

Capitalism and collapse of humanity: A study of *The Great Gatsby* and *Seize the Day*

Md. Morshedul Alam

Department of English Language and Literature

International Islamic University Chittagong (IIUC), Bangladesh

Shamim Ahmad

MA Student, ELL

International Islamic University Chittagong (IIUC), Bangladesh

Abstract

Disregard for men by men for money and wealth prompted by capitalism plays a devastating role in modern societies. In *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Seize the Day* (1956) by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Saul Bellow respectively, the two American novelists portray a modern society of America belonging to 1920's and 1950's, which fosters capitalism to bring disaster to human life. More specifically, Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* and Dr. Adler in *Seize the Day* have involved in manifold activities destructive to human relationship stirred up by material success which significantly exposes them as a capitalist. They prove themselves neither to be truly moral nor pro-human so, they possess the negative qualities of the capitalist victimizers of men. This paper attempts to explore how Tom Buchanan and Dr. Adler, representing two different decades of twentieth century capitalistic America, nurture the objective of earning money and wealth, perform anti-human activities and turn capitalist victimizers. For this kind of human nature, ultimately, men collapse and consequently, individuals, family and society go through inhuman sufferings.

Keywords Capitalist, Victimizer, Human relationship, Inhuman sufferings, Material success, Men collapse

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), a 20th century American novelist and short story writer, earned tremendous success, fame and fortune in his lifetime. Focusing on the America of 1920 Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* is a story of a wealthy man of North Dakota named Jay Gatsby from a very economically poor background. After much struggle and deprivation, he joined army and later fell in love with Daisy, the daughter of a wealthy man in Louisville, Kentucky. As Gatsby joined the World War I, Daisy married Tom, a rich man of capitalistic America. When the novel opens, Gatsby's



return from the war is already a matter of the past, and he becomes a rich man through unfair means and owns a luxurious mansion in West Egg. He also arranges expensive and gorgeous party every Saturday night to impress Daisy who lives nearby with her husband. One day Gatsby requests Nick, a neighbor, to arrange a reunion with Daisy at his residence as Nick can do it easily having been the cousin of Daisy. Accordingly, it is arranged and the former lover starts spending sweet time with Daisy. One day, Daisy's husband Tom discovers the relationship and wishes to take revenge on Gatsby, though he himself maintains an adulterous relationship with Myrtle, the wife of George Wilson of the Valley of Ashes. Afterwards, in a party in New York, Tom exposes in front of Daisy that Gatsby is involved in bootlegging and has not been an Oxford graduate which the latter would claim. Daisy gets mentally detached from Gatsby. While returning from New York, Daisy, who drives Gatsby's car, hits Myrtle and kills her. Later Tom mentions to Wilson that the car that has killed Myrtle is the car of Gatsby, with a deliberate hint that Gatsby has intentionally caused the accident. Wilson thinks that Gatsby is the person with whom his wife was continuing the secret affair and for some reasons he has killed Myrtle. Wilson instantly goes out and shoots Gatsby. Tom, along with his wife Daisy, remains unaffected, though most of the major injuries to different characters of the novel are caused by the aristocratic Tom.

Saul Bellow's novel *Seize the Day* is considered to be one of the classics of all time. Focusing on the America of 1950s *Seize the Day* relates the story of Tommy Wilhelm living in the Hotel Gloriana of New York where his father Dr. Adler is also living. We find Tommy Wilhelm, in his mid-forties, is in severe financial crisis. He wants to get help from his father Dr. Adler but his father is completely indifferent to his son's financial need because he believes that he will lose his money if he helps him with money. Dr. Adler was indifferent to his wife too, when she was alive. Nor does Adler help his daughter financially in her creative endeavor in painting. Severely helpless, Tommy turns to Tamkin who escapes along with Tommy's last seven hundred dollars. Resultantly, Tommy faces complete mental collapse and fails to cope with the capitalistic America of the 1950's.

So, both Tom of *The Great Gatsby* and Dr. Adler of *Seize the Day* deserve critical attention as they, with their capitalistic attitudes totally devoid of humanity, directly or indirectly victimize their families and society. Thus, this paper concentrates on a world which is torn by actions prompted by greed for money and wealth, or capitalism.

Many researchers have carried out their significant research into *The Great Gatsby* and *Seize the Day*. Wolfe (1976) in "The Nature of the Dream in

The Great Gatsby” illustrates the American dreams that many characters try to achieve but become unsuccessful because of their inapt efforts. Hooti and Omrani (2011) in “Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day*: A Modernist Study” try to analyze Saul Bellow’s *Seize the Day* from a modernist point of view. They believe that the modernist movement breaks away from the established literary conventions. Wu (2013) in his article “*Seize the Day*: An Existentialist Look” focuses on the idea about the living condition of modern men and their activities. Machcinski (2013) in “Civilization is going to pieces: crime, morality and their roles in *The Great Gatsby*” tries to investigate the issues related to many characters involved in asocial, immoral and criminal activities. In “Triangling Bellow’s *Seize the Day*” Novianti (2015) discovers a family system therapy in Indonesian context where she critically analyses literary works dealing with family matters. But no researcher has ever undertaken so far, any research combining Tom of *The Great Gatsby* and Dr. Adler of *Seize the Day* in order to explore how the two capitalist characters Tom and Dr. Adler, being anti-human, victimize family and society in the twentieth century American context. The present paper makes a modest endeavor to address that research gap.

This paper first sheds light on a deeper understanding of capitalism, noting down its impact upon mankind, with special emphasis on man in American society, then it attempts to figure out various dimensions of the characters of Tom and Adler as capitalist victimizers who act against family and society in the American society of 1920’s and 1950’s respectively.

If Tom of *The Great Gatsby* and Adler of *Seize the Day* are the representatives of the aristocratic class of capitalistic America and act contrary to the desire of family and society and grow capitalist victimizers of men, it is quite worthwhile to do an in-depth analysis of capitalism which turns man inhuman in his greed for money and wealth.

Capitalism is defined in Merriam-Webster Dictionary in the following way: It is an economic system characterized by corporate ownership of capital goods, by investments that are determined by private decision, and by prices, production, and the distribution of goods that are determined mainly by competition in a free market.

Here freedom to individuals in the field of economy initially sounds pleasant but the problem is that the personal freedom on which no moral or religious constraints has been imposed. The concept of freedom is guided by the principle “laissez faire”, meaning one can do whatever one likes for the increase of one’s money and wealth. As a result, freedom makes an individual arbitrary as he is set in a competition of economic growth. Thus, money,

instead of life, is given priority and price or quantity, in place of value or quality, is given preference. Consequently, money turns out to be the prime concern and men are placed against men, color against color and so on as enemies to accumulate money. Individuals as well as two most important human institutions-family and society are consequently shattered. Ultimately, majority of the world population go through immeasurable sufferings owing to the capitalist economy.

Adam Smith (1723-1790), author of *The Wealth of Nation* (1776), is considered by many as the father of capitalism. The West later adopts it when it goes through a transition from their agro-based structure (Feudalism) of economy to industry based economic system. Interestingly, while in Feudalism, few lords would torture the whole community of the working-class people, in capitalism each individual is inspired to be a lord with the silent permission to exploit others. Thus, unhealthy competition for money and wealth is introduced by capitalism and in this competition the vast majorities are sure to fail and become the victims of those few who succeed. Layard (2009) upholds the reality of the alarming predictions about the effects of capitalism and says, "Our society has become too individualistic, with too much rivalry and not enough common purposes. We idolize success and status and thus undermine our mutual respect".

Tom Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby* significantly understands the society of the America of the 1920's. The author himself expresses his satisfaction by delineating his character. Fitzgerald, in a letter to Maxwell Perkins, writes,

Turnbull (1968) I suppose he's the best character I've ever done- I think he and the brother in *Salt* and Hurtswood in *Sister Carrie* are the three best characters in American fiction in the last twenty years (P.173).

Tom actually represents the upper class of the capitalistic America of 1920's and, in this research, we will see Tom, as a capitalist victimizer of the people below him, acting against all them in his society. Various features of the capitalist Tom that contribute to the shattering of American society engage our attention and need a thorough analysis.

Tom Buchanan is the most unfriendly, aggressive and ego-centric character in the novel, *The Great Gatsby*. His social status is terribly powerful because of his money. In the beginning of the novel, we find that Nick Carraway, the narrator in this novel, goes to the Buchanan's house to pay a visit because he is invited by his cousin Daisy Buchanan, wife of Tom. Tom Buchanan, unlike Gatsby, belonging to the class of the traditionally rich and comes to East Egg, a fashionable aristocratic area. Nick is almost astonished to see Tom's wealth. He says, "It was hard to realize that a man in my own

generation was wealthy enough to do that” (8-9). Tom Buchanan inherited all his wealth from his forefathers. It is clear that he has not earned them through hard work and talent. Still, he shows off and speaks very highly about himself when he meets Nick. He says, “It is just because I'm stronger and more of men than you are” (9). So, quite vainly, he vests his ego regarding his inherited wealth.

Besides this, Tom talks with others about his wife in a manner that severely dishonors the latter. When Nick and Daisy take a private walk, Daisy informs Nick of some of the unhappy affairs of her conjugal life. Subsequently, Tom warns Nick and says, “Don't believe everything you hear, Nick” (22). Here Tom surely dishonors Daisy behind her back in the form of backbiting.

We see Tom taking Nick with him while going to pick up his mistress Myrtle Wilson. Myrtle is the wife of George Wilson who runs a garage in the Valley of Ashes inhabited by the poor class. It is evident that in order to feel rich at least for some moments, Myrtle accepts the illicit relationship with Tom Buchanan. Tom takes this opportunity to treat Myrtle as an object of fulfilling his physical desire. She seems to be a token of his fashionable aristocratic life as well. This proves that in terms of riches, Tom and his classes are on top, but their expensive and amoral lifestyle leaves them at the bottom. About Tom, the character critic Graham Summer argues by saying,

The millionaires may fairly be regarded as the naturally selected agents of society for certain work. They get high wages and live in luxury, but the bargain is a good one for society. This assures us that all who are competent for this function will be employed in it so that the cost of it will be reduced to the lowest terms. (90)

Tom's keeping a mistress assumes negativity in the superlative when we discover Tom looking upon Myrtle as his slave. This attitude of Tom is clear when we see Tom arranging an impromptu party in his apartment Morningside Height in New York where he gives a puppy as a gift to Myrtle but immediately afterwards breaks her nose for obstinately uttering the name of Daisy. Tom thinks Myrtle is so low in her social status that her utterance of the name of Daisy who belongs to Tom's aristocratic class is sacrilegious and blatant audacity. It is not love for Daisy, but a matter of his ego that he inherits from his class. Earlier, when Tom went to Valley of Ashes to call Myrtle, how he talked to Wilson is significant too. Wilson's residence and garage were attached to each other, and Tom was calling out to Myrtle, standing in front of the garage. Just then, without giving a moment's scope to do the job, he told Wilson that offering a chair to a visitor to sit on was a

form of politeness. Instantly, Wilson went inside to fetch a chair. But by the time he returned, Tom went away taking Myrtle with him without saying anything to Wilson. Far from feeling ashamed of carrying on an adulterous relationship, Tom was rather aggressive in his treatment and abusive in his comment on Wilson who was none other than the one whose wife was appointed to pander to that adultery, a crime against humanity and society. Here Tom feels that he was the master as he was rich, and Wilson was the slave as he was poor. Thus, he had the right to make a mockery of Wilson's innocent nature and poor economic circumstances that decide the social status and honor of man in a capitalist society.

Tom, his attempt to grab what he targets, appears to be hypocritical and shrewd. He deceives Wilson every moment when he accompanies Myrtle with him to New York. Tom has convinced Wilson that Myrtle is going to New York to see her sister Catherine who lives there. Tom pretends to Wilson that he is simply a companion of Myrtle in that short journey. When Tom and Myrtle get on the commuter train in the Valley of Ashes, they sit separately in different compartments. This is Tom's arrangement that has two reasons. Firstly, he does not want to be the subject matter of any gossip; secondly, he wants to give the impression of a good fellow who has no objectionable affair with any lady other than his wife. As a matter of fact, when Nick curiously wants to know whether or not Myrtle's husband Wilson knows about her illicit relationship, Tom says that Wilson is a dumb husband. Tom, taking pride in the success of his hypocrisy, considers himself clever, whereas he regards simpleminded Wilson as a dumb fool. Tom, later on recklessly moves about in New York, happily buying things for Myrtle. Thus, Tom buys for Myrtle a lot of things including dogs. 'I want to get one of those dogs', she said earnestly (29), requesting Tom to buy her a dog.

As a matter of fact, we may presume Tom just exploits Myrtle and Daisy for his happiness by spending recklessly money which both Myrtle and Daisy need very badly. However, Tom actually wants to buy life and happiness for money. At Buchanan's house, we find that Gatsby comes over for lunch along with Nick and Jordan. Tom notices how Daisy looks at Gatsby and realizes that they are having a love affair. But we find that Daisy, at one stage of the novel, admits she never loved Tom as a husband rather Daisy loves Tom's money and nothing else. Tom knows well that Daisy will never leave him though she does not love him or vice versa. In other words, Daisy's life is already bought by Tom's money. Moreover, Tom believes that he can cause death very easily with the power of his money. Here, Daisy's belief in the power of money to bring about death is no exception. After the traumatic event of Myrtle's death in a car accident caused by Daisy herself, the

carelessness and callousness, and indifference to Myrtle's death are very evident in the Buchanan's behavior. In the same afternoon of that traumatic day, the husband and the wife enjoy fried chicken together. Furthermore, Tom mentions to Wilson that the car that caused the accident was owned by Gatsby. Tom very shrewdly indicates that Gatsby caused the accident. Simple-minded Wilson readily believes it thinking that Gatsby is the person with whom his wife was maintaining the adulterous relationship. To take revenge, Wilson kills Gatsby later on. Thus, Tom shrewdly gets Gatsby killed by Wilson. Nick thinks that persons like Tom believe that they can destroy life and property whenever they want and in doing. So, their money is their safeguard. As the spokesman of Fitzgerald, Nick comments,

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy - they smashed up things and creatures and then retreat back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made . . . (142)

Dr. Adler of *Seize the Day* is a capitalist by nature. His son Tommy is in financial straits but he refuses to help him. Nor does he help his daughter in her need. Nor did he have true feeling for his wife. This is how the readers of the novel find Adler, in American context, who is a capitalist and self-centered. These two traits of the man's character prevent him from helping his family. As he feels no commitment to his family, it is quite natural that he surely does not feel for his society. Definitely, a society inhabited by capitalist people like Adler is sure to meet with its collapse. Thus, Adler's character invites critical attention here.

Seize the Day is a novel about Tommy Wilhelm, son of Dr. Adler. Tommy is basically an unemployed man, and lives temporarily in the Hotel Gloriana of New York City. In the same hotel, his father Dr. Adler has taken his residence for several years though Tommy and his father live separately. In the text, we see Tommy in desperately need of his father's financial help but his father is unwilling to provide it. Actually, the novel deals with a society where people successful in particular fields are being respected. In terms of money and status, Tommy is a total failure who fails to establish himself as a minor film actor. More significantly, he does not get love from his children too because of his rude wife Margaret who always tries to hurt him because of monetary failure. To start a new life, he goes to his father, old Dr. Adler, who has now enormous fortune and could easily help Tommy Wilhelm but he is not interested in it. But Dr. Adler treats his son like a patient. He can theoretically offer many solutions but practically he is reluctant to provide his son with help. Tommy sadly reflects," Dad is no longer the same person. He

was thirty-two when I was born, and now he is going to eighty. Furthermore, it is time; I stopped feeling like a kid toward him, a small son” (11). With the increase of age, sympathy is expected to grow and proliferate but in Adler, opposite thing has happened. In fact, he looks at his son professionally. While he used to give treatment to his patients, he would remain confined only to giving prescription in exchange for money. Similarly, he advises his son. He, for example, asks, “What’s the matter, Wilky, didn’t you sleep last night?” (32). It is as if a doctor were taking care of his patient’s sleep. So, fatherly or human self is absolutely extinct in Adler. Haque (2003) rightly calls him Tommy’s “biological father”, not a father in the fullest sense of the term. As a father or a human when Adler is not helpful to his son, it is not possible for him to be helpful to society. Professional identity replacing all other identities is a basic characteristic of a capitalistic society.

Dr. Adler knows it very well that Tommy is unemployed. He, nevertheless, describes him in front of his old friend as a “sales executive” with a large salary. He says, “My son is sales executive. He did not have the patience to finish school. But he does all right for himself” (23). Interestingly, his father feels anxious to introduce his son as a jobless man because his son remaining unemployed goes against his high status. The author writes, “His father was ashamed of him” (14). Again, at one stage of the story of the novel, in his conversation with Mr. Perls, friend of Dr. Adler, Dr. Adler proudly says that his son's income was up in the five figures when he was engaged in the Roiax Corporation. As soon as, Mr. Perls gets the information of money which was up to five figures, he feels astonished and his voice grows eagerly sharper. As a matter of fact, Tommy understands from his experience how capitalists consider money and makes comments on them in the following:

How they love money. They adore money! Holy money! Beautiful money! It was getting so that people were feeble- minded about everything except money. While if you did not have it you were a dummy, a dummy! (36)

Dr. Adler, along with his old friend, can at best think of money as God. To them, money, like God, can bring happiness and solve any problems of life.

However, Adler does not help Tommy in his desperate needs. Then, Tommy asks his father whether he will help Catherine, Adler’s daughter, to fulfill her dream to be an artist. He says, “I was glad enough to buy crayons for her when she was four. But now she is a woman of forty and too old to be encouraged in her delusion” (46). So, he will think only of himself, not of

anybody else even if it were his daughter. He deems Tommy and all other members of his family as burdens on him. The way Adler is materialistic and, consequently, selfish, he wants his son to be as selfish as he himself. He says, "I cannot give you any money . . . I am still alive not dead. . . . Get off! And I give you the same advice, Willy carry nobody on your back" (56). Actually, Adler is not a caring father. Nor was he caring towards his wife, Tommy's mother. To Adler, Tommy says, "you were set free when Ma died. You wanted to forget her. You'd like to get rid of Catherine too, me too. You are not kidding anyone (29)". All Adler cares about in his entire life is money.

Men must not try to achieve that high level of economic growth that will ultimately force them to sever all connections with all the priceless objects – family, society and workplace of life that man holds very dear to him. Layard (2009) writes,

"So accelerated economic growth is not a goal for which we should make large sacrifices. In particular, we should not sacrifice the most important source of happiness, which is the quality of human relationships – at home, at work and in the community. We have sacrificed too many of these in the name of efficiency and productivity growth. Adler cannot refrain himself from that accelerated economic growth".

In pursuit of the American Dream, Tommy Wilhelm fails to cope with the capitalist world, but his father Dr. Adler is successful in turning him into a capitalist. American Dream itself is capitalistic in the sense that it only emphasizes the materialistic success of an individual with no commitment to society, issues of morality, sense of humanity and importance of religiosity. The difference between father and son is due to the factor called money, and it is money that brings about the separation between them. His tragedy turns deeper, as he loses his self-confidence and begins to think that he is not the right type of son. Thus, Adler indirectly becomes the causes of estrangement, alienation and loneliness in his son. At least, it was possible for Dr. Adler to give him emotional support. As Adler withdraws it, Tamkin takes the chance and earns Tommy's trust and makes off with his last saving for which Tommy meets his catastrophic end, that is, his total physical and mental collapse. When Tommy is surrounded by the buzzing of material success from the people who are related to him and among whom Tommy feels so lonely, Adler is of course one of those successful men (Haque, 2003). Adler is to be blamed for the total collapse of Tommy. Adler could have saved his son as the writer writes,

Dr. Adler liked to appear affable. Affable! His own son, his one and only son, could not speak his mind or ease his heart to him. I wouldn't turn to Tamkin, he thought, if I could turn to him. At least Tamkin sympathizes with me and tries to give me a hand, whereas Dad doesn't want to be disturbed. (11)

Actually, the kind of psychology Tommy has within him does not match the materialistic, heartless and capitalistic surroundings of the America of 1950's whereas he himself is full of emotion, affection, love, respect, morality, humanity all that are despised by the capitalist society. While Tommy has those human characteristics, Adler features the opposite ones. Tommy Wilhelm feels dissatisfied when he talks with his father. Richmond writes, "Dr. Adler's vampiristic role and the complexity and machinery of New York City are the sources of the failed son's 'congested' emotional condition" (Kalay, 2015).

Clearly, both Tom of *The Great Gatsby* and Dr. Adler of *Seize the Day* are the capitalist figures of the American society of 1920's and 1950's respectively, who victimize others, including the members of their family and society. Because of Tom's capitalistic nature that comprises the ego, aggressive habit, selfishness, sensuality, shrewdness, worldliness and inordinate greed for wealth, others have to undergo utmost sufferings. Myrtle dies, Wilson loses his wife, Gatsby dies, his wife Daisy is betrayed, his three-year-old daughter is almost an orphan and Nick gets pessimistic about the world. Because of Dr. Adler's capitalistic nature that features extreme greed for money, his son Tom is a total failure ending up in total mental collapse, his wife dies uncared for and his daughter's creative aspiration in art comes to a sudden halt. The findings of the research may be helpful to critically understand the present world scenario or the individual self which is torn into pieces with the materialistic ideas of capitalism absolutely divested of human qualities.

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Corresponding author

Md. Morshedul Alam can be contacted at: morshedeng82@gmail.com

