

FORUM

COMMENTARY FROM THE COMMUNITY

Beating on, against the current



Illustration by Advance Local, original painting by Francis Cugat

The Great Gatsby's
enduring relevance.

Richard M. Perloff and Jeff Karem

*"So we beat on,
boats against the current,
borne back ceaselessly into the past."*

This sentence, one of the most famous in American literature, is the endpoint of F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterpiece, "The Great Gatsby." On the 100th anniversary of the novel's publication in 1925, the novel remains hauntingly relevant, crystallizing Americans' infatuation and ambivalence with wealth. "Gatsby" gives us insights into the fragility and nobility of the American Dream.

Fitzgerald's Jazz Age was dripping with wealth and inequality, just like our own era. America's decisive election of a billionaire president in 2024 may sit uneasily with concerns about rising inequality and diminished economic opportunity. This tension finds a parallel in Fitzgerald's own attitude toward wealth in "Gatsby" — admiring Gatsby's romantic dreams of a rich, golden life, while detesting the "rotten crowd" he hung out with.

"The Great Gatsby" remains relevant because it raises timeless questions about the American dream. The novel asks

**"The Great Gatsby" remains relevant because
it raises timeless questions about the
American dream.**

whether the dream has been contaminated by greed and moral vacuity.

Although the book's narrator, Nick, learns that Gatsby, who sought wealth through hard work, was ultimately a criminal bootlegger, he and Fitzgerald admire Gatsby for envisioning a more expansive, bolder American dream. For example, Gatsby's parties are both luxurious and inclusive, welcoming not only established New Yorkers, but also newcomers from Ireland, Italy, and Poland — the very groups viewed with distrust by many in Fitzgerald's day.

When Fitzgerald writes that what "flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes" was "a fresh, green breast of a new world," he captures the hopes for a vision of a new world that has inspired Americans for generations.

But then Fitzgerald takes a decidedly more negative view with his closing words that we are "borne back ceaselessly into the past," suggesting that we may be looking backwards as we pursue our American Dreams.

A century after "Gatsby" was published, we see these issues play out today as President Donald Trump's supporters seem to be borne ceaselessly into the past with a wistful vision of an America that they believe was once great but is no longer. It's a nostalgic vision of an America that, whether myth or history, is doomed to be as elusive as Gatsby's attempt to recapture the bloom of his first love with Daisy.

In 2025, the tension Fitzgerald captured between optimism and pessimism a century earlier remains. Notably, while young

people remain optimistic about the economic future, four in 10 adults under 50 doubt they can achieve any semblance of the American Dream.

And yet, while Gatsby's tragic death at the hands of a jealous suitor sounds a cautionary note, Nick's affirmation elsewhere in the novel that "anything can happen ... anything at all" sounds a note of renewal and regeneration that still echoes today.

More generally, Fitzgerald's "Great Gatsby" offers a timeless insight about the essential ambiguity of the American dream — that in an era of boundless wealth, the dream lurks luminously but may be unachievable for many when rising inequality and sky-high housing prices put the dream of owning a home out of reach. Yet for Fitzgerald, it is the pursuit of the dream — newcomers to New York like Gatsby who seek their fortunes, and generations of immigrants who have sought to fulfill their own hopes and aspirations — that gives the American dream, "the fresh, green breast of a new world," its transcendent meaning.

And that's why "The Great Gatsby" still moves us. A hundred years later, "Gatsby" remains great, its lyrical prose inviting new generations of readers to contemplate the majesty and meaning of the American dream.

Perloff is a Distinguished Professor of Communication and Karem is a professor of English at Cleveland State University.