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The Color of the American Dream in The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is often celebrated as the quintessential American novel, a portrait of ambition, wealth, and illusion during the Jazz Age. In classrooms and scholarship alike, the novel is commonly read through the lens of class, wealth, and the myth of the American Dream. Because of this, it is important to analyze it through a lens that is less observed compared to its popular counterpart of class. Beneath the glittering parties and tragic romance lies another, underexplored theme: the role of race and ethnicity in shaping who is allowed access to the dream of upward mobility. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT), this essay argues that *The Great Gatsby* portrays race and ethnicity as invisible yet central determinants of social belonging in 1920s America, ultimately revealing why the novel needs a critical update today, because its version of the American Dream is an exclusive ideal reserved for dominant white privilege.

The 1920s marked a major paradox in American race relations. On one hand, Black culture flourished during the Harlem Renaissance, and jazz, a distinctly African American art form, became the soundtrack of the decade. Yet at the same time, Jim Crow laws entrenched segregation across the South, the Ku Klux Klan resurged as a powerful political force, and pseudoscientific theories of racial hierarchy gained legitimacy in mainstream discourse. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, a novel immersed in the glamour of the Jazz Age, reflects these

contradictions. While the narrative sparkles with images of luxury, parties, and jazz-infused nights, it is also marked by an absence: Black Americans appear only fleetingly, often as entertainers or anonymous figures at the margins. Furthermore, policies like the Immigration Act of 1924 drastically curtailed immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe, codifying a hierarchy of belonging that privileged whiteness, particularly Northern European ancestry. This tension illustrates how the novel simultaneously acknowledged cultural diversity while reproducing the exclusions of its social context.

To understand how these exclusions work beneath the surface of the text, Critical Race Theory offers a crucial intervening lens. In his examination of CRT, Roy L. Brooks explains how race influences the distribution of opportunities and how seemingly neutral social systems reinforce existing racial hierarchies rather than operating fairly for everyone (Brooks). Brooks demonstrates that racial inequality goes far beyond individual prejudice and becomes embedded within society's institutions, allowing certain groups to maintain social and economic advantages while others face structural barriers (Brooks). When applied to Gatsby, Brooks's framework challenges the traditional assumption that the American Dream offers equal opportunity to anyone willing to work hard. In East Egg and West Egg, belonging is controlled by whiteness. The novel assumes that the true elite, Tom, Daisy, Jordan, and even the nouveau riche like Gatsby himself, are white. Their whiteness is rarely questioned; it is the unremarked default of who belongs and who can partake in luxury and cultural prestige. Even though Black jazz music fuels the excitement of Gatsby's parties, Black musicians remain unnamed background ambiance, excluded from the narrative's inner lives.

Beyond structural omission, the novel directly engages with 1920s anxieties surrounding race and ethnic difference. As scholar Peter Gregg Slater argues in "Ethnicity in The Great Gatsby," ethnic identity is an essential element of the novel that deserves serious attention beyond surface-level discussions of Fitzgerald's personal prejudices (Slater). Rather than treating references to background and ethnicity as incidental details, Slater shows how ethnic differences actively shape characterization and reflect the deep social tensions of the 1920s (Slater). The most explicit articulation of this racial hierarchy comes from Tom Buchanan in Chapter 1, where he invokes eugenicist thought almost verbatim from Lothrop Stoddard's The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy. Tom warns, "Civilization's going to pieces... Have you read 'The Rise of the Colored Empires' by this man Goddard?... The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved" (Fitzgerald 12-13). He continues, "This idea is that we're Nordics... and we've produced all the things that go to make civilization oh, science and art, and all that" (Fitzgerald 13). By claiming sole ownership of civilization's achievements, Tom draws a strict racial boundary around who counts as a legitimate American.

This policing of ethnic and racial boundaries appears throughout the novel's treatment of outsiders. For example, in Chapter 4, Nick describes seeing "a limousine... driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry" (Fitzgerald 69). Nick’s laughter and the description of their "haughty rivalry" mark this moment as both comic and unsettling, signaling a perceived reversal of the racial order. He immediately reflects, "Anything can happen now... Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder" (Fitzgerald 73), linking Gatsby’s

improbable social rise to this fleeting disruption of racial norms. Equally troubling is Fitzgerald's depiction of Meyer Wolfsheim, Gatsby's business associate, who is described as "a small, flat-nosed Jew" with "tiny eyes" (Fitzgerald 69). Following Slater's analysis of how ethnic differences mark characters as outsiders in the 1920s social environment (Slater), Wolfsheim is cast as fundamentally alien and morally corrupt, whereas Tom Buchanan's corruption is insulated by his aristocratic Anglo-Saxon status.

Even when a character like Jay Gatsby manages to accumulate massive wealth, his story reveals that money alone cannot dismantle these entrenched hierarchies. In "Gatsby: False Prophet of the American Dream," Roger L. Pearson argues that Fitzgerald presents Gatsby as a "false prophet" because his pursuit of success becomes centered on hollow materialism rather than genuine fulfillment (Pearson). As Pearson notes, although Gatsby achieves financial success, he ultimately fails to attain the happiness and social acceptance he desires, reflecting how materialism has corrupted the original promise of the American Dream (Pearson). While Pearson frames this failure primarily around class and corrupted ideals, connecting his argument to Roy L. Brooks's critical race theory shows why Gatsby's mobility is so strictly capped (Brooks). Gatsby tries to reinvent himself and erase his past, even changing his name from James Gatz, to fit into the elite world of East Egg. Yet Tom Buchanan still rejects him as an outsider, proving that the gatekeeping mechanisms of privilege rely on inherited status, background, and racialized social norms that money cannot simply buy.

Some critics might argue that *The Great Gatsby* is strictly a novel about economic class division, old money versus new money, and that reading it through Critical Race Theory forces

modern racial politics onto a story about wealth. They might also point out that Gatsby's downfall stems from his own criminal bootlegging and obsessive illusions about Daisy rather than systemic inequality. However, as both Slater and Pearson demonstrate, class status and ethnic identity in the 1920s were deeply intertwined (Slater; Pearson). Gatsby's desperate need to fabricate an Oxford education and mask his origins proves that the social system offered no legitimate pathway for outsiders. Furthermore, while the novel critiques the carelessness of the rich, Fitzgerald leaves intact the racial hierarchies that define who is even allowed to dream. Even the Valley of Ashes, described as a "fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens" populated by "ash-grey men" (Fitzgerald 23), serves as a dumping ground for marginalized laborers erased from the elite dreamworld.

Ultimately, *The Great Gatsby* requires a critical update because its depiction of the American Dream, though celebrated as universal, is built on exclusion. Through Tom Buchanan's eugenicist rhetoric, the caricature of Meyer Wolfsheim, the spectacle of the limousine scene, and the silent backgrounding of Black jazz musicians, Fitzgerald's novel mirrors the systemic barriers of the Jazz Age. Applying Roy L. Brooks's Critical Race Theory alongside Slater's and Pearson's analyses exposes how the myth of equal opportunity often masks structural privilege (Brooks). While the novel effectively critiques the moral decay of wealth, recognizing its racial and ethnic blind spots allows modern readers to challenge the ongoing illusion that success in America is determined by hard work alone.

Annotated Bibliography

BROOKS, ROY L. “CRITICAL RACE THEORY.” *Racial Justice in the Age of Obama*, Princeton University Press, 2009, pp. 89–108. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7pfsm.9. Accessed 4 Nov. 2026.

This chapter explores the concept of critical race theory and its relationship with systemic power structures, racial inequality, and social institutions. The author, Brooks examines how race influences the distribution of opportunities and how seemingly neutral systems can reinforce existing racial hierarchies. The chapter provides a framework for understanding how racial inequality operates beyond individual prejudice and becomes embedded within society. Through examining the relationship between race and power, Brooks demonstrates how certain groups maintain social and economic advantages while others face structural barriers. This perspective challenges the idea that society offers equal opportunities to everyone, regardless of their racial background. I think this source will be valuable to my research because it provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing *The Great Gatsby* through critical race theory. Specifically, I want to explore how the American Dream is presented as an ideal of equal opportunity despite the racial and social hierarchies that limit who can achieve it. Brooks's discussion of systemic inequality can help me examine how power and privilege shape access to wealth and social mobility. I can use this framework to question whether the American Dream is genuinely attainable for everyone or whether it primarily benefits those who already occupy positions of social and racial privilege.

Slater, Peter Gregg. “Ethnicity in The Great Gatsby.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1973, pp. 53–62. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/440797. Accessed 4 Nov. 2026.

Slater's essay examines the significance of ethnicity and ethnic differences in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby. He argues that ethnic identity is an important element of the novel that deserves attention beyond discussions of Fitzgerald's perceived racism or antisemitism. Rather than treating these references as incidental details, Slater explores how ethnicity contributes to the novel's characterization and broader social commentary. His analysis highlights how ethnic differences influence the way characters are represented and perceived within the social environment of the 1920s. Ultimately, the essay emphasizes the importance of considering ethnicity when interpreting the novel's underlying social tensions. I think this source will be particularly useful because it directly examines the role of ethnicity in *The Great Gatsby*, allowing me to connect the novel's portrayal of race to broader systems of social inequality. Slater's analysis can help me explore how ethnic identity influences characters' positions within society and how certain groups are viewed as outsiders. I am especially interested in connecting these ideas to the American Dream and how race and ethnicity complicate the promise of social mobility. By combining Slater's literary analysis with critical race theory, I think I can examine how the novel reflects the racial and class divisions that existed in 1920s America.

Pearson, Roger L. “Gatsby: False Prophet of the American Dream.” *The English Journal*, vol. 59, no. 5, 1970, pp. 638–45. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/813939. Accessed 9 Nov. 2026.

Pearson's essay examines how *The Great Gatsby* portrays the American Dream through Jay Gatsby's pursuit of wealth, social status, and his idealized vision of Daisy Buchanan. Pearson argues that Fitzgerald presents Gatsby as a false prophet of the American Dream because his pursuit of success becomes centered on materialism rather than genuine fulfillment. Although

Gatsby appears to achieve financial success, he ultimately fails to attain the happiness and acceptance he desires. Pearson also explores how the novel reflects the decline of traditional American ideals, suggesting that the pursuit of wealth and material possessions has corrupted the original promise of the American Dream. I think this source will be useful to my research because it provides another perspective on how *The Great Gatsby c*ritiques the American Dream. Pearson's discussion of materialism and the pursuit of social status connects to my interest in how wealth and privilege influence an individual's ability to achieve success. I want to explore how Gatsby's financial success does not guarantee his acceptance into the upper class, demonstrating the limitations of social mobility. I can connect Pearson's argument to critical race theory by examining how the American Dream is restricted not only by class divisions but also by racial and social hierarchies.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby.* New York, Scribner, 1925.