby who ran over Myrtle. He had thought that Daisy cared for Gatsby, but he now realises that because of her upper class upbringing and lack of empathy for lower class people she will not come to his funeral.

When the Buchanan family moves west Nick sees this as them running away from the pain they have caused. He details how their money has made them less emotionally capable human beings. When Nick feels sad he deals with it, while Tom moves someplace else in order not to have to deal with the emotion. Nick’s reacts quite negatively to this difference between himself and Tom. He starts to feel that not only Tom, but the upper class as a whole as careless people (Fitzgerald 186). Also, out of all of Gatsby’s friends, Nick is the only one to stick around and organise the funeral. This shows how shallow the relationships between Gatsby and his guests truly were as they all make excuses not to come to the funeral. Dieng also offers some insight into why Gatsby’s guests and acquaintances do not want to attend the funeral:

In The Great Gatsby, the unyielding long for life and happiness has negatively impinged on people’s perception of death and funeral. Death has turned into a tragedy and nobody wants to hear something of the kind. That is why Fitzgerald’s reader is unavoidably taken aback by the attitudes of Gatsby’s former collaborators and supposedly friends. Whereas in happy moments they all agree to cooperate and befriend Gatsby, there is a general reluctance to take part in his mourning ceremony. (103)

She goes on to make another analysis of this part of the novel, but more concerning how the style affects the mood. This shows how saddened Nick is by Gatsby’s death and how he has a hard time understanding why no one wants to come to Gatsby’s funeral. Dieng brings up how there is a stark contrast between this much sadder part of the book and the other happier events: “Life in this part of the novel, is inactive and morose”, unlike for example the parties which were vibrant and wild. In this kind of setting, many of Gatsby’s friends leave him as their friendships are revealed to be superficial. Amongst everyone who knew Gatsby, only Nick Carraway stays by his side. This is despite him being one of Gatsby’s newest friends (Dieng 104).
At the end of the novel, Nick’s view of New York and its upper class citizens has changed. He no longer sees a city filled with opportunities and beautiful glamorous parties. Bickwell explains Nick's sentiment: “an image of an action symbolizing hollow lives and empty relationships. In this sordid orgy, the sham camaraderie of whiskey only emphasizes the absence of any really human or humane contacts” (2). Nick only sees a broken society that lies to the lower and middle classes about their possibilities in life by making it so hard for them to reach the top that they have to turn to crime to even have a chance. And even when they’ve broken the law to get to the top, they aren’t really at the top because they are new and thus not as “legitimate” as upper class people who inherited their fortunes. This goes against everything Nick thought about the American dream before the novel and convinces him that he needs to leave New York. However, amidst all the events of the novel the reader easily forgets why Nick originally came to New York. He came to make money in the bonds business. While Nick only mentions his job in passing, he still tells us that he is not selling a lot of bonds. In other words, he is failing at earning his own fortune separate from his family. As we’ve seen Nick believes in the American Dream, that if he puts in the required work he will be rewarded. As his relationships with Gatsby and the Buchannan's drain him, he only makes a few sales. So not only does he see his American dream fail, but he also fails at his original goal of making his own fortune. This then adds to his disgrace as he leaves New York.

All of the characters I have included in this essay have one thing in common. They are all sad or frustrated, or both, because the society they live in cannot fulfill their needs even though society created that need in them. Daisy is unhappy because she cannot have a love-filled marriage or be a perfect mother to a perfect child. These stops her from reaching the highest position of socioeconomic power and fulfill the role which her society’s ideology has given her. Tom is unhappy because he is not popular, he is not considered old money by Eastern Americans. This lack of socioeconomic power and acceptance frustrates him to no end along with his lack of authority over Daisy, whom according to the ideology of the ideal family at the time, should be subservient to him. Myrtle and George have clear motivations; they both want to leave the valley of ashes as they have both realized that they cannot advance further in society if they stay. However, Myrtle is only looking out for herself while George still adores and cares for her. Myrtle no longer loves him and seeks to marry herself into the upper class as a shortcut while George toils away to make enough money to move westward. Finally there is Nick, who starts out as a hopeful and ambitious man who came to New York to make money. However, he finds that the conflicting ideologies around him, coming from mainly from Gatsby and Tom, drain him. In this drained state he is unable to work and date with any success. This leads Nick to not only give up on his job, but the New York’s upper class as well.

All of these people started out looking for something that they did not or could not have, and they were all denied it. Daisy affair ended in tragedy. Tom’s mistress Myrtle died. George kills himself
after losing Myrtle and killing Gatsby to get revenge. Nick is drained of all his hope and ambition by the people and society around him until his dream has turned into a twisted perversion of itself and he cannot stand it anymore. All of it because the commodified society they lived in gave them desires that they could not fulfill, which brought them unhappiness and pain.


