
The Song of Solomon and The Great Gatsby: Representations of the American Dream

Monetary Wealth and Materialism

Monetary Wealth and materialism are two elements that both, *The Song of Solomon* and *The Great Gatsby* share. These novels interpret “The American Dream” and as a result emphasize the significance of the role that money plays in each of their character’s lives. Within each of these novels, the presence of a yearning for wealth within the characters and their decisions exists as a means of social criticism that exemplifies the corruption that coincides with materialism. The characters buy into the notion that money will provide happiness and therefore a sense of fulfillment. However, in many cases, an excessive amount of money can cause one to become distressed and empty. Money can provide luxury and convenience but it does not have the ability to alleviate all problems. Toni Morrison and F. Scott Fitzgerald reveal this concept in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Song of Solomon* through focus on their character’s attention to money and status which leads to their overall corruption.

The Great Gatsby emphasized monetary wealth through multiple character and themes throughout the novel. Money is a huge motivator in the character’s relationships and drive. The character’s reveal themselves to be highly materialistic, specifically when making decisions. Tom and Daisy’s relationship is supported by their money. They are able to be part of the upper-class elite due to their high socioeconomic standing. They take advantage of what they have which has negative effects on the lives of other people. The narrator, Nick, is uncomfortable due to the way Tom and Daisy poorly handled their disruptive acts. He doesn't even want to shake Tom’s hand after running into him because he is entirely disgusted.

“I couldn't forgive him or like him, but I saw that what he had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money on their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they made. . . .” (Fitzgerald, 179)

Tom and Daisy stay together because of Tom’s wealth that Daisy is attracted to. They perform despicable acts and get away with it because they are rich. They believe that because they have money they are superior to others who do not have as much as them. They do not adhere to morality because their money is blinding. Nick observes that while Myrtle, George, and Gatsby have all died, Tom and Daisy are not punished at all for their actions or behavior. The couple uses their money as a shield to avoid responsibility. While they technically have caused three deaths, they are still able to live how they would like because they have the means to do so. They use money to run away from their problems but ultimately money cannot bring people back after they are dead. Tom and Daisy subconsciously are aware of this, which is why they choose to run away. Nick sees past their outward expression of their wealth and is unhappy with who they are beneath their money shield. He cannot forgive what they have done to Myrtle, George, and Gatsby. Their actions are not tolerated by Nick which proves that money cannot buy forgiveness.

Fitzgerald carries out the idea of corruption due to wealth through Daisy. She is a character who has prioritized wealth but has come to realize that she isn't happy. Her money has not allowed her to find happiness.

"You see I think everything's terrible anyhow," she went on in a convinced way. "Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I know. I've been everywhere and done everything." Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's, and she laughed with thrilling scorn. "Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!"(Fitzgerald, 17)

Daisy has led a life supported by monetary wealth. She has traveled the world and had access to the unimaginable. Yet, she still thinks her life is terrible. She thinks this because money cannot buy one's happiness. She believes she has already seen all that the world has to offer, but in reality, she has only seen what money can buy. She is left unfulfilled by the life she has chosen to live because it has been built on materialism. She is speaking from a place of arrogance. Fitzgerald emphasizes this when referring to her eyes. They "flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's." Daisy, like her husband, speaks from a privileged perspective. She is aware that she is privileged. She remains certain in her word but is insincere. She is pretentious and carries herself as such. She uses her status as a way to hide who she really is. She is in fact a miserable person who is left empty on the inside but she surrounds herself with material items that failed to make her feel better about herself.

Toni Morrison carries out the theme surrounding the desperation to have access to money through Milkman Dead's character. Milkman embarks on his own quest for success which he initially believes is Pilate's gold. Milkman shares his father's materialistic values. He has no empathy for those whom he perceives as being inferior to him economically. The gold blinds Milkman's sense of morality as he wants to steal Pilate's gold for himself in order to gain freedom. His father has always expressed that money is the key to one's freedom. Macon Dead says to his son, "You'll own it all. All of it. You'll be free. Money is freedom, Macon. The only real freedom there is."(163) Macon emphasizes the importance of money to his son. He believes that the only way to be free, is to have enough money to support yourself. Milkman believes this as well which leads him to behave in ways that he wouldn't if money was not the priority. Macon Dead wants his son to "take back" what he believes Pilate stole from him. Macon Dead wants his son to essentially steal this money back. He says, "Macon, get it and you can have half of it; go wherever you want. Get it. For both of us. Please get it, son. Get the gold."(172) Milkman wants to get out of the town he has grown up in and believes his father when he says that money is the key to being free. Therefore, he agrees to stealing back the gold from Pilate. Milkman's father manipulates him into thinking that the money will alleviate what has been causing him stress. Milkman thinks that this gold will solve all of the problems that he believes he has due to the fact that he has no money. His father pressures him into getting the money by pointing out what he will be able to do with it. Although Milkman knows that stealing is wrong, he is desperate to be free.

Milkman believes the money will bring salvation and happiness.

Milkman wanted boats, cars, airplanes, and the command of a large crew. He would be whimsical, generous, mysterious with his money. But all the time he was laughing and going on about what he would do and how he planned to live, he was aware of a falseness in his voice. He wanted the money—desperately, he believed—but other than making tracks out of the city, far

away from Not Doctor Street and Sonny's Shop, and Mary's Place and Hagar, he could not visualize a life that much different from the one he had.(179-180)

Milkman wants all the material items that money can buy. He fantasizes about the grass being greener on the other side. He wants to live a lavish life full of luxurious items that he believes will bring him joy and happiness. He believes that access to a large amount of money will carry him away from the world that he has known his entire life. However, he is aware of the "falseness in his voice." Milkman knows that this imagined life is idealistic and deep down he knows that it may not bring him exactly what he needs because money can only provide material things. It cannot provide one with emotional support. Milkman is looking for emotional support but the money will only get him so far. He cannot envision a different life because he has known the same one his entire life. His environment hasn't changed, therefore his mindset hasn't changed. He can't see what he has never been exposed to, which leaves him longing for the money more. Milkman wants to break away from parents and the life they have built for themselves. However, he doesn't realize that by prioritizing monetary wealth, he will end up just like the person he wants to run from—his father. Even after Milkman gains access to gold, it is not guaranteed that the problems caused by his childhood will just disappear.

Monetary wealth is a concept that is prioritized in both *The Great Gatsby* and *Song of Solomon*. The characters that make money an important part of their life are the ones that are the most lost because money does not provide emotional stability. Money can only do so much before one realizes it is not enough. Fitzgerald and Morrison both emphasize this point by allowing the reader to gain insight on each of the character's lives and how money does not improve their overall happiness. Money can present certain conveniences but cannot eliminate all issues that one may face. Money can only do so much before one realizes that money cannot buy happiness in the grand scheme of things. Fitzgerald and Morrison make an effort to show this through use of their character's journey to figuring out this theme for themselves.