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Tanaka 1

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Rich Man, Poor Man: *The Great Gatsby*  
and the American Dream

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* is considered one of the greatest American novels of the 20th century. One reason for its greatness is its exploration of the American dream. However, most critics agree that Fitzgerald had a negative view of the American dream and that the novel exposes the dream as an illusion (Bewley 23). America is not a land of equal opportunity where all hard-working individuals can become rich and successful, as many Americans believe. Wealth and success are guarded by the very rich--by the richest men, in fact. Tom Buchanan in the novel represents this world of rich "old money"; the unsuccessful George Wilson and the newly rich Jay Gatsby represent ordinary Americans in search of success, personal happiness and social acceptance. But both fail against Tom and his wealth and power. They fail to hold onto or to win the women they love, and they both die because of Tom Buchanan's influence. This essay explores the conflict of male representatives of the wealthy and the poor in *The Great Gatsby*, and suggests that the richest Americans, men such as Tom Buchanan, rule by force and violence, not by hard work, intelligence or virtue.

Opening  
sentences  
announce  
specific  
theme and  
accepted  
view of  
the novel.

Introduction  
narrows  
focus on  
male  
characters

Thesis  
statement  
announces  
topic and  
main idea  
of essay

Topic  
sentence:  
Biographical  
background  
on author

The struggle for wealth and love were important themes in F. Scott Fitzgerald's life. Although Fitzgerald (1896-1940) came from a comfortable middle-class family in St. Paul, Minnesota, he worried about money and success most of his life. As a boy, he was strongly affected by his father's failure in business. It was mostly because of money from her mother's family that could he grow up in a prosperous neighborhood, play with the sons and daughters of the wealthy and attend good schools (Brucoli). As a result, Fitzgerald was attracted to the world of the rich, but he knew that he did not belong (Curnutt 14). His first love affair, with Chicago socialite Ginevra King, is a good example of his fascination with wealth--especially with women as symbols of wealth and success. It was also a reminder that he was an outsider to this world. During one visit to King's home in the wealthy Lake Forest suburb of Chicago, Fitzgerald overheard a member of the family say, "Poor boys shouldn't think of marrying rich girls" (West 61). These biographical facts are reflected in much of Fitzgerald's writing.

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In *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan represents the wealthy upper-class of America. Not only is he rich; he is competitive and controlling of the people around him. Although Tom is "enormously wealthy," as Nick tell us (Fitzgerald 6), Tom doesn't seem to work much. Indeed, he and Daisy appear to be members of the idle rich: those who do not work but live off of their money. As Nick writes, the couple "drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo or were rich together" (Fitzgerald 6). Tom spends most of his time giving his opinions,

judging and controlling others. With "shining arrogant eyes" and "the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward" (Fitzgerald 6), Tom displays "paternal contempt" for the people he meets, and Nick reports that many men in college "hated his guts" (Fitzgerald 7). Moreover, Tom is often described in the novel as physically powerful and violent. He has "enormous power" and a "cruel body" (Fitzgerald 6-7). Daisy, whose finger Tom has bruised, calls him "a brute of man, a great big, hulking physical specimen of a --" (Fitzgerald 10). When Nick has dinner at Tom and Daisy's mansion, Nick says that "Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker piece to another square" (Fitzgerald 9). In this scene, Nick is treated like a mere token in Tom's game. This manipulation by Tom extends to others, including George Wilson, the owner of the car repair shop in the "valley of ashes."

**Transition sentence:  
Announces  
the topic of  
the next  
paragraph**

**Quotation  
is set up by  
giving  
some  
details of  
the scene**

George Wilson represents the struggling working-class American. He is a small business man running a rather unprosperous garage. Although Wilson is described as a "spiritless" man by Nick on their first meeting (Fitzgerald 17), he seems at first to be an honest, hardworking man. Yet Wilson is controlled by Tom in many ways. The fact that Tom is having an affair with Wilson's wife, the materialistic Myrtle, shows Tom's dominance. With his money, Tom can give Myrtle anything she wants; George cannot. Tom also keeps Wilson under his thumb by promising to sell him a car, a car that Wilson thinks he can resell and turn a profit. When George gets pushy about the car, Tom threatens to cancel the deal (Fitzgerald 17, 73). Later, in the novel, Tom uses the car to help convince Wilson he is his friend (Fitzgerald 90). Finally, of course, Tom turns Wilson on Gatsby saying that it was Gatsby who was driving the car that killed Myrtle (Fitzgerald 114). Thus just as Nick imagines himself manipulated by Tom--a mere token in a game--so is Wilson controlled by the wealthy and powerful Tom Buchanan.

The only man who challenges Tom is Jay Gatsby, who has risen from poverty to great wealth. The son of poor farmers in North Dakota, James Gatz dreams of a better life for himself. Importantly, Gatsby does not achieve his greatness alone. The wealthy Dan Cody gives him his first education (Fitzgerald 64), and later Gatsby becomes a partner of the shady Meyer Wolfsheim in New York. His success in part is based on the help of the rich. Gatsby's own dream of success involves winning Daisy Buchanan from Tom. He buys a mansion in West Egg on Long Island, across the bay from Tom and Daisy's home, and holds lavish parties through the summer of 1922, hoping that Daisy will appear there. Like Tom, Gatsby is also driven by competition; his love for Daisy is based on the fact that she is wanted by other men. She is Tom's wife of course, but as Nick tells us, when Gatsby courted Daisy five years before, "[i]t excited him ... than many men had already loved Daisy--it increased her value in his eyes" (Fitzgerald 94). During the drinking party at the Plaza Hotel in chapter 7, Gatsby confronts Tom over Daisy. He says that Tom will no longer take care of Daisy; she is leaving him (Fitzgerald 85). But Tom fights back by revealing Gatsby's secret: his wealth has come from criminal activity. Gatsby, says Tom, is a "common swindler," "a bootlegger" (Fitzgerald 85). Gatsby struggles to convince Daisy that his reputation is good, but after the accident Tom convinces Daisy to forget about Gatsby--as Nick witnesses them "conspiring

**Quotation  
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together" (Fitzgerald 93)--and by the time Gatsby is murdered by George Wilson, both have left New York. Tom plays a large part in the destruction of Gatsby's dream.

In conclusion, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel about the conflict between the rich and the poor, in particular the struggle of men for love and wealth. People like Tom Buchanan rule over society by force. Tom uses his wealth and power to manipulate others: the women in his life, working-men like George Wilson, and male challengers like the newly wealthy Jay Gatsby. He is depicted as cruel and physically powerful; he is for the most part unintelligent with racist, bigoted views of women, non-white Americans, and immigrants. Indeed, Tom represents not only wealth in America but also the ascendancy of white Protestants, the capitalist system and "traditional" morality in the 1920s. According to David J. Goldberg, there was growing fear among white Anglo-Saxon Protestants (sometimes referred to as "Nordics") during the 1920s about the immigration, and the growing rights and freedoms of women and of African Americans (126, 140). In addition, there was much conflict between capital and labor, that is, between the rich capitalist owners of companies and their workers (66). Tom's views in the novel and his attempts to exert control over the people around him--Daisy and Myrtle, and especially George Wilson and Jay Gatsby--may reflect the growing anxieties of some Americans during the 1920s. In any case, *The Great Gatsby* with its theme of love, wealth and the American dream tells us much about the social and cultural changes taking place during the "Roaring Twenties."

Identifying a source: "According to ..."

Conclusion: Repeats the thesis and summarizes the points in the body

Cultural and historical background: linking essay theme to context

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"Works Cited" means sources that are quoted or summarized in the essay

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