

Interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* From the Perspective of Psychoanalytic Criticism, Feminist Criticism and Marxist Criticism

Brief Introduction of *The Great Gatsby*¹

The Great Gatsby is widely recognized as the masterpiece of Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald. First published in 1925, it immediately won a great popularity among readers and literary critics and still retains as a classic literary work today. T. S. Eliot spoke highly of the novel by referring it as “the first step that America fiction has taken since Henry James”.² The story in this novel is set up in the summer of 1922 and is told by the first-person narrative Nick Carraway who left his home in Midwest to New York City to learn the bond business. He had a cousin, Daisy, who lived in East Egg with her husband Tom Buchanan. Nick rented a house in West Egg and his neighbor Gatsby was a mysterious rich man. As he got to know more of Gatsby, Gatsby’s mysterious past was gradually unraveled. Gatsby was born in a humble family; however, he had always dreamed of becoming somebody. When he was young, he fell in love with a southern lady, Daisy, who belonged to the upper-class. Gatsby was crazy about her, but when he returned from Europe, he quickly became disillusioned about the fact that Daisy had already married a rich man. Driven by the desire to win his love back, he strived to become a millionaire. He bought a luxurious house and threw extravagant parties from now and then hoping that Daisy may come someday. Under the help of Nick and Jordan, they met again and picked up their romantic history. However, gradually Gatsby realized that Daisy was far from the love he had dreamed of. Unfortunately, it was not long before this awakening, Daisy, driving Gatsby’s car, ran over Tom’s mistress and left. Later Gatsby was killed by the mistress’s husband. Daisy moved to another city hastily with her husband and didn’t even show up at Gatsby’s funeral. Seeing through the cruelty and indifference of the wealthy upper class, the narrator, Nick, left New York and returned to his hometown in the Midwest.

Psychoanalytical Analysis: the *id*, *ego* and *super-ego*.

Freud described the psyche as the interaction of the *id*, *ego*, and *super-ego*. These three ‘levels’ of the personality can correspond to the unconscious, the consciousness and the conscience respectively. In other words, the *id* is the part of a person’s psyche that focuses on basic desires and needs: pleasure, food and survival. Usually it is amoral, energetic and it represents the instinctual behavior. The *ego* is the rational part of personality, which is driven by the reality. It mediates between the desires of the *id* and the *super-ego* and represents what we call reason and common sense. The *super-ego* is the moral part of the personality. It operates as a moral conscience, and if one violates the moral codes, feelings of guilty and anxiety will appear. Freud’s psychic mode has a huge impact on philosophy, art, literary creation, and literary criticism. As he has pointed out in *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*³ that when unfulfilled desires are

¹ Fitzgerald, F. S. (1925). *The Great Gatsby*. Planet E-Book.

² (quoted from) Donalson, S. (1984). *Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*. Boston: G.K.Hall and Co. 268.

³ (quoted from) Freud, S. (1908). *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*. Edited and Translated by James Strachey. *The Standard Edition of the Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol 9.

suppressed and pushed back in our unconscious, they manifest in the form of dream, tongue slips and literature. It is the *ego* that helps the writers to express the repressed desires in a socially acceptable form, his/her literary works. Lin⁴ (1983) also mentions that through self-observation, a writer splits his/her 'psyche' into many 'sub-psyches'. As a result, the conflicting thoughts in his/her mind are often reflected in the personalities of the characters he/she has created.

Take Fitzgerald, the writer of *The Great Gatsby*, as an example. Born in 1896, he was the only son of an aristocratic father and a working-class mother. Due to the complex background, it's hard to define the social-economic status of his family. In his own description of one of the houses where he used to live in as a teenager, he said, "a house below the average on a street above the average".⁵ Growing up in such an environment, his life was full of conflicts, ideals and confusions. When Fitzgerald was 18 years old, he met a rich and beautiful Chicago girl, Ginevra King, at the prom. They quickly fell in love with each other. However, Ginevra's father told him there was no way for a poor boy like him that can marry the rich. These words deeply humiliated and hurt Fitzgerald and his relationship with Ginevra ended up with her marrying a wealthy guy. When World War I broke out, he joined the army and fell in love with Zelda Sayre, the daughter of the chief judge of the Alabama State Supreme Court. However, later they broke up out of almost the same reason: his poor financial conditions. In 1920, his first work *This Side of Paradise* was published and turned out to be a great success. Apart from gaining fame and money, Fitzgerald also won Zelda's heart back and married her. Yet his earlier frustrating love experience made his attitudes towards the rich complicated and contradictory. On the one hand, he despised and questioned the shallow upper and wealthy bourgeoisie; on the other hand, he also indulged himself in the enjoyment of luxurious life and privileges of being rich. This contradictory and conflicting state of mind influenced his writing. For one thing, he appeared to be a transcendent, simple and dedicated writer. For another, in order to make a living, he wrote something to cater the public not his heart. In terms of the characters he created in *The Great Gatsby*, we can trace the three aspects of Fitzgerald's personality.

The main character, Gatsby's relationship with Daisy resembled Fitzgerald's own relationship with his wife. He knew clearly that his wife's affection and loyalty to him can only be maintained through his success and money. So, he had to work hard. In order to afford his wife's luxurious life style, he had to write something he despised. On one hand, he was exhausted and saw clearly the destructive essence of the extravagant life they had. On the other hand, he could not stop and was also enchanted by the material world. In *A Moveable Feast*⁶ Hemingway blatantly commented that Fitzgerald was ruined by women. In terms of the *id*, Fitzgerald was driven by the strong desire of basic pleasure or libido. His ability of marrying his wife was a proof of his financial success and his superior class status. He was preoccupied with money and

⁴ Wu, L. & Lin, X. (Eds). (1983). *Selected Works of Modern Western Literatures*. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.

⁵ (quoted from) Cooperman, S. (1966). *F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

⁶ Hemingway, E. (1964). *A Moveable Feast*. London: Cape.

fame. And at the same time, the *super-ego*, moral standard, made him suffer from the actual entering of a rich and hypocritical social circle. Finally, with the disillusion of American dream, Fitzgerald's doubt and self-contradiction kept growing and were stored in Fitzgerald's subconscious. This subconscious was constantly being suppressed and finally got released through his work. He created Gatsby, whose life in many aspects was a miniature of his own. Gatsby created a fake identity, covered his family background, changed his name, and pretended having received a good education. He tried all means to merge in the upper class. However, deep in his heart, he despised the hypocritical rich class that he strived so hard to fit in. And he couldn't find a way out. He was only a man driven by the reality.

Daisy and Nick were people driven more by the *id*. Nick's comments on them are: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (p.191). Daisy only pursued material enjoyment and barely had sense of moral, so did her husband. There was a time depicting Tom's beating of his mistress— "Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand" (p.41). He was the kind of person with little rational thinking or the ability of self-control. When he got annoyed, he expressed his anger instinctively. Similarly, when Daisy hit Mrs. Wilson by car, her first reaction was to run away and get out of the trouble as soon as possible. She acted like a baby girl who had done something bad and was eager to get away from the spot.

Nick was a distinct and important figure of this novel. The magic power of Nick lied in the fact that his contact with all other characters in the fiction equipped him with a good view to judge them all. Although being involved in the whole event, he stood away from some distance and always kept an objective view of everything to a large extent. He provided the voice of the novel, documenting the summer of 1922. In a way, he was one of the few representatives of innocent morality in the novel. Fitzgerald successfully shaped Nick, a witness to the materialistic and morally corrupt social outlook of the United States after the First World War. Although Nick was also attracted by the fortune dream at the beginning of the story; dazzled by the wealth owned by Gatsby; and even developed a seemingly ridiculous love story with rich girl Jordan; he chose to withdraw from the whirl in the end. Fitzgerald seemed to use Nick's withdrawal to prove his soberness and moral purity. Looking back at the time of the creation of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald realized that he was unable to extricate himself from the rotten life and that redemption was no longer possible. Only in his works could he realize his dream: to return to the innocent life. In other words, Nick was the moralized *super-ego*, the moralized Fitzgerald. He mainly represented two aspects: the conscience and ideal. In the beginning part of the novel, Nick quoted his father's advice to him:

"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." He didn't say any

more but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments. A habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores"(p.3).

Obviously, it was not Nick's father in fiction that imposed this "purified morality" to him, but the author, Fitzgerald. It can also be drawn from the beginning of the novel that Fitzgerald was committed to molding Nick into a moral model that he dreamed of but could not accomplish himself. Facing the rich and beautiful girl, Nick was able to leave bravely despite his reluctance, while Fitzgerald couldn't. The best way for writers to achieve their ideal state is to create a character representing their *super-ego* and realize their ideals in the fictional world.

Psychological Status of Daisy and Feminist Interpretation

After Freud issued individual unconsciousness, Jung further developed collective unconscious by introducing language into unconsciousness. Lacan came up with the notion that the unconscious is structured like language. He believed that the contents of the unconscious are fully aware of language, especially the structure of language. He saw his "signifier" as what Freud would call "conscious" and his "signified" the "unconscious". From analyzing Daisy's words, we can get her unconsciousness. Her very first utterance in this novel is "I am p-paralyzed with happiness" (p.11). The words distinctly expressed her unconscious, which is paralysis. Another utterance worth noting is her introduction of the gender of her baby: "All right... 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" (p.20). From her words, we can easily find her disappointment to her husband and to the patriarchal society she lived in. Although superficially, she appeared to be a careless, vain, money-oriented woman; in fact, her unconscious was filled with soberness and hatred to her life. In her following account of her expression, she said:

" 'You see I think everything's terrible anyhow,' she went on in a convinced way. 'Everybody thinks so—the most advanced people. And I KNOW. I've been everywhere and seen everything and done everything.' Her eyes flashed around her in a defiant way, rather like Tom's, and she laughed with thrilling scorn. 'Sophisticated—God, I'm sophisticated!' " (p. 22).

Daisy's unconsciousness of "terribleness" governed all factors of her life and was embodied through her words. Perhaps it was this unconscious that instructed her futile, irresponsible and aimless living style and led to her paralysis in the spiritual world.

In my opinion, she was a sober and cynical lady who just behaved superficially to mask her pain and helplessness in this morbid world. Daisy had been an innocent girl who longed for true love. When she met Gatsby, despite of the fact that she had many other rich pursuers, she fell in love with him. She loved him and hoped to be with him. However, when she needed support and help, she got nothing from Gatsby. She was left there, alone, to undertake pressure from the outside, from the patriarchal family and society. At that time in the 1920s in America, girls from the upper-class

families had no rights to choose her lover and marriage. Daisy tried to pursue her own love and freedom but her ability was so trivial in her time. “Her mother had found her packing her bag one winter night to go to New York and say goodbye to a soldier who was going overseas. She was effectually prevented, but she wasn’t on speaking terms with her family for several weeks” (p.81). In this sense, it seemed biased for Nick or others to regard Daisy as a heartless gold-digger. She was a victim of the money-oriented patriarch society, there was little she can do. Even being an upper-class girl with a rich family background, Daisy still had little say in her love and life. Her fate was arranged by others. Even Gatsby could find a way to achieve economic status and success. However, as a girl, there was no way she can take the initiative. The suppression of her pursuit of true love by the patriarchal family might be the first big blow to her. Later she gave in and married a rich man from the same social class, Tom Buchanan of Chicago. However, her unhappy marriage life was another blow to her. To begin with, Tom had many love affairs with different women, and they had to move from place to place to avoid embarrassment. What’s more, Tom didn’t respect her and didn’t treat her as equal beings. For instance, he was rude to her that he kept interrupting her while they were chatting:

“ ‘Well, you ought to see her. She’s—

Tom Buchanan who had been hovering restlessly about the room stopped and rested his hand on my shoulder.

‘What you doing, Nick?’

‘I’m a bond man’ ”(p.13).

“ ‘You did it, Tom,’ she said accusingly. ‘I know you didn’t mean to but you DID do it. That’s what I get for marrying a brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen of a——’

‘I hate that word hulking,’ objected Tom crossly, ‘even in kidding.’

‘Hulking,’ insisted Daisy” (p.15).

“ ‘Tom’s getting very profound,’ said Daisy with an expression of unthoughtful sadness. ‘He reads deep books with long words in them. What was that word we——’

‘Well, these books are all scientific,’ insisted Tom, glancing at her impatiently. ‘This fellow has worked out the whole thing. It’s up to us who are the dominant race to watch out or these other races will have control of things’ ” (p.16).

“ ‘From Louisville. Our white girlhood was passed together there. Our beautiful white——’ ‘Did you give Nick a little heart to heart talk on the veranda?’ demanded Tom suddenly.

‘Did I?’ She looked at me. ‘I can’t seem to remember, but I think we talked about the Nordic race. Yes, I’m sure we did. It sort of crept up on us and first thing you know——’

‘Don’t believe everything you hear, Nick,’ he advised me” (p.22)

As the examples indicated, it seemed Tom interrupted her in almost every utterance she expressed. It is justifiable to reach the conclusion that he didn't allow her to have her own feelings or thoughts. It couldn't be more obvious that in marriage life, Daisy was not happy and there was little she can do about that. In the process of fighting against her fate, Daisy gradually understood that she would never win in the phallogocentric society, so she acted like a beautiful fool to protect herself. In the boring marriage life, she killed her time day by day until she met Gatsby again after five year's separation. In my view, there was a time she had prepared to give up her marriage to be together with her true love, but when she realized that Gatsby had done something illegal to win his wealth, she became disillusioned again. Maybe she had saw through the hypocrisy of men--in Gatsby's eyes, she was also an object that he needed to work hard to win back. So, I would agree that Daisy had changed from a joyful and innocent girl to a sophisticated and pessimistic woman. But what I wouldn't agree with is the view that she is a material, shallow, heartless women. She is not shallow at all, on the contrary, her acute observation on the repression and limitations society imposed on women made her couldn't be more conscious of her fate. She could do nothing but concede. She is just a realistic woman. When she killed Myrtle in the car accident, she did not stop to check but ran away quickly. Indeed, she was quite selfish but understandable. It was a tragedy of Gatsby, of Daisy, and of the time.

In the 1920s, the Jazz Age, America developed rapidly and many people became millionaires overnight. It was in the year 1920, American women first began to have the right to vote. On the surface, women seemed to get more and more rights and freedom, but the dominant social power was still in men's hands. At that time, women did not have the same working rights with men. They were housewives supported by their husbands. So, to a large extent, women relied on their husbands to survive. Under such circumstances, Daisy's sense of security would only come from a decent marriage, but Gatsby was unable to provide that. Daisy did not have her strength to change her position or her fate, but to follow and accept the arranged fate. It was not Daisy's fault. Again, it was the pity of that time and of women. Also, from Nick's negative comments on her, or Fitzgerald's comments, it couldn't be more patent that women were being wronged by males. They were victims of a patriarchal society.

However, I am not saying that Daisy is flawless or trying to find excuse for her. It is true that Daisy indeed had her shortcomings in her character that she chose to be worldly wise. When she fell in love with Gatsby, she was not independent enough to get rid of the control and oppression of the family to elope with Gatsby. She tried to meet Gatsby but failed, and then she lost the courage to escape from her family to pursue her love. She was not a determined and rebellious woman. After her marriage with Tom, her obedience to her family switched to her obedience to her husband. Even when she knew about Tom's infidelity, she chose to submit to humiliation. It was partly due to her weakness in character, Tom paid much lesser attention to her feelings. Then five years later, when Gatsby returned to her, she had already lost her courage. After the car accident, she again passively accepted Tom's arrangement to go away. In the end, she thoroughly became the kind of person like the Buchanans. But she is

a victim of a complex network of needs and desires; she deserves more pity than blame. That is the fate of women at that time. Few can escape. Women had no history---so they were told; so they believed. Thus, ultimately, it is men's hegemony over the symbol system which most decisively disadvantaged women ⁷(Lerner, 1986). But women have their history, though isolated and interrupted, the herstory exists. Lerner told us that when historical conditions are right and women have both the social space and the social experience in which to ground their new understanding, feminist conscious develops.

Marxist interpretation of *The Great Gatsby*

Marxist critics pay attention to the connection between literature and realistic life and treat literary work as a dynamic reflection of realistic life rather than a machinery replication of it. In *History and Class Consciousness*⁸, George Lukatcs expressed his ideas that a realist work must reveal the underlying pattern of contradictions in a social order. In other words, literature should serve not only as a reflection but also a critique of the socioeconomic reality. *The Great Gatsby* is one such work with profound themes.

The Disillusionment of the American Dream

The American Dream is a stark theme in *The Great Gatsby*. On the macro level, the American Dream is the idea of "equality, democracy, and freedom" guaranteed in the Constitution; on the micro level, it is the opportunity of reaching a high social status through individual efforts. Gatsby was of poor origin and eager to achieve his "dream" through struggle. So did Fitzgerald. In the novel, there is one part depicting Gatsby's self-made working schedule and resolution.

"Rise from bed 6.00 A.M.

Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling 6.15-6.30 A.M.

Study electricity, etc 7.15-8.15 A.M.

Work 8.30-4.30 P.M.

Baseball and sports 4.30-5.00 P.M.

Practice elocution, poise and how to attain it 5.00-6.00 P.M.

Study needed inventions 7.00-9.00 P.M.

GENERAL RESOLVES

No wasting time at Shafers or [a name, indecipherable] No more smokeing or chewing Bath every other day Read one improving book or magazine per week Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00 per week. Be better to parents " (p.184).

Gatsby made a strict plan and resolution for himself, including when to get up, exercise, study, work, and practice speech rituals. While reflecting Gatsby's great determination to pursue his dream, these details also showed the hardship of Gatsby's past life. The crossed-out details of saving \$5.00 per week reflected Gatsby's helplessness situation to the living conditions at that time. His determination collided with reality and he had to make some concessions. Then he met Daisy and quickly fell in love her. Daisy's beautiful appearance, lively personality, superior family background represented everything Gatsby wanted. To win Daisy was his "American

⁷ Lerner, G. (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

⁸ Lukacs, G. (1974). *History and Class Consciousness*. Chessington: The Merlin Press.

Dream". Even after five years' separation with Daisy, this dream was never faded. All his efforts were to achieve this dream. He accumulated a large amount of money through illegal means. And in order to integrate into the upper class, he made up stories of his past and threw large luxurious parties to entertain the rich and celebrities. Although according to Marxist theories, the superstructure can be determined by the economic foundation, the old aristocrats still looked down upon Gatsby. There is no way he can really realize his American dream. For example, from Tom's comments on Gatsby: "A lot of these newly rich people are just big bootleggers" (p.114), it is rather clear that the old rich did not wish to incorporate this newcomer. There is still a social boundary between Gatsby and the upper class. In addition, Gatsby could never reach his dream for he couldn't face his past. He changed his name, reinvented his experience, lost his soul. He told others: "I was the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all who were dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors had been educated there for many years" (p.70). In doing this, superficially he achieved his goal, but in fact he never made it. The new life might be fake or almost unreal to him, because he left so much of himself behind to get there.

Gatsby's idealistic view of Daisy created a conflict for him once confronted by reality. Over the course of five years, Gatsby had built Daisy up in his mind to be a perfect woman, someone that the actual Daisy can never measure up to. As Nick observed: "He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (p.103). The reality is hard, Gatsby's dream collapsed when he failed to win Daisy back and was ultimately rejected by the higher social group. No former party guests showed up on his funeral. To trace the root of his tragedy, his desire for a better life stemmed from his faith that anything was possible if he put his mind to it, which was also a part of the American Dream. However, in the end, it was the dream pursuer who worked hard to realize his dream that suffered, not the bourgeoisie. The reason behind the reality is thought-provoking.

According to Lukacs, literature should not only reflect the reality but also criticize the reality. What Fitzgerald what to criticize in *The Great Gatsby* is capitalism and its material values. In his time, the development of industry has brought a lot material enjoyment to people in America and given birth to endless material desires. People worked hard to survive, and the material enjoyment brought about by labor forced people to work more to obtain more enjoyment. In the end, people lost their real selves and happiness in the endless pursuit of wealth, which was a morbid form of the American dream. Gatsby is a vivid example of the failure of the American Dream. It is a true and concentrated embodiment of reality and ideology of that time. The whole life of Gatsby is the process of the disillusionment of the American dream. In some sense, his tragedy is the miniature of all the American who pursue the American dream all their lives. Fitzgerald firmly grasped the pulse of the times through his own main voice, vividly recorded the social reality of the 1920s and expressed sadness of the "Lost Generation" for the disillusionment of the American

dream. Fitzgerald saw through the glittering of the Jazz Age, the emptiness and hypocrisy beneath that time. He expressed his realistic reflections on society through his work. The average American public, like Gatsby, were deeply driven by the American dream, which seemed to provide equal opportunity for everyone to have his/her success in society. However, in a capitalist country where the means of production are private, only a handful of the rich who control the vast majority of natural, economic, and human resources that can rule and lead a good life. It is impossible for most of the lower and middle classes to achieve success. The success of the American Dream and the extravagant life enjoyed by a few people are based on the miserable life of the middle and lower classes and the working people. Tom, Daisy and Gatsby in the novel are typical examples. However, most people are fooled by the so-called American Dream; they are unaware of the serious social injustice in American society, and become the victims of such dreams. To quote Lukacs's opinion, "Comparing with race or religion, socioeconomic class divides people even more distinctively. Commodity production of the modern capitalism leads to the dehumanization of human relations, that is, human relations are commodified."

Conclusion

The Great Gatsby is one of the best works of Fitzgerald's. Through this article, some creative interpretations to the characters and themes are given from different literary criticism angles. Starting from a psychoanalytic point of view, the article deals with the author's projection of his own *id*, *ego* and *super-ego* to the characters in this novel. Also, though a detailed feminist exploration of the female character, Daisy's psychological path and repression is presented to the readers. Finally, the theme of the fiction is analyzed from a Marxist perspective.