

4-1-2013

The Mask of the 'American Dream'

Saraswathi Nookala '15

Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2013>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nookala, Saraswathi '15, "The Mask of the 'American Dream'" (2013). *2013 Spring Semester*. Paper 1.
<http://digitalcommons.imsa.edu/spring2013/1>

This Sophomore Award Winner is brought to you for free and open access by the Award for Excellence in Expository Writing at DigitalCommons@IMSA. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2013 Spring Semester by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@IMSA. For more information, please contact pgarrett@imsa.edu, jean@imsa.edu.

Sara Nookala

Hancock

Lit. Ex. 2

February 9, 2012

The Mask of the 'American Dream'

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* are heralded as some of the greatest insights into human nature in American literature. Both authors ask the reader to scrutinize the actions and emotions of the characters in their books to understand the true meaning behind their double-sided statements. From analyzing the characters of Tom and Daisy Buchanan and Lambert Hutchins, the reader can conclude that although they have the inordinate amount of wealth everybody in America works toward, they are dissatisfied, and use their money and aristocratic position to project the exterior of contentment. Fitzgerald and Masters believed 'the American Dream' never led to happiness; those who achieved materialistic success never attained fulfillment, but rather struggled to maintain the appearance of it.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan's family is "enormously wealthy" and he had moved "to the east in a manner that rather took your breath away" (Fitzgerald 6). Yet, despite all this money and apparent security, Tom has a need to put others down to feel in control. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is Tom's physical abuse of people, which Nick describes as his "sturdy physical egotism" that "nourished his peremptory heart" (20). When Tom's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, repeats Daisy's name over and over again in a fit of jealous pique, greatly annoying Tom, he "with a short deft movement...broke her nose with his open hand" (37). Furthermore, he attempts to establish himself as an intelligent, superior man when he says,

“these books are all scientific...it’s up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things” (13). When Tom feels as if he is better than others, he feels as if all is well in his world. Furthermore, Tom is unnecessarily extravagant to show that his life is wealthy, carefree, and ideal. For Daisy’s wedding present, he buys her “a string of pearls valued at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars” (76). Why would he buy Daisy such a pricey gift? He certainly did not love her, as he slept with a maid a few weeks into their marriage. His actions clearly show he gives her such an expensive present as a show of grandeur to the world. Tom tried to appear happy, yet his actions are more of a show than a true expression of joy.

Daisy Buchanan, Tom’s wife, attempts to seem like a successful woman, like she is happy living ‘the American Dream,’ but in fact she has only wealth and a showpiece daughter and not much else to show for her life. Much like her husband, Daisy comes from a wealthy family and, in the eyes of society, led a “rich life,” in “her rich house” (Fitzgerald 149). When Daisy got tired of waiting for Gatsby-her letters began to take on “a quality of nervous despair”- she married the excessively wealthy Tom Buchanan, wanting “her life shaped now, immediately- and the decision must be made by some force-by love, of money, of unquestionable practicality” (151). However, despite her wealth, and living in the “fashionable East Egg,” she is not happy due to Tom’s extramarital affairs (5). Daisy expresses her despair in her marriage when she says to Nick about her daughter, “I hope she’ll be a fool-that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (17). Daisy feels that it would be better if she were ignorant about her husband’s affairs, and therefore happy. She attempts to appear constantly jovial and charming, as evidenced by her flirtatious and witty comments, to mask her unhappiness. Her opening line in the novel “I’m p-paralyzed with happiness,” coupled with her “absurd little laugh,” marks her attempt to brush over all that is wrong in her life because she initially wants to

give Nick Carraway the impression that she is content, as she does with most people she doesn't know well (8). However, her choice of words—"paralyzed"—suggests that she is stuck in checkmate; to appear happy, she must remain married to Tom; however, she is unhappy with him. Furthermore, Daisy, tries to make herself seem more successful, and as if her world was more whole, to Nick and Jordan, people who know what a miserable life she leads, by showing off her daughter like a prize dog: "'Bless-ed pre-cious,' she crooned, holding out her arms. 'Come to your own mother that loves you'" (117). The manner in which Daisy summons her child is much like how a girl summons her favorite puppy. Daisy then says, "Stand up now and say how-de-do," and her daughter politely shakes hands with Nick and Gatsby, like a dog trained to perform a charming trick (117). Daisy goes on to artificially fawn over her daughter, saying "She doesn't look like her father...she looks like me. She's got my hair and the shape of my face" (117). Daisy tries to make it seem as if she has a close relationship with a daughter that she adores, but in fact is using her daughter as a symbol of success.

Lambert Hutchins, from *Spoon River Anthology*, made an effort to look rich and happy, made an effort to seem as if his 'American Dream,' was fulfilled, but when he tried to marry off his daughter it became obvious that despite all his pretenses, money could not buy happiness. Lambert was a politician who strived to earn him and his family a position in society. He built "the mansion" and had another grand house, "on the lake-front in Chicago" (Masters 142). Yet, as desperately as he tried to ensure the security of his daughters, they "...married madly, helter-skelter," (142) one to a man, as evidenced by his daughter Lillian Stewart's epitaph, who was a gold digger. He questions the value of his financial and social security when he says "And what was the whole of this damn business worth? Why, it wasn't worth a damn!" (142) and realizes he is discontent with his life. It is revealed in the epitaph of Lillian Stewart that "...my father's

fortune was little besides it [the house]” (143). He built the house, trying to appear wealthy, creating a false sense of financial and social standing, a false sense of his own fulfillment.

Fitzgerald writes a line describing the endless pursuit of the American Dream: “these reveries... were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing” (Fitzgerald 99). Those who pursued or achieved ‘the American Dream,’ found themselves facing reality, found themselves facing the fact that the rock of the world was not founded on a fairy’s wing, but rather on a the wing of a deceptive moth, that shimmered as its wings lay wide for the world, but underneath was gray. Fitzgerald and Masters used the characters of Tom, Daisy, and Lambert, trapped people seeking ways to relieve themselves of their dream turned nightmare, as a vehicle for the idea that the apparent success of those who achieved the ‘American Dream’ was in fact a ploy to appear content, a mask to hide their unhappiness.

Works Cited

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. Print.

Masters, Edgar Lee. *Spoon River Anthology*. New York: Penguin Putnam, Inc, 1992. Print.

