

# The fall of the American Dream in the Queen of Versailles, The Great Gatsby and Blue Jasmine

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## Abstract

*Greenfield, Fitzgerald and Allen have critiqued what is essentially the hollow and morally barren nature that is at the heart of the pursuit of the American dream which is to grow in wealth and accumulate property and possessions in a consumer society. At heart their critique is the morally bankrupt nature of material pursuits and the morally empty characters who inhabit the sphere of great wealth. It is apt then that T S Eliot had written to Fitzgerald that his novel was the first advance in the American novel since Henry James, because the idea of a spiritual wasteland very much informs Fitzgerald's critique of capitalist society and the empty nature of the American dream of attaining and amassing wealth. To this end the critique holds of modern capitalist society and the hollow, meretricious ideals that underpin much of it. Fuelled by cheap money and greed thus, the Siegel's fall symbolizes the corruptibility of the American dream and its turn to wealth as a religion and false idol which finally fails them. With their wealth dwindling away and the realization they have no savings for their children's future, the Siegels show that wealth is fleeting and transient and will fail you and leave you spiritually and morally impoverished and controlled by greed and lust for more possessions. There is no love in the family, David says his family does not comfort him and it is clear he is tired of his beauty queen wife who is left clueless in their financial struggles and just seeks more lavish beauty treatments. The spiritual poverty of the Siegels and their dysfunction*

*of facing reality is highlighted. The American Dream is thus shown to be just material wealth pursuit and moral bankruptcy at its end without spiritual sustenance, leading to a dysfunctional, greedy and loveless family despite its wealth.*

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There's a scene in "The Queen of Versailles," Lauren Greenfield's documentary, in which the subject, Jackie Siegel, is travelling to Binghamton, New York to visit the neighborhood in which she grew up. After getting off the airplane and making a stop in Elmira, she and her children find themselves at a Hertz Rent-a-Car counter. First, she explains to the clerk that flying commercial for the first time was bizarre. Second, she asks the clerk for the name of her driver. The clerk can only stare at her in stunned disbelief.

Jackie's life has been nothing if not a climb up the social ladder, during which she had earned a bachelor's degree in computer engineering technology, worked at Citigroup, was briefly in a relationship with Donald Trump, and had been a model, her efforts rewarded in 1993 when she was crowned Mrs. Florida. In 1996, at the age of thirty, she met sixty-year-old David Siegel, a real estate broker who amassed billions after buying an eighty-acre plot of orange groves in Orlando and turning it into Westgate, a



private time-share resort that, since its inception, has expanded to twenty-seven other locations, including Las Vegas. David and Jackie married in 2000, would over the next nine years have eight children (including an adopted niece), and in 2006 oversaw the start of the construction of their 90,000 square-foot Orlando dream home.

They have dubbed it Versailles, and true to its name, it's modeled after the famous French château. Standing at nearly seventy feet tall, the incomplete palace sits on ten acres of lakefront property. The house itself consumes an entire acre. When completed, it will have thirteen bedrooms, twenty-two bathrooms, nine kitchens, a bowling alley, a roller-skating rink, an arcade, an indoor swimming pool, a fitness center, a spa, and staff quarters. The kids will have an entire wing made just for them, complete with a living room, a computer center, and a movie theater. The adults will have a theater of their own, as well. Jackie takes Greenfield on a tour of the grand ballroom, which, even in its unfinished state, is a sight to behold. Two staircases sweep down on either end of the 120-foot long, sixty-foot-wide room, which has French balconies and a six-foot-high glass dome built into the ceiling.

Construction had to be halted in 2009 due to the faltering financing for Westgate, a direct result of the 2008 economic collapse. Versailles, which the banks are threatening to foreclose on, sits only 60% complete, with no interior walls, no plumbing, and no electricity. The 200 crates of Italian marble they had imported specifically for this project lies unused in the twenty-car garage. As for the Siegels, with David's company in upheaval and his personal fortune deeply affected (he suddenly found himself around

\$1.2 billion in debt with no real savings), he and his family moved indefinitely into the 27,000 square-foot home intended to be a temporary residence until Versailles' completion. By most standards, that would be more than an adequate amount of space for a family of ten. For the Siegels, Jackie's extravagant shopping has left the house in a state of clutter.

It appears the filmmakers wanted to document the rise of this monstrosity of a house and display the lifestyle of the obscenely rich. Even better, these rich people liked to flaunt in front of the camera, not enjoy their splendor in private ala Bill Gates. David Siegel proudly claims he is individually responsible for George W. Bush winning the state of Florida and therefore the presidency; however, he chuckles that what he did was not exactly legal. Oh yes, schadenfreude. David called himself the 'King of Time Shares'. He built 28 resorts and an enormous building on the Vegas strip, parceled them up, and sold them 52 different times to vacationers. Then, in what must have exceeded all of the filmmakers' expectations, the recession hit and everybody in the country stopped buying time shares.

The Siegels were billionaires and yet, they had no savings. They paid cash for the Versailles house and only later put a mortgage on it because that meant millions more in ready, liquid money. They put nothing away for college funds for their kids. In fact, Jackie stares at the camera exclaiming her children might actually have to go to college now. The Siegels can no longer keep up with the Versailles mortgage



payments and put it up for sale unfinished for \$75 million. The housing market just crashed, tens of thousands of families are entering foreclosure, including Jackie's best friend, and the Siegels are trying to move a \$75 million dollar mistake. The realtors may not be quite up to the task of marketing the house since one of the agents exclaims how unique Versailles is.

Nobody is buying time shares, therefore, there is no money coming in to the company, and David lays off 7,000 employees. He also fires 19 household servants. Dogs run around crapping all over the house and nobody picks it up. A lizard dies of lack of food and water, a fish floats at the top of its filthy tank, and one of the kids exclaims, "I didn't know we even had a lizard." Don't worry, Jackie still compulsively shops to add to the ridiculous piles of 'stuff' that the kids do not even know they have. She also maintains her plastic surgery regimen. Jackie's chest has enjoyed being a third character in this whole mess.

"The Queen of Versailles" is nothing if not a cautionary tale of wretched excess, fueled by the relentless yet hollow pursuit of the American Dream. We now live in a time when the country's population has been categorized into one of two percentiles; here is a profile of two proud one-percenters, one of whom defines herself by living beyond her means. We see her buying shopping carts full of board games from Wal-Mart and turning them into Christmas gifts. We see that she still has a limo driver, who in one scene takes her to McDonald's, and maids from the Philippines, one of whom lives rather comfortably in the children's former playpen and laments about the family

she never gets to visit. We see one of Jackie's dead pet dogs on display in a glass case, having been worked on by a taxidermist. We see entitlement and irresponsibility in her niece, whose excuse for letting her pet lizard die was not being driven to a pet store. Fuelled by cheap money and greed thus, the Siegel's fall symbolizes the corruptibility of the American dream and its turn to wealth as a religion and false idol which finally fails them. With their wealth dwindling away and the realization they have no savings for their children's future, the Siegels show that wealth is fleeting and transient and will fail you and leave you spiritually and morally impoverished and controlled by greed and lust for more possessions. There is no love in the family, David says his family does not comfort him and it is clear he is tired of his beauty queen wife who is left clueless in their financial struggles and just seeks more lavish beauty treatments. The spiritual poverty of the Siegels and their dysfunction of facing reality is highlighted. The American Dream is thus shown to be just material wealth pursuit and moral bankruptcy at its end without spiritual sustenance, leading to a dysfunctional, greedy and loveless family despite its wealth.

Much has been written about the corruptibility of Gatsby's dreams in pursuit of a vulgar and meretricious beauty. I would like to suggest however, that the failure of Gatsby's dream, aside from being a shattering of the myth of the American dream is also about the incommensurability of the ideal with the real. Indeed, Gatsby's dreams arise from a Platonic conception of himself, it is essentially a transcendental



ideal of wealth as material fulfilment of himself that he pursues, Gatsby views himself as the Platonic opposite of Daisy and in order to fulfil this dream of being Daisy's ideal lover essentially Gatsby reinvents himself as a fabulously wealthy person to match Daisy's social status. That Gatsby seeks to realize a Platonic conception of himself in service of something as vulgar and meretricious as wealth and material success is where his dreams fall short as the ideal is incommensurable with the real and no amount of vast wealth will ever buy him the happiness he seeks as it is a meretricious beauty he serves and thus a hollow and empty success that he realizes as Daisy while wealthy is also immensely shallow and hollow as a person herself, her loyalties remain to a life of old money and comfortable privilege rather than any magnificent romance with Gatsby as the depth of Gatsby's transcendental love for her far exceed the limits of her hollow, shallow and superficial self interest and her carelessness.

The fundamentally material nature of Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy is seen in his comment when he says "Her voice if full of money"(Fitzgerald 1926:120) Indeed it is the allure of wealth as a resplendent beauty Gatsby seeks as if wealth itself were able to confer the Platonic ideal upon himself. Fitzgerald's comment, however, is that wealth is meretricious beauty, it is a hollow ideal and superficial without any moral depth to it. It is indeed the amoral nature of wealth that Fitzgerald seems to condemn. When Nick Buchanan tells Gatsby that he is

worth the whole bunch of the wealthy Buchanans and Jordan Baker put together it is an expression of the admiration of the idealism of Gatsby and his transcendental Platonic pursuits that separate him from the hollow cynicism and amorality of the Buchanans. Indeed Nick first gestures to this view when he expressed distaste towards Daisy's insincerity when she had boasted about knowing and seeing everything and hence becoming sophisticated and worldly. While the Buchanans are wealthy, they are also shallow and careless, using their wealth to exploit and then abandon people for their own selfish ends, as we see with Tom's affair with Myrtle Wilson. Daisy is temporarily drawn to Gatsby for his fabulous wealth but as soon as she discovers its origins in the underworld she is quick to withdraw into herself and abandon Gatsby for her shallow relationship with Tom in which she puts up with his affairs and philandering in order to preserve her superficial life of privilege and comfort.

The tragedy of Gatsby is that he invests his Platonic ideals and pursuits in something as superficial as wealth and material gain which is exposed to be ultimately an illusion. All the wealth in the world is not sufficient to draw the shallow Daisy away from her comfortable world of old money, inherited wealth and privilege. Gatsby's new money and the origins of his new money in the underworld have Daisy quick to abandon Gatsby and whatever novelty their newfound romance had been. Indeed the amoral nature of the wealthy is seen in Fitzgerald's referencing of the eyes of T J Eckleberg overlooking the



valley of ashes as an indictment of American society as a spiritual wasteland. Money has no moral ground, this is seen in the corrupt means by which Gatsby amasses his wealth through “gonnegsions” with Meyer Wolfsheim and bootlegging and bucket shops and the utter lack of morals Nick Buchanan has in utilizing his status of being wealthy to have an endless string of affairs and adultery outside his marriage. Indeed it is the carelessness of the wealthy that Nick Buchanan is critical of. Jordan Baker, Tom and Daisy Buchanan are described as careless drivers. Their wealth is the source of their contemptuous and condescending attitude toward the people around them, indeed being wealthy is the access to a ‘secret club’ to which Daisy and Tom belonged, leading them to trample on those not as privileged and themselves and dispense and dispose of them when they had outlived their usefulness to their hollow self interests. This is seen in their destruction of Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson. The car is a metaphor for the use of wealth to oppress those poorer than them in the description of Tom, Daisy and Jordan as careless drivers. The car is essentially an instrument and status symbol, and is used as an instrument to subordinate and destroy others as they smash people up carelessly with their careless driving. It is a metaphor for the way in which Tom, Daisy and Jordan, from the domain of old money, utilize their wealth as a weapon towards those around them whom they destroy with their careless driving.

Gatsby is described as son of God, and it is the misguidedness in which he makes wealth his religion that Fitzgerald

condemns, wealth has no moral depth or allegiance or soul to it, as we see in Daisy’s eventual abandonment of Gatsby and Tom’s shabby treatment of Myrtle Wilson and Gatsby. A film which made in recent years which has some parallels with *The Great Gatsby* is Woody Allen’s film *Blue Jasmine*. Jasmine, the protagonist of the film, experiences a series of nervous breakdowns after she loses her wealth when it is exposed that her fabulously wealthy husband had amassed his wealth through corrupt means and illicit businesses and transactions. She discovers that all her wealthy friends are quick to abandon her and snub her when she works as a shoe shop assistant at Park Avenue. She almost ensnares another wealthy man, a diplomat, who is quick to abandon her as soon as he discovers the truth about her past. Her son is one of those who abandon her as well as he discloses that he holds a grudge against her for bringing her husband down when he threatened her with divorce for a new and younger woman, just one in a string of mistresses he has had outside their marriage which Jasmine had to turn a blind eye to. The corrupting effect that wealth has on its owners is thus seen in *Gatsby* and *Blue Jasmine*.

The essential hollowness of the American dream of amassing wealth and being materially successful is thus exposed in *Gatsby* and *Blue Jasmine*. Indeed what Fitzgerald and Allen have to comment on the nature of this dream is that pursuing wealth as a religion is essentially morally groundless and superficial, as Jasmine discovers through the superficial nature of her friends who abandon her, including her



son, when her money evaporates and Daisy's quick abandonment of Gatsby when she discovers the illicit nature of his wealth shows. social status that wealth bestows is ultimately exposed to be transient as riches may not last with a turn of events as we see with Jasmine's husbands downfall with the FBI and Gatsby's trouble with one of his bucket shops towards the end of his life shows. Superficial friends abound when one is wealthy and successful but as we see with Gatsby's desolate funeral only attended by Nick and his father wealth can buy you friends only as long as you are successful and all the splendid parties that Gatsby threw were just hedonistic shows to which superficial pleasure seekers thronged without owing him any sense of loyalty and allegiance when he runs into trouble or at the point of his death.

I have earlier brought up the incommensurability of the ideal with the real. Indeed the colossal vitality with which Gatsby had invested his dream, described as something which went far beyond Daisy and anything materially attainable is his tragedy as something as fallen and meretricious as Daisy will inevitably be inadequate to the vast expectations of his ideal and dream. Daisy's shallow mind can only appreciate wealth and Gatsby's new money and splendid mansion and shirts as long as Gatsby sustains the illusion that he is truly self made and legitimate but as soon as Daisy discovers that his wealth is derived from shady underworld "gonnegsions" she is quick to retreat to the safe world of Tom Buchanan and the realm of old money and inherited wealth. Indeed the very idea of

attaining Daisy is something that would have eluded Gatsby and remained eternally out of his reach had he pursued a legitimate career rather than one that involved crime because there would be no possibility he could have amassed such sheer wealth so rapidly. Daisy, the golden girl, the princess in the castle thus remains out of his reach by virtue of their social disparity and origin from different classes in society. Fitzgerald's novel is an indictment of the inequality that capitalism creates and the way it allows morally bankrupt people like the Buchanans to go around smashing and destroying people's lives simply because they belong to the domain of old money and inherited wealth. Indeed Fitzgerald's novel is an indictment of the moral vacuum that lies at the heart of the very wealthy and the careless way in which they dispose people around them and possessions.

In conclusion, Greenfield, Fitzgerald and Allen have critiqued what is essentially the hollow and morally barren nature that is at the heart of the pursuit of the American dream which is to grow in wealth and accumulate property and possessions in a consumer society. At heart their critique is the morally bankrupt nature of material pursuits and the morally empty characters who inhabit the sphere of great wealth. It is apt then that T S Eliot had written to Fitzgerald that his novel was the first advance in the American novel since Henry James, because the idea of a spiritual wasteland very much informs Fitzgerald's critique of capitalist society and the empty nature of the American dream of attaining and amassing wealth. To this end the



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