



The Price of Privilege: Wealth, Power, and Inequality in *The Great Gatsby*

By Blake Glasser

We often hear the phrase ‘Money can’t buy happiness,’ but for the Buchanans, it seems to buy power, dominance, and privilege. Set in the 1920s, *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, depicts extreme inequality through the narration of Nick Carraway, who describes the lifestyles and corruption of New York’s elite. Two of these elites, Tom and Daisy Buchanan—a wealthy and arrogant man and a woman who uses her beauty and femininity to gain privilege—symbolize social inequality. The Buchanans represent the power of money and how generational wealth and status protect the wealthy from the consequences others might face. In contrast, Jay Gatsby is a self-made man who uses his wealth to try and bring back the love of his life, Daisy, who he met and fell in love with before WWI. His efforts fail; despite his wealth, Gatsby’s origins undermine his attempts to gain the same privileges held by the Buchanans. This pattern—reaching for the American Dream only to have it ripped away by a lack of status—is one we see repeated today. In *The Great Gatsby*, the Buchanans represent the extremes of socioeconomic inequality; their immense wealth is not only a foundation for their selfishness and entitlement but also a symbol of the aspirational inequality of the American Dream. Through their privilege, Fitzgerald argues that immense wealth perpetuates unearned power and evades accountability, showcasing the social hierarchies that still occur today.

Tom Buchanan’s sense of superiority derives from his inherited wealth, which lets him view himself as part of an exclusive social class. When Tom arrives at Gatsby’s mansion, he



immediately assumes that Gatsby's wealth stems from selling illegal alcohol, asking, "Who is this Gatsby anyhow? Some big bootlegger?" (107). This question shows Tom's belief that wealth obtained outside inheritance must be fraudulent. Fitzgerald uses Tom's disdain for Gatsby's success to demonstrate the division between "old money" and "new money." Tom, who inherited his money and his name, is pitted against Gatsby, who independently (though illegally) worked his way to wealth, representing the self-made man. However, his association with individuals from the lower and marginalized classes, such as Meyer Wolfsheim, marks Gatsby as unworthy of true respect in Tom's eyes. Tom's perception of Gatsby's wealth as immoral and criminal reflects a broader cultural prejudice: the idea that earned or "stolen" wealth is inherently suspect, while inherited wealth, regardless of origin, conveys legitimacy. Tom's entitlement and privilege stem not just from his wealth but from never having to justify its source. While some might view those with new money as hardworking or self-starting, Tom frames Gatsby as a felon whose wealth, lacking the authenticity of family ties, must be tainted.

Tom's hatred for Gatsby's lower social status thus enables him to feel superior to anyone outside his social sphere, reinforcing the rigid social classes held firm by inherited privilege. His comment, "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife" (130) dismisses Gatsby as a "nobody" unworthy of respect. By reducing Gatsby to "nobody," Tom points out the association between wealth, status, and morality. Gatsby's self-made wealth, however vast, legal, or illegal, cannot overcome the rigid barriers maintained by people like Tom, who benefit from and protect their privilege. This dynamic is echoed today in ongoing debates about wealth inequality.



Tom's "Nobody from nowhere" attitude persists today in how elites dismiss people who challenge existing structures based on their background, whether through resistance to policies aimed at wealth redistribution, gatekeeping elite industries, or the exclusionary practices associated with inherited wealth. Now, just as was the case in the novel, "self-made" individuals are constantly examined, while families with generational wealth meet almost no opposition in maintaining their position, thanks to laws that protect inherited fortunes. Disparity appears in systemic advantages like tax loopholes and generational wealth transfer laws that protect inherited wealth and place heavier burdens on self-made earners. A modern-day example of this might be the Walton family, who founded Walmart. The Waltons preserved their fortune through specific tactics like trust funds and tax loopholes, which can reduce taxes on inherited assets. These strategies are unavailable to self-made earners, who are subject to more scrutiny and less capacity to consolidate their wealth or pass it on to the next generation. The goal of all these tactics is to ensure that the family remains wealthy, and therefore powerful—regardless of how Walmart (the corporation) does. Further, wealth like the Waltons' breeds political influence, which enables them to perpetuate wealth further. Families like the Waltons are therefore able to influence laws and provide additional support or legitimacy for their own accumulation of wealth while simultaneously making it harder for others to reach their financial heights. Tom's disdain for *Gatsby* reflects this, showing an ongoing cultural bias: the gatekeeping of wealth and status by those who view themselves as its rightful inheritors, dismissing others' success as a threat, illegitimate, or morally suspect.



Fitzgerald continues to develop the theme of social hierarchies through Daisy's involvement with money and aesthetics, which frame her as both aspirational and unachievable. While getting ready to head to New York City, Nick and Gatsby briefly discuss Daisy. Abruptly, Gatsby says something that momentarily clears his blind love for Daisy: "Her voice is full of money," he said suddenly. That was it. I'd never understood before. It was full of money—the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song" (120). Here, with a tone of celebratory appreciation, Gatsby recognizes that Daisy's wealth has been so thoroughly integrated into her identity that it defines her; wealth has become an identifying characteristic of Daisy's persona. Fitzgerald uses this poetic description of her voice, likened to music and the sound of coins knocking against each other, using "jingle" and "cymbals' song" to symbolize how Daisy's privilege is embedded in her very being. Daisy does not just possess wealth; her old money is integrated into her physical identity. Her charm and attractiveness are tied to her status, symbolizing the unattainable dream that wealth supposedly provides.

This portrayal of Daisy is similar to how wealth can define public figures, especially among modern-day celebrities and influencers, who focus their personalities around their money. Celebrities like Kim Kardashian and Kylie Jenner tie their reputations to their luxurious lifestyles. They use their wealth to reach a greater audience through social media and entertainment. Then, they show off their seemingly perfect lives. As a result, their wealth symbolizes beauty, power, and desirability. Much like Daisy, their identities are built around the display of privilege, with followers drawn to the image of abundance that their brands project. Like Daisy, these women's identities are shaped by wealth and privilege, whether generational or



self-made. They are not real. Their bodies are literally built from scratch by the money they have. Gatsby's idealization of Daisy parallels how society idolizes these figures, mistaking wealth for worth and reinforcing the idea that privilege is the same as value.

Yet, this image of wealth often masks the emptiness of superficiality; despite her professed love, Daisy is ultimately indifferent to Gatsby. She is more focused on maintaining her privilege and social class. Like Daisy, modern-day symbols of wealth often lack substance. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok intensify this by creating a culture of performative privilege, where people display luxury to gain social capital to varying degrees of success, regardless of reality. Some influencers on TikTok live a lavish lifestyle, wearing designer outfits, eating at expensive restaurants, and traveling around the world without contextualizing their funds. In this way, the aesthetics of money become more important than anything else. The entire appeal of these content creators is their wealth; they do not offer anything else. Despite this, wealth remains a powerful aspiration, just as it was for Gatsby, whose obsession with Daisy reflects a broader fixation on wealth as a marker of success. Through Daisy, Fitzgerald critiques this dynamic by showing that wealth, whether shown via the voice or via social media feed, can inspire unearned adoration while perpetuating inequality and unattainable desires.

Further, the Buchanans' wealth enables a dangerous lack of accountability, helping them avoid the consequences of their actions. After both Myrtle and Gatsby's death, Daisy and Tom disappear, a move that illustrates how they rely on their privilege to get them out of situations, using it to deflect responsibility for the destruction they have caused. Nick describes how their social class and way of life allowed them to destroy everything around them without



consequences. He explains, “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated into their money or their vast carelessness.” (179). This shows how Tom and Daisy use their wealth as a shield, allowing them to wreak destruction on others’ lives without facing repercussions. Tom and Daisy’s behavior demonstrates how inherited privilege upholds social hierarchies and encourages a lack of accountability. Daisy kills someone, Tom repeatedly degrades those around him, and both manipulate their friends and acquaintances to leverage their dominance and power. Most damningly, they are often oblivious to these privileges. They assume it is their right to get away, literally, with murder. This lack of accountability demonstrates how wealth fuels inequality and corruption, protecting the privileged from the consequences that others must face.

This pattern of wealth shielding individuals from accountability is still relevant today. High-profile scandals involving billionaires and elites often repeat this same dynamic of evasion or proportionally minuscule penalties (a fine of 10 million dollars is nothing to a family with billions). For example, consider the Sackler family, whose pharmaceutical empire profited massively from the selling of opioids and whose company essentially engineered the opioid crisis. The Sacklers faced minimal personal consequences despite the destruction and human cost of their actions and negligence. Similarly, today’s political elites use wealth to escape accountability. Just as Tom and Daisy retreat into their wealth to escape consequences, today’s elites rely on privilege to shield them from public scrutiny and responsibility. This lack of accountability is made worse by a culture that supports and normalizes such behavior. On platforms like Twitter or Instagram, brief explosions of outrage over elite wrongdoing often burn



out, replaced by the next scandal. Public memory is short and getting shorter, and wealth allows people like the Buchanans, Waltons, or Sacklers to outlast or ignore any temporary backlash. The result is a system where privilege justifies selfishness, cruelty, and entitlement.

Fitzgerald's argument is still relevant. *The Great Gatsby* portrays wealth as both a source of power and a barrier to morality, reflecting the social hierarchies of the 1920s. Through Tom and Daisy, the novel critiques the entitlement and extreme social stratification that come with inherited privilege. On the one hand, Gatsby's pursuit of status shows the impossibility of overcoming these hierarchies. On the other, the Buchanans' wealth protects them from accountability, while self-made success is dismissed as illegitimate. This critique also applies today, as wealth disparities continue to grow, with inherited privilege protecting elites from accountability and self-made success often dismissed as suspicious or temporary. Fitzgerald's perspective on privilege and inequality resonates as strongly today as it did nearly a century ago.