Life Lessons from Jay Gatsby

Literature has a way of telling an enthralling story that captivates readers, while exemplifying an important life lesson. In countless literary works there is a recurring theme of living one’s dreams and aspiring to gain success in life. Some characters attempt this by fixating on others successful lives, continuing to focus on the past and trying to repeat it, abandoning morals to join a higher social class, and constantly worrying about what people think of them. Jay Gatsby, from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*, is a perfect example of the consequences that occur from these actions. From reading this novel I’ve learned a valuable lesson about living my own life, setting realistic goals, and focusing only on the present.

Throughout history, societies have been built upon the need to live up to one’s dreams. In America this started in the birth of the nation and has continued on to the present time. Immigrants coming to America hope to live the so called “American Dream”, while others already established here, are striving to exceed it. Exemplified in *The Great Gatsby* is a constant battle that only brings self destruction. Gatsby’s single goal in life was to be wealthy, successful, liked by everyone, and to win the love of his life back. From this he “…paid a high price for living too long with a single dream.” (169). He lived his whole life with this one dream, a dream that ended up killing him in the end. When we have unrealistic dreams we usually end up being disappointed and hurt in the end.

Many people are consumed by the past. They never seem to move on with their life and are constantly trying to relive the past. This concept of reliving the past is a problem because when one focuses on the past they can never thrive in the present. We see in Jay Gatsby’s life that he was trying desperately to live in the past. “‘You can’t repeat the past.’ Can’t repeat the past?” he cried
incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’” (116). He believed that everything would turn out ok if he went back to the way things used to be.

Gatsby has this idea of the past in his mind that doesn’t allow him to prosper in life. When you have this unvarying view of someone, in Gatsby’s case he only thought of Daisy as the girl she used to be, you can never see who they’ve become today. You only see the person they used to be. Gatsby was chasing after a girl he had known at one time. Daisy had changed dramatically though, but Gatsby couldn’t see it. All he saw was the girl she used to be. “I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,’ he said, nodding determinedly. ‘She’ll see.” (117). Gatsby’s effort to relive the past brought only pain because all of his goals were structured around the past. He thought he could fix everything how they were and then Daisy would come back to him.

There is an aphorism that has been said over many years that people in our society are always trying to “keep up with the Jones’”. This idea of always having to have more than the neighbor has caused several problems in our culture. People are never satisfied with what they have; they always want more, just so they can show up the neighbors. Gatsby does this, and it shows the consequences of always trying to be on top. Gatsby continually throws these elaborate parties, with lavish foods and drinks, magnificent entertainment and only the high class people attended. “On buffet tables, garnished with glistening horsd’oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkey bewitched to a dark gold. In the main hall a bar with a real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors...” (44). Gatsby had to throw these superlative parties; he would settle for nothing but the finest for his guests. This is one way Gatsby declares his social status. He would not settle for being just a resident of West Egg; he had to be the most prominent resident.

The house Gatsby lives in is not just a house, but a mansion, even though he is the only resident. For him, he was trying to reach his goal of getting Daisy back. Daisy was wealthy and lived in a beautiful
mansion across the bay in East Egg. Gatsby couldn’t just buy any house and expect her to leave her ideal life for a meager one. This is why he buys this mansion. Along with owning an extraordinary home, Gatsby also owned many expensive cars. Gatsby was overwhelmed with pride and conceit about his possessions. “It’s pretty, isn’t it, old sport.” He jumped off to give me a better view. ‘Haven’t you ever seen it before?’ I’d seen it. Everybody had seen it.” (68).

This arrogant attitude of Gatsby helped lead to his downfall. He was so keen on everyone liking him and looking up to him, that he forgot the value of humility.

For Gatsby to gain his high social class he would have to become extremely wealthy. The only way he felt he could do this was to desert his moral values and go to work for a criminal. This criminal, Mr. Wolfshiem, was infamous in New York for fixing the World Series. Mr. Wolfshiem helped Gatsby become wealthy; however he had to become part of a shady business. “I raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter. I saw right away he was fine appearing gentlemanly young man and when he told me he was an Oggsford I knew I could use him good.” (179).

Before Gatsby met Mr. Wolfshiem he was a man of morals and values, although, after he got into business with Mr. Wolfshiem he discarded the values he was raised with so he could acquire his wealth. He set this goal as a young boy and it continued on with him. “Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something.” (182). When wealth became his main focus he forgot the important things in life, and one being his personal morality.

Another way Gatsby could reach his goal was to lie about his past. He had to lie about who he was. “I’ll tell you God’s truth.” His right hand suddenly ordered divine retribution to stand by. ‘I am the son of some wealthy people in the middle-west- all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition.” (69). Gatsby could not be sincere of who he was. He knew if he gave himself an honorable background
he would be welcomed into the society of the East and West Eggers. Gatsby knew the only way he could reach his goal he would have to be received and admired. This is the reason he lied about his life, parents, and his education.

One of Gatsby’s major character flaws was his desire for everyone to like him. He was always striving to for the approval of people. This was another one of the reasons he threw his extravagant parties. Gatsby felt if he received sanction from the community, Daisy would notice him. When one is putting all their energy into getting people to like them this will only lead to disappointment. This constant need of approval drove Gatsby to his death. One important lesson to be learned from this is to be yourself and not worry about what other people are thinking of you. Gatsby felt that if people liked him, Daisy would see that and go back to him.

The life of Jay Gatsby demonstrates the quandaries that arise from living a life such as his. From reading *The Great Gatsby* it has taught me a myriad of valuable lessons that I can easily apply to my current standing. Growing up I’ve had friends that have similar qualities as Gatsby, and I have seen how it has hurt them. At some points in my life, I myself have beheld such qualities and I’ve seen how it has stunt my ability to grow and succeed in life. I have found the most prevalent problem with our society is the need to “keep up with the Jones’”. This notion that is highly contagious surrounds all of us. Sadly many people, myself included, have at one point incorporated this ideal.

Growing up in California and attending schools where the majority of my peers came from very wealthy backgrounds, it was difficult to relate to my fellow students. They came from a completely different social standing; their families were members of country clubs, and attended social events and high class parties. My family belonged in the middle class; we were not poor but surely not incredibly wealthy. We always had what we needed and were content with our living. When my friends were getting cell phones, I was given change to use the pay phone. I saw my friends with these expensive gifts
and I always wanted what they had. I spent so much time fixated on these materialistic possessions I forgot what is important in life. This is what happens when we always want what other people have. We lose sight of just trying to be ourselves and be happy with our life. Lucky for me my parents kept me in check, and were gracious enough to remind me what is important and continued handing me change when I begged for a cell phone.

We are seeing in our society that the desperate need for owning expensive materialistic objects is one of the reasons we are in this current economical downfall. Many people became obsessed with what their friends and families had and wanted the same things. They began purchasing these things purely on credit, getting deep into debt. While these people thought owning expensive things would make them happy. They viewed this life as being wealthy and in the upper class. For a time, before this economical down turn, I envied these people. I looked up to them and wanted the same exact thing. I learned these things did not bring them happiness, but disappointment and sorrow in the end. As Gatsby demonstrated in his quest for high social standing, he became consumed by his possessions; his mansion, his cars, his library full of real books. Seeing how this destroyed Gatsby has helped me to think realistic about what is important to me, owning expensive things that will not bring me happiness, or just being content with what I have and not worrying what people think of me.

Another thing I’ve learned from Gatsby is how living in the past doesn’t bring happiness. This is an important concept that I now can see happening in my life. I graduated high school and left for college, hoping to never return. I was ready to move on and begin a fresh life and meet all new people. However, many of my friends stayed in our home town and never actually left high school. Going home on breaks from school I’ve occasionally run into old friends and I’ve seen how the need to relive the past has stunt their growth. Their obsession with recreating high school has made it so they can never fully move on with their life. They don’t seem to grow up or ever learn the valuable principles in this. I saw in
Gatsby’s life that because he was so enveloped in the idea of Daisy, the girl he used to know, he was constantly trying to recreate that time. He never grew up and this is part of the reason he was never actually happy.

For a brief period of time I was extremely devoted to setting goals and striving to achieve them. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but the goals I was setting were not exactly attainable. One goal that I set for myself was to come first in my age group in the LA Marathon. Instead of setting a goal to simply complete a marathon I was solely focused on winning. I trained for months just trying to be fast enough. However, I eventually gave up when I realized that I could never be fast enough to come in first. This is only one unrealistic goal I set, but after this particular instance I came to the realization that I was never accomplishing the goals I was setting and this was a problem. Reading about Jay Gatsby and his goals, I found some similarities. My focus drew away from goals that are achievable and have importance and value, just like Gatsby.

Goals should make a person better, particularly in the path to achieving them. They should help them to contribute to society and be a person of worth. Gatsby’s goals, and the drive to reach these goals, did the opposite. Gatsby did not become a better person, but a dishonest, immoral person. He abandoned his morals just to reach his set goals. I have never deserted my morals and values on the path to achieve my goals, but I was not becoming a better person along the way. With my marathon goal, all I wanted was to win. I forgot what was important because my ambitions were outrageous and rather unnecessary. I was setting goals for myself that were in a way unreachable and had no value to them. I’ve learned to set simple goals, goals that I can reach and aspire to accomplish. This is something I learned from The Great Gatsby. I’ve discovered how important it is for me to have goals that help to better myself and also to be a contribution to society. I’ve abandoned my goal of winning a marathon, and I’ve set a new goal to simply complete a marathon.
Reading *The Great Gatsby* has taught me several life lessons that couldn’t be learned any other way. Granted, Jay Gatsby is a fictional character; I still have been able to read the story of his life, and see the mistakes he made and learn not to make the same mistakes. Gatsby was great, in a way that his life captured the portrait of America and the incessant need to live the American Dream that has destroyed people. Gatsby demonstrated how setting unrealistic goals and goals that lack value are not achievable. The pursuit to accomplish these goals, more often than not, leads to disappointment. Seeing this has helped me to step back and examine my goals and how to achieve them. I learned the consequences of trying to relive the past and the importance of focusing on the present. I’ve seen how the desire to “keep up with the Jones’” only brings downfall. I know that I should focus on living my own life rather than someone else’s. I only learned these valuable lessons from reading this remarkable American literary classic.