

The quest for wealth and happiness in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby"

Vaci, Dajana

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Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku
Filozofski fakultet
Engleski jezik i književnost – Mađarski jezik i književnost

Dajana Vaci

The Quest for Wealth and Happiness
In F.Scott Fitzgerald's
The Great Gatsby

Završni rad

Mentor (doc.dr.sc.Sanja Runtić)
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Abstract

In his novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925) F. Scott Fitzgerald places a great emphasis on the characters' social status, and the corresponding level of power or weakness it denotes in society. Moreover, the author highlights the issue of the characters' never-ending quest for wealth, which is seen as the only basis of their lives. At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to the character of Nick Carraway, the narrator, who comes to East Egg in search for a better job. Nick represents a member of the working class, a common man who has to earn for his living. Thus, the idea of the quest for financial security is stated at the very beginning of the novel. The first chapter also introduces Jay Gatsby, who is described as a well-off, successful man. The character of Jay Gatsby encompasses all types of pursuits; he struggles to obtain a status of a well-to-do person, while at the same time he unsuccessfully searches for joy and his long-lost love. He, as well as Tom and Daisy Buchanan, blindly believe that one's position in society depends on a person's wealth. Tom and Daisy Buchanan stand for clear examples of opulent members of higher class, who never seem to have enough money to buy what they truly lack. All in all, the novel deals with money and the consequences it has on people. These are seen through greedy and corrupted people, who always want more. The novel also challenges the question of social class and the distinctions felt between people of different status. *The Great Gatsby* is all about money, the pursuit of wealth and possessions.

Keywords: *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald, social status, wealth, happiness, money

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Introduction

In the novel *The Great Gatsby*, “[s]et in America’s Jazz Age, Fitzgerald creates a world of money, power, corruption, and murder” (Hickey). In other words, a great emphasis is placed on characters’ social status, and the corresponding level of power or weakness it denotes in society. Moreover, the author brings to the spotlight the issue of characters’ never-ending quest for wealth, which is seen as the only basis of their lives. At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to the character of Nick Carraway, the narrator, who comes to East Egg in search for a better job. The first chapter also introduces Jay Gatsby, who is described as a well-off, successful man. However, a certain degree of doubtfulness in Gatsby's background seems to exist in this portrayal. In addition to these characters, we are introduced to Tom and Daisy Buchanan, who stand for clear examples of opulent members of higher class. In his work “The Great Gatsby”, Witkoski explains: “In a sense, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about identities, as each of its major characters struggles to find or create himself or herself as an independent figure in twentieth-century American life”. This paper will look at these struggles from a closer perspective, and also exemplify how the struggles represent each character’s personal pursuit of wealth, prosperity, pleasure, or true love.

I. The Narrator-Protagonist

The novel opens with Nick Caraway's explication of his coming to East Egg. He decides to move there in order to learn bond business, as "the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe" (Fitzgerald 4). Nick represents a member of the working class, a common man who is forced to earn for his living. Thus, the idea of the quest for financial security is stated at the very beginning of the novel. Coming to the East, Nick is faced with "the promise and hollowness of wealth" (Witkoski). His cousin, Daisy and her husband Tom confirm this statement. At first, Nick is taken aback by their wealth, but afterwards, he realizes that all the money they have does not imply they are happy. Nick is contrasted to them since he is of a much lower status than they are. Tom Buchanan was one of the most important football players at New Haven, who reached the peak of his career at the age of twenty-one. Besides this, "even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach" (Fitzgerald 6) due to his well-standing family. Even Nick finds it hard to believe that Daisy and Tom are "wealthy enough to" (Fitzgerald 6) constantly move to fashionable places, or to spend heaps of money on their caprices. The class distinction is best seen in the places they live in. It can be said that the "houses serve to define other characters as well, in particular Nick and Daisy" (Donaldson). Nick's house is situated in the less stylish part of the West Egg, and he himself calls it "an eyesore" (Fitzgerald 5). Tom and Daisy's house is just the opposite: "a cheerful red-and-white Georgian colonial mansion, overlooking the bay. (...) The front was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold..." (Fitzgerald 6). Obviously, as members of the higher class, the Buchanans are not concerned with the moneymaking process. Daisy and Tom's only concern is how to present themselves as rich people in the society, and to compete with other rich people. The only thing they care about are possessions. Therefore, they are not aware of the fact that money cannot buy them essential things needed in life, which results in their quest for happiness.

II. The Central Character of Jay Gatsby

Furthermore, the character of Jay Gatsby encompasses all types of pursuits mentioned earlier: he struggles to obtain a status of a well-to-do person, while at the same time he unsuccessfully searches for joy and his long-lost love. He, as well as Tom and Daisy Buchanan, blindly believe that one's position in society depends on a person's wealth. In this novel, it is obvious that characters are driven by self-conceived ideas of "idolatry and consumerism" (Donaldson), as they are mainly defined through their material status and love relationships. Gatsby grieves for Daisy, who is now married to Tom Buchanan. Even though all of the characters are greatly concerned with social status, one character's relation to money is brought to focus. It is Jay Gatsby who sees wealth as a means of achieving his boyish dream to win back his first love, Daisy Buchanan. However, "lost hope, the corruption of innocence by money, and the impossibility of recapturing the past" (Magill) will eventually designate Gatsby's tragic fate and break his lifetime longing.

Jay Gatsby is the protagonist around whom the plot of the novel builds up. Fitzgerald sets Gatsby in focus "by using Nick Carraway as the first-person narrator" (Witkoski). Bit by bit, Nick retells a story about Gatsby, mentioning at the beginning: "there was something gorgeous about him" (Fitzgerald 3). Moreover, Nick always approaches things he finds out about Gatsby with precaution, analyzing them in a realistic way. Therefore, he serves as "an honest, reliable person" (Witkovski).

Gatsby decides to survive in a rough world by obtaining a great fortune, and in that way create a better life for himself. His figure is wrapped in a cloud of mist; there is no reliable information about his personality, his origin, or his occupation. No one seems to know Gatsby personally, so Nick can only assume facts about him from the eccentric, fancy parties that take place every night at his mansion. After he attends one of the many parties thrown by Gatsby, Nick finds out that Gatsby is rumored to have killed a man; some even claim he was a German spy during the war; others say that he fought for Americans during the war years. Then, Nick converses with Gatsby, without knowing who he is. Through other people's eyes, Gatsby is seen as a person "eager to entertain his guests as extravagantly as possible. Frequently he is called away by long-distance telephone calls. Some of the guests laugh and say that he is trying to impress them with his importance" (Hickey). The reason people say this is because Gatsby organizes sophisticated parties, attended by people who "were not invited" (Fitzgerald 27). His

guests often amuse themselves without knowing who the host is, or they leave without having known the host. However, Gatsby puts a lot of effort in organization: he decorates his garden with colored lights; he has oranges and lemons delivered every Friday; the buffet tables are garnished with the tastiest foods. There is also an orchestra amusing guests throughout the evening. However, the guests are too ready to judge Gatsby and his attitude towards them, without having any personal relation to him. Unlike the rest of them, Nick does not believe the rumors so easily, and is instantly fascinated by Gatsby upon their first meeting. After he is acquainted with Gatsby, Nick finds a reassurance in his smile, and admits to himself that his preconceived opinion about Gatsby has proven to be true. Later on, he looks upon Gatsby as “an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd” (Fitzgerald 32). Clearly, Gatsby is a type of a person who leaves an impression of a dignified man, yet a man too obsessed with other people’s opinions.

As Donaldson states in “Possessions in *The Great Gatsby*”, “One’s house, one’s clothes: they do express one’s self, and no more than Jay Gatsby”. Obviously, knowing that people judge strangers on the basis of their appearance and clothing, Gatsby dresses lavishly and overtly displays his fashion style through his luxuriously decorated house. He even chooses his words with great carefulness, which proves his intention of leaving a certain impression on others, rather more, of a person refined in every aspect. However, Nick notices something artificial in his behavior because “Gatsby constantly errs in the direction of ostentation. His clothes, his car, his house, his parties – all brand him as newly rich...” (Donaldson). From Gatsby’s excessive demonstration of wealth Nick can infer that he has recently acquired it. Only later in the novel does Nick find out details about Gatsby’s private life and his past. Surprisingly enough, Gatsby has the need to justify himself to Nick, who is yet an absolute stranger to him: “I don’t want you to get a wrong idea of me from all these stories you hear” (Fitzgerald 42). This quote shows that Gatsby is absolutely aware of being falsely spoken of, and wants to present himself in a better light. After this, he exposes his origin and past to Nick, saying how he comes from a wealthy family, members of which are all deceased now. Unfortunately, Nick does not know that Gatsby’s confession is not true, and is intended only to hide his true origin. Furthermore, Gatsby claims to have been raised in America, but to have been educated at Oxford, since it is a long-standing family tradition. Nick notices his nervousness when talking about his past, as “he hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford’, or swallowed it, or choked on it, as though it had bothered him before” (Fitzgerald 42). Nick’s doubt increases even more when Gatsby states he

inherited a lot of money after all the members of his family had died. Continuing with his story, Gatsby talks about his numerous journeys, and his experience in the war. Besides this, he admits that during all these years he has been “trying to forget something very sad that had happened to [him] long ago” (Fitzgerald 42). This admittance of misfortune is the only thing Gatsby does not lie about to Nick. Afterward, at the end of their conversation, he draws Nick’s attention by telling him that he will share with him his sad story.

Later that day, Gatsby allows Nick to get an insight into his personal life. He takes Nick to lunch, where he introduces him to a friend of his, Mr. Wolfsheim. Throughout the conversation, Nick notices Mr. Wolfsheim’s cuff buttons are made of human molars. It is at this point that Nick realizes how some of his suspicions about Gatsby have been true after all. Mr. Wolfsheim explains how he met Gatsby, “a man of fine breeding (Fitzgerald 46)”, right after the war. In her article “The Great Gatsby”, Angela Hickey describes how during the conversation “Wolfsheim hints at some dubious business deals that betray Gatsby’s racketeering activities, and Nick begins to identify the sources of some of Gatsby’s wealth”. As Nick finds out that Wolfsheim set up the World Series in 1919, he becomes aware of the ways Gatsby has obtained his fortune. He senses Gatsby’s involvement in illegal activities similar to those of Mr. Wolfsheim, as they call each other business partners. “Despite Gatsby’s underworld past and associations...” (Heims), Nick continues to respect Gatsby, in part due to his compassion, and partly because he understands how it is to stay alive among people who are hungry for money.

III. The Affair with Daisy

After getting a picture of the ways Gatsby earns money, Nick also finds out the story about his past, and the reasons he decided to change his status in society. Jordan Baker, a friend of Daisy, reveals to Nick detail about Daisy's past. Jordan recalls how, almost five years ago, Daisy was "by far the most popular of all the young girls in Louisville" (Fitzgerald 48). On one occasion, Jordan saw her talking to a young lieutenant, and they "were so engrossed in each other that she didn't see [Jordan] until [she] was five feet away" (Fitzgerald 48). Jordan even remembered his name, and it was Jay Gatsby. In the years following that event, Daisy did not appear in public as often as she used to before. People claimed her mother prevented her from going to New York in order to say goodbye to a soldier, presumably Gatsby, who was going to take part in the war. By the next year, she was engaged to a man named Tom Buchanan. The thing that surprised Jordan was how peculiarly Daisy behaved at her own wedding. She became intoxicated, even though she almost never drank alcohol, and was crying bitterly over a letter she received. What is more, she even said she did not want to marry Tom because she had changed her mind. However, the wedding did take place, and Daisy never spoke of her breakdown after that. Jordan also describes how, all of a sudden, Daisy was "so mad about her husband" (Fitzgerald 49), when they came back from their honeymoon. All this leads us to conclude that Daisy could not marry the man she loved, the lieutenant Jay Gatsby, who is the same man as the mysterious, wealthy man Gatsby. The letter was apparently from Gatsby, but knowing she could not marry a poor soldier, she decided to say yes to a prosperous man. In one of the interviews with Fitzgerald, he summed up the character of Jay Gatsby, saying that he represents "the unfairness of a poor young man not being able to marry a girl with money" (Donaldson).

Gatsby's past life is of much importance to why Daisy could not marry him. Only in the middle of the novel are we informed that his real name is James Gatz, and that he changed it at the age of seventeen, hoping to become successful. In chapter Six, Fitzgerald reveals that "his parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people – his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all" (63). Young James Gatz was ashamed of his parents, and by discarding his family name, he alienated himself from the poverty it represented to him. Gatsby made it on his own: after having worked as a clam-digger, salmon-fisher, and even a janitor, he had the luck to become "the protégé of a wealthy old gold miner [Dan Cody, whom he] accompanied on his travels until the old man died" (Hickey). Gatsby inherited a fortune from

Cody, but unfortunately, it never came into his possession. He was now left without his parents, his protector, and money. When he returns from war, “the limitations of this background finally make it impossible for him to win the enduring love for Daisy Fay Buchanan” (Donaldson). Therefore, he “made his fortune the old-fashioned way: he stole it. Gatsby’s partner in crime, quite literally, was the sinister Meyer Wolfsheim...” (Cohen). Gatsby’s climb on the social ladder begins when he throws off his family name. At a young age, he sets his mind on success and wealth. All along his years of struggle for Daisy, he does not realize that it is actually wealth and happiness he is looking for. In Gatsby’s life, Daisy serves as a surrogate for the recognition in the world of rich.

Yet, Daisy’s and Gatsby’s love relationship turns out to be a tragic one, and we learn that Gatsby “has spent a lifetime working to get her back” (Cohen). Having acquired wealth through criminal deeds, he traces Daisy, and buys a house near hers. Gatsby’s plan is to get as close as possible to Daisy, and then impress her with his wealth. The means he uses to carry out his plan are the newly obtained “wealth, his mansion, his parties, his possessions, even his heroism” (Witkoski). It is through acquaintanceship with Nick that Gatsby plots to get into contact with Daisy. Namely, Nick will invite Daisy to a cup of tea, where Gatsby will appear as a completely different man from the one she used to know. The reason why exactly Nick is to invite Daisy, is because Gatsby “wants her to see his house” (Fitzgerald 51), since he is Nick’s next-door neighbor. Gatsby wants to evoke Daisy’s admiration with his magnificent mansion and possessions. The way he dresses up for the meeting also implies that he intends to knock Daisy off her feet with his classy apparel. He shows up “in a white flannel suit, silver shirt and gold-colored tie...” (Fitzgerald 54). Simply, Gatsby is concerned with every possible detail that might affect Daisy’s opinion of him. For example, he sends one of his men to cut off the grass of Nick’s lawn. In addition to this, he sends Nick flowers to decorate his house. The problem is that Gatsby relies too much on this plan, and wrongly believes that Daisy can be his again if he is rich enough. According to Decker, “Gatsby’s romantic ambition is, of course, to amass a fortune fantastic enough to win the heart of Daisy Fay...”. By choosing wealth to get Daisy back, Gatsby plays safe, since it was another man’s wealth that took Daisy away from him.

Gatsby and Daisy meet five years after they parted. He is vividly thrilled to bits, while Daisy displays some signs of uncertainty. However, she loosens up when Gatsby takes her and Nick to a tour through his house. Shiny and luxurious chambers of his mansion-like home enthrall her, and that is what Gatsby has secretly hoped for. At the end of the chapter, Nick

describes the change in the two of them: “His hand took hold of hers, and as she said something low in his ear he turned towards her with a rush of emotion. (...) They had forgotten me, but Daisy glanced up and held out her hand; Gatsby didn’t know me now at all. I looked once more at them and they looked back at me, remotely...” (Fitzgerald 62). This quote implies that the flame of old love starts to burn again. Besides that, we learn about Daisy's suspicion in her feelings for Gatsby. She is aware of the fact that he does not belong to her world anymore. Moreover, it reveals Daisy’s money-oriented side, since material possessions are more important to her than human values.

IV. Other Characters in Pursuit

After that, Gatsby makes a huge effort to overcome Tom. John F. Callahan claims, "...the struggle over Daisy is fought on the field of property." On the one hand, Gatsby is an example of a recently enriched person, whilst Tom always belonged to a higher class, the so called "old money" (Callahan). Indeed, Gatsby and Tom are competing unconditionally for Daisy's love. Nevertheless, this competition is not motivated by their true love since both of them are just trying to give an impression of being financially superior. According to Callahan, both for Tom and Gatsby "Daisy is a possession; for Buchanan material, for Gatsby ideal". As Tom's wife, Daisy functions as a pretty lady whom he displays at parties. Having a mistress – completely different from Daisy withal, he leads a double life. When Daisy uncovers his affair, he remains unconcerned and shows no repentance. Thus, Tom does not love or respect his wife. On the other hand, Gatsby sees Daisy as his "American dream, which used to be about attaining security for one's self and one's family and happiness..." (In context). Financial security, as well as security of family, is the thing Gatsby is thriving for. He is yearning for appreciation, love, and material prosperity. What is more, "he aspires to greatness, which he associates with Daisy" (Witkoski).

Not only does Gatsby aspire to fulfillment in all aspects of life, but also Daisy, Tom, and Tom's mistress Myrtle do. Just as Witkoski wrote, "they enter the novel as self-centered, essentially uncaring persons, obsessed with their own concerns and indifferent to the feelings and the existence of other people". Gatsby remembers Daisy as a clean-handed girl, but "instead, Daisy Fay turns fickle and self-indulgent" (Callahan). After he goes to war, Daisy pursues her own happiness since she is preoccupied with her future and position in society. Therefore, she chooses to secure herself by marrying a man who will offer her anything she wishes for. Evidently, this decision of hers deludes Gatsby into thinking he can win her with money. He does not realize that "his great love is a much more realistic, hard-headed character" (Witkoski).

Just like Daisy, Tom measures the worth of things according to their material value. For him, even the place where one lives influences on a person's social rank. That is why he confesses he would be a fool to live anywhere else than in the East, since East is equated with fashionable areas, and rich people. He is an egotist, a dominant figure, unsympathetic of his wife's feelings. This is reaffirmed in the manner he talks about his mistress: "The fact that he had one was insisted upon wherever he was known. His acquaintances resented the fact that he turned up in popular cafés with her and, leaving her at a table, sauntered about, chatting with

whomsoever he knew” (Fitzgerald 17). He does not find it morally wrong to have an illegitimate affair; on the contrary, he sees it as a social privilege that strengthens his position.

V. Myrtle Wilson

A further example of a character corrupted by money is Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress. She is a wife of a garage owner, George Wilson, on Long Island. Nick describes her "faintly stout, but she carried her flesh sensuously, as some women can. Her face (...) contained no facet or gleam of beauty..." (Fitzgerald 18). Being plump, it is with her sensuousness that she seduces Tom. As a wife of an unsuccessful mechanic, she "must cross a vast social divide to reach the territory of the upper class" (Donaldson). During their trip to New York, Nick notices that Myrtle changes her clothes several times in a day. For this reason, she tries to fit in, to present herself as a woman with style, behaving as if she were of the same social status as Tom. She delights in shopping, buying unnecessary things such as a gossip magazine, cold cream, and a flask of perfume. Moreover, she overdoes in some things. For example, she urges Tom to buy her "one of those dogs" (Fitzgerald 19), she also "let four taxicabs drive away before she selected a new one lavender-colored with gray upholstery" (18). Evidently, she wants to own and enjoy things that are in fashion, the ones that rich people have or can afford. The way she speaks is also seen as being characteristic of wealthier people: when Mrs McKee compliments her dress, Myrtle declares it is a dress she "slips it on sometimes when she doesn't care what she looks like" (Fitzgerald 21). Similarly to Daisy, Myrtle does not realize she is just one of Tom's "objects to be possessed" (Donaldson).

VI. Gatsby's Fall

Gatsby's fall begins on the hottest day of summer. The Buchanans, Nick, Jordan and him take a trip to New York. Romance between Gatsby and Daisy is so obvious; they even ride in the same car, separate from the others. When Daisy confesses love to Gatsby, Tom sees it and begins to understand what is happening. Having a mistress himself, jealousy that arises in him is unjustified: "He was astounded. His mouth opened a little, and he looked at Gatsby, and then back at Daisy as if he had just recognized her as someone he knew a long time ago" (Fitzgerald 75). Therefore, Tom deems of Daisy as of his possession because he does not become occupied with her until he finds about her affair. From that moment on, "Tom accuses Gatsby of trying to steal his wife and also of being dishonest" (Hickey). What is more, he underestimates Gatsby because of his family background, calls him a "bootlegger" (Fitzgerald 85) and accuses him of selling "alcohol over the counter" (85). This argument results in Daisy's choosing Tom over Gatsby, thus picking out an easier way, where she remains corrupted and captivated by money. Ironically enough, "his wealth and background win the battle for Daisy, despite his habitual infidelities – an outcome that seems not only grossly unfair but morally wrong..." (Donaldson). This argument proves several assertions. One of them is that, after all, all the characters are unconsciously caught in the relentless pursuit for wealth. The other one goes in Tom's favor, as a person's origin is of great importance to Daisy. Lastly, she is portrayed as a woman contradicting herself and the beliefs she stands for. She cannot estrange herself from Tom, or even worse, she does not want to. Nevertheless, she does not live a life of happiness and pleasure.

Even though her husband has a mistress, and she feels miserable in her marriage, Daisy betrays Gatsby. She suddenly changes her mind, saying she wishes all this to end. What she means by that is the end of her romance with Gatsby. Tom takes pleasure in his victory, "exulting and laughing" (Fitzgerald 87), he even makes Daisy and Gatsby drive home together, just to humiliate his opponent even more. On the ride back, Daisy runs over Myrtle, while driving Gatsby's automobile. Naturally, Tom and Nick assume it was Gatsby who drove the car. However, Gatsby confesses Nick that Daisy drove the car, but that he "is willing to take the blame" (Hickey) for her. Sadly, Gatsby is still hoping that Daisy will change her mind, and come back to him.

“When Myrtle Wilson's death places their world in jeopardy, husband and wife quickly abandon their 'loves' and retreat into the safety of money and privilege” (Witkoski). What is more, Daisy does not plead guilty, letting others believe Gatsby is the murderer. This uncovers her true nature – a woman unable to love, to sympathize, to place a person beyond possessions. Besides this, her obvious lack of worry for the man she recently claimed to love attests to her superficiality. Gatsby waits for her, worries for her, yet he is aware “he had certainly taken her under false pretences” (Fitzgerald 95). Due to this conclusion, he classifies her as being equal to snobbish rich people. In addition to this, he gradually becomes aware that she presented a symbol of happiness he wanted to achieve by winning her, and now “there is no happiness to pursue” (Callahan).

VII. Tragic Fate of Money-Diggers

At the end, the pursuits are unfulfilled. This ends so because "...people are often the opposite of what they appear to be..." (Heims). Daisy turns out to be money-grubbing, and in the end, her miserable state is the same as in the beginning. Similarly, Tom's character does not change as he remains a self-assured snob. The only person who chases after money at the risk of his failure is Gatsby. Also, to the end, he does not realize the effects money has made on him. Just like Daisy, he becomes caught in the world of corruption and consumerism. Only Nick undergoes a complete transformation. He "is a pendulum", that swings back and forth in order to show "biting realism and florid romanticism" (Barrett), that is the distinction between the West Egg and the East Egg. After Gatsby's death, Nick leaves the East, admitting that he is not part of it nor will he ever be. With this, his own pursuit for wealth is abandoned, and is replaced with the pursuit for happiness, which cannot be achieved in the East.

Conclusion

All in all, the novel deals with money and the consequences it has on people. These are seen through greedy and corrupted people, who always want more. Besides, the novel also challenges the question of social class and the distinctions felt between people of different status. *The Great Gatsby* is all about money, the pursuit of wealth and possessions. Consequently, money crazes people and forces them to seek various ways to obtain wealth. Gatsby's pursuit for wealth is depicted throughout the novel, seen as a pursuit for rewriting the past. Finally, it is this pursuit that causes his downfall, and his death. With broken dreams, it ends tragically, and does not offer any hope for either of the characters. However, besides these negative ideas, the novel also hides some thought-provoking questions. Namely, the novel can function as a warning, a cautionary tale for future generations of Gatsbies in pursuit of wealth. We should think over our ideals and the things we are striving for. Is it indeed true happiness we are looking for or have we become puppets of the corrupted, materialistic society of today?

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