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The Failed American Dream?
Representation of the American Dream in F.
Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ralph
Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Johan Åkesson

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Supervisor: Cecilia Wadsö-Lecaros

Abstract

The American Dream has been a central theme of American literature since the early nineteenth century. The American Dream has subsequently become a tool for depicting the uniqueness of America. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) are two classic American novels, depicting the American Dream in different social and racial contexts. This essay examines the representation of the American Dream in these novels, focussing in particular on Fitzgerald's characterisation and criticism of the consumerism of the 1920s, and on the themes of invisibility and racism in *Invisible Man*. The essay also considers the relationship between the protagonists of both novels and the liberal, capitalist American ideology, concluding that both protagonists suffer from a naïve and fatal belief in the American Dream.

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1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's iconic novel portraying the roaring 1920s has been the subject of ongoing literary research for decades. *The Great Gatsby* has been analysed as a tragic love story and its symbolism with references to American political, economic and social history is well-known. The novel's relationship to the American Dream has been noted by many researchers (Callahan, Keshmiri). I will expand on the discourse of the American Dream by not only looking at the representation of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* but also in another classic American novel. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is set during the 1920s and 30s, narrated by a nameless African-American protagonist who wishes to be seen and acknowledged in an America governed by white power structures. Opting for these two novels in a discussion of the American Dream allows me to discuss and analyse the Dream across racial and social lines as one novel is set among affluent white Americans and the other narrated by an African-American from the South journeying through the country trying to claim visibility in a society which does not acknowledge him.

The protagonists are of different ethnicities and exist in vastly diverse worlds, but their existence is directly linked to chasing their respective American Dream. My goal is not to compare the representation of the American Dream in a binary sense between the novels as different features of the Dream are represented. I aim rather to determine that even though aspects of the American Dream are represented differently, both novels show the failings of the Dream. Furthermore, both novels support the idea that if any individual fails to achieve their American Dream, then that failure is their own responsibility. According to the American Dream, financial and intellectual capital should in theory nurture success, whoever you are. The protagonists represent American liberal and capitalist ideology and their experiences offer a damning verdict on the opportunities for social mobility and happiness.

The cornerstones of what constitutes the Dream were expressed 150 years before the term was coined. In theory, the American Dream is supposed to be an accessible vision for every citizen of The United States. The Declaration of Independence announced by Congress in 1776 states that "we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (USHistory). Cullen defines the keywords equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as inherent components of the American Dream (5). In *The Epic of*

America (1931), the American historian and writer James Truslow Adams describes the American Dream as a dream:

of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. [...] It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman can be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognised by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (404)

The Dream's components, opportunism and a cemented belief in the good of life and the nation, become even more stringent when we acknowledge that his work was published during one of the most turbulent periods of American history. According to Samuel, the American Dream was a unifying vision that set the nation apart and became America's only influence on world civilisation (14). Consequently, the American Dream became an important symbol of American identity in a historical period marked by social, economic and political chaos.

Over the decades following Adams' work, the American Dream developed from a singular dream into multiple dreams – dreams of upward mobility, social equality and fame and fortune. In order to contextualise the American Dream's cemented role in American society and literature, this essay will include an overview of the American Dream within literature, followed by the representation of the Dream in *The Great Gatsby*. The focus will be on Jay Gatsby's disillusioned pursuit of the Dream and how Fitzgerald uses Daisy Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson to represent different aspects of the American Dream. Moreover, I will consider what aspect of the Dream Daisy represents for Gatsby, arguing that he desires her because she represents old money and the social class of which he aspires to be a part.

Invisibility, racism and the role of geographical representation in *Invisible Man* will be analysed in order to discuss how the American Dream is obstructed and unattainable for the novel's African-American narrator. Finally, the essay will recount for what the novels reveal about the failings of the American Dream where aspects of narration will be discussed.

2. The American Dream in Literature

The American Dream was originally based on religious themes but over time was gradually decoupled from religion to encompass social and financial opportunities for individuals, according to Cullen. The American Dream does not revolve around one single definition but includes “religious transformation, political reform, education attainment, sexual expression: the list is endless” (Cullen 7). The American Dream has been defined as “one of the motivating forces of American civilization” (Carpenter 5). Literature on the American Dream explains that the Puritans and the Founding Fathers created guidelines based on moral and liberalist ideas. Adams then interpreted these ideas and its primary document, the Declaration of Independence, and coined a term that gave a name to the ideas that define America’s national ethos. The early Puritan settlers were convinced that God lead them to North America where their New World was described as a promise land. Cullen claims that the Puritans’ sense of mission and their belief that the New World was deemed significant by God has influenced the way modern Americans think about their country and themselves as a prototypical nation for moral guidance and economic prosperity (17-18). John Winthrop’s *A Model of Christian Charity* from 1630 describes the Christian society’s colony as “a City upon a Hill” – a shining example to the rest of the world, adding to the view of America as a unique place (Kehl). Cullen explains that the American Dream had by the eighteenth century become separated from religious discipline and had become a dream of individual freedom. By noting the discrepancies and hypocrisies of the Declaration of Independence, Cullen points to the Founding Fathers’ belief in their natural aristocracy that allowed them to declare equality while still endorsing slavery and rejecting full citizenship for women.

The American Dream has since become a tool for depicting the uniqueness of America. Carpenter argues that the American Dream is what makes American literature distinct from English literature. The Dream is “always vaguely present but never clearly defined” which is the mythical ingredient that defines the American Dream as a motivating force of American civilization and therefore of literature as well (Carpenter 5). Even if the Dream has been reproduced willingly or unwillingly, if people have believed in its progressive force or “attacked this dream as delusion”, it has had a determining effect on American thinking and American writing (5).

Through American literature we can trace the American Dream as a representation of hope and idealism turned into disillusionment, depravity and falsity. Nineteenth-century writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman wrote of the emerging U.S. democracy and hymned man's love for the land. The dark side of the Dream emerged in literature from the mid-nineteenth century with writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James and Mark Twain who became disillusioned by a changing America and wrote of finance, capitalism, industrialism and social corruption. Twain's suggestion that the American Dream was flawed at its core was further explored during the early twentieth century by F. Scott Fitzgerald. It became a trend for twentieth-century writers to personify the Dream as a beautiful young woman such as Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, the beautiful but vacuous fairy girl of George F. Babbitt in Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1922) and Faye Greener in *The Day of the Locust* (1939). Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck have as modern American writers written about the Dream's hollowness. (Kehl)

Bennett and Royle bring up two historical arguments of literature where

[t]he historical context of a literary work – the circumstances surrounding its production – is integral to a proper understanding of it: the text is produced within a specific historical context but in its literariness it remains separate from that context. [...] [l]iterary works can help us to understand the time in which they are set: realist texts in particular provide imaginative representations of specific historical moments, events or periods. (113)

Both *The Great Gatsby* and *Invisible Man* are examples of these historical points. F. Scott Fitzgerald connects the American Dream to American history by describing his heroes as possessing ideas and having a drive that is typically American. Fitzgerald's predisposition to symbolism using colour patterns is drawn from periods of American history (Keshmiri 1298). For example, the green light that Gatsby sees across the bay where Daisy Buchanan lives which is a well-known symbol for money, envy and greed. The period of the 1920s is described by Fitzgerald as a period of foul values.

The discrepancies between old and new money on Long Island and the colliding worlds of New York City, as well as the valley of ashes and the lavish estates outside the big city, depicts an America of social divisions. *The Great Gatsby* stands as a symbolic discussion of life during the 1920s, where Gatsby's financial wealth should in theory entitle him entrance to the highest social class. Fitzgerald's novel shows that Gatsby represents the falsity of the Dream as his

desires can never be realised no matter how much money he has. In this sense, Gatsby personifies the dissolution of the American Dream in an era marked by accumulating wealth and material goods.

Ellison's protagonist, on the other hand, measures himself against the influential African-American leaders who fought to proclaim the minority's voice at the turn of the century. In the novel, an African-American interpretation of the Horatio Alger myth is discussed through the protagonist's ventures. Alger was a prolific American writer whose novels most often involved a "rags-to-riches" narrative which had a formative effect on American literature and society. Levine claims that "the nation was imbued with the notion that Man could progress according to the Horatio Alger model, that the individual moulds his own destiny" (24). Alger's work revolved around a teenage boy whose hard-working nature enabled him to escape poverty. However, it was often not the boy's diligent effort itself that rescued him from an impoverished fate but an unexpected act of honesty or bravery. Instead, Alger's protagonists might return a sum of lost money or salvage someone from an overturned vehicle which brought him and his predicament to the attention of a wealthy individual. Therefore, the Alger model can be applied to claim that a poor individual can try his best and work hard but ultimately, he is dependent on the financial aid of a wealthy outsider. The effort is there, and the American Dream is present in the individual's psyche but that might not lead anywhere without financial assets.

The protagonist of *Invisible Man* represents the African-American translation of the Alger model. The protagonist is influenced by Booker T. Washington, the educator and author who was a prominent leader in the African-American community during the late 1800's and early 1900's. Yarborough accounts for Washington's impact on African-American philosophy as "Washington presented a parallel paradigm: a young black boy, born a slave and raised in poverty, who achieved a position of power and celebrity through diligence, humility, integrity, and patience" (Yarborough 48). This contrasts to Alger's orphan protagonists who insured success through courage, honesty, determination and intelligence. Washington's ideas had an effect on African-Americans in a tremendous way but, according to Yarborough, must be "viewed in the context of the national emphasis on self-help current at the time of his rise to power" (47-48). Ellison's character's relationship to Booker T. Washington is expressed in a pessimistic fashion as will be shown below.

3. The Great Gatsby

I will focus on two aspects of the American Dream: Fitzgerald's criticism of 1920s consumerism and the different representations of the American Dream depicted through Myrtle Wilson and Daisy Buchanan; and the extent to which the protagonist's rise from poverty to immense wealth by dubious means represents Fitzgerald's depiction of the corrupted Dream. The desire to consume and to possess material things along with Jay Gatsby's pursuit of the American Dream are undoubtedly prominent themes of Fitzgerald's novel. As Gatsby reinvents himself as a multi-millionaire party host, his sole motivation is his desire to be with Daisy.

American values changed during the Roaring Twenties as white Americans were able to accumulate great wealth. Because of a rising advertisement industry, citizens were nourished with new ideas about the American Dream. The "blue and gigantic" advertisement hoarding of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg's "persistent stare" highlight the power of consumerism where the "one yard high" retinas "brood on over the solemn dumping ground" (Fitzgerald 16-17). America during the 1920s was a country where citizens started to compare material possessions with their own "self-worth", according to Batchelor (41). In *The Great Gatsby*, this is shown in the possessive behaviour of the protagonists with their large mansions and luxurious cars. Fitzgerald criticises the materialist outlook of his characters by depicting their lives as tragic and sorrowful as their material accomplishments fail to bring them happiness.

3.1 Daisy and Myrtle – Representations of the American Dream

Fitzgerald characterises Daisy Buchanan by linking her to previous definitions of the American Dream and depicts her as alluring without highlighting physical attributes. James Truslow Adams describes the Dream as a vision of a "better and fuller" life where one's "fullest stature" can be obtained (404). By marrying the wealthy Tom Buchanan, Daisy has reached the "fullest stature" and is "better and fuller" in the eyes of Gatsby. Moreover, she comes from a family of status and was born under "fortuitous circumstances of birth and position" (Adams 404). These traits, fitting perfectly into Adams' description, makes Daisy a desirable woman and links her to the American Dream. As mentioned earlier, a twentieth-century trend was for authors to

represent the American Dream through a beautiful woman. However, Fitzgerald depicts Daisy's characteristics not primarily in physical terms but instead shows that she possesses qualities which make her psychologically desirable. Her aura is described as that of an unattainable princess "in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl" with an "inexhaustible charm" and a voice "full of money" (Fitzgerald 76). These words liken Daisy to the most desirable woman on earth and adds a 1920s component to represent the materialistic age – her voice was "full of money" (76). Even though Daisy is described as a beautiful woman, it is what she represents that makes her so desirable. I argue that the core of Gatsby's American Dream is his desire to become a member of the highest social class. Daisy comes from a traditional American family, and she marries Tom Buchanan who is of similar stock. What a relationship with Daisy represents for Gatsby is not pure love, but his only way to penetrate the social class distinction and fulfil his American Dream.

This deceptive nature of Daisy can be read as a Fitzgeraldian criticism of the wealthy elite class. The narrator comments on Daisy's seemingly distant relationship with her own daughter, and after Gatsby's death takes notice of Daisy and Tom's retreat "back into their own money", "their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together" (Fitzgerald 114). In *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty*, Myers makes the argument that one will not find prolonged happiness by the accretion of material things. Instead, the individual will experience only a brief rush of gratification (135). Daisy is caught between her fiery relationship with Gatsby and the satisfaction of being financially immune thanks to her marriage. Schwartz has reviewed Myers' book and his claim that being rich "fills our bellies, but leaves us spiritually hungry" (Schwartz 74) is fitting for describing Daisy's choice between Gatsby and her husband. Fitzgerald's social criticism of the aristocracy on Long Island positions itself as an obstruction of the American Dream. Where others fail like Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson, Daisy manages to emerge from all events unharmed. Her choice of husband with his inherited wealth offer her financial security which enables her to remain "with an absolutely perfect reputation" (Fitzgerald 50).

Another characterisation that allows Fitzgerald to criticise the social structure of 1920s' America is Myrtle Wilson whose character demonstrates the American Dream's impact on the frenetic quest for wealth. Myrtle desires a richer and better life through escaping her husband and possessing material things. Regardless of whether Myrtle is subconsciously aware of the American Dream, she believes in the power of ownership, material things and their ability to

create happiness. Her fundamental belief in materialism may be why Fitzgerald dooms her flawed character by sentencing her to a cruel death. Myrtle's edgy character, free of inhibitions, is suggested from the moment she is introduced; her raw sexuality is expressed through her "immediately perceptible vitality [...] as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering" (18).

Callahan explores the manifestation of happiness in Fitzgerald's novel and brings up the connection between property and happiness (380) which is exemplified in the apartment on 158th Street where Myrtle's accumulation of material goods has created a room filled with oversized furniture (Fitzgerald 20). For the wife of a poor garage-owner, possessing material things seems to be the crucial factor to pursuing happiness. Material acquisition is also important for Gatsby, but as he reaches a position of great wealth, the qualitative quest for Daisy is of greater importance. Myrtle seems to be more obsessed with the quantity of her possessions. She appears to possess an embellished impatience towards the tediousness of life. This is shown when Myrtle lists all the items she says she has a need for such as 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" (25).

Myrtle's attitude towards spending money is representative of the increasing consumerism in the American post-war period. Myrtle's desire to purchase a dog collar while her husband fights for their economic survival is presumably a Fitzgeraldian criticism of the widespread American consumer hysteria and the widespread belief that the American Dream was a material one. Her affair with Tom offers an escape from her seemingly gloomy marriage with George into a world of richness where she can feel like she is sharing Tom's luxurious lifestyle. Her urge to take part in the culture of materialistic ownership (the over-furnished apartment, the dog collar, the perfume, the gossip magazines) is directly linked to the changing American Dream where Dreams of Consumerism and "Dream of Abundance" (Ownby) becomes essential in order to highlight one's extravagant way of life. Myrtle's consumerist behaviour is founded on her belief that consuming and owning things aligned with wealthy people is her only path to fulfil her American Dream. By depicting Myrtle as a slave to the American consumer society, Fitzgerald channels her fatalistic journey which results, just like Gatsby, in tragic death. Ultimately, Myrtle can accomplish her desire of owning material things just as Gatsby can uphold his mansion and luxurious cars, but they are both restricted from their American Dreams due to their inability to achieve social mobility.

3.2 Gatsby's pursuit of the Dream

The protagonist accomplishes one element of Cullen's definitions of the American Dream in the sense that "the American Dream was never meant to be a zero-sum solution: the goal has always been to end up with more than you started with" (Cullen, 159). Impressively, Gatsby acquires great wealth despite being born into a poor family of farmers. Cullen points to the fact that wealthy individuals acquire their riches not from salaries but from shares or investments. An individual acting solely for the sake of making money risks becoming blind and missing the deeper, more meaningful themes of the American Dream (160). As Gatsby becomes richer and richer in the quest for Daisy, his achievement becomes more about the acquisition of financial quantity than quality. The qualitative component Gatsby lacks is his Dream of being with Daisy, which would enable him to be labelled as a member of the traditional old money community.

Gatsby's obsession with Daisy and out-earning her husband Tom to financially and emotionally provide for her illustrates what Carringer defines as Gatsby's "indomitable idealism" and characterises a significant element of what constitutes a true American within American literature. Carringer believes that the self-made man is a vital component of the definitive American within American fiction. According to him, a true American is practical, energetic, shrewd and always with an eye on the future. Moreover, he adds specific qualities of Americanness which consists of an openness to experience, naturalness, inventiveness, indomitable idealism and a relentless will to achieve success (307). In Gatsby's pursuit of his Dream – his Daisy – his criminal acts aid him financially and create an image of him as the ultimate self-made man. Gatsby fits this description as a self-made man who shows creativity and possesses a will to succeed in order to show Daisy that he is worthy of her affection. However, Gatsby lacks certain qualities that Carringer mentions such as practicality and forward-thinking.

Gatsby's obsession with Daisy seems to cloud his mind, which denies him from thinking practically and coherently. Furthermore, Gatsby's obsession with his and Daisy's mutual past is a contrast to the self-made man's quality of always having an eye on the future, as is shown when Nick Carraway tells Gatsby that he cannot "repeat the past" and Gatsby suspiciously

replies that “of course you can” (Fitzgerald 70-71). Gatsby’s inability to redefine his relationship with Daisy after years apart is what dooms him from thinking and acting rationally. He relentlessly refuses to let go of the past where he and Daisy were involved in a meaningful relationship. Instead, Gatsby exists in his own illusion based on his shared history with Daisy and thus is not capable of altering his image of her as she is his “incorruptible dream” (Fitzgerald 98).

Gunn names Gatsby’s wonder and idealism a “tragedy” (175), stating that what kills him is his excessive illusions and dreams of a future with Daisy. When the awaited reunion between Gatsby and Daisy occurs in Nick Carraway’s house the narrator comments on Gatsby’s disillusioned mind as “Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion” (Fitzgerald 61). Daisy could have acted and spoken in the exact way she did when the two of them first meet and fell in love and still, Gatsby’s built-up image of her would convince his mind that she was not the same. The force of his illusion – his American Dream – takes over how he thinks and acts. As Gatsby cannot redefine himself without Daisy, he fails to realise what *Invisible Man*’s protagonist at last comprehends – that the individual must define his own identity in order to come close to an American Dream. This common point represents what was mentioned in the introduction: namely, that the failure of an individual to achieve their American Dream is to be attributed to the shortcomings of that individual rather than to those of the socio-economic system which they inhabit.

Gatsby’s traits show the duplicity of his character and the belief in the American Dream. His attributes are honourable and inspiring; however, in due course, the same characteristics result in his death, which defines Gatsby as a tragic protagonist. Fitzgerald’s fictional creation shows both an admirable and disillusioned protagonist. We see a hopeless romantic as well as a naïve fool. Gatsby’s perpetual hope and idealism are representations of the American Dream’s central components. Therefore, as his dream collapses what remains is the worthlessness of the aspiration for fame and fortune. Financial expectations also figure Gatsby’s romantic depression as he represents young men’s conviction that having money enables men easily to capture the woman of their dreams. The dichotomy of Gatsby can be interpreted as a dark side of the American Dream’s idealistic ideas, driven by the expectations of the upper class in the growing consumeristic American society.

4. *Invisible Man*

Ralph Ellison's 1950s novel *Invisible Man* depicts the misadventures of a nameless young African-American narrator from graduating high school to the intense race-tensions in Harlem. The protagonist's physical journey and psychological development is marked by his invisibility in society and the racist structures of early twentieth-century America. In the sections below, I will discuss *Invisible Man*'s eagerness to be acknowledged and the racism he suffers which obstructs his American Dream. Furthermore, I will bring up other factors which doom his prosperity, such as his naïve belief in geographical migration and respected leaders. *Invisible Man*'s themes of invisibility, racism and migration make it, as Yarborough puts it, "[o]ne of the more complex, multifaceted novels in twentieth-century American literature" which "reverberates with myriad themes and motifs central to the black experience in the United States" (Yarborough 47).

4.1 Invisibility and racism

The nameless narrator's journey can be discussed from the set of dreams that he aspires to fulfil. For the protagonist and his fellow college students, Booker T. Washington's rhetoric is a gospel of the American Dream. His influence is supposed to be a force of enlightenment but over time it is depicted more and more as blinding and restricting for the Invisible Man. The first example of this occurs when he quotes one of Washington's speeches as he addresses the white leaders of his college and fails to comprehend the racist exploitation he suffers. He and his fellow African-American students are objectified and dehumanised with their "uniforms pressed, shoes shined, minds laced up, eye blind like those of robots" (Ellison 36). During the Golden Day, the narrator is called "the mechanical man" and described as "a walking zombie" (94). Furthermore, the protagonist finds himself in a white cold hospital after a workplace accident with no memory of who he is. The doctors repeatedly ask him questions relating to his African-American origin and perform electric shock treatment which the doctor enjoyed as African-Americans "really do have rhythm" (231). The doctors' constant will to remind the protagonist of his origin as well as the event when the college leaders throw money on the ground for the

protagonist and his fellow African-American students to fight for expose the racist mindset towards African-Americans in the public sphere. Ellison begins his novel by letting his narrator and protagonist acknowledge that he “is an invisible man” who “might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me” (Ellison 3). The novel’s opening cements the belief that other people view the protagonist as a less intelligent human being because of his race, or that white people are not deemed by society to understand African-Americans because they are believed to have different minds.

Ellison’s portrayal of Washington and his persona is of importance as Sundquist points out that “[t]he chapters devoted to black college life are a means for Ellison to anatomize the racial and class hierarchy, assimilative pressure, disdain for folk culture, and personal aggrandizement that might also be found at a black college founded by Booker T. Washington” (18). The protagonist sees the college’s statue of Washington, showing him lifting a long veil from a slave’s back and eyes, but wonders if the veil is not actually pinched back down over the innocent slave’s face and chest (Ellison 36). This scene highlights a cultural cleansing of African-American colleges which Washington’s doctrine endorsed. Hughes notes that many “have been pretty well aware of the lack of personal freedom that exists on most Negro campuses” (cited in Sundquist 58). African-American students like Ellison’s hero exist in a context of absent cultural heritage where a lacking sense of freedom creates an indoctrination of young African-Americans to a mainstream American line of thinking which puts pressure on them to sway from their cultural identity. The protagonist in *Invisible Man* battles with his own identity and how society defines him in order to regain his feeling of freedom and visibility.

In the search for guidance, the protagonist is repeatedly let down by initially promising mentors. Instead of accepting Washington’s ideas and eagerly following them as the “black rite of Horatio Alger” (Ellison 111), he aspires to be like the school’s unnamed founder whose bronze statue fronts the college’s entrance. The Founder resembles Booker T. Washington but in the narrator’s eyes the Founder is his Messiah. After joining the Brotherhood, an activist group that commits to better social conditions in Harlem, New York, the group compare the protagonist to Washington, but the protagonist refuses this comparison and insists instead on being compared to the Founder as “[...] in the first place, the Founder came before him and did practically everything Booker T. Washington did and a lot more. And more people believed him” (306). The Founder represents a hope that can change society and represents the Invisible Man’s American Dream: the dream of social equality.

This dream, the protagonist eventually realises, is impossible to fulfil because of the racist ideology which rules society and defines him solely as African-American and therefore, incompetent. His search for philosophical guidance highlights the African-American search for identity in order to succeed. Booker T. Washington, the Founder and Dr Bledsoe, the President of the college, ultimately fail to offer salvation. Bledsoe is initially a source of great inspiration as he has become a leader in the black community and represents an idealised America just like the Founder, but the Invisible Man's idealisation breaks into pieces when he realises Bledsoe has been sending negative recommendation letters about him. The failed guidance represents the point that the American Dream must be defined individually and searched for within oneself, as a driven African-American is not allowed to aspire for success.

The protagonist believes that being acknowledged is a path to success, but his gullibility creates failure. As the protagonist witnesses an elderly African-American couple being evicted in Harlem, he makes an impassioned speech that incites the bystanders to oppose the law enforcement officials in charge. A member of the Brotherhood notes the protagonist's impressive rhetoric and urges him to become a part of the Brotherhood. The inspiring and influential Brother Jack satisfies the narrator's need for acknowledgement by suggesting that "[y]ou shall be the new Booker T. Washington, but even greater than he" (Ellison 307). The Invisible Man's need to be visible is perhaps most clearly expressed when he acknowledges that "I am what they think I am" (379), thus accepting the fact that perhaps he is forced to let other (white) people define him. The protagonist realises his potential as a thinker in the Brotherhood where he is recognised, visible and admired for his coherent thoughts and rhetorical abilities. Just like the gratifying emotions the narrator initially felt at college and the admiration he felt by Bledsoe, he feels similar in the Brotherhood's proximity until he realises that they hired him as a messenger for their white ideology. The group has been likened to the Communist Party (Prescott) as all individuals must surrender for the organisation's cause. The narrator struggles to see the intentions of people he meets as he is blinded by a naïve conviction that people are good-natured. For example, the way in which Bledsoe strips the protagonist's sense of masculinity as he goes from being a role model to an antagonist: "For three years I had thought of myself as a man and here with a few words he'd made me as helpless as an infant" (Ellison 144). The disappointments the protagonist faces make him realise that he cannot trust respectable leaders as they only reinforce the subordination of African-Americans in society.

Initially, the protagonist believes strongly that all it takes is “only to work and learn and survive in order to go to the top” (355). Even if we accept the fact that he truly does that, he fails to reach “the top” and instead ends up hiding away in his basement, thinking about his agonising dreamlike chronicles. His belief in the American Dream is destroyed because he exists in an unequal society – a fact he cannot change. The Invisible Man possesses the liberalist drive that the early American thinkers valued so highly but his blindness and the racist ideology which he exists in disillusions him. In similar fashion, Gatsby’s disillusion is caused by a personal deficiency, his blind love for the Daisy of his past, and a social structure – the hysteric quest for wealth. No matter how hard the Invisible Man tries to show his worth with rhetorical skills or hard labour white racists and social structures stand in his way.

4.2 Geographical Representation – Migration from South to North

Cullen claims that each version of the American dream is based on orientation and geographical location (160-161). For the Invisible Man, New York City and the district of Harlem is of great significance. He journeys to the big city in pursuit of a job and money to finance his education. His journey does not affect his development in the way he imagines but does prove valuable. Within American culture, the journey from east to west is often mentioned in terms of demographic and spiritual transformation or expansion. However, as Yarborough explains, for African-Americans “the dominant direction has been from the South to the North. Since slave time, when the captives sang of stealing away not just to heaven, but to Philly-me-York, the North has symbolized a place of both refuge and promise” (Yarborough 49).

Ellison’s protagonist migrates north with aspirations similar to those expressed in Emmett J. Scott’s “the Land of Hope” and “Northward Bound” even though this part of the country hardly was a promise land for African-Americans. The Invisible Man is warned of this fact by the vet on the bus to NYC: “That’s not a place, it’s a dream. When I was your age it was Chicago. Now all the little black boys run away to New York. Out of the fire into the melting pot” (Ellison 152). This warning does not sway the Invisible Man from his fantasy where he envisages himself outshining Dr Bledsoe as “shrewd, suave and dressed not in somber garments (like his old-fashioned ones) but in a dapper suit of rich material, cut fashionably, like those of the men you saw in magazine ads” (164). He sees himself returning to the South “full of New York

culture” (157) as a “younger version of the doctor, less crude, indeed polished” (164) with a distinct developed sophistication. He “would hardly ever speak above a whisper” but naturally “you couldn’t speak that way in the South, the white folks wouldn’t like it, and the Negroes would say you were ‘putting on’” (164). In NYC he “would have one way of speaking and another in the South. [...] If Dr. Bledsoe could do it, so could I” (164). Shortly after arriving to the big city the protagonist’s interest in money increases and especially its representation of power. His migration north is determined by the assets assigned to him which he believes is a sign of success however, he ignores that the messengers he looks up to are “chained to money” (Ellison 163). Yarborough believes that the protagonist is burdened “by a naïve optimism which dooms him from the outset to failure” (Yarborough 50).

5. Failings of the American Dream

In this section I will discuss the green light in *The Great Gatsby* as a symbol for the failure of the American Dream. Moreover, I will compare the novels in terms of narration as their narrative styles may have an influence on the representation of the Dream. *The Great Gatsby*’s version of the American Dream is the eagerness within people to reach towards something that is out of reach – something greater than themselves. Three instances of the green light symbolise its representation, and the American Dream. Firstly, in chapter one, the light is mysteriously described by the narrator. It is almost as if the narrator is not sure about where the light is coming from, or the light’s function as it is described by Nick Carraway when he “glanced seaward – and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock” (Fitzgerald 16). The vagueness and mystery of this description underscores the symbolism of the object. The light is undeniably a physical object in the novel but also, the light seems to stand for a philosophical idea.

Halfway through the novel, the light returns as Gatsby shows Daisy his estate:

"If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay," said Gatsby. "You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock."

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it

had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (60)

Here, instead of an almost magical light appearing in the distance the light is described as something of “colossal significance” that has been lost, or perhaps that a symbolic component has ceased to exist. The reason for this must logically be because Gatsby now is standing close to Daisy being able to physically touch her without stretching his arms towards a distant green light. The green light’s separation from its symbolic meaning can be read in a tragic sense as Gatsby seems to be mentally absent during this scene, ignoring Daisy as she puts her arm through his. I argue that Gatsby here realises that Daisy, and the green light and his American Dream, are all regular to him. Physical objects that were more attractive to him when he reached towards them from afar.

The final encounter with the green light is during the novel’s final paragraph where the light no longer remains a visible object.

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night. Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . And one fine morning –

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past. (115)

Gatsby is now dead, Daisy gone, and the narrator no longer resides in Long Island. The green light only exists in the narrator’s memories. Hence, the green light has returned to being a mere symbol.

However, the personal deep symbolism that the green light represented for Gatsby in the beginning of the novel has now been shifted from an individual to a collective. The narration shifts from a light that “Gatsby believed in” to a common symbol which motivates “us”, the collective. The novel ends with no longer Gatsby reaching for the green light, but the light is something that we all universally are stretching out our arms towards, hoping to reach it tomorrow or the day after that. But then, as none of the central characters in *The Great Gatsby* seem to experience happiness is it possible to collectively reach for a common American

Dream? After all, if we accept that the Dream is freed from religious beliefs, as Cullen suggests, then the Dream is founded on American liberalist ideas where it is the individual who moulds his/her destiny. I argue that Fitzgerald uses the green light as a symbol for Gatsby's failed American Dream, and the novel's last paragraph stands for the naïve belief that another person, or collective, can reach it.

Invisible Man illustrates how the American Dream includes racial limitations for Ellison's protagonist, as he is on a quest to find his own identity in a world defined by white power structures and senses that a geographical migration to New York City is the path to walk. However, he realises that he and everyone else does not seem to be defined as individuals but as constituents of their race, no matter where one resides. After realising the complexity of black nationalism and its failure in America, the narrator redefines his invisibility to the extent that he retreats from society into hiding and contemplates his own identity. He thinks of himself as a free individual without illusions, claiming that "[I]ife is to be lived, not controlled, and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many – This is not prophecy, but description" (Ellison 577). Instead of aspiring to fulfil an American Dream according to Booker T. Washington or the Founder, the narrator's personal philosophy aligns more closely to the famous abolitionist, author and orator Frederick Douglass. His life was self-determined, packed of "unexpected transformations" (381) where the "world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity" (498).

The protagonist's rebirth during the last third of the novel is based on his own acceptance of failure and the realisation of the infinite possibilities and "the beautiful absurdity of American identity" (Ellison 559). Despite the racist abuse, the factory failure and the Brotherhood's manipulation which point to the narrator's failed American Dream, he comes to realise that the truth of the Dream might be, as Yarborough puts it, "the opportunity to define oneself as one chooses" (52). When he left his southern hometown hopeful of the North's treasures he fooled himself to believe that "coming North was a jump into the unknown. [...] You could actually make yourself anew" (499). Retrospectively, looking back on his expectations, the narrator defines the blinding opportunism of the American Dream as he just "like almost everyone else in our country, [...] started out with my share of optimism. I believed in hard work and progress and action" (576). Not until he hides in his "hole" and accepts that he does not share the "increasing passion to make men conform to a pattern" does he rediscover himself because to

him “diversity is the word” and “[w]hy, if thy follow this conformity business they’ll end up by forcing me, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one” (577).

Ellison’s and Fitzgerald’s protagonists highlight the characters’ respective search for the American Dream. Ellison’s hero reaches the conclusion that he cannot view his dream as a political, financial, territorial, or religious prize to be won at the end of the road because this would violate its original promise (Yarborough 52). His journey shows strong evidence for the failure of the American Dream and the narrator realises this towards the end of the novel in order to redefine his outlook, and himself, before the novel ends. Jay Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson, on the other hand, lack the clarity to see their respective doomed paths until it is too late. Gatsby and Myrtle are unable to reach the social class to which they aspire and thus are victims of the ideology of the American Dream.

Fussel highlights the hypocrisy of the American Dream as a significant ingredient in Gatsby’s character as his ideals and beliefs align “with the society that destroys him” (295). Gatsby displays both Cullen’s notion of the dream of fame and fortune and Ownby’s dreams of consumerism and abundance, combining corrupted objectives with romantic ideals. This disillusioned duality is what clouds Gatsby’s mind and life, and dooms him and his Dream to ultimate failure. Contrary to Gatsby, *Invisible Man*’s protagonist is aware of the fatal beliefs of his society and reflects upon them to not lose his will to live. Unlike Fitzgerald’s characters, Ellison’s hero survives so that he can share his liberalist revelation with the world.

The novels differ in terms of narration, which begs the question: who narrates the American Dream? The protagonist in Ellison’s novel narrates his own story whereas an outsider, Nick Carraway, narrates Myrtle’s and Gatsby’s fatal months in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby is unable to distance himself from the events around him and fails to reflect on his own actions, whereas the Invisible Man finally succeeds in doing just that. Even if Nick were to realise his friends’ dark future, he cannot prevent their fate as this is only something the individual can understand, as the Invisible Man realises. The demise of Gatsby and the collective accentuation in which Fitzgerald ends his novel contrasts with the first-person realisation in *Invisible Man*, where the protagonist narrates his own life, distancing himself from collective groups. The fact that the Invisible Man narrates his own Dream may be the decisive reason for why he is able to redefine

himself and send the message that the American Dream cannot be achieved when the individual is categorised into a specific racial, financial or political category.

6. Conclusion

This essay has discussed the representation of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* and *Invisible Man*, with the intention of highlighting the failings of the Dream and the damaging ideology associated with it. I have analysed Fitzgerald's representation of the American Dream in the characters Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson and Jay Gatsby with special attention paid to Fitzgerald's criticism of the consumerism of the 1920s. The analysis of Ralph Ellison's protagonist has shown that he desires to be acknowledged in a society defined by racist structures. Events from the novels show the fatal representation of the American Dream where Gatsby's quest for his dream ends up with him losing his sense of identity, resulting in tragic death. Similarly, Myrtle Wilson's frenetic desire to own things result in her death. This essay argues that no matter how much financial capital Gatsby accumulates and how many luxurious items Myrtle purchases, neither of them can fulfil their American Dreams because of the class structures which restrict them. Through racist abuse and exploitation, the Invisible Man ingenuously believes in an American Dream until he after repetitive disappointments, comprehends that he is an individual in his own right and not only a member of a collective group.

In the essay, I have argued that Gatsby's disillusioned mind is what dooms him to failure whereas *Invisible Man's* protagonist wakes up from his disillusion in time to reflect on the failing American Dream. I have argued that the narrative style of the novels influences the perception which the protagonists have of the Dream and of their own identity: the Invisible Man narrates the American Dream from his own perspective while Nick Carraway, as an outsider, can see the Dream's fatal impact on Myrtle Wilson and Jay Gatsby. Nick Carraway cannot stop their fate as this is only something the individual can understand, as the Invisible Man realises. *The Great Gatsby* and *Invisible Man* both offer a criticism of American ideology where the American Dream is fundamental: the experiences of the protagonists portray the often-valorised American Dream and its influence on American society in a very negative light.

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