

# An Analysis of *The Great Gatsby* on Consumption Concept in Jazz Age

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**Abstract:** *The great Gatsby* was written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. This book gives us a wonderful picture of the life style of people in Jazz age, which was luxurious and extravagant. *The great Gatsby* has aroused many disputes since it had been published. Many of them analyze from the perspective of consumerism, but few analyze the consumption concept of that era and the causes of it. The aim of this thesis is to study the consumption concept and consumer culture in *The Great Gatsby* through the theory in Baudrillard's *Consumer Society*, and also to have a research on how Jazz Age's consumption concept affects people's consuming behavior. Thus we can draw a conclusion that this consumption concept was not advisable.

**Keywords:** Consumerism, consumption concept, Jazz Age, consumer culture

## 1. Introduction

In 1920, Fitzgerald published his first book, which was *The Side of Paradise*. He made great fame and gained large quantities of money through this book, and he began to live an extravagant life since then. *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, which was after he published *The Side of Paradise*. In this book, he gave us a wonderful picture of the luxurious and extravagant life in the Jazz Age. The life he showed us in *The Great Gatsby* had a lot in common with his own. Due to this reason, there is gossip that the prototype of Gatsby is Fitzgerald himself.

*The great Gatsby* has aroused many disputes since it had been published, and many scholars had studied it from different aspects. Some people analyze its characters and some analyze its writing style. There are some people who also analyze it through consumerism. Although they combine consumerism to analyze *The Great Gatsby*, they just give some examples to prove that people often show off their wealth in Jazz Age. They don't have a further discussion on the consumer behavior and why they had this kind of consumption concept. They also don't research why people in Jazz Age overspent money and what made them only care about money.

Some scholars pointed out that modern Chinese's spirit were desolate. This phenomenon was similar to American's in Jazz Age. The development of modernization has brought people great material wealth, but at the same time, it has also brought people's spiritual desolation (Liu 140). And there are also many similarities between American economic society in 1920s and today's China, so it is of great significance for us to study consumption concept behavior and consumption concept in Jazz Age. Therefore, this thesis is to study the consumption concept and consumer culture in *The Great Gatsby* through Consumerism, and also to have a research on how Jazz Age's consumption concept affects people's consuming behavior. To find out the reason why people in the Jazz Age pursued the luxury life, this thesis is going to combine the theory in *Consumer Society* to analyze the history and background of Jazz Age, which can help us better understand the consumption concept in Jazz Age. To help readers have a clear view of Jazz Age's consumption concept, the author will use three main scenes in *The Great Gatsby* as examples to clarify it. First, from Nick's first visited to Tom's mansion to analyze Tom's consumption concept and consuming behavior. Second, to analyze the party held by Gatsby to discuss his thoughts and behavior. Third, through the first met between Gatsby and Daisy to draw a conclusion on what concept Daisy had.

The meaning of the thesis is not only to help people have a better understanding of the consumption concept and consumer culture in the Jazz Age, but also to know better about the Jazz Age. Meanwhile, it is hoped that its negative influence on Americans in *The Great Gatsby* can give some warning to modern Chinese. In view of the facts in the book, people with wrong consumption concept in Jazz Age

didn't end up well, which convinced that the consumption concept was not advisable. And it is also hoped that they can learn that a wrong consumption concept will lead people to wrong path, so that they will not chase the same wrong consumption concept like the characters in the book.

## 2. Baudrillard's Consumer Society

French philosopher Baudrillard published *Consumer Society* in 1970, and it had many influences among the world since it was published. Baudrillard saw through the symbolic consumption concept in the postmodern society from daily consumption concept, and thus established *Consumer Society*. In the following decades, the social development of the developed countries confirmed some characteristics of the consumer society. Some theory in the consumer society can also be confirmed in *The Great Gatsby*.

In that age, capitalism was highly developed, commodities were extremely abundant, and with the development of productivity, it was still increasing. These phenomena constituted a fundamental change in the society. Rich people were no longer surrounded by people as they used to be, but by all kinds of things. Generally speaking, we are living in a society which is full of commodities. People's desires for commodities are not just for shopping, but also to satisfy their desires with symbolic value. And social class is distinguished by symbolic consumption concept.

Baudrillard believes that for thousands of years, production has been the basis of existence in the society. In developed countries, the productive society which was short of substance began to transform into the consumer society of abundant substance. With the rapid development of the state-owned economy, a large number of cooperative economies had emerged, and the advent of the joint-stock economy had become the main form of economic of capitalism. The cultural level of the proletariat had been greatly improved. Secondly, the proportion of white-collar workers had been greatly increased thus led constantly increased of the consumption concept level. Thirdly, the service industry was thriving. With the rapid development of science and technology, the productivity level of Western capitalist society improved, the number and the variety of commodities were growing, which caused the excess production of commodities. Department stores and supermarkets were full of all kinds of goods, and people were engulfed by innumerable goods. In a logical sense, consumer society is the substitute of productive society. Around us, there is a phenomenon of fast-growing goods, services and wealth. This phenomenon constitutes a fundamental change in human environment. Appropriately speaking, rich people are no longer surrounded by people as they used to be, but by all kinds of different products (Baudrillard 1). In the consumer society, goods must meet a certain symbolic meaning to be worth buying. The functionality of products is no longer important, and the usefulness of goods is not the purpose of people's consumption concept, instead, the symbol of consumption concept has become the dominant role of the society. In the pre-industrial society, the function or usefulness of products was the first requirement for people to buy things. At that time, people's demand for things was mainly to survive. Thus, production was the foundation of pre-industrial society. However, the situation changed in the post-industrial society. The excessive supply of products in the "consumer society" provided numerous choices and substitutes for consumers. People's eyes were confused by all kinds of product and began to pay for the symbol of product. The demand is not aimed at buying goods, but the value of goods themselves (Baudrillard 2). These values could mean social status, fashion style, but all these values must be reflected by certain products to show the owner's wealth. Therefore, the production of consumer society was no longer to produce useful product, but to produce symbolic signs that reflected the values they pursue. This is what Baudrillard calls symbolic consumption concept, to concretize every product by giving certain value to product.

Generally speaking, consumer society is a set of symbol coding system. The price and value of products are depending on the coding system. The meaning of this code is to let consumer better evaluate the products. The coding system of consumer society determines that consuming behavior is based on symbols rather than the product itself, which means people are more likely to buy product to show off their wealth rather than to make good use of it. Baudrillard repositioned the relationship among human, product and symbol. In Baudrillard's consumer society, the consumption concept of product is equal to the symbolic consumption concept. When we buy goods, we are in the consumption concept of symbols. Currency circulation, product purchase, and symbols constitute our coding system today, and the whole society relies on it to communicate with each other (Baudrillard 71). Therefore, the consumer society has changed the relationship between people and products as well as the relationship between person and person. Symbolization has become the basic feature of consumer society. Products have become symbols in the consumption concept system. The relationship between

people and products has also evolved into the relationship between people and symbols. People view more of the famous brands as representatives for fashion and wealth rather than its function. Cosmetic surgery is harmful to the body, but under the influence of the trend, the surgery becomes the symbol for “beauty”. In this case, what they consume is not cosmetic surgery, but the symbol that cosmetic surgery is fashion.

### **3. The Consumption Concept in Jazz Age**

#### **3.1 The Background of Jazz Age**

The Jazz Age was between the World War I and the Great Depression. This name was given by F. Fitzgerald. During this period, America was changing to a new era, meanwhile, the thriving of capitalism led America to industrial society. In addition, America didn't suffer from the World War I, instead, they gained plenty of money from it. After World War I, the economy of America soon recovered and developed, thus entering an era with fast growing economy and abundant substance. What is more, the government didn't interfere with the economy. So, the economy in America at that time was booming, and various industries developed. The reason above made the Jazz Age.

However, the growth of economy didn't fulfill people's mental life. People's lifestyle was changed by the industrial revolution. The lifestyle people got used to live with was suddenly out of fashion. They were confused about what direction they would go. In addition, due to the different lifestyle, people couldn't communicate with each other anymore. So, Americans began to chase money due to their empty soul.

People in Jazz Age thought highly of money. In that Age, people's success and social status were depending on how much wealth he had. They did everything in order to become rich, even if the business they did was illegal. They used money to fulfill their desire and also to achieve their goals. There was a typical example of it. In the 1920s, America was under the prohibition of alcoholic. It's illegal to gather a crowd to drink. However, the harder it was to get, the more precious it was. Many people ignored the prohibition and drank alcohol. Under this circumstance, there was a strong demand for alcohol and the value of alcohol rose. Some businessmen found the opportunities and suddenly became rich by illegally manufacturing or smuggling alcohol. In Jazz Age, many newly rising rich Americans made a sudden fortune this way. And Gatsby was one of the businessmen who benefited from the illegal alcoholic trade. Due to the huge change of the society, people started to pursue living an extravagant life. Jazz Age was deeply associated with the word “Money”.

Fitzgerald himself was also born in the 1920s. He partied and drank alcohol everyday just like the characters in his book. He noticed the change of this society. He put his own experiences into the writing, and gave us a clear picture of Jazz Age. Fitzgerald once said, “It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire” (This Side of Paradise 34). The consumption concept of Jazz Age was totally different from the traditional consumption concept. The traditional consumption concept was to work harder and harder so that you would gain your fortune. While the consumption concept of Jazz Age was that money was the power, if you had money, you can have everything. The Jazz age was full of temptations and nearly no one could escape from the temptations. So, Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* on the basis of Jazz Age to let us know that mental wealth was more valuable than money.

#### **3.2 The Consumption Concept in Jazz Age**

The consuming culture of Jazz Age was no longer to work hard and to save money in order to make one's own business. It had changed into a culture that everyone preferred to overspend money. Consuming culture was a consumption concept and life style of Jazz Age. People pursued an extravagant life and view it as the target and value of their life. In order to earn more profit, the producer must try their best to promote people's consuming behavior. They made consumer believed that they needed more products than they really needed.

Due to the economy boom, people had many chances to become rich. To meet people's desire for consuming, producer began to produce product that could present the wealth and status of the buyer. In Jazz Age, people bought products not because they needed but because shopping could bring them happiness, whether it's the rich, the ordinary or the poor. They began to show off their wealth to demonstrate their social status through buying big mansions, driving luxury cars, overspending money,

drinking alcohol and having parties all day. However, this consumption concept and consuming behavior led to spiritual emptiness and emotional for Jazz Age's people. In the following chapter, three scenes of the novel will be selected to analyze the consumption concept and consuming behavior, as well as the results caused by the consumption concept and consuming behavior.

#### **4. The Consumption Concept of Jazz Age in *The Great Gatsby***

The background of *The Great Gatsby* was set in the Long Island of New York City in the 1920s. In Fitzgerald's writing, the consumption concept in *The Great Gatsby* was distorted. The characters in *The Great Gatsby* distinguish social status through consuming behavior. What is more, they thought that overspending money can fulfill their desires. Fitzgerald used Consumerism to describe this era, and the characteristics he presented were extravagant, luxury and dissipation.

##### **4.1 Tom's Mansion**

As the theory in *Consumer Society* said, people viewed everything as a symbol. What they consumed is not the goods but the value of itself (Baudrillard 2). When Nick paid his first visit to Tom's mansion, he found it was extremely luxury. Tom's mansion was enormous and its lawn started at the beach and ended at the house.

We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea. (Fitzgerald 12)

In Baudrillard's *Consumer Society*, people are buying product to demonstrate their taste and what they are pursuing. For Tom, the big mansion and luxury furniture were symbols of his wealth. The exquisite and elaborate mansion was his means to tell people he was a well-educated gentleman from a rich and powerful family. He used his purchasing power to give people a deep impression of his social status. The luxury mansion and the expensive materials reflected the consumption concept of Tom, he was born in a wealthy family, so he must bring something that could demonstrate his social status. "For instance, he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that" (Fitzgerald 8). Whoever has seen this consuming behavior will be astonished except people in Jazz Age. They were surrounded by all kinds of product and symbols and they needed shopping to fulfill their desires and pursuits.

In Baudrillard's view, the value of labor force was no longer existed in the post-modern society characterized by the consumption concept symbols. The conversation between Nick and Tom proved this opinion. When Tom asked about Nick's job and heard the answer that he was bond man. "Never heard of them,' he remarked decisively" (Fitzgerald 14). The word "decisively" demonstrated Tom's disdain to Nick's job. People symbolized all kinds of product, including labor force. According to the symbol system, the labor force was not worth a penny. And that's why Tom showed no respect to Nick's job.

Tom's indifference and disrespectful toward people doomed him to have no friends and true love. His wife Daisy married him because he sent big pearl necklace and enormous money to her. In a sense, Daisy was actually Tom's consumption concept symbol, her extravagant and unrestrained consumption concept made Tom have a strong sense of satisfaction (Long and Jin 839). And his mistress Mrs. Myrtle was desired for his social status. He could not meet his true love because he never treated people sincerely, for he regarded everyone and every relationship as a symbol. So, even if Tom had spent so much money to live an extravagant life, he still could not fill his empty soul.

##### **4.2 Gatsby's Party**

Even though Gatsby and Tom had many similarities in consuming behavior, their consumption concepts were still not the same. Gatsby's first attempt to hold the party was not to show off the wealth, but to find Daisy. Gatsby and Daisy met at a party at Daisy's house. He thought Daisy would like big party, so he held the big party hoping the party-girl would appear. The party was held every weekend, it had everything and fruit were fresh arrived every Friday, and buffet tables served all kinds of food and drinks. What is more, the party even had orchestra, dance performance and a big pool. (Fitzgerald 54).

Could the guests eat up so much food? Did the party really need the live orchestra? Of course not! But the abundant food and beverage, different kinds of entertainments and luxury surroundings could be symbols for his wealth, even if they were useless. It also confirmed the theory that the value of product was based on its symbol rather than its function. In other words, this party was a product for Gatsby to become famous, and all the preparations were a tool for him to become famous enough to encounter Daisy again. In Gatsby's consumption concept, if he had money, he would have his beloved girl. That's why he showed off his wealth.

In this society, the loss of values, dreams and ideologies results in people's daily enjoyment (Baudrillard 203). And the example in *The Great Gatsby* that people came to Gatsby's party without invitations proved this idea. Normally speaking, if we come to a party, we must be invited by the owner. "Sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all, came for the party with a simplicity of heart that was its own ticket of admission" (Fitzgerald 56). They didn't need to know the party owner. Someone was having a party, and they wanted to have fun, so they went to the party. They followed hedonism, pursued immediate pleasure, cultivated self-expression lifestyle and they were narcissistic and selfish (Baudrillard 165). Jazz Age's people were indifferent, they didn't care about people, the only thing they cared about was money. When Nick asked the people at the party if they knew Gatsby, the answer he got was that no one knew Gatsby, they only here to have fun. Hedonism has made the lifestyle of extravagance and indulgence the mainstream of consumer behavior in Jazz Age. They had unrealistic illusions and hoped to live a luxurious life.

#### **4.3 Gatsby and Daisy's First Encounter.**

When we consume goods, we are consuming symbols and defining ourselves in the meantime (Baudrillard 110). Gatsby paid so much attention to the outside appearance. He spent his money on product that could make him seem rich, such as big mansion, clothes, furniture. When the day came that Gatsby met Daisy, he sent a greenhouse to decorate Nick's house. He thought Nick's place was too simple to meet Daisy, so he used many decorations to make it more beautiful. In addition, when Gatsby invited Daisy and Nick to his home, he made great compromise to his house. "My house looks well, doesn't it?" he demanded. "See how the whole front of it catches the light" (Fitzgerald 122). From Gatsby's words we could see that he had a strong confidence in his wealth. He thought as long as he owned this, he could become an honorable man. However, people in that age adored the old money more. In *The Great Gatsby*, the East Egg was where the "old Money" families live. These were old established and extremely wealthy families, and Tom Buchanan's family was one of these. Whereas, the West Egg, were the people who recently become rich mainly due to the economic boom lived. For instance, Gatsby was one of the parvenus. However, there was a huge gap between the two classes. Gatsby was born humble. He had a strong self-pity towards his family. So, after he became rich, he began to overspend money in order to cover the secret of his family background. He thought the outside appearance could get him into the upper class. He managed to use the power of money to redefine himself and turned himself into a rich man. But these still couldn't turn him into a completely gentle man like Tom. No matter how hard he tried, his still lost his disguise when Daisy said she loved Tom. He could never overcome the barrier between these two classes.

Apparently, Daisy was shocked after she saw the wealth Gatsby presented to. When they first met at Nick's house, Daisy didn't show much love feeling for Gatsby, but after seeing how rich Gatsby was, she was touched. Daisy also recognized money as the symbol of social status. So, she was deceived by Gatsby's disguise after seeing how rich Gatsby was. Daisy was a woman that cared about money and social status very much. She received a letter from Gatsby on her Wedding Day, she cried at first, but she still married Tom wearing that big pearl necklace gave by Tom. She loved Gatsby, but she could not waste her time to wait for him, so she chose Tom instead. This was a common phenomenon in Jazz Age. Women in Jazz Age were affected by the consumer culture at that time. They didn't have jobs and incomes, but they needed money to satisfy their consumption desire. So, they could only rely on men, especially rich men. "Apart from being recognized as a dependent part of their husband, they began attach importance to their social status, which could be decided by their consumption power" (Wang 31). This idea was proved by Mrs. Myrtle. Mrs. Myrtle said she was already made a mistake to marry Mr. Myrtle when her friend Lucille said she almost made a mistake to married a kike who was way below her. "I married him because I thought he was a gentle man," she said finally" (Fitzgerald 48). She thought Mr. Myrtle was rich so she married him. However, when she found out that her husband was only a repair man, she was disappointed. And when she met Tom, She thoughtlessly became his mistress. He loved Tom because he was rich and gentle and despised her husband who was a repair man. She believed once she was loved by Tom, she would get herself to upper class and lived

extravagantly. However, no matter how hard she tried, she still could not truly be loved by Tom. When Tom found out that Daisy might leave him, he abandoned Mrs. Myrtle without hesitation. And she ended up dead chasing Tom's car. She was desperate to escape from the bottom of society, but she chose the wrong way. It was unwise for women to rely on men to change their fate. And this wrong consumption concept not only failed to get her into the upper class, but also led to her death.

## 5. Conclusion

Fitzgerald showed us a clear picture of Jazz Age's consumption concept, and it was like he brought us back to Jazz Age again. It is a true representation of the social landscape on American Jazz Age (Li 111). And it demonstrated us how Jazz Age's consumption concept affected people's actions and feelings. People's consumption concept in Jazz Age was affected by the surroundings. In the big surrounding, no one could escape from the consumption concept of overspending money. The three main characters in the novel had not fulfilled their desires. The consumption concept they had was absolutely wrong, and it could not bring real happiness for people. With this distorted consumption concept, they were doomed to be tragedies. So, we can't have this consumption concept like people in Jazz Age. In order prevent us from getting into the wrong consumption concept, we should remind ourselves often.

From this study, we can find out that although Jazz Age's people prefer living an extravagant life, they still can't fill them empty soul. Thus, we should find the true value of ourselves. We can't view money as everything like Jazz Age's people, and we should learn lessons from them and improve ourselves.

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