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ABOUT Q **The Secret to (real) Success**

**By…**

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ll through social media we are presented with people who seem to have it all. From the celebrities who always post their flashy cars and red carpet looks, to the friends on vacation while you’re at home wondering where it all went wrong. It’s fair to say that we are constantly walking around with the weight of the world on our shoulders to be ‘successful’. But in reality, shouldn’t success be self-defined? Instead, we see one picture of someone and assume we know them inside out. It leaves us not only questioning ourselves, but also our own successes and achievements. Rather than looking internally for what makes us fulfilled and happy, we use meaningless likes and comments to measure our self-worth and success. The American texts, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *Little Miss Sunshine* by Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton show us that the idea of success is damaging and unreachable, and can only stem from denying society’s expectations. It becomes abundantly clear that unachievable dreams are the roadblock to success and the perception of success is completely inaccurate to its reality.

Fitzgerald’s popular 1925 novel, *The Great Gatsby*, set during the Roaring Twenties and told through the critical eyes of Nick Carraway, uncovers the life of his wealthy neighbour, Jay Gatsby, and his pursuit towards success. Fitzgerald reveals to us that unattainable dreams prevent people from achieving true success. Gatsby appears to have a lifestyle most people can only dream of; riches and popularity. But for Gatsby, the only thing he wants is the one thing he can’t have, substance-less, Daisy Buchanan. When Nick finds Gatsby refusing to leave Daisy after Myrtle’s murder, Nick criticises him, “He wouldn’t consider it. He couldn’t possibly leave Daisy until he knew what she was going to do. He was clutching at some last hope and I couldn’t bear to shake him free.” (pg. 114) Fitzgerald’s tear-jerking use of personification uncovers how far Gatsby has sunken into the abyss of his unreachable dreams. Rather than facing the sad truth that Daisy has left him in the past, he waits countless hours for her, only to be left alone in the dark with himself and his shadow of disappointment. Their relationship hits rock bottom when Daisy turns out the lights for her house, symbolising the end of their relationship. It’s disheartening for us to see this unfold as Gatsby would’ve attained true success if he gave up on trying to look conventionally successful for Daisy. Instead, he spent it all chasing after a figment of his imagination, an idolised version of a girl he once loved. He tried, yet to everyone’s disappoint, he was just another victim to the damaging expectations of success that we, as a society, have created.

Fitzgerald also introduces us to Tom and Daisy Buchanan, a snobby and privileged old-money couple from East Egg who believe themselves to be superior to everyone, much like the Kardashians. However, their success is not what it seems. The Buchanan’s perfectly fit society’s expectations, and if anything, they set the damaging standard of conventional success. However, it’s clear that behind their shiny exterior, lies a corrupt and substance-less marriage. Tom and Daisy are admired by socialites in New York, but their empty decadence is hidden behind their old money façade. Evidently, they are all surface and no substance. While most people are fooled by this façade, Nick is able to see past their flashy exterior, describing them as “careless people” who “smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money and their vast carelessness… and let other people clean up the mess they made.” (pg. 139) Fitzgerald’s purposeful use of metaphorically portraying Tom and Daisy as beasts emphasises their inhumanity. This demonstrates the contrast between how society views the Buchanan’s, as everybody puts them onto a pedestal, allowing them to easily get away with murder. And although they are seen as highly successful people on the outside, it’s obvious that on the inside they are miles away from achieving true success. Clearly, underneath their masks lies a corrupt and shallow couple who are merely projections of the cookie-cutter expectations of ‘success’. Fitzgerald leaves us with one question: if we as a society are conforming with the conventional idea of success, then aren’t we the root of this damaging issue?

Gatsby’s a man who is always chasing after unrealistic dreams, but it’s unfair to judge him because in one way or another most people are doing the same thing. It would be too hypocritical to criticise him because let’s be honest, it’s human nature to dream. This is obvious in Faris and Dayton’s heart-warming film, Little Miss Sunshine, a story about winners – starring a bunch of losers. In this touching film, Faris and Dayton present us with characters that learn to reject society’s expectations and the conventional ideas of success, hence achieve true, self-defined success. They learn to see past the shiny exteriors people present and ignore social-norms. Instead of questioning themselves and falling for the facades of social media presences, they’re able to find comfort in their dysfunctionality.

Little Miss Sunshine follows the flawed family of the Hoover’s and their trip to get their daughter to a beauty pageant, in the end they unconventionally come to the realisation that success is what fulfils you. Initially, Faris and Dayton paint a picture of a judgemental and success-oriented father, known as Richard Hoover, who is distant from his family due to his obsession with winning. He is unsuccessful in fulfilling his own ambitions, yet he is stubborn in nagging others about ‘success’ and ‘failure’. It’s clear that Richard is unsuccessful, as we see him passionately giving a lecture on success, however when the camera pans to the audience, it’s depressing to see an almost empty room. Countless times in the film we see how Richards unachievable dream causes him to develop an obsession for being successful, saying, “luck is a word losers use…gotta be a winner” and “do you think you can win little miss sunshine…are you gonna win?” Just like Gatsby, we see how delusional he becomes in regards to achieving his goal. His repetitive comments only push him further away from his family, as we see the family awkwardly eating dinner in silence. Clearly Richards projection of his insecurities blocks him from having a successful family life. Faris and Dayton create Richard to demonstrate the damaging effects of success, however we also learn that he only truly achieves success when he denies societies expectations. Through Richards character, Faris and Dayton encourage us to recognise that we are not always able to achieve our dreams, however it’s important that we don’t allow this to get in our way of attaining success.

Furthermore, Faris and Dayton introduce us to Olive, a character who proves that the perception of success is nowhere close to reality. Olive is one of the only characters in The Great Gatsby and Little Miss Sunshine who outwardly shows their true self. Unlike Tom and Daisy, Olive never conforms with what others expect of her, rather, she sets her own standard of happiness and success. And while she may not be perceived as conventionally successful, Olive is the truest representation of success, in comparison to the other beauty pageant contestants who mirror societies expectations. We immediately see how different Olive is to the other contestants through Faris and Dayton’s montage, demonstrating the contrast between Olive and the other girls. As Olive walks on stage with her quirky outfit while the song ‘Super Freak’ plays, and the other contestants stride around in their barbie doll-like outfits, it’s clear that she stands out from the crowd. Although Olive stands out like a sore thumb and doesn’t win the contest, she wins something better; the unity of her family. And while they might have looked foolish dancing on stage, to Olive’s definition, they are successful. Faris and Dayton teach us that success can be whatever you want it to be. Like a snowflake, no two people are going to have the exact same definition of success, so why change your philosophy to align with society?

From the corrupt environment of the roaring twenties to the lifestyle of a dysfunctional family of ‘losers’, Fitzgerald, Faris and Dayton’s texts hone in on the one thing everyone is working towards: success. Through these stories, we are taught that the societal idea of success is not set in stone. Gatsby, the Buchanans, Richard and Olive teach us not to get caught up in unachievable dreams, and that the perception of success strongly differs from its reality. So, next time you decide to scroll through social media and feel bad for yourself, don’t. Who says you can’t be happy on your warm couch that you get to curl up on every night? At the end of the day, you’re never going to find success or happiness by looking at what others have that you don’t.