The American Dream In A Streetcar Named Desire And The Great Gatsby

Critics have long debated the presentation of The American Dream in both ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ and ‘The Great Gatsby’, a theme that is intertwined in both texts. Both authors evaluate how males and females seek the concept of the American Dream and how they do this in different ways. In ‘The Great Gatsby’, males are perceived to be infatuated about the idea of wealth because they believe that it is their only solution to be successful I.e. Gatsby who strives for wealth in order to win Daisy’s heart. Alternatively, in ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’, females are presented to fulfil the stereotypical image of being weak and vulnerable, which is emphasised by the protagonist, Blanche, who avoids her reality and makes herself seem gentle to help her accomplish her dream, which is to be loved by everybody. The Great Gatsby was set in the ‘roaring twenties’ where there was an age in social and political changes, leading on to the economic boom. Conversely, A Streetcar Named Desire was set in the late 1940s, after World War 2 where U.S. Americans largely overestimated their social mobility and had unrealistic views on the Dream. The time period is important as it marks a time of personal freedom; people are able to reconstruct their lives in order to make them feel comfort.

The two writers, Tennessee Williams and F.Scott Fitzgerald, express the American Dream to be nothing more than a myth; rather it’s a desire that people strive for. In ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’, Blanche is seen to aspire to the fantasies of a high class lifestyle. She lives in a fantasy world; her desire is to escape reality to find happiness. In Scene One, we see Stella’s and Blanche’s first encounter where she demands her to turn the light off so her beauty is hidden, “And turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won’t be looked at in this merciless glare!” There is a motif of light used throughout the play which compares the idea of realism and dreams. It is an important factor that links to the idea that the American Dream is nothing but an ideology that people follow. The imperative that’s used is metaphorically showing how the light exposes and forebodes Blanche’s wrongdoings that she is yet to carry out later on in the play, therefore to be seen in the light is something she is trying to avoid. Furthermore, it implies how reality itself is seen to be harsh and “merciless” as it illuminates her personality; we see her as being an individual who is dramatic and very self conscious. “Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light…as well as her white clothes that suggests a moth.” Light is also mentioned in a way that symbolises her reality. At the start of the play there is foreboding of Blanche’s destruction as she merely avoids the light due to her inability of understanding her reality. This links to the fact that the dream is a myth as she is so consumed with living like someone else, that she avoids her true colours. Moreover, her “white clothes” are a symbol of purity which is juxtaposed throughout the play as we come know that she had a sexual desire which she fulfilled in order to gain comfort. This is ironic because she was once married, and wearing white on your wedding day is a symbol of purity. The fact that she is no longer a virgin could accentuate how marriage took her virginity but then the whole idea was ruined as she was married to a homosexual, which horrified her. This reflects the kind of response Williams himself had encountered as he was a homosexual playwright, living in a society which had social order. On the other hand, one may argue that Blanche may be a ‘cover’ for Williams himself to avoid having to confront his own feelings about himself. Williams had a carefree childhood and had lots of support from others. However, he began to lose the sense of belonging when his family moved to St. Louis, Missouri. Due to this, he began to look down on life as he claimed it was “because I found life

unsatisfactory." This links to Blanche because she also looks down on her own life and seeks validation from the kindness of strangers. This also links to the American Dream because Blanche wants to avoid her past and aim for a new goal which seems impossible to reach for. Her betrayal that she had from her husband made her yearn for love and comfort. Although her previous love left her in fragments, she is willing to find happiness again. Conversely, one may criticise that Blanche is superficial due to her former status. However, "the protagonist's behaviour is in a certain way symptomatic of society itself, even of humanity as a whole" (Skiba.M 2008). This reinforces the American Dream because individuals avoid their reality in order to feel somewhat closer to their dream. Additionally, In 'The Great Gatsby', there is also a motif of light that runs throughout the novel however the difference between the two texts is that in 'A Streetcar Named Desire', Blanche avoids light to hide her reality whereas in the novel, Gatsby edges towards the light as it's representing Daisy. In chapter 5, Nick notices the heavy beam of light that had spread across the whole West Egg, "I was afraid for a moment that my house was on fire... and the whole corner of the peninsula was blazing with light." The overwhelming "blazing" of light proposes the idea of brightness and clarity which could potentially indicate Gatsby's dreams and how he has a clear image of it yet it seems to be impossible to reach for. The "blazing" lights that illuminate while Gatsby is waiting for Nick imply not only Gatsby's eagerness to meet Daisy but also the loneliness of his life and the potential emptiness of his dreams. One may argue that, "his fable of East and west is little concerned with twentieth century materialism and moral anarchy, for its theme is the unending quest for the romantic dream, which is forever betrayed in fact and yet redeemed in men's minds" (Scott Fitzgerald's fable of east and west, Robert Ornstein p139). This supports the idea that Gatsby values materialistic features in order to achieve his romantic dream. Fitzgerald also writes, "…Involuntarily I glanced seaward." The narrator's fascination with Gatsby's dreams is shown here as he "involuntarily… glanced seaward". This quote suggests how Nick is somewhat attracted to Gatsby's ability to dream which is potentially foreshadowing how dreams lead to destruction. Not only does this create hope for Gatsby, but it's also giving Nick a reason to build a friendship with him because he seems to put his lover's happiness before his own. The dissimilarity between Gatsby and Blanche is the fact that Blanche, as a female, courted herself with men in Belle Reve whereas Jay feels obliged to earn a rich living in order to get the girl of his dreams. The fact that he wasn't born into money made his dream seem like its further way from his reality. This is symbolic because 'The Great Gatsby' was written in the 'Jazz Era' which was when the U.S. passed the 18th Amendment, outlawing the production and sales of alcohol. The distribution of alcohol became the province of bootleggers therefore they accomplished selling alcohol through speakeasies. This links to Gatsby as he made his fortune through bootlegging and other criminal activities; Gatsby's dream was fuelled from the money he made from these unlawful deeds in which he hoped to draw Daisy in from.

Both 'A Streetcar Named Desire' and 'The Great Gatsby' use characters who change their ideals to fit their view of the American Dream. For example, in 'The Great Gatsby', Fitzgerald creates Myrtle's lifestyle in a way in which lures her to have an affair with Tom Buchannan, Daisy's husband. Her physical description that is mentioned could perhaps imply that her lifestyle is nothing but a false representation of her own American Dream. In chapter 2, Fitzgerald describes Tom Buchanan's mistress in a sensual manner, "She had changed her dress to brown figured muslin, which stretched tight over her rather wide hips". By using words like "stretched" and "wide" could imply how men only look at the appearance of women and not their personality. She is just a sexual object to him that can be used whenever he desires, which portrays women as materialistic and submissive. Nonetheless, Myrtle's behaviour in the novel demonstrates the fact that she wishes to climb the social status ladder via her sharp

manner and sensuality. Having wealth is a dream for her which she expresses through her choice of clothing as it could give her an illusion that she is one step closer to her version of the dream. Myrtle, like Gatsby, was not born into money, and instead is relying on her own intelligence to make something of herself in the 1920s America. Contextually, when The Great Gatsby was written, it was the post- war financial boom which brought the Great Depression. During this time period, anyone was able to experience upwards social mobility which is seen in Myrtle as she has an affair with a wealthy man. It signifies how easy it was for social mobility hence why so many people did it in 1920s America. Additionally, S.P George criticised that "Myrtle displays the ideology of having an affair to be a show of power." It's clear that Myrtle perceives herself as confident and self-assured, and assumes that her relationship with Tom is a permanent ticket into the world of the rich, not just an uninterested relationship. Fitzgerald characterises her as possessing "an immediate perceptible vitality" which seems to overstate her boredom and carelessness. This is exemplified by the following quotation from Nick's first meeting with Myrtle: "I'm going to make a list of all the things I've got to get…and a collar for the dog" The list used highlights how she is trying to fulfil her needs in such a small space of time. She wants "a black silk bow for mother's grave" which seems to be a very materialistic thing to ask for. The fact that she beautifies death could be an aspect of foreboding as her life also comes to an end. This could perhaps indicate how as soon as she has access to wealth; she immediately spends it on things that aren't necessary; it shows how one can be so desirous for money, which is ultimately her dream. Time is another motif used, which could possibly entail that Myrtle's simultaneous desire to reach the future will be nothing but a belief due to the fact that her own pride got her killed. Additionally, Fitzgerald criticises The American Dream through the description used to portray Myrtle and Tom's relationship. According to Daisy, Tom is "uncivilised" and is a "brute". Her thoughts are evidenced in chapter 2 when we see Tom's moral corruption as "he broke her nose with his open hand" for suggesting a divorce with Daisy. The brutality of this quote shows that both characters are impulsive, and driven by their needs. Tom is aggressively asserting that his needs are more important than Myrtle's; after all, to Tom, Myrtle is just another mistress who he can dispose of. Moreover, in 'A Streetcar Named Desire', Williams contrasts the American Dream by exploring Stella's view. Her dream is different to Myrtle in 'The Great Gatsby' which is significant as it outlines the fact that the view on the American Dream is a personal interpretation; Myrtle's dream was to be wealthy whereas Stella's dream is to have a family. Stella's dream is significant as it outlines the fact that wealth doesn't always bring happiness into one's life- in actual fact, in most cases, great wealth brings sadness into a person's life. This is shown in both texts. 'Aren't you being a little intense about it? It's not that bad at all! New Orleans isn't like other cities." Stella seems to be defending her choice of lifestyle as "New Orleans isn't like other cities" when Blanche critiques her, bearing in mind that she did come from an upper class family but she chose to live in a deprived neighbourhood. Freeman argued that "Stella is among those who take ownership of their values in order to gain comfort." This can be supported by Stella's comment on New Orleans being "not bad at all" which could potentially outline how she doesn't need prosperity in order to be happy, she just wants love and calmness within a household. Furthermore, throughout the play, we see a change in Stella as it could be argued that she is dramatising domestic violence as well as using it as a stepping stone to reach her dream. We hear "a sound of a blow and Stella cries out" which occurs in Scene 3. Stanley is trying to assert his control over Stella by hitting her; reinforcing his role as the dominant male in the relationship. It also reveals the drawback to the vibrant life that we have seen in Elysian Fields as it foreshadow violence, in which we see throughout the play, that finishes during the rape of Blanche. The fact that Stella takes the "blow" and doesn't do anything about it could perhaps indicate how she is blinded by the idea of marriage and family and sees it a normal

continuing series of abuse that naturally occurs in a relationship. The fact that she is willing to go through this stage of her relationship just to reach her end goal of being happy in a family, suggests how determined she is for a better future. Stella, according to Kazan, is “driven by her determination to hold onto Stanley.” This is shown throughout the play where she defends him when he raped her sister. It indicates how Stella can be so self-driven to achieve her dream of having a family.

Both “A streetcar Named Desire” and “The Great Gatsby” use their main protagonists to represent the horrible end to the dream they desired. In “The Great Gatsby”, Fitzgerald created Gatsby's death as the consequence of his relationship to 'reality'. In his life he does not accept reality as a given but instead he sets out to alter it in order for him to reach his dream. A.E Dyson argues that ‘Gatsby believes in himself and his illusions’. This is shown in Chapter 8 when he dies because he took the blame of his lover’s murder. It could perhaps display how he is so blinded by his illusion of being with Daisy that his reality took his life away to prove that his dream is nothing more than a delusion. Gatsby says to his gardener, “Don’t do it today… I’ve never used that pool all summer” which is significant as we know that he gets shot in the pool. The fact that he chose the pool is effective because it’s as if he is jumping into his realism; Daisy will never be his lover therefore all his hard work reaches an end. The pool is symbolic of his illusion of a perfect dream which he will never witness. However, it could create a sense of hope for Gatsby that he may reunite with his lover in another life; water has connotations of purity which links to the idea of a new beginning that he may wish to pursue with Daisy. Nick also says to Gatsby that he “pays a high price for living too long with a single dream” which is important because it’s allowing the reader to understand how everything has a consequence therefore his unattainable dream is the reason for his death. Nick describes the water as “hardly the shallow of waves”. The adjective “shallow” could perhaps symbolise Gatsby’s life; the fact that he is now dead, puts an ending to his eagerness for wealth. He no longer needs to participate in any criminal activities to earn money in order to impress Daisy. It highlights how Gatsby himself was a superficial individual who was blinded by his own misapprehensions. However, In ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’, Williams uses Blanche as a vehicle to explore the theme of madness. Contextually, Williams had a sister, Rose, who was lobotomised in his absence and was later institutionalised leading many critics to believe that the character of Blanche may have arisen from events in his own life. This links to the American Dream because people had a specific thought on how they want their life to turn out however most of the time that dream only ever remained a fantasy and nothing more The adjective, “clean” is effective in this sense that it highlights Blanche’s dream becoming nothing more than a fragment as she uses sex for comfort and not even her fantasy could cover her reality therefore she has become transparent, you can see her reality clearly. The adjective, “clean” is effective in this sense that it highlights Blanche’s dream becoming nothing more than a fragment as she uses sex for comfort; not even her fantasy could cover her reality therefore she has become transparent. Not only that, but the adjective “clean” contradicts Blanche as a person as Mitch denies her marriage proposal due to the fact that she uses her promiscuity in order for her to gain happiness. In the final scene Blanche’s last words to the doctor are, “Whoever you are I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.” This phrase is ironic as it indicates how Blanche is blinded by the idea of love and happiness that she perceives her doctor as being her saviour. It highlights how her “kindness on strangers” is the reason why she isn’t successful in her life as she becomes an easy target for people to take advantage of her; the only kindness she showed strangers is by having sex with them. Nevertheless, Williams may have portrayed Blanche this way to mirror the fact that many women are easy to manipulate in exchange for love and comfort. It shows how Blanche is disconnected from realism but the fact that she

chooses to ignore it is an element of her being in love with the idea of comfort, which is her illusion.

To conclude, the presentation of The American Dream in both ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ and ‘The Great Gatsby’ allows us to interpret how both Blanche and Gatsby change their lives in order to reach self-satisfaction in striving towards their goals. Ultimately, it shows how one can be so blinded by their dream; even if it’s unattainable they will still strive towards it to seek comfort and happiness. The Dream is nothing but an illusion that people use to feel satisfied, as shown in both texts.