

The Analysis of the Protagonists in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract: American writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald's work *The Great Gatsby* is regarded as the masterpiece of Jazz Age in American literature. As his most influential work, the book focuses on the theme of contemporary social life, expressing the pathos under the American Dream. The essay based on the influence of Jazz Age's environment on the traits of persons not only analyzes the main characters but also elaborates the profound subject of realistic significance of American Dream.

Keywords: Protagonists; *The Great Gatsby*; character analysis; F. Scott Fitzgerald.

1. Introduction

The Great Gatsby, one of the most important masterpieces in American literature history, is written by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896--1940) who is an outstanding novelist of the *Lost Generation* in the roaring twenties. Although it has been published for more than one hundred years, it still influences one after one generation and enjoys high reputation for a very long time. And one of the reasons why it is heatedly discussed until nowadays is the characteristics of protagonists in it are very vivid and their deeds could trigger us to reflect ourselves. This article tries to analyze them from different perspectives, which hopefully could bring more thinking for the readers.

2. Gatsby

2.1. A Determined Guard for Dream

He is a very self-disciplined person. Even in his teenager years, he has already had high demands of himself. In the end of the whole story, his father shows Nick the schedule of Gatsby, from which we could find he actually follows his ideal at that time with his own deeds. He believes that with hard work finally he can make success. And this belief is kept by him for all his life time. No matter when he is at war as a soldier or he deals alcohol as a trafficker.

Gatsby has done many things and prepared for a long time for his only dream. After his return from war and the college, Daisy has already married to Tom. But Gatsby does not want to give up and for the wrong attribution to his lose of love, he would like to take great risk to do the illegal job only for money. Besides, as he firmly regards that he and Daisy are the only true love to each other, he can not bear that their reunion with each other is designed purposely, which he wants to achieve by chance. For sake of that, he holds parties every night, using plenty of money, in order to trigger his lover's interests. In the novel, author has added many details for it. *Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulp-less halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour; if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb...At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden. On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors'd'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs*

and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold. In the main hall a bar with a real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another [6].

Besides, he has stuck to his dream until his death and even he realizes that his dream is not the one he thinks it should be. After they are in relationship together, one day he suddenly tells Nick that *her voice is full of money*. At this moment, he has actually realized that she has changed and is not the girl she used to be in his memory. However, he still loves her because he believes as long as he tries harder, his dream must be realized. Moreover, in the end, he has already determined to take her and leave all the things behind and she would agree with that even before his death.

To make a summary, Gatsby is not only a man who has dream and willing to do anything for it, also, he would like to do it with the price for his life.

2.2. A Pathetic Ordinary Man of the Era

The death of Gatsby is a pity and the reasons for that deserve to be discussed. From my view, himself and the twisted social environment should be blamed.

First, he does not realize what kind of person Daisy is in the end who is no longer the naïve girl when they first meet each other. He is not a very extinguish person at that time and to some degree, he is only an ordinary person like anyone else. The author has actually mentioned that with the help of Nick. When Nick makes his acquaintance with Gatsby and they meet each other for couple of times, he thinks *So my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate roadhouse next door [6]*. That indicates Gatsby is not a well-educated person but rich. Also, he could make mistake like anyone else when encountered with romance. He is too naïve to trust Daisy would not change at all for more than five years and the money can buy love back. Honestly speaking, he is as same as other man at his age.

Although Gatsby himself is one of the very important cues for his death and failure, we could not attribute all to a single person. Besides, we need to analyze the background situation of the era.

In the 1920s, the Second Industrial Revolution was almost finished. During that period, America was gradually taking place of British as the new world factory. On top of that, Americans are not only confident with their country, but also themselves. They believe they can make a better living with their own efforts[1]. They all chase for money and become

more and more obsessed with it for it also brings them a lot of sensual enjoyment. In another word, money makes the dark side of human nature more obvious.

In such an abnormal social environment, Gatsby also internalizes the silent consensus by all numbers. For this reason, he is very self-contradictory meanwhile he makes up a new identity for himself. He regards himself as the son of God, who is born in a rich family, however, his father is just a poor farmer in the middle. He wants to obey the moral rules in the society and to be a respectable man. On the opposite, he has affair with a married woman and wants her to betray her family. From this perspective, he is very complicated and has many inner combats with himself. On the one hand, he really hopes to be accepted by the society with a more glorious image. But it can not happen in such kind of society. His stubborn and unreasonable illusion could also explain why he would fail in the end.

3. Nick

3.1. A Self-disciplined Man

Nick comes from a wealthy family, as he says, *My family have been prominent, well-to-do people in this middle-western city for three generations. The Carraways are something of a clan and we have a tradition that we're descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather's brother who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War and started the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on today* [6], but he does not totally depend on his family background. On the contrary, he wants to do his own career by his own efforts. On top of that, he chooses to move to the east and learn the bond business. Beside from making living by himself, he also has high demands morally. After graduated from university, he uses what he has learned and joined the first world war where he is cultivated for many virtues. He wants everyone could behave themselves and he also asks himself for that--*When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart* [6]. At the same time, though he calls for an ethical world and society, it does not indicate that he is very mean. In the beginning of the novel, the author has shown that he is actually a very tolerant person. *Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,' he told me, 'just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had*[2]. And it is this sentence that makes his criticize towards Daisy and Tom more real and acceptable.

3.2. An Honest Narrator

First, he is a reliable narrator. He is an honest man, and honesty makes Nick's narrative all the more reliable. And he is connected closely to the other characters. He is not only Gatsby's neighbor, but also Gatsby's trusted friend. He is Daisy's cousin and Tom's classmate. These relationships allow him to witness their behavior, which deepens the depth and breadth of the novel, so he acts as a mirror to the broken American dream. Also, Nick participates in all the events. With his help, Gatsby meets Daisy five years later. He is present when Tom has private meetings with his lover, and when Gatsby trades illegally with his partner. As a bystander, he can know the truth about everything and judge it. He is a good listener, who has an objective judgment on all things.

He is also conscious, and he can give them some advice. He keeps a clear head as a calm onlooker. All of these factors enable him to establish an image to the reader as a trustworthy narrator.

Besides, he is a calm spectator. Gatsby just says a very simple sentence, and he tries to find out the truth. Nick could guess the truth quickly, and his cognition enables him to see the essence of everything in the materialist world. Being a calm onlooker enables him to see clearly himself and the society. When Gatsby and Tom argue in the hotel, he keeps a neutral attitude from the beginning until the end. Nick is not terribly depressed about the lifestyle of the rich class. At first, Nick's attitude was tolerant, then critical. Nick has mature humanity and sense of responsibility. In Nick's eyes, Daisy and Tom do not have humanity [2]. The Midwest symbolizes the traditional virtues that allows him to start his life. In a sense, Gatsby is a failure in the way of realizing their respective American dreams, and material wealth became the standard to measure achievement and social status. Nick, as a dispassionate bystander soberly realizes that Gatsby will never know until he dies. When he sees Gatsby's dream shattered, he feels the selfishness and indifference of Daisy and Tom. He decides to return from the city to his hometown, to the Midwest, where he was born.

4. Daisy

4.1. A Materialistic Woman

She is a material woman. In the Jazz Age, women married only for money and status, not for love. Daisy was a beauty. All the young men are crazy about her. To all the young men, Daisy is like a flame, like a star twinkling before their eyes. When Gatsby goes to the front, Daisy promises him that she would wait for him to come back, but in fact, she marries Tom. A few days after Gatsby joins the war, she starts seeing someone else. In the end, she chooses a man who gives her three hundred thousand pearls. Tom's wealth is more important and valuable than her love for Gatsby. Her love is not faithful. She promises Gatsby, but betrays him at once. For Daisy, her daughter is a gift, and she just wants to show her daughter to her friends. At this time, Gatsby becomes a rich man. He has a luxuriously decorated villa and he often holds parties. Then she is deeply attracted by Gatsby's wealth, for Daisy, which is more important than Gatsby's sincere and unwavering feelings for her [3]. To be more specific, Gatsby flaunts his wealth to win back Daisy's love. She does not know the source of Gatsby's money, when she hears Tom say that Gatsby is a big smuggler and does illegal activities, she chooses to go back to live with her husband without hesitation, after that she thinks Gatsby is rich enough to take good care of her. As a result, even though she knows that Tom has a mistress, which makes her miserable and hopeless, she still does not give up this comfortable and wealthy life and she does not want to divorce.

4.2. A Pathetic Representative at That Time

Although it is all accepted that Nick is a very reliable narrator for this novel, however, we also have to admit that the women characters in it are all silent. What they do and speak is retold by Nick. They have no right to speak for themselves. To some degree, it is also a reflection of woman's social position at that time.

Daisy is not born so indifferently and materialistically. She has changed by the society and people around her. There is an

important change of her attitude when she decides to give up their love with Gatsby. On her wedding day with Tom, she receives a letter from Gatsby, which hesitates her greatly. It is reasonable to believe at that moment she is still a pure girl who prefers love rather than money. She even is determined enough to break her engagement with Tom. However, for the second time, she does not hesitate at all and just retreats back to her vast marriage immediately. During these two periods, she has completely internalized the rules of so-called upper classes, which renders her tightly clings to wealth and status and do not care about morality and virtues at all. When Nick first visits her and Tom, she told Nick that she thinks her daughter should be an innocent idiot. *She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. 'All right,' I said, 'I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.'* [2] This is the truth she realizes after her broken marriage. She is depressed for that and it is indicating that she still chooses to be a confederate.

5. Tom

5.1. The Representative of Upper Class: Immoral

Tom is a perfect character for the upper class. There are many detailed descriptions from the book displaying his wealth: *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: for instance he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest...* [6] But with so much money, he has done many unethical things.

First, the reason why his family would move to the east from Chicago is suggested: *'You're revolting,' said Daisy. She turned to me, and her voice, dropping an octave lower, filled the room with thrilling scorn: 'Do you know why we left Chicago?' [6]* It is reasonable for us to believe after they get married, Tom has cheated for more than one time. And when they still live in Chicago, Daisy could not bear the rumors any more and they have to settle to another city. Even when his wife is giving birth to his first child, he still hangs out with his mistresses. Daisy says, *Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where.* So, Daisy has known about it for a long time. At the beginning for their marriage, he has started to do that. *Tom ran into a wagon on the Ventura road one night and ripped a front wheel off his car. The girl who was with him got into the papers too because her arm was broken—she was one of the chambermaids in the Santa Barbara Hotel.* And this incident renders Daisy leave for France with their daughter to live for a year.

Besides, he is really an immoral person. He despises everything. It seems that there is nothing for him to respect for. For example, he does not allow Myrtle to call Daisy's name for what he likes is only her body and she is much superior to his wife. After Myrtle's death, he tells Wilson it is Gatsby who kills her on purpose, which directly leads to Wilson to shoot Gatsby dead. And he persuades Daisy to leave all this mess behind and remove again [3].

6. Conclusion

The Great Gatsby stands as a profound literary mirror reflecting the spiritual crisis and moral decay of the Jazz Age. Through the intricate portrayal of its protagonists, F. Scott

Fitzgerald not only narrates a tragic love story but also exposes the profound disillusionment of the American Dream in a materialistic society [4].

Jay Gatsby embodies the paradoxical nature of the American Dream—he is simultaneously a determined dreamer and a pathetic victim of his era. His unwavering pursuit of love and success, driven by self-discipline and hope, ultimately collapses under the weight of social reality and his own naivety. Gatsby's tragedy lies not merely in his personal failures but in the systemic impossibility of transcending class boundaries through wealth alone in a society that commodifies human relationships.

Nick Carraway serves as the moral compass and trustworthy narrator, representing traditional Midwestern values in contrast to the East's corruption. His gradual disillusionment and eventual retreat to his hometown symbolize the loss of innocence and the recognition that material wealth cannot substitute for ethical integrity. Through Nick's eyes, readers witness the hollowness beneath the glittering surface of the upper class.

Daisy Buchanan, often perceived as merely materialistic, reveals the constrained choices available to women in the 1920s [5]. Her transformation from a girl who once hesitated between love and wealth to a woman who ultimately embraces material comfort illustrates how social norms and gender expectations can erode individual authenticity. Her wish for her daughter to be "a beautiful little fool" poignantly captures the resignation of women trapped in a patriarchal, consumerist society.

Tom Buchanan represents the entrenched immorality of the old-money aristocracy. His casual cruelty, infidelity, and ultimate scapegoating of Gatsby demonstrate how the upper class maintains its power by exploiting and destroying those who aspire to join its ranks. Tom's impunity underscores the novel's critique of a society where wealth insulates individuals from moral accountability.

Ultimately, *The Great Gatsby* transcends its narrative of personal tragedy to offer a sweeping indictment of an era. Fitzgerald reveals that the American Dream, when reduced to the accumulation of wealth and social status, becomes not a beacon of hope but a source of alienation and destruction. The characters' fates collectively illustrate that in a world where money supersedes morality, dreams are destined to shatter, leaving behind only the haunting green light—eternally distant, eternally unattainable.

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