I am absolutely convinced that *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is one of the finest pieces of American literature. It is such because 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.

Much of America was settled by people who brought with them the doctrines of John Calvin. The Calvinist belief with which we are most concerned today is the “Doctrine of the Elect” that essentially proposes that mankind is doomed to eternal damnation, for it is burdened with original sin. Calvin held out no hope that man could be saved; as a matter of fact, he thought it impossible except for those few whom God had predetermined would be spared. This group, whose identity was known only to God, was called “The Elect.” Calvin suggested that a member of The Elect could be “dropped” by God if he failed to live a proper life of hard work and atonement, hoping that, if he should be one of the Elect, he would not lose this station.

When the Puritans settled in America, they brought with them these beliefs, and as time passed became more and more obsessed with learning who the Elect really were, despite the fact that they had been taught that this was impossible. In looking for a sign, they came to believe that the possession of material things might be an indication, since it was likely that one who had such objects must have worked and prayed hard and long. Of course, it is often true that those who do work hard frequently amass a considerable number of material things. Since hard work was associated with God, and since hard work often resulted in wealth, it was not long before these two things became associated. Wealth came to be a sign of goodness, since it indicated membership in the Elect.

From this, it is easy to see where snobbery in American life is derived. A person who was not well-to-do and who did not belong to the right club or attend the right school was considered not only poor, but sinful. The pursuit of wealth came to have a meaning which transcended the mere desire to be more comfortable. It served in an attempt to erase original sin and earn eternal salvation. Striving for wealth has become a way for Americans to ease their consciences, while one’s morality is often measured by the ability to acquire material possessions.

In America, however, several other factors have been at work. They combine with the Puritan ethic to create what we can call “The American Dream.” This dream is founded upon the philosophical...
fundamentals on which our nation was built, summed up in Thomas Jefferson’s expression that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights to liberty, life and the pursuit of happiness. In other words, America was to be a place where men were politically free to pursue whatever goal they wished.

The second factor incorporated into the American Dream resulted from the legacy of the Transcendental revolt that took place from about 1830 to 1860, a revolt which attempted to free man from the burden of the old Puritan conscience, by imparting the idea that man and God were not separate entities, but one. Therefore it was essential that each individual should behave as an individual in order to represent faithfully the elements of God within him. The Puritan wealth/goodness concept gave Americans a goal to pursue; our political philosophy freed us to pursue this goal, and Transcendentalism showed men that they, as individuals, were to lead the way.

Out of the combination of puritanism, democracy and transcendentalism has emerged the term “rugged individualism” that describes an inner-directed, individualistic approach to the acquisition of material wealth, an approach which every man is free to take. And out of this comes the idea of the American Dream, the idea that one can, if one wishes, make a fortune, rise to great heights, and achieve. However, always in the background is the belief that the only truly worthy achievement is that leading to material gain. Perhaps the most famous literary example of this is the Horatio Alger stories which in their time were perhaps the most widely read literary endeavors in America. These stories all follow the same pattern; a poor boy perseveres through hard work, goes from rags to riches, climbs the ladder of success, and earns not only wealth but also acceptance from the “better people,” the wealthy in our society.

There is a general understanding by readers of The Great Gatsby that it is a commentary on the American Dream and not simply a documentary on the Jazz Age. It is a criticism of American experience—not only of our manners, but of our basic historic attitude toward life. The theme of Gatsby is the withering of the American Dream. The dream is essentially anti-puritanical (to go from rags to riches and therefore from rejection to acceptance). In the book lies the tension between faith and reality. The reality is the distrust of mankind as expressed by the puritanical obsession with determinism arising from a belief in original sin. The tension between faith and reality is symbolized by two of our nation’s great political leaders: Jefferson who trusted the American people, and Hamilton, who did not. Jefferson advocated a pure democracy and Hamilton preferred a republic. Hamilton won out. This tension between faith and reality and idealism and practicality are the heart of American art and American politics, and Jay Gatsby personifies this conflict.

Gatsby is an idealist. He has the faith that one can “recapture the past.” He evokes from Nick a memory which “remind[s]...[him] of something, an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words that...[he has] heard long ago.” Gatsby, as a boy, had faith. His copy book in his own handwriting says, “study electricity, study needed inventions,” characterizing the faith that the perfection of the individual is possible in America.

The reality, however, is grounded in Gatsby’s experience with the Buchanans and others. It lies in the tragedy of his never knowing 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. When the going gets
rough, they retreat back into their world of money and security. They leave others to clean up the messes they make and pick up the broken pieces from their destructive behavior.

Gatsby never succeeds in seeing through the sham of this world. It is the essence of his romantic American vision that it lacks the seasoned powers of discrimination and he dies faithful to the end. The novel, of course, is of the tragedy of that vision. Fitzgerald perfectly understood the inadequacy of Gatsby’s romanticism. The scene in which Gatsby shows his pile of shirts to Daisy is not vulgar but pathetic. These are the tangible evidence of his salvation; they are the sacramentals. Sacramentals, as those brought up in the Catholic church know, are outward signs of inner grace, and I submit that Gatsby is showing these shirts to Daisy to show her that he has been “cured” of poverty. He is not showing them out of vanity or pride, but in humility and reverence, much the same as that which must have exemplified those who were miraculously healed by Christ.

The literary critic Lionel Trilling has said that America’s archetype of the young hero has come from European culture. This hero generally comes from obscure or humble beginnings, and there is a mystery about his birth (i.e., perhaps he is a foundling prince). A product of poverty, pride, and intelligence, along with a sense of his own destiny, he passes through a series of adventures. His purpose is to enter life by subduing the world which considers him an outsider. Gatsby is an American version of this archetype in the tradition of Natty Bumpo, Huckleberry Finn, even in the character of “The Virginian,” or the hero of High Noon, or Matt Dillon or that western hero which Gary Cooper played so well. Indeed, it is even in Gatsby’s flyleaf of his copy of Hopalong Cassidy that he has written the schedule that his father shows Nick. This list, of course, is the one in which “study needed inventions” is located. Gatsby does not seek to master or understand society. He does not pass from innocence through experience to sophistication, but retains innocence throughout his life.

According to Nick there is “something gorgeous about him.” Gatsby wears this gorgeousness with the same elegance that Gary Cooper, alone and unafraid in the movie High Noon, wears it, saving townspeople, who have shown by their cowardice that they are not worthy of him. Fitzgerald has created Gatsby with a sense of his own election. He bears himself with the dignity of this. His speech and his dress touch the imagination. In his “white flannel suit, a silver shirt and a gold tie” there really is something Olympian in him. This Olympian stature shows in his attitude toward all of his guests. He remains aloof while providing them with the base material things he instinctively knows they want. Fitzgerald makes it clear that Gatsby does not enjoy these things for himself. They are merely being used to realize his dream...the acquisition of Daisy.

The masterful passage wherein Fitzgerald chronicles those who accepted Gatsby’s hospitality emphasizes the gulf between Gatsby and his guests. It is a list written by Nick on the back of the timetable, ironically dated July 5th, the day after the festival of America’s birth date, the birth date of the American Dream. The writing is splendid as Fitzgerald manages to create an impression of this society without actually describing it. The list creates an atmosphere of vulgar American fortunes and vulgar American destinies. Fitzgerald describes Gatsby saying farewell, and writes, “A wafer of a moon was shining over Gatsby’s house surviving the laughter and sound. A sudden emptiness seemed to flow from the windows and great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host who stood on the porch, his hand up in a gesture of farewell.”

Mythic characters are by definition
impersonal and in this sense Gatsby is mythic. He has no private life, no meaning or significance that depends on his fulfilling his private destiny. Daisy’s love for Tom was “only personal” Gatsby says to Nick and believes that what he and Daisy shared was outside the realm of real life. But 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.

Daisy exists on two levels as Gatsby’s idealized vision and as the reality that Fitzgerald delineates to the reader. Fitzgerald knows that, at its most depraved level, the American Dream merges with the American debutante’s dream, and it is a thing of deathly hollowness. At a party, Gatsby points out a movie star and her director. The scene is highly civilized as the director bends over her. Then our attention is directed to other scenes at the party. A few pages later we are suddenly returned to this couple and Fitzgerald achieves a curious impression of static or arrested action, an emptiness as though this were merely a scene in a movie and not evidence of any real emotion.

Daisy cannot stand emotions. After all, sophistication is merely an emphasis on ritual without emotion. In fact, it leaves no room for emotion because emotions are dangerous; they are demanding and cannot always be controlled. Sophisticated people are “cool” people, and real emotions are a threat to them. Daisy is a gesture divorced from life and she assumes that Gatsby is like her. She is attracted to Gatsby when he appears to her to be a sophisticated, empty man; at no time does she face the fact that he truly is in love with her. (Nick has described Gatsby’s personality, after all, as an unbroken series of successful gestures.) As the novel unfolds, Fitzgerald illustrates the emptiness of Daisy’s character as it turns into the viciousness of monstrous moral indifference.

Gatsby’s attraction to Daisy lies in the fact that she is the green light that signals him into the heart of his vision. Fitzgerald maintains the mythic quality of Gatsby by avoiding details of the romance; he leads us at once to recognize that Daisy is not in reality what Gatsby dreams she is. 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. “Her voice is full of money,” he says to Nick. Gatsby sees Daisy but as a blinded idealist who has a dream. When the dream clashes with reality, he follows it anyway, because to face reality is to face the fact that all his years of dreaming and striving were for nothing.

In Gatsby’s home after the meeting at tea, Fitzgerald writes that the “significance of the green light” is gone and Gatsby’s “count of enchanted objects...[has] been diminished by one.” After that afternoon, which obviously is not as innocent as Fitzgerald paints it, Gatsby is beginning to realize that Daisy is not what he has dreamed. Disillusionment begins. If Daisy does not quite measure up to what he has dreamed, he will just have the piano player play songs to keep him in the world of faith rather than risk slipping into the disenchantment of the real world.

In the end, Gatsby’s insistence on maintaining the dream kills him. It is obvious that Gatsby is aware that Wilson will come to kill him. He can run away, but he chooses to stay because he really prefers to die rather than face up to the fact that his dream was not worthy of him. Fitzgerald tells us of Gatsby’s last moments of disillusionment: “He must have looked up at the unfamiliar sky and shivered at what a grotesque thing a rose is and how the sunlight is—a new world
where ghosts breathing dreams drifted fortuitously about."

When the dream disintegrates, Gatsby is face to face with reality. Tom and Daisy and millions of other small-minded, ruthless Americans believe only in the value of material things, with no room for faith and vision. As the novel closes, the experience of Gatsby becomes the focus of Fitzgerald’s disillusionment. In one of the most beautiful passages in American literature, Nick, after Gatsby’s death, goes to bid the last farewell to Gatsby’s abandoned mansion and says,

for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.

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 roll on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic 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.

It is in this passage that Fitzgerald sums up the entire tragedy of Gatsby. He really is the American boy pursuing the American Dream, never knowing that the dream which his idealism has created is not worthy of him. He never realizes that what Nick says is true, Gatsby was “better than the whole rotten bunch.”

The 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. Jay Gatsby is the embodiment of the American Dream. He is shown to us in all his immature romanticism, which includes an insecure grasp of social and human values, a lack of cultural intelligence and self-knowledge, a blindness to or unconcern for the pitfalls that surround him. All of these things are results of his compulsive optimism and idealism (the compulsive optimism of America) and they are masterfully drawn. Gatsby is, after all, merely the typical American small town boy. He is unsophisticated, believing, and idealistic and cannot choose to see through the sham of what the American Dream has become.

Although these are practical deficiencies, they are also the basis of Gatsby’s goodness and faith in life. He has a compelling desire to realize all the possibilities of life and believes that we can have an earthly paradise populated even by the Buchanans. Fitzgerald has effectively suggested that these deficiencies are not so much the personal deficiencies of Gatsby, but deficiencies of the American vision. Although admirable, they are defenseless before the other side of American life, the materialistic, pragmatic world of Daisy and Tom. And so Gatsby really does become a tragic figure almost in the classic sense. His flaw is his “faith” in mankind and in America, which has blinded his intelligence and judgment. Hence, it is a tragedy of an America traditionally torn between the two forces of optimism and pessimism, of idealism and practicality, of faith and reality, and of romanticism and realism. It is the same clash of ideals which differentiated Jefferson’s democracy from Hamilton’s federalism. It is a schism that exists in America and has existed since its inception.