
House Against Home in the Great Gatsby and Death of a Salesman

In the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and the play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, both authors use their characters' living space, the house, as a metaphor for the attainability of the American Dream of security, wealth, and happiness. In the American Dream, the house—the living space—demonstrates the social class and degree to which the Dream has been physically attained. The home, however – the dynamic among the people living in the house—demonstrates the happiness and fulfillment truly attained. Because of the emphasis on material things that was necessary for these characters to get their houses in the first place, neither are able to make their house into a home because of the misguided focus on material success.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the title character's house and the parties that it hosts are wildly extravagant. The narrator, Nick, describes Gatsby's mansion as "a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool and more than forty acres of lawn and garden" (Fitzgerald 5). Gatsby has seemingly attained his American Dream of love and happiness because he is rich and powerful—even after Gatsby's death, his father carries a well-worn photo of the Gatsby mansion, suggesting that his father is proud mostly because of his son's physical wealth.

While Gatsby's mansion houses some hired servants and the parasitic boarder Ewing Klipspringer, these characters barely associate with Gatsby, making his home devoid of any human interaction. Gatsby does, however, attempt to turn his massive house into a loving home through Daisy. When Gatsby first gives Daisy the grand tour of his property, she "admired this aspect or that of the feudal silhouette against the sky, admired the gardens, the sparkling odor of jonquils and the frothy odor of hawthorns..." (90). However, Daisy eventually rebuffs Gatsby's attempts to make a home together; she refuses to admit that she "never loved" her husband Tom, and instead flees from East Egg with Tom, leaving a crestfallen Gatsby.

Unlike the extravagant Gatsby mansion, the Loman house in *Death of a Salesman* is a typical lower-to-middle-class house in Brooklyn. Despite the differences in house size, the protagonist Willy Loman has still succeeded in owning a house (his American Dream), and like Gatsby, has not been able to turn it into a true home. At the end of Act II of *Death of a Salesman*, Willy dies just as the mortgage on his house was fully paid off. Willy spends his life and sanity in vain, attempting to escape debt, but does not live long enough to take full possession of his house: he has failed himself. In a conversation with his wife Linda right before his suicide, Willy says,

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“Work a lifetime to pay off a house. You finally own it and there’s nobody to live in it.” Although Willy has two children, Biff and Happy, Willy feels emptiness and failure without a loving home. Although Willy has a desire to make his house a home, there is nobody to live in it.

In the article “Crafting the New American Dream,” Penelope Trunk offers the exact advice that Gatsby and Willy needed to make their houses into homes. Trunk suggests an antidote to the “old” Dream, which “used to be a college education, a steady job, a nice house (and a family to fill it), and a better financial picture than what your parents had.” Instead, Trunk suggests, in order to truly achieve the American Dream of happiness, one should not try for better than one’s parents financial status (the House), but rather in fulfillment (the Home). Had Willy and Gatsby built meaningful human relationships, rather than business ones, as Trunk suggests, perhaps both characters would have found such fulfillment, although perhaps they would not have had quite as much material wealth. Indeed, one’s success in attaining the new Dream will not be as tangible as the old Dream; as Trunk writes, “the new American dream is about fulfillment, which is a murky slippery goal, but young people...know it when they feel it, and you will, too.”

Likewise, in response to the question “What is the American Dream?” Martha Stewart rephrases Trunk’s advice in a succinct statement. Stewart quoted the writer Samuel Johnson: “To be happy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition.” Johnson and Stewart suggest that the Dream requires one to forget about financial aspect of the Dream and instead focus on personal fulfillment; the amount of money one earns or the size of one’s house does not determine happiness. Instead, create a real home, suggests Stewart, one “full of life and light and joy for those we love.”

By utilizing the dwelling as the central setting of the texts *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of a Salesman*, Fitzgerald and Miller illustrated the lives of those who could never understand the easier-said-than-done knowledge of those successful at attaining the American Dream: follow the path to fulfillment, not financial achievement. Ironically, in both *Gatsby* and *Salesman*, the protagonists are prevented from turning their houses into homes because of the emphasis on material success to gain the house in the first place. Indeed, from the 1920s, when *Gatsby* was written, to the late 1940s, when *Salesman* was written, to the present day of Martha Stewart and Penelope Trunk’s “new American Dream,” the house remains a symbol of riches and wealth while a loving home remains a symbol of personal contentment and fulfillment.

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