



A Reality Check on the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*: A Textual Analysis through Strain Theories

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Received: 10 Mar 2024; Received in revised form: 15 Apr 2024; Accepted: 21 Apr 2024; Available online: 30 April, 2024

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Abstract— This article uses Robert Merton's 'Strain Theory' and Agnew's 'General Strain Theory' to investigate the manifestations of deviant behavior in F. Scott Fitzgerald's seminal novel *The Great Gatsby*. This study delves into the socioeconomic and psychological strains experienced by the novel's characters using meticulous textual analysis as its methodology, shedding light on the intricate dynamics between societal expectations, individual aspirations, and the pursuit of the elusive American Dream. By combining the tenets of Strain Theory with the narrative landscape of the novel, this research elucidates how economic disenfranchisement, materialistic obsessions, and psychological pressures contribute to the portrayal of deviance and disillusionment among the characters. Furthermore, this analysis sheds light on the underlying sociological realities of the Roaring Twenties era, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in pursuing the American Dream, as well as the implications for societal norms and individual behavior. Finally, this article contributes to the discourse on American literature and sociological theory by elucidating the enduring relevance of Strain Theories in understanding the complexities of human behavior and social dynamics in the context of Fitzgerald's masterwork.



Keywords— Strain Theory, Socioeconomic, Psychological, Roaring Twenties, The American Dream, Deviance

The Great Gatsby, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald and published in 1925, is a masterpiece of American literature. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1896, he went to Princeton University and is widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century. His writing captured the essence of the "Jazz Age" and the extravagant lifestyles of the wealthy elite. *The Great Gatsby* is set on Long Island, New York in the summer of 1922, and tells the story of the enigmatic and opulent Jay Gatsby, who throws extravagant parties in the hopes of reuniting with his lost love, Daisy Buchanan. Fitzgerald's novel explores themes such as wealth's corrupting influence and the American dream's demise. The novel has since become a celebrated classic and has been adapted into various movies, plays, and operas. Its enduring legacy continues to captivate readers worldwide.

The term 'American Dream' was coined in 1931 by James Truslow Adams in his *Epic of America*, but its origins can be traced back to the early settlers from Europe who left their old world to build a new home in search of freedom and new opportunities for prosperity. These aspirations culminated in 'The Declaration of Independence' of 1776, which stated, "all men are created equal" and thus equally able to pursue "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness." The five elements of the American Dream are found on the American ideals of democracy, rights, liberty, opportunity, and equality. However, after World War 1 was over there was a new approach towards the Dream amongst the American public from happiness and success to the accumulation of material possessions. However, with such new aspirations came new complications such as corruption, the conflict between the older upper classes and the newly emerged ones, or the aspirants of such. As a result, such desire to accumulate wealth overnight opened the doors to

unrealistic goals leading to desperate situations among individuals who may not have the appropriate means to achieve them. Moreover, due to societal pressure adding to this desperateness, such individuals may develop deviant behaviors where they are forced to use illegal, criminally inclined means to achieve their goals creating a very toxic, unhealthy competitive environment that often leads to very harmful consequences.

Strain theory, a foundational concept in criminology and sociology, provides profound insights into understanding such deviant behavior and its societal consequences. Emile Durkheim's work *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) introduced the concept of "anomie," which refers to a state of normlessness or social deregulation. He argued that rapid social change, such as industrialization, can cause a breakdown in social norms and values, leaving people confused and disoriented. In the mid-twentieth century, Robert K. Merton expanded on this concept by introducing the strain theory in his seminal work, *Social Structure and Anomie* (1938), which holds that societal structures may pressure individuals to commit acts of deviance when they are unable to achieve culturally prescribed goals through legitimate means. Merton (1938) identified five types of individual responses to societal pressures namely "I. Conformity", "II. Innovation", "III. Ritualism", "IV. Retreatism" and "V. Rebellion" (p. 676). These modes revealed how individuals respond to the stress caused by societal expectations and constraints, shedding light on various paths to deviance.

Building on Merton's foundational framework, Robert Agnew proposed the General Strain Theory (GST) in the 1990s. Agnew's theory first articulated in *Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency* (1992) expanded the scope of strain beyond economic aspirations to include a variety of sources of strain, such as the inability to achieve positively valued stimuli or the presence of negative stimuli such as abuse or discrimination.

Agnew(1992) identified three major sources of strain starting with 'the failure to achieve positively valued goals', 'the removal of positively valued stimuli', and 'the presence of negatively valued stimuli'. Agnew's incorporation of these sources provided a comprehensive understanding of deviant behavior's complexities, shedding light on how strain can manifest in various forms and contexts.

Merton and Agnew's theories have had a significant impact on the scholarly discussion of deviance and continue to provide valuable insights into the motivations behind criminal behavior. Firstly, I shall consider Merton's theory for analyzing the novel and its sociological implications. Merton defines 'innovation' as

one of the modes of societal adaptation in which people accept cultural goals but reject or modify the prescribed methods for achieving them and it is the most widely used technique by the characters in the work. Jay Gatsby, the protagonist of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, is a perfect example of this. Gatsby's partnership with underworld figure Meyer Wolfsheim exemplifies his adoption of this mode of adaptation, as he seeks to achieve wealth and social status through illegitimate means.

Gatsby's relationship with Wolfsheim, a notorious gambler, and alleged criminal, serves as a means to acquire the wealth needed to fulfill his romantic idealization of Daisy Buchanan. This partnership is evident in her wealthy husband Tom Buchanan's description of Gatsby's involvement in their business dealings: "He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 106). Furthermore, Gatsby's lavish parties, which are funded by his ill-gotten gains, serve as a public display of his newfound wealth and social standing. Fitzgerald describes Gatsby's parties as extravagant spectacles, attended by the elite of West Egg and beyond, reflecting the success of his innovative approach to achieving status: "Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday, these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves." (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 26). His innovative adaptation to societal strain is encapsulated in his relentless pursuit of wealth and status to win over Daisy, exemplified by his iconic declaration to Nick Carraway. "I'm going to make everything just like it was before..." "She will see." (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 71)

Myrtle Wilson also exemplifies the concept of adaptation as a response to societal strain. Myrtle, trapped in the lower echelons of society, seeks to overcome her socioeconomic limitations by having an extramarital affair with Tom Buchanan, who represents wealth, social status, and privilege. Myrtle uses her relationship with Tom to strategically innovate and gain access to the affluent class's lifestyle, albeit through illicit means.

Myrtle's extravagant consumption and desire for material possessions are notable examples of her pursuit of innovation. In Chapter 2, Fitzgerald (2004) depicts Myrtle eagerly embracing the trappings of wealth during her rendezvous with Tom in New York City. She spends "ten dollars" on expensive items like "a small flask of perfume", "a copy of *Town Tattle*", and even an "Airedale" dog, all of which represent her desire to advance in society (pp. 18-19). Myrtle's purchase of material goods reflects her belief that by imitating the lifestyle of the wealthy, she can overcome

her working-class roots and achieve some semblance of social mobility.

Furthermore, Myrtle's affair with Tom helps her gain social recognition and validation. Despite Tom's blatant disregard for her feelings and his condescending treatment of her, Myrtle sees their relationship as a path to advancement and social acceptance. She throws lavish parties at the flat Tom rents for their liaisons, where she entertains guests from the upper classes. Myrtle's attempts to integrate herself into Tom's social circle show her willingness to innovate and seize opportunities for advancement, even if it means sacrificing her moral integrity. However, her attempts at innovation are ultimately futile, resulting in tragedy. Her affair with Tom only reinforces the power dynamics of class and privilege, as evidenced by Tom's callous treatment of her and eventual abandonment of her during the confrontation at the Plaza Hotel. Myrtle's inability to overcome her socioeconomic limitations exemplifies the inherent constraints of social mobility in *The Great Gatsby's* world, where people like Myrtle are pushed to the margins of society, unable to break free from the cycle of poverty and disenfranchisement. Through her character arc, Fitzgerald offers a critical examination of the limitations of innovation as a means of achieving success within a stratified society. Despite her efforts to emulate the wealthy elite, Myrtle eventually succumbs to the novel's rigid social hierarchies and entrenched power structures. Her tragic fate serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the inherent injustices and inequalities that exist in the pursuit of the American Dream.

While Myrtle's Strategy for social mobility eventually failed her, Daisy Buchanan succeeded. She exemplifies Merton's concept of 'conformity', which became the difference between her and Myrtle, as evidenced by her decision to marry Tom Buchanan despite her lingering feelings for Jay Gatsby. Daisy's adherence to societal expectations, as well as her decision to conform to conventional norms, reflect her desire for security, stability, and the preservation of her social status, which many other middle-class Americans shared at the time.

Daisy's marriage to Tom Buchanan, a wealthy and socially prominent individual who represents the pinnacle of traditional success in the novel's affluent society, is a prime example of her conformity. Despite her previous romantic involvement with Gatsby, Daisy ultimately chooses to marry Tom, aligning herself with the expectations of her social class and securing her future within the established social order, something Myrtle could not perfect as she was already married to Wilson and hence failed to legitimize her relationship with Tom, "Its really [Tom's] wife that's keeping them apart. [Daisy]'s a

Catholic and they don't believe in divorce." Daisy was not a Catholic, and I was a little shocked at the elaborateness of the lie." (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 23) These lines also demonstrate her conformity, which is reinforced by her reluctance to disrupt the status quo or challenge the existing power dynamics in her social circle. Despite being aware of Tom's extramarital affairs, Daisy chooses to remain passive and complicit, preferring to keep her marriage stable rather than confront the underlying issues or assert her independence. So, in comparison to Myrtle Daisy's decisions highlight her willingness to prioritize societal norms and expectations over her desires and aspirations as exemplified by Catherine in Chapter 2 about both the couple's dissatisfied marriage, "Neither can stand the person they are married to." (Fitzgerald, 2004, pp. 22-23)

Daisy's conformity is also evident in her behavior and interactions throughout the novel, as she maintains the appearance of marital bliss and contentment despite the underlying tensions and disillusionment in her relationship with Tom. For example, during the scene at the Buchanan's mansion, Daisy maintains a composed and affable demeanor, concealing her true feelings and conforming to polite society's expectations: "Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's, and she laughed with thrilling scorn. "Sophisticated - God, I am sophisticated!" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 13)

It is also reflected in her symbolic association with the color white throughout the novel, which traditionally represents loyalty and conformity to societal norms. Her voice as Nick observed was "full of money — that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of ...High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl..." (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 76) Overall, Daisy's adherence to conformity serves as a poignant commentary on the pervasive influence of social norms and expectations within the pursuit of the American Dream. Through her character arc, Fitzgerald explores the complexities of identity, agency, and societal conformity, shedding light on the inherent tensions and compromises individuals make to navigate the constraints of their social environment.

Meanwhile, the character of George Wilson represents a shift from Merton's concept of 'ritualism' to 'rebellion' in response to societal stress. Merton defines 'ritualism' as an adaptation mechanism in which individuals accept the means to achieve societal goals but abandon their pursuit of those goals, whereas 'rebellion' is the complete rejection of both elements and their replacement with alternate means and goals. Initially, Wilson embodies ritualism through his diligent but futile adherence to his simple life and work as a mechanic in the Valley of Ashes.

Wilson's ritualistic adherence to his mundane existence is evident in his dedication to his auto repair shop, despite its lack of profitability and his wife Myrtle's dissatisfaction with their socio-economic status as we notice in Catherine's comment about how "[Myrtle] really ought to get away from him" cause "They have been living over that garage for eleven years." Fitzgerald (2004) portrays Wilson's resigned acceptance of his circumstances as "He was his wife's man and not his own" (p. 87) Wilson's ritualistic behavior is characterized by his persistence in adhering to societal norms, even as his aspirations remain unfulfilled.

However, Wilson's adherence to ritualism is disrupted following the tragic death of his wife, Myrtle, in a hit-and-run accident involving Daisy Buchanan's car. Wilson's transition to rebellion against the societal forces that have oppressed and abandoned him is triggered by his wife's death and the revelation of her affair with Tom Buchanan. This existential crisis, which will be discussed later in detail, fuelled by his financial incompetence, played a significant role in his violent climatic outburst, as did Tom's manipulation, which leads him to believe that Gatsby, not Daisy, is responsible for Myrtle's death. Tom exploits Wilson's vulnerability fuels his desire for vengeance and motivates him to take action. Wilson's rebellion culminates in his pursuit and murder of Gatsby, whom he mistakenly believes is responsible for Myrtle's death. Fitzgerald portrays Wilson's descent into rebellion as a desperate attempt to assert agency in the face of massive social and economic disparities. Therefore, George Wilson's progression from 'ritualism' to 'rebellion' in the novel reflects his response to the strain imposed by societal inequities and personal loss. Through his portrayal of Wilson's transformation, Fitzgerald highlights the corrosive impact of societal pressures on individuals' behavior and the tragic consequences of unchecked ambition and manipulation.

In examining these characters' actions in *The Great Gatsby* through the lens of strain theory, it becomes apparent that Merton's framework primarily addresses economic and materialistic motives driving deviant behavior. However, to fully understand the psychological underpinnings of their actions, Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) offers valuable insights. His theory expands upon Merton's framework by incorporating psychological factors contributing to strain and subsequent deviant behavior. Unlike Merton's focus on economic and structural constraints, Agnew emphasizes the role of negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and resentment, in motivating individuals to engage in deviance when faced with strain. According to Agnew, individuals may experience strain not only from the inability to achieve

valued goals but also from the loss of positive stimuli or the presence of negative stimuli.

In *The Great Gatsby*, characters experience various forms of strain beyond economic deprivation, including unrequited love, social rejection, and existential disillusionment. For instance, Jay Gatsby's relentless pursuit of Daisy Buchanan is driven not only by his desire for social status and material wealth but also by his longing for acceptance and validation. This psychological strain is evident in Gatsby's obsessive fixation on Daisy, as reflected in Nick's description of how Gatsby tried to impress "her under false pretences" and how "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. As a matter of fact, he had no such facilities - he had no comfortable family standing behind him, and he was liable at the whim of an impersonal government to be blown anywhere about the world." (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 95)

Similarly, George Wilson's descent into rebellion following Myrtle's death is fueled not only by economic desperation but also by profound grief and a sense of betrayal. Fitzgerald portrays Wilson's emotional turmoil and psychological distress even before Myrtle's death when he, "... discovered that Myrtle had some sort of life apart from him in another world, and the shock had made him physically sick" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 79). Therefore, Wilson's actions are driven by a complex interplay of economic strain and psychological distress, highlighting the multifaceted nature of deviant behavior.

Research on Agnew's GST supports the idea that negative emotions play a central role in motivating individuals to engage in deviance when faced with strain. Studies by Agnew (1992) and Brody et al., (2003) have found that experiences of anger, frustration, and resentment are significant predictors of various forms of deviant behavior, including aggression, substance abuse, and property crime. Moreover, further research by Agnew (2001) and Paternoster & Mazerolle (1994) also has shown that individuals may employ coping mechanisms, such as substance use or delinquency, as a means of alleviating negative emotions and restoring a sense of control in the face of strain.

Jay Gatsby's pursuit of the American Dream is such a complex amalgamation of ego, the frustration of social rejection, and the prevention of achieving 'positively valued goals', as posited by Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST). Gatsby's relentless quest to attain wealth, status, and the love of Daisy Buchanan is driven by a deep-seated desire to transcend his humble origins and gain acceptance into the upper echelons of society.

Gatsby's ego, fuelled by his idealized vision of himself as a self-made man of wealth and importance, propels him to amass a fortune through dubious means and fabricate a persona designed to impress Daisy and secure her affection. Despite his accumulation of wealth through bootlegging and other illegal activities, Gatsby remains an outsider in the elite circles of East Egg. His humble origins and lack of familial pedigree prevent him from gaining full acceptance into the upper class, leading to feelings of frustration and resentment. This inflated ego is evident in Gatsby's grandiose statements and exaggerated claims about his past, as exemplified in his assertion to Nick, "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 42).

Moreover, Gatsby's frustration at being ostracized by the old-money elite of East Egg despite his material wealth further motivates his pursuit of Daisy and validation from the upper class. Fitzgerald portrays Gatsby's longing for acceptance and recognition, "He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: 'I never loved you'" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 70). Fitzgerald vividly portrays Gatsby's frustration with his outsider status when "He talked a lot about the past, and [Nick] gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 71). This passage highlights Gatsby's longing to reclaim a sense of identity and belonging through his pursuit of Daisy and the American Dream

The presence of negative emotions, such as anger, frustration, and resentment, is evident throughout Gatsby's interactions and actions in the novel. Gatsby's extravagant parties, ostentatious displays of wealth, and elaborate schemes to win Daisy's affection serve as coping mechanisms to alleviate his psychological strain and restore a sense of control in the face of adversity.

Ultimately, Gatsby's tragic demise can be seen as a consequence of the strain he experiences in his pursuit of the American Dream. He "...paid a high price for living too long with a single dream" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 103). His relentless pursuit of wealth, status, and love, coupled with his inability to achieve these goals through legitimate means, culminates in a tragic end fueled by feelings of anger, frustration, and despair.

Agnew's GST provides a theoretical framework for understanding Gatsby's motivation in terms of the prevention of achieving positively valued goals. According to Agnew, individuals may experience strain when they are unable to attain culturally prescribed goals through legitimate means, leading to feelings of anger, frustration, and resentment. Gatsby's inability to achieve acceptance into the upper class and win Daisy's love through

conventional means exacerbates his psychological strain, prompting him to resort to unconventional and often illegal methods to achieve his objectives. Gatsby's experiences of strain resulting from the prevention of achieving positively valued goals, coupled with his emotional responses to these obstacles, shape his actions and ultimately lead to his downfall. Through Gatsby's story, Fitzgerald explores the complexities of human ambition, desire, and the pursuit of happiness in the face of societal constraints and personal limitations.

Wilson's descent into violence can also be understood better through Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST), which posits that individuals may also resort to deviant behavior when faced with strain resulting from the 'removal of positive stimuli'. Myrtle's affair with Tom Buchanan already serves as a source of strain for Wilson, reminding him of their impoverished circumstances and his inability to change them. This frustration is evident in Wilson's interactions with Myrtle, as he berates her for her infidelity and expresses his desire to escape their bleak existence, "You may fool me but you can't fool God!" (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 102). His condition worsened with the loss of a positive stimulus perhaps the only positive stimulus in the form of Myrtle evident in Michaelis's presumption as he tried to console him or rather, "he was almost sure that Wilson had no friend: there was not enough of him for his wife." (Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 101) This feeling of incompetency, failure, and loss exacerbates his feelings of anger and resentment, leading him to lash out in a desperate attempt to regain control over his life through any means necessary.

Talking about love, in sociological research, the concept of romantic love is often explored in terms of its psychological and social dimensions. Studies have shown that romantic love involves a complex interplay of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components, shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations showing how "They shed powerful beams of light on the question of biology and culture in shaping our inner lives" (Hatfield & Rapson, 2013, para. 4). This is indicative enough of the insufficiency of analyzing the experiences of strain faced by the characters solely from an economical perspective, hence the usage of the GST theory.

On the other hand, Tom's resentment towards Gatsby's attempt to infiltrate their class fuelling his willingness to manipulate Wilson into carrying out his bidding is a result of the clear case of 'old money' versus 'new money'. The former group with the likes of Tom who are born into their ancestral wealth and social status absolutely could not digest the latter newly emerged class who got wealthy through social mobility after World War I

using various means most of which are attempted to be proved as illegitimate as possible by the former class to secure their own 'exclusive', 'legitimate' existence. This is visible in Tom's repeated emphasis on Gatsby's association with the underworld and the likes of Wolfsheim to prove him undeserving to be in his social class, "I picked [Gatsby] for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong." (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 85) However, there are also other psychological stimuli behind Tom's behavior other than just economic and materialistic and Agnew's GST helps us uncover them. According to his theory, the 'presence of negative stimuli' in the form of personal insults can lead to deviant behavior just like the ones Tom directly or indirectly received from Gatsby. As a result, along with his resentment these insults also lead to crippling anger and envy in Tom when he finds out about his wife's past relations with Gatsby who even now openly confesses his love for her right in front of him challenging him to take her away as he helplessly watches, "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr Nobody from Nowhere make love to yo ur wife." (Fitzgerald 2004, p. 83) Soon, he succumbs to these strains leading to his deviant behavior or rather indirect deviant behavior as his superiority complex over Gatsby of being from the 'legitimate' Old money which prevents him from indulging directly in any acts that would go against his societal expectations. In desperation to justify this 'conformity' of his to societal norms and his desire to preserve his privileged position Tom blames Gatsby that he deserved it and how "That fellow had it coming for him" even shamelessly trying to convince Nick before that by claiming that he "...told [Wilson] the truth," (Fitzgerald 2004 p. 114) which he didn't. Such scenarios truly highlight the pervasive influence of deviance due to such psychological strains and power dynamics in shaping immoral individual behaviors.

CONCLUSION

The application of Merton and Agnew's Strain Theories to the sociological analysis of *The Great Gatsby* yields profound insights into the tumultuous era of the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald's vivid depiction of the stark economic and social divides that characterized 1920s American society aligns powerfully with Merton's conception of structural strain. The author's portrayal of the lavish excesses and false glamour of the wealthy elite, juxtaposed against the destitution and limited opportunities facing the working classes, starkly illustrates the systemic barriers and unequal access to legitimate paths of social mobility.

Furthermore, the characters' discontent, frustration, and resentment at their inability to achieve the American Dream reflect Agnew's general strain theory

model. The novel's tragic storylines, such as George Wilson's turn to violence and Gatsby's ultimately futile attempts to acquire wealth and status through illicit means, provide potent examples of how strain can drive individuals toward deviant adaptations. Conversely, Gatsby's innovative, if ultimately doomed, efforts to transcend his humble origins through ostentatious displays of conspicuous consumption exemplify how some may rebel against societal norms in a desperate bid to close the gap between aspirations and reality.

Ultimately, this textual analysis through the lens of Merton and Agnew's theorization illuminates the profound social, economic, and cultural turbulence that defined the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald's masterful narrative serves as a rich sociological case study, elucidating the complex interplay between cultural values, social structures, and individual agency that shaped the precarious lived experiences of Americans during this transformative historical period. By situating *The Great Gatsby* within the theoretical frameworks of strain theory, this research offers a nuanced and insightful examination of the sociological realities underlying the author's iconic literary portrait of 1920s America.

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