

## The Failure of the American Dream in “The Great Gatsby”- Fitzgerald

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### Abstract

The American Dream is one of the most important issues, which has drawn the attention of literary criticism through many years. It represents the ideals of a nation: equality, liberty, pursuit of happiness and democracy; ideals that have been understood in different ways by people. The real values related to these ideals changed and deviated from what it was meant into the enormous desire and greed for wealth and power. Fitzgerald tried to reveal that social discrimination is present and no one is treated as equal to others. The following research over the novel “The Great Gatsby” demonstrates how the dream cannot be successful because of the way it is misunderstood by the society and people’s materialism view of modern life. The characters and their attitudes through the chronology of the story are the embodiment of disappointment and the lack of moral values in the pursuance of a dream. Qualitative research used in this study aims to give a clear image and a deep analysis of the novel’s major themes, symbols, the period of writing, author’s life, various perspectives of the American Dream and its failure. We expect this thesis to be a good guide for further readings and projects with an explicit goal that the achievement of a dream does not necessarily requires the loss of the self and an excessive significance to what ruins the personal and the others future.

**Keywords:** the American Dream, failure, Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, power, wealth

### Introduction

#### 1. An overview on the novel *The Great Gatsby*

The novel begins with an advice of the narrator’s father “Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone, just remember that all the people in this world hasn’t had the advantages that you’ve had”(p. 2). Nick Carraway is the narrator of the book and introduces the reader with the characters and the settings of the story. Nick is from Minnesota and in the summer of 1922, he moved to New York because of his interests over the bonds. He leased a small house in the West Egg district of Long Island, near a mysterious neighbor named Jay Gatsby.

At the other side of the island live his cousin, Daisy and her husband Tom Buchanan, an old college friend of him. Nick goes to have a dinner with them at their house. Tom and Daisy have a two-year old daughter who spends most of the time sleeping at her room. They were one of the richest families of the area and the narrator loves to tell us a lot about it. There he meets a friend of Daisy, a young beautiful lady dressed in white, Jordan Baker. As four of them were drinking and having a friendly conversation, Tom received a call. Jordan tells Nick about the problems of their marriage and that the person on the phone was Myrtle Wilson, Tom’s lover. She says that everyone is aware of Tom’s affair, even Daisy herself. Daisy gets angry and starts shouting at Tom. Nick watches Gatsby from the window of his house. It seems a little strange to him because almost every night, Gatsby stares at the water of the island, particularly at a green light as he was looking for something (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

After some days, Nick receives an invitation from Tom for an afternoon in New York. On their way to the city, they pick up Myrtle, Tom’s mistress. She is the wife of George Wilson, who owns a modest garage and gas station along the highway. In the role of the narrator, Nick explains that Tom does not care if others see him with Myrtle and says how shameless he is about it. They go to the Catherine’s apartment, Myrtle’s sister. Myrtle calls her friends McKee’s to come and join the party. That was only the second time in his life that he has ever been drunk. Myrtle drinks more and more and begins to talk about Daisy. Tom warns her never to mention the name of his wife but she insists in talking on whatever she wants. Tom responds and breaks her nose. Nick leaves the apartment and finds himself waiting at the train station to go back at home (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

Nick takes an invitation from Gatsby's chauffeur to go at his home. There was a large and crowded party as the ones that Nick had heard about. He meets Jordan in the party and all people gossip about the mysteries of Gatsby. Some think that he is a spy during the war and some think that he is a bootlegger. Nick visits the house and everything seems mysterious to him, even the library, books and the servants. Gatsby talks to Nick and they realize that both of them have served in the same division during the war and as he does with everyone, he calls Nick "old sport". They plan to have a trip with his hydroplane in the next day. After this short talk, he leaves to deal with the business matters.

Jordan mentions that Gatsby was graduated in Oxford and Nick gets fascinated with all that this man has. Meanwhile, a butler comes and gets Jordan for a private chat with Gatsby. When she comes back, she claims that Gatsby told her amazing things but she cannot say anything for the moment; maybe in another day when they will meet again. Even though Jordan is not honest, she attracts him, but still he, himself, thinks that he is one of the few honest people he has ever known (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

Nick goes for lunch in New York with Gatsby. During the trip, he tries to explain to Nick that his past was not a real one, but an ideal life and family like what he really wanted to have. He pretends to be a son of a wealthy family from Midwest, exactly San Francisco; being graduated at Oxford; being awarded medals in World War I. There he meets a Gatsby's friend and business partner, Mr. Wolfsheimer. Jordan tells the details of the mysterious chat she had with Gatsby at the party. She says that Daisy was an eighteen-year-old beautiful girl who fell in love with the Lieutenant Jay Gatsby, but the family prevented her from meeting Jay again. Years later, she married Tom Buchanan, a wealthy man, and gave birth to a little girl. They loved a lot each other up to the moment when Tom had love affairs with other women. Gatsby bought "the castle" to be near Daisy. Gatsby needs Nick's help to him in inviting Daisy at home for tea, and he would come casually (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

Nick follows the plan and invites Daisy for tea. Gatsby comes, meets Daisy and Nick leaves the room. Gatsby invites them to see his house. All he has achieved is related with the idea of impressing Daisy with the fine things. She likes all the details of the house and the luxurious lifestyle as much as she starts crying. They dance in the hall full of happiness and smile for the moment. Nick leaves and let them be alone together, again (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

A reporter comes to Gatsby's mansion to interview him and have more information about the myths around him, his lavished parties and the way in which he became rich. All of what Gatsby said up to now is a fantasy world that he created about himself. His real name is James Gatz and he grew up in a poor family. He did odd jobs and tried to attend a small college for some weeks. One day, while he was walking in the shoreline, he saw the yacht of a wealthy man, Dan Cody. He warned Dan Cody for a storm that might destroy the yacht. He went with Cody for five years as his friend, secretary and after Cody's death was supposed that he will get a large portion of the fortune, but it didn't happen like this. Cody's mistress did not allow Jay to get the money. Tom and Daisy go at the next party at Gatsby's house. Tom does not like the party and wonder how did Gatsby earned this enormous wealthy. He is quite sure that his money comes from drugstores. Gatsby is certain that he will convince Daisy to return and live together (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

There are no more parties at Gatsby's house because now, he had found his lover. Next Saturday Gatsby goes to Daisy's house where he finds Nick, Jordan and Tom. They have a cocktail and decide to go in town in two groups: Daisy and Gatsby with Tom's car and the other group: Jordan, Tom and Nick with Gatsby's car. Both cars stop at Wilson's gas station. Aware of his wife affair, Wilson asks Tom for money to move out West with Myrtle. The two groups arrive at a hotel and try to have a quiet conversation, but the tensions between Gatsby and Tom increase. Tom says that Jay did not study at Oxford. Gatsby tries to explain that he was there for a few months. Finally, Tom mentions the affair of him and Daisy. She does not speak at all and Gatsby tells that she never loved him and now, she is going to leave him. Jay and Daisy leave to go home with Gatsby's car. Nick realizes that it is his thirty birthday. Tom, Nick and Jordan leave with the other car and stop at Wilson's garage because of a tragedy occurred in the road. Wilson's neighbor, Michaelis discloses what has happened: while Wilson and Myrtle were arguing, she went near the road, a yellow car killed her and it did not stop. Gatsby is ready to sacrifice and show himself as guilty even though it was Daisy who killed Myrtle (Shmoop Editorial Team, 2008).

Full of revenge, Wilson goes to Gatsby's house, shoots him and then suicides. Nick finds him dead in the pool. He tries to call Daisy and inform her about Gatsby's death but the Buchanans have already left to another house. His attempt on getting in touch with friends and family for the funeral, but no one wanted to come, except his father, Mr. Gatz. He reveals that Tom and Daisy are those kinds of people who make troubles and leave; other people have to find a solution for the problems caused by them.

Before moving back to Minnesota, Nick meets Jordan and goes to see the green light for the last time. The novel ends with one of the most famous passages in American Literature: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning--So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (p. 172).

## 2.1. Defining the American Dream

American Dream has been for more than 200 years the most compelling and the most desired dreams of all times. It started almost 400 years ago with Puritans immigrating to America to become after that the driving engine of a whole nation. The movement of religious immigrants to America had started as early as the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century, but it was only in 1630 that 700 Puritans lead by John Winthrop would settle American shore with the belief that the New England (America) was a chosen land from God, distinguished and exceptional. They were among the firsts to set the values of a belief that for a long time would be the idol of every person on earth.

American Dream can be defined as the belief that anyone that works hard to achieve success in America can achieve it. This belief is consistent to everyone and no race, class, gender or nationality distinction makes the difference. For ten score years, this has been the prevailing idea of Americanism and most of other nation's citizens sought to reach this.

The first to mention the term American Dream is James Truslow Adams who was an historian and writer. He defines it as "dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement." (Adams, 1931). Hence, from his definition one can understand that it is directly related to the tenets determined in the Declaration of Independence. Terms such as social, gender, religious inequality, racism, xenophobia etc. become invaluable ones while facing the values of American Dream.

The freedom in America is "associated with autonomy" (Rifkin, 2004, p. 13). Thus, when one has autonomy or independence upon others, he or she is free. This type of freedom that characterizes America is more in the materialistic aspect. Therefore, as much wealth has one, that much independent one would be.

The concept of freedom is not only related to that of autonomy, but to work ethic as well. Based on American beliefs that are set forth by Franklin Roosevelt, it is the hard work that sets the individual free because only if the individual works

On the other hand, this conviction on American uniqueness is associated with the patriotism, which is a core value of Americanism. American Dream developed because of deep patriotism, love for the country and celebrated the two feelings. This sense of belonging was the generator of the Dream. Rifkin notes regarding the uniqueness and belongingness as "from the very beginning it was meant to be exclusive to America" (Rifkin, 2004, p. 17). He also says that this dream was never a dream "to be [...] shared with or exported to the rest of the world" (Rifkin, 2004, p. 17). Thus, the American Dream could be lived only in American land.

## 2.2. Depiction of American Dream in "The Great Gatsby"

*The Great Gatsby* is a mere description of the culture of 1920s and the impact this culture had in the failure of the so-called American Dream. In this section the culture of consumerism, being an epitome of "going from rags to riches", luxury, parties, attempts to become an "old money" will be discussed. All these factors and the replacement of the old Protestant values of work ethic and pursue of happiness of the Declaration of Independence with leisure and pursue of wealth supply the demise of a dream that has been the driving force of a whole nation.

It also reflects the contribution and involvement of the characters in the novel to the failure and downfall of the American Dream. Despite the depiction of the socio-cultural and economic conditions of 1920s and the same conditions that push and provoke his characters, he provides the reader with an insight on the psychology of each of them and "the interior motives which they use to justify their behavior and actions." The Dream that everyone seeks in *Great Gatsby* is being corrupted by his or her immoral lives and actions.

The lives of the characters, especially Gatsby, depict the culture of excessive consumerism and extravagantly wealthy living. They, the people like Gatsby that had come from the bottom part of the society, needed to settle their position and newly gained status in the society. In addition, they attempted to gain the respect that the "old rich" already had achieved that far and the necessary esteem that characterizes the rich people through the means of displaying their wealth and fortunes and through the purchases.

Fitzgerald depicts Jay Gatsby as a paragon of self-made man of success. He starts everything from the very beginning and from living his childhood days in poverty becomes a millionaire. He achieves the success that everyone in America was seeking for at the period. Gatsby has a huge house, servants and many friends that attend his parties. All the success he has achieved and the status he has will assist in his decay.

Given the abovementioned culture of consumerism, Jay Gatsby falls into the same tendency as the others like him. His dressing style was often pompous. Also, he inclined to show off with his "circus wagon" car and his large house where he organizes huge parties and consumes lavishly and great amount of alcohol. The wealth and power is not sufficient for a wealthy person to maintain his esteem. By putting it into evidence, thus by showing it to others, makes these people more confident.

Gatsby succeeded to give the impression that he had achieved the American Dream though from the inside he still sought assurance about him being impressive enough. In the book, he asks Nick to assure him about how impressive his house looks. The house of Gatsby was made just for the sake of its outward appearance and for public entertainment. It had a swimming pool that Gatsby says in the book "he never had used", large lawns and gardens surrounding it and a tower. All these details depict the importance that he paid to making evident his richness. This is due to his lack of being part of the "old rich" society. Another means for him to display his successes and great wealth are the huge parties that he organizes in his mansion. His guests are mostly from the new riches and, according to Fjeldstrom, "It is easy to see that the guests at Gatsby's party are completely unable to exist independently of each other, for all of these people are similarly trying to become a part of the rich set" (Fjeldstrom, p. 38). Belonging to the same strata of society, and intending to achieve the American Dream that they believed Gatsby had succeeded on; they could not understand that he was indeed lacking it. His American Dream was not only that of success. His American Dream was to win Daisy.

After the WWII, there was a great change in the economy of American people and a shift of status happened while the poor became rich and vice versa. It was a time when the riches bankrupted and many industries or companies crashed and went out of business. Therefore, the people from the lowest strata of the society could collect money through corruption and illegal means. Hence, the American Dream that before it was through hard work and self-discipline that one could attain, during 1920s turned out to be one of luxury, idleness and leisure. The newly rich had they achieved their goals regarding material wealth, did not persist in the Protestant ethic of hard work that the American Dream was supposed to be achieved. Regarding this, Cervo says:

America is the land of opportunity, but all the opportunities that really matter are basically criminal in character, like bootlegging. To spin off from this a bit, it may be truly said that in America, no noncriminal ever becomes rich. By "crime" I mean not only the illegal, but the immoral; that is, breaches of decency, like honesty and trust, and a fair product for a fair price (Cervo, 2010).

Yet, one must admit that not all became rich because of their criminal accounts but related to immoral aspect it is true. Also, regarding Gatsby it is true in both aspects while Jay Gatsby and others coming from a poor setting involved themselves into these illegal works in order to achieve their dream. Gatsby deals with bootlegging business. Because Gatsby differs from some others that achieved their materialistic dream in that respect that he earns his wealth not in an honorable means, he lacks this work ethic. It is the means through which he accumulated his material wealth that contributed in the corruption and the demise of the American Dream and Gatsby's downfall.

It is previously mentioned that Gatsby's American Dream is tightly bound to Daisy and winning her back, ergo he uses many different attempts, one might consider even naïve ones, to reach her. As long as Daisy is already a member of that part of the society that has always been rich and wealthy, only money cannot satisfy her and cannot make Gatsby reach her. She is already rich enough and has a rich husband. Gatsby fails to realize and understand that no matter how much Daisy involves with him, she will never leave the life that she has and the society she belongs to or being an "old money" representative.

The belief that having more materialistic wealth for Daisy he would have higher chances to be loved by she makes him involve in these businesses, but it concludes that money cannot make him happy. Also when they have the car accident and murder Myrtle, Gatsby cares only about Daisy and that she will have no problems. Having Daisy become the only important thing about him, he starts to become just as careless as she is. He lies about the cause of Myrtle's death in order

to save Daisy and is killed by George after that. Thus, the means Gatsby chooses to win his dream cause him to die and, consequently, the failure of his American Dream for that he never could fully complete it.

Myrtle though she is not one of the main characters in novel, she is a key character in the general flow of the plot and in the understanding the society of consumerism in 1920s and, the most important, for her continuous pursue of the American Dream.

She is a flat character, which means she does not experience any changes throughout the book. Yet, though she is the type of character that does not change, she drives most of the action of the novel and reveals the real faces of other characters such as for instance Tom Buchanan or Daisy. Thus, Tom while being with her reveals his imperfections of being a husband that betrays his wife.

Her American Dream is to achieve material wealth that would be enough to satisfy the needs that cannot be completed by her husband's incomes. In order to get this dream she does whatever it takes without thinking about how much she damages other people's lives, especially George's, her husband. She married him by believing that she truly loved him and that they would be happy together, but because her only driving force in life is money and wealth. She looks down on her husband. George was not a rich man; in addition, he was a poor person indeed for that in order to marry Myrtle he borrowed his wedding suit to a friend. In the book, she says "The only crazy I was when I married him. I knew right away I made a mistake. He borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in, and never told me about it, and the man came after it one day when he was out..." (p. 37). She calls herself crazy for involving herself in a marriage with a person that could not even afford his wedding costume and views it as a big mistake. It is understandable that her only purpose in life is the material world and does not appreciate the struggles of George to be with her.

It is a completely different attitude towards Tom. Holding the belief that she would become part of the aristocracy, Myrtle involves herself into immoral actions in order to achieve her biggest dream. She holds a great desire to have a luxury life. It is this dream of becoming rich or taking the taste of the wealthy material world and luxurious lifestyle that push her to start an affair with Tom. She starts this love affair because Tom is a representative of that society that she wants to be part of. By being with Tom in a relationship, she feels as if she is already member of the aristocracy that is Myrtle's greatest happiness. Even though he mistreats her and hits Myrtle, she compromises with these. Therefore, her American Dream of having a better life and being financially successful brings the decay of her character. Despite being a mistress for Tom, she is able to endure even these mistreatments that show her real position in Tom's life and the society after committing the act of adultery that is a position of the lowest level of the society because she is both poor and a dishonest person.

Just like Jay Gatsby Myrtle's Dream is a consumerist one. She serves to Fitzgerald's depiction of what is consumerist hysteria. Fitzgerald depicts her as a typical woman character of the 1920s while her habit of buying magazines serves to feed her Dream. She reads magazines and fantasizes of being among those people. Therefore, as soon as she becomes Tom's mistress she starts to spent without any regard.

### **2.3. The Failure of the American Dream in the novel**

The Roaring years show that there was no any golden role for the accomplishment of the American dream. Every man has just to work hard enough for his success, even if he is not part of a rich family or a high social class. Roland Marchand (1986) claims, "Not only did he flourish in the fast-paced, modern urban milieu of skyscrapers, taxicabs, and pleasure-seeking crowds, but he proclaimed himself an expert on the latest crazes in fashion, contemporary lingo, and popular pastimes." The definition on his book for the man of 1920's attaining the American dream is quite similar with the way Fitzgerald portrays the figure of Gatsby from the lower class to a luxury life. Jay Gatsby is the embodiment of the self-made success who invented a new identity for himself regardless the poor past. The richness and the social status of him are the factors that cause the death of the American dream.

An American of that time was considered wealthy according the material wealthy and how much is he able to spend. The sizes of the houses described in the novel are the main element that indicates the status of someone. At the first sight, it seems like Gatsby has everything of the American dream, but he still asks for Nick's assertion as it is shown in chapter 5: "My house looks well doesn't it? See how the whole front of it catches the light." (p. 87) Donaldson (2001) explains in his article: "The culture of consumption on exhibit in *The Great Gatsby* was made possible by the growth of a leisure class in early-twentieth-century America. As the novel demonstrates, this development subverted the foundations of the Protestant

ethic, replacing the values of hard work and thrifty abstinence with a show of luxury and idleness.” (p. 8). Donaldson explicates how hard work and social values lost their importance and are replaced by laziness.

“The Great Gatsby” represents characters that are interested in materialistic life and never get interested in working hard. One of the reasons why Gatsby loves Daisy may be her aristocracy origin. He was not able to understand that money is not enough to win Daisy’s love. In the other hand, Tom is as wealthy as Jay but he uses a careful and fine way to show off his fortune.

Gatsby tried to have everything for show such as: the big house, the beautiful swimming pool and the generous parties. Donaldson (2001) comments upon this: “The outsized house, together with the lavish parties and the garish clothing, the automobiles and the aquaplane, represent his attempt to establish himself as somebody, or at least not nobody.” (p. 11) The partygoers were striving for the American dream but they couldn’t realize that Gatsby who had all this fortune has not achieved yet the real American dream. All of them think that he has a perfect life but he needs Daisy to enjoy the luxury life at all.

Gatsby thinks that he has to “establish himself as somebody” for the achievement of the American dream. After the meeting with Daisy, he understands that their relationship was not as beautiful as before. This is the moment when his life starts to downfall. He decided to live alone without the servants and lost the desire for the Saturday’s parties. That happened because of his wrong conception of being “somebody” for the sake of love.

The automobiles are one of the most obvious elements of the novel too. The twenties were the years when the cars, as a new technology, characterized the high class Americans. They do not consider the cars as a way of transportation but as a possibility to exhibit their fortune to the society. The protagonist has employed a personal chauffeur but he himself has an expensive yellow car. In her article, Lauraleigh O’Meara highlights the significance of cars at 1920. She describes Gatsby’s car as “...a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hatboxes and supper-boxes and tool boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of windshields that mirrored a dozen suns. Gatsby’s ‘splendid car’ delineates an expensive and unique commodity, not an efficient means for travel” (p.68).

The role of automobiles seems to be related with the failure of the American dream because of Gatsby’s ideas to prevail Daisy’s love through the luxury life. The cars display their negative side in the culture of 1920 as well and so far, they lead the characters toward the demise of the American dream. Myrtle died due to a car accident while the reason of Wilson and Gatsby’s death are also associated with the car. O’ Meara calls them as the car of deaths. According to the novel and society of the twenties, wealth was the only road that could realize their dreams and makes their lives happier than before. Meyer Wolfsheim, Gatsby’s “friend”, deals with illegal businesses and criminal activities. Gatsby was not corrupted by Wolfsheim but he couldn’t avoid being more like him through the story.

Catherine, Myrtle’s sister is a lesbian and Nick describes her as a strange person. He says, “She came in with such priority haste and looked around so possessively at the furniture that I wondered if she lived here. But when I asked her, she laughed immoderately, repeated my question aloud and told me she lived with a girl friend at a hotel.” (p. 34) He also portrays Mr. McKee as a weird character: “Mr. McKee was a pale feminine man from the flat blow...he informed me that he was in the “artistic game” and I gathered later that he was a photographer and had made the dim enlargement of Mrs. Wilson’s mother which hovered like ectoplasm on the wall.” (p. 34). These characters search for wealth as a hope to fulfill their empty spiritual world.

The Buchanans family may be the best representation of the American dream but they are people without dreams, without social values, without goals in their life. Everyone is amazed by Tom’s life as far as he is “a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anti-climax; His family were enormously wealthy — even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach — but now he’d left Chicago and come East in a fashion that rather took your breath away” (p.10).

He is not a responsible person and does not care for the other’s feeling. Tom does not know how to behave with his wife and take care of her. His personality is considered as vulgar and mean. The novel and the way that Fitzgerald ends the life of the characters demonstrate that money cannot buy happiness. Gatsby could not success in winning Daisy’s love because of the wrong perception of the American dream and the decline of the moral values. Obsessed with the idea of having Daisy’s love back unconditionally, he forgot to pay attention to the moral and social principles. Instead of being a noble wealthy man, he became more like Tom and Daisy, careless people.

The representations of parties, automobiles and houses resulted in the failure of Gatsby's dream. George and Myrtle Wilson passed their lives on attempts to escape from the struggles of the low class to the comfort of the upper class. They tried a lot and used the "few" chances life gave to them up to death. Nevertheless, they could be neither like Buchanans nor like Gatsby ("The Demise of the 1920s, n.d.).

"The Great Gatsby" introduces hope and persistence as the most important characteristics of the American dream. People have to believe on being successful beyond all possibilities. Mr. Gatz told Nick about his son's attempts to be a great man since he was young. He brought a journal that proves all of his words by representing Gatsby as the epitome of the American dream. He has always been ambitious, hard working and looking for adventure. He used these qualities for the eternal hope over Daisy's love. Contrary to Tom, he is very careful not to hurt Gatsby. Even in the day of car accident, Gatsby dint recognize who was the dead person, but he worried about Daisy's future.

The deaths of Myrtle, George and Gatsby at the end signify the destruction of the American dream. The characters of the book are the best symbols that chased the dream until the end of life and failed in its success because they overvalued materialism and money instead of its pure ideals. Thus, the novel is focused on the existence and death of the American dream (Hindus, 1968, p. 39- 40).

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