Rugged Individualism in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby

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1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald first published *The Great Gatsby* in 1925 and it was written during the so-called "Roaring Twenties" which is also the time period in which the novel is set. The ideologies of Roaring Twenties are reflected in the novel's characters and their lifestyle. Scott Donaldson remarks that "[a]s many critics have noted, one of Fitzgerald's strengths is that he is so keenly in touch with the social and cultural events of his time" (199). This essay will focus on the concept of rugged individualism in *The Great Gatsby*, analyzing the novel from a Marxist perspective. According to Michael Ryan, Marxists believe in the ideal of economic equality. To promote or challenge economic equality or inequality, literature can be used to spread ideas that are dominant in different time periods. Although literature can be a powerful tool for challenging ideology, often these ideas are used to make economic inequality seem right and natural and to ensure that the dominant class stays in power. Two concepts Marxists cite as promoting inequality in America are rugged individualism and the American Dream. While *The Great Gatsby* has been examined from various Marxist perspectives, my analysis will show that the title character, Jay Gatsby, is portrayed as an exemplary rugged individualist. Moreover, the main reason why Gatsby appears to be a more sympathetic character compared to the other characters is because he is the best example of a rugged individualist.

I will begin by defining the related concepts of rugged individualism and the American Dream. The essay will then examine each of the most important traits that make up rugged individualism and see which of these traits the characters Jay Gatsby, Tom Buchanan, Daisy Buchanan, George Wilson and Myrtle Wilson have. Selfishness, striving for a goal, succeeding alone and both romanticizing and being romanticized for these traits are all important factors in rugged individualism. Several characters in *The Great Gatsby* possess some of these qualities, however Gatsby is the best example of rugged individualism since he possesses all of them. To support the thesis statement, the main analysis will focus on Gatsby and on what exactly makes him
a good example of rugged individualism and how he is romanticized because of it. Other factors that make Gatsby seem more sympathetic are his social class and how Tom Buchanan is used as an antagonist. Nick Carraway, the narrator of the novel, plays the largest role in romanticizing Gatsby. In order to support the thesis claim, I will analyze the contrast between Gatsby and the other characters since the other characters do not appear as sympathetic as Gatsby, although they show some characteristics of rugged individualism or have other qualities that are problematized in Marxist criticism such as the belief in the American Dream.

Previous research used in this essay has focused solely on the American Dream and its relation to *The Great Gatsby*. I wish to add to their perspective on the American Dream my own perspective on rugged individualism and how it is used in this novel. By looking at the American Dream, this paper will try and answer how Gatsby can be used as a symbol to promote different ideas and values such as rugged individualism and the American Dream.

2. Definition of rugged individualism and the American Dream

The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines, rugged individualism as the independence or self-sufficiency of a character. It is specifically a social and economic ideal that is associated with the American free-market economic system in the 19th and 20th centuries. A rugged individualist is someone who is self-reliant and independent (“rugged, adj.1 and adv.”). Elizabeth C. Hirschman mentions that Francis L.K. Hsu believes that rugged individualism can cause people to be aggressive and break the law because a rugged individual is supposed to be self-centered and can hurt others in order to achieve their goals (10). Hirschman also writes that an ideal within rugged individualism is ruthless competition (12). This ideal is also a feature of the American free-market.

Furthermore, Lois Tyson describes rugged individualism as an ideology that romanticizes an individual who tries to achieve on his own difficult goals that most other people would not undertake. A rugged individualist's goal could for instance be an attempt to undertake a high-risk
business venture in order to become rich even though there is a chance that one might lose everything (57). Rugged individualism, for some people, has positive connotations and it was often used by Herbert Hoover during his presidency. According to Tyson, Marxist thinkers criticize this ideology because a rugged individualist would put his or her own needs before others and society. In rugged individualism, the individual is admired and the focus is only on him or herself. Marxists criticize rugged individualism and consider it an oppressive ideology because Marxists believe that the focus should be on society as a whole (57).

These definitions of rugged individualism are similar in the way that they focus on the individual and the idea that one has to succeed on their own without the help of others. A rugged individual also has selfish qualities because he or she puts their own interests first. There is a difference of opinion on whether rugged individualism is positive or negative and some definitions focus more on how rugged individualism can be an ideal in the economic system while others see it as harmful.

According to Roger L. Pearson, the American Dream is a popular theme in American literature. He defines this concept as the "belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, monetary, or social" (638). Tyson writes that the American Dream is the idea that one can succeed and become wealthy simply by working hard. However, this implies that it is the poor people’s own fault for being poor because they must be lazy or else they would have achieved financial success (Tyson 55). However, the success of the ideal of the American Dream means that only a few can have financial success while most will continue to be poor (56). Tyson also states that getting ahead, competition and rugged individualism are all a part of the American Dream because everyone is seen as free to pursue their goals as far as their ability can take them (55). The major characters in The Great Gatsby show different traits of the American Dream and rugged individualism. They represent different social classes and are affected differently by the American Dream and rugged individualism.
3. Literature review

According to the database Literature Online, F. Scott Fitzgerald has a prominent place in the American literary canon and The Great Gatsby is often considered to be one of the greatest American novels of the 20th century. As a result, compared to his other novels, The Great Gatsby has been the subject of the most studies. Other novels Fitzgerald wrote include This Side of Paradise (1920), The Beautiful and Damned (1922), and Tender Is the Night (1934).

If one searches for just "Gatsby" in the MLA database, it is not until the 1950's that articles first starts to appear. The area of interest in these articles is mainly the stylistics that Fitzgerald uses. The theme of the novel and the narrative structure also attracted much attention in the 1950's. One example is W.J. Harvey's 1957 article "Theme and Texture in The Great Gatsby" in which he was not only interested in the novel's themes but also the structure. "The Narrator as Hero" written by Jerome Thale, in the same year as Harvey, focuses on how Nick Carraway is used as a narrator to persuade the reader that Gatsby is a great person. Eric Solomon also discusses themes in his article "A Source for Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby" (1958). Solomon compares The Great Gatsby with Theodore Dreiser's short story "'Vanity, Vanity,' Saith the Preacher". Solomon discusses the similarities between the two stories and mention the different approaches the two authors have to a similar theme. The narrator sets the tone for story and what is different between the stories is that the narrator Nick becomes more knowledgeable by watching the protagonist fail and this effects how the novel is perceived (Solomon 187).

Some more recent research and articles focus on class, symbolism and materialism in the novel. There are clear class differences in The Great Gatsby and one person who has examined the novel from a class perspective is Veronica Makowsky. Makowsky published an article on the subject in 2009 called “Among the Ash-Heaps and Millionaires: Teaching The Great Gatsby through the Lens of Class”. There is also a focus on symbolism in recent articles. Robert C Hauhart discusses in "Religious Language and Symbolism in The Great Gatsby's Valley of Ashes" (2013),
how the “Valley of Ashes” is a religious symbol and how it is related to the events and themes in the novel. Hauhart claims that the Genesis might be source for the valley of ashes. Hauhart also says that religious allusions arise from the image of ashes (201-202). Matthew Little discusses cars and money and he looks at the novel from a materialistic perspective in "I Could Make Some Money': Cars and Currency in The Great Gatsby" (2015).

There are numerous articles written about Jay Gatsby as a representative of the American Dream and about The Great Gatsby as an American novel. One recent example of this is the article "The Great Gatsby" written in 2007 by John A. Pidgeon. Pidgeon claims that the reason why The Great Gatsby can be considered one of the greatest American novels is because F. Scott Fitzgerald give great insight into the American mind and the character Jay Gatsby is a great representation of the American Dream. Pidgeon also writes that the pursuit of wealth is not just about being well-off but also less sinful because wealth is sometimes equated with being good and poverty with being sinful (178).

"Oxymoron in the Great Gatsby" by Peter L. Hays is an article written in 2011. According to Hays, Gatsby believes in the American Dream and he believes that he can do anything as long as he works hard for it (319). Hays also mentions the belief in different myths such as the myth of equal opportunity (324). This article also mentions different aspects of American society in the 1920's such as the prohibition, class and how the production-mode economy was shifting to a consumer economy. Thus, Hays’ article is relevant for my paper since he explains some of the contradictions in the novel and why some characters behave as they do.

4. The American Dream & class

An understanding of the American Dream provides a necessary background for understanding rugged individualism. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the American Dream is “the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and
prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative” (“American, n. and adj.”). Many researchers have discussed Gatsby's connection to the American Dream. Pidgeon states that "F. Scott Fitzgerald has displayed not only insight into the American psyche but also a magnificent grasp of 'The American Dream' which Jay Gatsby represents" (178). Nicole Guetin also mentions how "Gatsby's and Tom's distorted aspirations may, at times, be found in the American psyche in the sense that these beliefs seem implicitly inscribed in the concept of the American Dream"(24).

Gatsby is free to pursue whatever he wants and he actually achieves his goals by working hard, albeit with illegal ventures. Gatsby is a good representative of the American Dream because he is a success story. He comes from a poor background and he achieves a great fortune on his own. According to Hays, "What constrains Gatsby is his extreme romanticism, his belief in the American myth that one, through hard work, can achieve anything, whether reliving the past or marrying Daisy in proper social splendor in Louisville so as to confirm his rise in American society" (319). If Gatsby manages to marry Daisy, he succeeds at the American Dream and as a rugged individualist because she represents everything he wants. It constrains him because he fails to see the truth about his ideals. The American Dream and Daisy are not as perfect as Gatsby believes. Daisy, as a representative of the American Dream for Gatsby, also reveals it flaws. Pearson writes that "[a]s a prophet of the American dream, Gatsby fails—miserably—a victim of his own warped idealism and false set of values. The American dream is not to be a reality, in that it no longer exists, except in the minds of men like Gatsby, whom it destroys in their espousal and relentless pursuit of it” (645). Even though Gatsby is considered a victim of the American Dream, he can still be used to promote it since the reader can be sympathetic to Gatsby and his beliefs. Gatsby is also sympathetic since his pursuit of an illusion is recognized as tragic. It is because of his pursuit of an illusion that makes him a victim of the American Dream. Nick criticizes Gatsby's beliefs when he says that Gatsby “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” (Fitzgerald 188). Thus, Gatsby
"paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (Fitzgerald 168).

According to Pidgeon, "Jay Gatsby is the embodiment of the American Dream" (182). Gatsby embodies this ideology because "[h]e really is the American boy pursuing the American Dream, never knowing that the dream which his idealism has created is not worthy of him" (Pidgeon 182). Tyson argues that Fitzgerald fails to fully criticize capitalist ideology because readers become more interested in the ideology since Fitzgerald repackages it anew (75). The reader receives a romanticized view of this ideology since the story is told through Nick’s point of view. Nick criticizes Tom and Daisy more than he actually questions Gatsby's own actions and beliefs. Because Nick is blinded by his illusions of Gatsby, and describes Gatsby and his ideals in a more positive way than they might deserve. However, Nick starts to see through some of the illusions after Gatsby fails his dreams and is killed. After Gatsby's funeral, Nick questions the Eastern life and he decides to move back home because he believes that the East has a “quality of distortion” (183). Nick used to see the East as a superior place but in the end he rejects the Eastern lifestyle because he considers himself a Westerner. He felt that he could not adapt to the Eastern life because he comes from the West. Nick also criticizes the East and Tom and Daisy by choosing to leave and by ending his relations with the people he knew from there.

According to Tyson the American Dream promotes the interests of people with power and the main reason why people who fail to achieve the American Dream, still continue to believe in it is because it encourages people to believe that there exists a possibility that anyone can succeed (56). George Wilson is a good example of this because he continues to believe in the American Dream despite the fact that the likelihood of him actually succeeding is very small. George tries to work hard to achieve the American Dream but like most people he fails to obtain a wealthy lifestyle. In Marxist criticism, both the American Dream and rugged individualism can be considered oppressive because they keep many laboring under illusions. The reason why Gatsby succeeds and not George is most likely because Gatsby breaks the law in order to achieve his quick fortune.
The characters are not only affected by their belief in the American Dream and rugged individualism but also by their class. According to Hays, "[d]espite our myth of a classless society, classes were still very distinct in 1925" (323). In *The Great Gatsby*, the characters are divided into, “old money”, “new money” and people who do not have any money. There are clear distinctions between these groups and they all live at different places according to their social status. Tom and Daisy live at East Egg which represents the place where the most elite live. Only people with great fortune and inherited wealth can afford to live there. People who have either less money than the people at East Egg or people who have made their own fortune, such as Gatsby, live at West Egg. George and Myrtle, who are less fortunate, live in the Valley of Ashes. Class divides are emphasized by the strictly demarcated areas where each character lives. The distinctions between the different groups are also seen in how the characters are portrayed and in their goals. Myrtle can be used as an example of class differences since she tries to improve her social status and belong to the upper class. Myrtle is highly materialistic and she judged her husband based on his appearance. Myrtle seemed to have believed that he was richer than he actually is because of the nice suit he wore when they got married. When she found out that George borrowed the suit for their wedding, she seems to regret marrying him. When a man came to collect the suit she says "I gave it to him and then I lay down and cried to beat the band all afternoon" (Fitzgerald 41). She cried because she had misjudged her husband. Myrtle says, "I married him because I thought he was a gentleman [...] I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe"(41). Because George is less wealthy than the rest of the characters, Myrtle believes that he is beneath her. By being with Tom, Myrtle is able to to socialize with the upper class and feel superior. When a worker makes a mistake Myrtle exclaims "'These people! You have to keep after them all the time''' (38). In her pursuit of wealth and power she tries to separate herself from others who are less fortunate than her. Her desire to attain upper class status manifests itself in her preoccupation with appearances. For example, she lets several taxis pass because she wants to ride in a "lavender-coloured" one (33),
most likely because this car seems more luxurious in her eyes.

According to Wright, "[c]lass is a normatively charged concept, rooted in ideas of oppression, exploitation and domination" (251). People who belong in the upper class are generally more powerful and they sometimes use their power to exploit others. One factor that separates Gatsby from Tom and Daisy, who are also rich, is the fact that Tom and Daisy have so-called inherited wealth while Gatsby had to work for his fortune. Tom has more prestige because "inherited wealth was 'even more honorific' than that acquired through one's own efforts" (qtd. In Donaldson 202). Gatsby is what is considered “nouveau riche”, as opposed to “old money” like Tom. Donaldson states that "Tom's 'old money' has a power beyond any that Gatsby can command" (196), because "[h]is wealth and background win the battle for Daisy, despite his habitual infidelities—an outcome that seems not only grossly unfair but morally wrong, for another point Fitzgerald is making is that if you have enough money and position you can purchase immunity from punishment" (196). Another example of this is seen when Gatsby is stopped by a police officer for speeding and avoids punishment because as Gatsby says "I was able to do the commissioner a favour once, and he sends me a Christmas card every year" (Fitzgerald 74). Even though Gatsby is “new money” he can still use his wealth to avoid punishment. Daisy's wealth and status also lets her go unpunished for the crime of killing Myrtle. If she were punished for her actions or even acknowledged her guilt then George and Gatsby might still be alive. It is mainly only George and Myrtle that actually suffer any consequences for their actions and they both come from poor backgrounds. Gatsby manages to get away with some of his crimes when he becomes rich, but in the end he is only used by Daisy. Even if one manages to become successful through the belief in the American Dream, he or she can still be discriminated against by the upper class because he or she was not born wealthy.

The American Dream fails Gatsby because it does not matter how hard he works, for he cannot change the fact that he comes from a simple background. Gatsby will always be
discriminated against by people like Tom because of the class he was born into. The American Dream also fails Gatsby because it his belief in this ideal that leads to his demise. Many people still believe in the American Dream and rugged individualism despite the fact that they will be discriminated against even if they succeed. The reason for this is probably because they do not have many other options than the belief in these ideals and they can still feel superior to other people who are even less fortunate. Marxists criticize the American Dream because many people fall victim to it like Gatsby. Marxists believe that the American Dream is an illusion because the majority will not be able to succeed. They also believe that it promotes inequality since it helps protect the interests of the wealthy and powerful. According to Ryan, Marxists believe that social wealth should be equally distributed (115). However, the people who support the American Dream believe that this ideology creates a more equal society since every citizen has the same opportunities to pursue any goal they want. It also promotes the idea that anyone can achieve success through hard work. Different characters in The Great Gatsby believe that they will succeed by working hard even though they ultimately fail.

5. Rugged individualism

5.1 Striving for a goal

An important aspect of rugged individualism is the pursuit of goals, especially if these goals are difficult to achieve and involve taking risks. As previously mentioned a rugged individualist becomes romanticized; by believers of this ideology for trying to achieve difficult goals even though they can be selfish in their pursuit. In The Great Gatsby, the characters from the lower classes are more goal-oriented compared to the wealthy characters. Gatsby, Myrtle and George all want to achieve success, fortune and a better social position.

Gatsby is determined to make himself a success and he seems to be willing to do anything to achieve his goals. Gatsby can be compared to Francis L.K. Hsu's definition of a rugged individualist
as a person who can harm others in order to achieve their goals (Hirschman 10). Gatsby fits this
definition because when he becomes a criminal in order to make his fortune, he has most likely hurt
other people and society in the process. He sells alcohol despite the fact that it is illegal at the time.
When Tom is talking about Gatsby, he says, "I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him,
and I wasn't far wrong" (Fitzgerald 140). Gatsby worked with a man called Mr. Wolfshiem and Tom
discovered that "[h]e and this Mr. Wolfshiem bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in
Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter" (140). It is implied that he might have committed
even worse crimes than bootlegging. Gatsby is willing to harm others in order to achieve his goals
and he does not seem to care about the people who suffer because of his crimes since he shows no
intention of stopping his criminal activities.

The reason why Gatsby is so desperate to achieve his goals is because he is in love with
Daisy and he needs money to be able to be with her. Solomon writes that "[m]oney and prestige
mean little in themselves to Gatsby who is seeking what appears to be the truly golden dream, the
love of Daisy Buchanan" (188). It is true that Daisy inspires him to achieve his dream by any means
necessary. However, money and prestige definitely matters to Gatsby because "[i]n Gatsby, Daisy
represents the most desirable object of all. She is invariably associated with the things that surround
her, her car and her house particularly, and most of all her voice" (Donaldson 200). Gatsby
describes her voice as "full of money" (Fitzgerald 126). Daisy's voice is most likely described thus
because she was born wealthy, and her voice reflects her high social status. Gatsby also mentions
her value when he says that "[i]t excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy – it
increased her value in his eyes" (Fitzgerald 154). To discuss Daisy in terms of value is a form of
commodification. Tyson states that “[c]ommodification is the act of relating to objects or persons in
terms of their exchange value or sign-exchange value” (60). To commodify people means that a
person structures his relationships with others in order to improve his own social or financial status.
The person’s relationships have a sign-exchange value because they can be used to impress others
and give him a higher social status (Tyson 59-60). If Gatsby can marry Daisy, it means that he has become a true success.

The reader sees Daisy as sophisticated, heartless, cold, while Gatsby’s vision of her is of the beautiful princess. Her failure is symbolic of the whole decadent society that she represents. And so as Gatsby errs in attributing glamor and wealth to goodness, so he errs in attributing goodness to Daisy, because he sees her as an embodiment of glamor and wealth. (Pidgeon 181)

Gatsby's ultimate goal is not only to be with Daisy but also to attain the same social status and wealth as her. He does not see her negative qualities because she represents everything he wants.

Neither Tom nor Daisy are rugged individualists like Gatsby, since they do not seem to pursue any particular goals. Daisy only wants to maintain her wealth which is probably why she chooses Tom over Gatsby. Daisy has selfish qualities and she does not seem sincere towards Gatsby because she only cares about his wealth and class. If she had known that he was poor she would most likely not have dated him when they first met. Daisy is very materialistic and this can be seen when she visits Gatsby's house for the first time. She becomes emotional when she sees Gatsby's display of shirts and she says, "It makes me sad because I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before" (Fitzgerald 99). When she first met Tom her impression of him was that "[t]here was a wholesome bulkiness about this person and his position, and Daisy was flattered" (157). Daisy liked him because of his high social position. It can be argued that Tom pursues women rather than money and that this could make him a rugged individualist. However, his status makes it easy for him to achieve his goals. He often uses his wealth to obtain everything he wants and this does not require a real effort on his part. Tom is not a rugged individualist since his pursuit of women is casual and risk-free.
George Wilson, on the other hand, is not wealthy and this means that he has to work harder to achieve his goals. George has some similarities to Gatsby in that both of them can be considered idealists. George seems to believe in the American Dream and he tries to improve his and his wife Myrtle's life by working hard in his auto-shop. He pours all his effort into his garage in order to succeed with his business. When Tom asks him about his work he replies, "I can't complain,' answered Wilson unconvincingly" (Fitzgerald 31). It sounds as though George struggles for example, when he was sick, "Michaelis advised him to go to bed, but Wilson refused, saying that he'd miss a lot of business if he did" (143). George is determined to change his living situation and he says, "I've been here too long. I want to get away. My wife and I want to go West" (Fitzgerald 129). The idea of “going West” is associated with the American frontier mentality and often associated with rugged individualism. George also says that "[s]he's been talking about it for ten years" (Fitzgerald 129), and George wants to grant Myrtle’s wish and leave. George continues to strive for his goals because he believes in the American Dream and he wants to make his wife happy. However, his hard work is never rewarded and he never takes any particular risks either.

Myrtle shows some traits of rugged individualism in the way that she puts her own interests before anyone else's. Myrtle strives to achieve a high social status and wealth but only for herself. She is very determined to achieve her goals since she decides to deceive her husband and start an affair with Tom in order to improve her social status. When Nick, Tom and Jordan Baker stop at George's garage to get gas, Nick sees Myrtle in a window and he "realized that her eyes, wide with jealous terror, were fixed not on Tom, but on Jordan Baker, whom she took to be his wife" (Fitzgerald 131). Myrtle is jealous of Daisy because she has everything Myrtle wants. Even though Tom sometimes treats her quite badly she continues to be with him because of the material benefits he can off her. Nick describes how "[m]aking a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand" (43). Tom hurts Myrtle simply because she keeps mentioning his wife's name. However, Tom spends a great deal of money on her and when Myrtle wants a certain dog, Tom pays
the salesman more than he thinks the dog is worth because Myrtle wants it. Thus, while George tries to achieve his goals through an honest method, Myrtle chooses a more dishonest method by being with Tom. The social opportunities afforded to women to attain or maintain wealth and status are limited during this time period. Myrtle chooses to increase her wealth and status by being with a wealthy man since she does not have many other social opportunities.

5.2 Succeeding alone

Gatsby is a self-made man because he started from nothing and managed to make a fortune without any support from others. He comes from a simple background: "His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" (Fitzgerald 105). Gatsby seems to have always been ambitious and this can be seen from the schedule he made for himself as a boy. Gatsby's father reads this schedule out loud for Nick, and he says that "Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something" (180). For example his schedule mentions his studies, how much money he needs to save every week and some of his goals such as reading an improving book or magazine every week (180). Gatsby even creates a new identity for himself in order to succeed. Gatsby was originally called James Gatz, but he changed his name in order to create the persona he wanted. According to Nick, "[t]he truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (Fitzgerald 105). Gatsby was embarrassed by his parents' poor backgrounds to the extent that "his imagination had never really accepted them as parents at all" (105). Instead "he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end" (105). Thus Gatsby is an idealist who never stops believing in this persona he created for himself as a boy. He values money and status much more than his own family. When Gatsby tries to invent a new persona, the narrator mentions that he “He was a son of God" (105). Nick compares Gatsby to Christ because he believes that he will achieve greatness. He also does not want to identify himself as a son of farm people. Gatsby is
ambitious and he dreams about becoming his idealized version of himself. Giles Mitchell argues that Gatsby is a narcissist because of this self-idealization and his beliefs that as a son of God he can do almost anything even control time (388). This could fit with the definition of a rugged individualist since there are a few similarities between a narcissist and a rugged individualist. Both a narcissist and a rugged individualist for example can be considered selfish and self-centered. Gatsby is self-centered and he even creates an ideal version of himself.

When Gatsby first met Daisy he felt inferior to her status and wealth because "[h]owever glorious might be his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present a penniless young man without a past" (154-155). He was scared that she would discover that he was poor so "he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself – that he was fully able to take care of her" (155). He believed that the only way he could be with Daisy was if he had the same status and background as her. However, "he had no comfortable family standing behind him, and he was liable at the whim of impersonal government to be blown anywhere about the world" (155). Consequently, he had problems being with her at the time because of his low status and his occupation. His feelings of inferiority and his feelings for Daisy are what motivate him to change his low status and become more successful. The only way for Gatsby to earn a quick fortune is by breaking the law. If he had followed the law, Gatsby would most likely have failed his goals and continued to have a low status. Even though Gatsby risks going to prison and losing everything, he continues to engage in criminal activity because he is determined to become a success and have the same status as Daisy. However, Gatsby can never achieve the same social status as Daisy because of the distinction between old and new money.

Gatsby's success in his pursuit of wealth is evident in his possessions. He manages to buy a large house in a short amount of time, Gatsby says "[i]t took me just three years to earn the money that bought it" (Fitzgerald 97). This shows how quickly he had made his fortune and how determined he is to be with Daisy because "Gatsby bought that house so that Daisy would be just
across the bay" (Fitzgerald 85). According to Donaldson, "[i]n a culture where pecuniary emulation predominates, the single most important object by which to declare one's status is the house" (204). Gatsby also wanted to impress Daisy with his house and he asks her "My house looks well, doesn't it?" (Fitzgerald 96). Daisy's parental home as well as her present house with Tom are also symbols of her social status. The houses of the characters play a role in displaying their social status.

Gatsby also shows off his fortune by having several lavish parties at his house. When talking about his house, Gatsby says. "I keep it always full of interesting people, night and day" (Fitzgerald 97). Another reason for his parties is that he hopes that someday Daisy will come. The first time that Nick meets Gatsby is at one of these parties. Nick says, "I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby's house I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited" (47). "People were not invited - they went there" (47). The parties are more famous than Gatsby himself because "[s]ometimes they came without having met Gatsby at all" (47). These parties show the world how much money Gatsby has and what a success Gatsby has become.

Tom, on the other hand, was born wealthy and he is completely independent.

His family were enormously wealthy – even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach – but now he'd left Chicago and come East in a fashion that rather took your breath away: for instance, he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that. (Fitzgerald 12)

Tom does not need to achieve any particular goals in order to be considered successful and he also flaunts his wealth. Being self-reliant is also a trait in rugged individualism. Tom does not have to rely on anyone and he can use his fortune to hire people to do anything for him. He is only reliant on his inherited wealth. His wealth and social standing makes him powerful and he does not need
any financial help at all from others. Tom only cares about himself most of the time and he does and says whatever he wants. Tom manages to succeed in marrying Daisy, something that Gatsby fails to do in the end. Tom and Daisy are not like Gatsby since they belong to the upper class and are already at the top. However, Tom and Gatsby are similar in the way that they use their fortunes in order to display their status. The ways Gatsby and Tom spend their money also show some of the problems of having an unequal distribution of wealth. For example, the constant parties thrown by Gatsby can be seen as wasteful since he spends large amounts of money on something frivolous while many less fortunate people are suffering.

Compared to Gatsby, George fails trying to succeed on his own. George, who is one of the less selfish characters, wants to achieve his goals not only for his own sake but also for his wife's. George worked hard for the sole purpose of making his wife happy. He is not a rugged individualist because he is an honest man and he is not self-centered like Gatsby. A rugged individualist does not necessarily have to be dishonest and self-centered but he or she has to be willing to do almost anything in order to succeed which can include lying and putting one's own needs first. George does not break the law like Gatsby to achieve his goal. He only decides to commit a crime when his wife dies unjustly and he becomes overwhelmed with grief. He breaks the law in order to avenge his wife's death and not because he wants to achieve his personal goal of becoming rich. It can be argued that he is a failed example of rugged individualism since he never manages to achieve his goals and he is stuck in the lower class. He does not seem to be able to change this fact since "[t]hey've been living over that garage for eleven years" (Fitzgerald 41). George is an example of how illusory the American Dream is since the American Dream promises success as long as one works hard and is determined. But it does not seem to matter how hard George works, he still cannot change his position in society. George also suffers because of his dreams and he can never stop working hard because of the small possibility that he might be able to succeed one day.

Tom, a representative of the upper class, also takes advantage of George because of this
knowledge. Tom has an affair with George's wife and he insults him behind his back by saying that "He's so dumb he doesn't know he is alive" (Fitzgerald 32). When George tries to convince Tom to sell his car to him by calling him at home, Tom is annoyed by the intrusion and says "[v]ery well, then I won't sell you the car at all . . . I'm under no obligation to you at all . . . and as for bothering me about it at lunch time, I won't stand that at all!" (122). Although George apologizes, Tom uses his superiority to treat George badly and George cannot do anything about it because he needs money. George can be understood as an example of how the ideal of rugged individualism harms society and the underprivileged because he has to suffer alone in a futile pursuit while other characters, who only care about themselves, take advantage and make a fool of him. Tyson mentions how rugged individualism can be considered an oppressive ideology since it puts the individual person first and it also works against people who are disadvantaged (57). Likewise, according to Marxist criticism, “the interests of subordinated groups can never be reconciled with those of their rulers” (Ryan 117). George is taken advantage of because he belongs to a subordinated group. The wealthy have all the power so George has to follow what they say. A more equal society would make George more powerful and he would not be exploited as much.

Myrtle also fails in her attempts to achieve her goals. Tom is not serious about her because he does not seem to have any real intention of leaving his wife for her. Her affair is not presented as a romantic love story like Gatsby's and Daisy's affair either. Myrtle is portrayed as a selfish person although she too is only used by rich people like the Buchanans. She has a tragic ending and dies in a car accident caused by Tom's wife Daisy. The truth about her death does not come out and Daisy, who is the real perpetrator, goes free.
5.3 Romanticizing the individual

According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), to romanticize something is to make it seem better or more appealing than it really is (“romanticize, v.”). Since Nick is the narrator of the story, he has the largest role in romanticizing Gatsby. Nick believes that Gatsby is better than the others. While referring to other characters Nick associates with such as the Buchanans, he says that "[t]hey're a rotten crowd" (Fitzgerald 160), and he shouts to Gatsby, "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together" (160). Nick is sympathetic to Gatsby's humble background and how he managed to make a fortune on his own through hard work, as well as of his main motivation to succeed in his love for Daisy. As Nick is the first-person narrator, readers will see everything from Nick's perspective and are more likely to sympathize with Gatsby.

As Allen Boyer claims: "Despite Nick's self proclaimed honesty, he romanticizes Gatsby, although Gatsby is linked to the underworld and is obsessed with a woman married to someone else" (335). Therefore, Gatsby is romanticized for his pursuits despite his faults. Hays writes that "Some students may think Tom and Myrtle's affair is cheap and disgusting, Jay's and Daisy's romantic, but both are the same morally and legally" (324). Technically this is true but since Gatsby is romanticized throughout the novel, his feelings are seen as more true and honest compared to Tom's feelings for Daisy. The reader is influenced by Nick's view of Gatsby and Nick is always on Gatsby's side. Pidgeon writes that "Gatsby experiences a personal relationship with Daisy throughout their affair, which would have been actually rather sordid had he not turned it into a romantic crusade in which he was the hero" (181). Thus, Gatsby also romanticizes himself because he makes himself the hero of this romantic story and he believes that Daisy is only sincere about him. Gatsby says to Tom that "[s]he only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved any one except me!" (Fitzgerald 137). The only reason why Tom and Daisy are together, according to Gatsby, is Tom's wealth. But this is also true for Gatsby since the reason she did not marry him was because he was
poor. Nevertheless, he believes that it is solely his and Daisy's love that is real love. Through Nick’s narration, the reader is more likely to sympathize with Nick's feelings regarding Gatsby and Daisy's relationship.

However, Tom is always very critical of Gatsby. He is the one who finds out the truth about Gatsby's illegal activities and he also believes that Gatsby is a "nobody". His response to his wife's affair is "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife” (Fitzgerald 136). Tom is the one character who truly despises Gatsby. Tom, on the other hand, is not romanticized at all in the novel but is rather used as a tool to make Gatsby more sympathetic. Thus, Tom has the role of the antagonist and he possesses many different negative qualities. One factor, already discussed, that differentiates Tom from Gatsby is that Tom has inherited his wealth while Gatsby has made his own fortune. Tom has several affairs during his marriage to Daisy and he says of himself "[o]nce in a while I go off on a spree and make a fool of myself, but I always come back, and in my heart I love her all the time" (138). Tom and Daisy are married so what Gatsby is doing is essentially wrong but because Tom is flawed and is also cheating, it helps justify Gatsby's actions. If Tom was nice and treated his wife better, it would make Gatsby the more unsympathetic character. Tom's love for his wife is not portrayed to be as genuine as Gatsby's love for her.

All of Tom's negative qualities help make Gatsby more sympathetic because the more the reader dislikes Tom the more they will romanticize Gatsby and hope that Gatsby wins the girl, or maybe that he will see the real Daisy. It is questionable if Gatsby and Daisy would have a happy ending together since Gatsby only see his idealized version of her. The fact that Gatsby is more in love with the idea of Daisy than her as a person can be seen when Daisy makes a visit to Gatsby's home. Nick says, "There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams – not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion" (Fitzgerald 102-103). Gatsby romanticizes Daisy and he associates his ideals with her. She is a
symbol of everything Gatsby wants and Hays states that "Daisy embodies the idea of perfection for
Gatsby, an almost unapproachable ideal of social success and self-realization" (320). Although he
commits crimes in his pursuit of this ideal, Gatsby's motives seem more noble than those of the rest
of the characters and excuse some of his behavior.

According to Pidgeon, Gatsby never discovers that "Daisy, the 'green light,' the green
money, the 'voice full of money' that Gatsby pursues is not the ideal that he imagines. In reality
Daisy is a 'bitch.' She and Tom are 'careless people' who hide behind their wealth and come out to
mix with others only long enough to hurt them" (Pidgeon 179). Even though Tom and Daisy are not
rugged individualists, they show some traits of rugged individualism. Daisy does not consider
anyone else's feelings except her own after the car accident and she does not show any remorse for
killing Myrtle. Nick tries to contact Daisy after Gatsby's death "[b]ut she and Tom had gone away
early that afternoon, and taken baggage with them (Fitzgerald 171). It is true that "[t]hey were
careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into
their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other
people clean up the mess they had made" (186). Daisy and Tom leave while everyone else has to
suffer because of their actions. Daisy also uses Gatsby since she never leaves her husband for him
and she lets people believe that it was Gatsby who killed Myrtle.

Gatsby's parties demonstrate how he becomes romanticized in the novel. Most guests at the
parties do not seem to know Gatsby personally seeing that there are only rumors about him. When
Nick tries to uncover who Gatsby actually is the guests tell him different things. One says,
"Somebody told me they thought he killed a man once" (Fitzgerald 50), while another guest tells
him that "it's more that he was a German spy during the war" (50). These rumors make Gatsby seem
more mysterious and a more romantic character. According to Nick: "It was testimony to the
romantic speculation he inspired that there were whispers about him from those who had found
little that it was necessary to whisper about in this world" (50). No one seems to know the truth
about him and he does not try and correct the rumors. By avoiding answering questions about
himself, Gatsby contributes to and encourages this romanticizing.

Nick does not romanticize any of the other characters in the same way as Gatsby. Myrtle is
described in a more negative manner and her relationship with Tom is seen as cheap by others. Even
though Gatsby and Myrtle are similar in that they pursue fortune and a higher social position by
being with people who already possess these qualities, Nick does not seem to sympathize with
Myrtle. Just like Gatsby is blind to Daisy's true personality, Nick is also only able to see his
idealized version of Gatsby. After Gatsby's death, Nick continues to defend him and he says "I
found myself on Gatsby's side and alone" (Fitzgerald 170). Nick does not try to explore Gatsby's
wrongsdoings and he chooses to defend Gatsby despite all his faults. Even though Nick romanticizes
Gatsby for his ideals, it is also because of these ideals that Gatsby suffers a tragic ending.

The reason why rugged individualism is romanticized here is probably "[b]ecause material
inequality is difficult to justify in itself, ideas and cultural values have become increasingly
important for maintaining the unequal distribution of wealth" (Ryan 115). Some people might be
more willing to accept the differences between the wealthy and the poor if there is a sense of agency
in whether or not one is poor or wealthy. Rugged individualism is also romanticized because it is a
way to celebrate people who have gone through different challenges and struggles in order to
succeed on their own. By believing in rugged individualism, one might also believe that money and
power are supposed to be divided differently in society. Even though rugged individualism is only
an ideology, it can be viewed as something natural in the world when it is romanticized. The ideal
of rugged individualism can be used to maintain economic inequality because people, like the
characters in The Great Gatsby, believe it to be right, natural and moreover, aspirational.
6. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to examine the concept of rugged individualism in *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby is the best example of a rugged individualist in the novel, since he embodies all the different aspects of this idea. Gatsby pursues difficult goals, succeeds on his own, and he is romanticized for his achievements and ideals. The other characters have some of the traits valued in rugged individualism; however, it is only Gatsby who possesses all of these qualities. Nick enhances the reader's sympathy for Gatsby and rugged individualism because of his romantic treatment of them. Nick still considers Gatsby to be better than the other characters despite the fact that Gatsby commits crimes. Gatsby is essentially a self-centered person who is willing to do anything to achieve his goals. Tom and Daisy, who represent the upper class, can also be problematized from a Marxist perspective since they use their power and influence to take advantage of the less fortunate characters, George and Myrtle. Both the American Dream and rugged individualism are criticized in *The Great Gatsby*, since the novel illustrates how people become victims by believing in them. George's belief in the American Dream gives him false hope about improving his situation since it is rare and hard to succeed on one's own. Gatsby is the only character who manages to achieve his goal of making a fortune on his own. However, he is killed in the end and becomes a victim to his own aspirations and his belief in the American dream. The upper class discriminates against Gatsby, George and Myrtle because of their background and the success of the American Dream or as a rugged individualist will not change that. Class plays a role in rugged individualism since one of the reason Gatsby is romanticized is because he comes from a poor background, but this also means that he can never have as much social prestige as Tom, who inherited his wealth. It is only the characters who come from poor backgrounds who suffer because of these ideologies which suggests that the belief in rugged individualism and the American Dream does not really help the less fortunate to succeed.

Pidgeon states that “[t]he great achievement of the novel is that it manages to do two things.
First, it poetically evokes a sense of the goodness of the early ‘dream’. Second, it offers a damning indictment of it” (182). Fitzgerald criticizes the American Dream, but he also shows some of the positive aspects about the dream. Nick romanticizes Gatsby and the reader can sympathize with Gatsby’s idealism. Gatsby tries to achieve his dreams throughout the whole novel and it is his beliefs that motivate him to succeed, but he ultimately fails in the end. Since Gatsby is strongly associated with his ideals, he can be used as a symbol for both the American Dream and rugged individualism and the values they stand for as well as the problems of believing in both.
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