

# An analysis of Gatsby's American Dream in *the Great Gatsby* from the perspective of Lukacs

**Yuan Jiajia**

Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, 610041, China  
2468382094@qq.com

**Abstract:** *The Great Gatsby* is one of the greatest works of the American writer Fitzgerald. The novel reflects the flashy and restless America in the 1920s and it depicts that the protagonist Gatsby attempts to obtain material wealth through illegal means in order to recover the relations with his former lover Daisy, while the selfishness and shallowness of Daisy gives him a fatal blow, and Gatsby's American Dream is shattered into pieces in the end. The author uses Gatsby's pursuit of the American Dream and the tragedy of the American Dream to mirror the cruelty of the society at that time, which also shows Gatsby's inevitable tragic ending under such indifferent social background. This paper tries to explain Gatsby's American dream from Lukacs' point of view, so that readers can understand Gatsby's tragedy from the perspective of social reality.

**Keywords:** *The Great Gatsby; The American Dream; Lukacs*

## 1. Introduction

This paper is divided into four parts. The first chapter is a brief introduction to literature, including the introduction of Fitzgerald and the introduction of *The Great Gatsby*. And in the second chapter, the author briefly introduces the theory of Western Marxist Criticism and Lukacs' view on literature, then his views are used to analyze the American Dream and its disillusionment in the last chapter.

In terms of the theories of literary criticism, the studies on *The Great Gatsby* mainly focus on feminism and new historicism. And the study on this work from the perspective of Western Marxist Criticism is few. So I would like to make an analysis on *The Great Gatsby* from Lukacs' view. Through analyzing Gatsby's American dream and its disillusionment, we could clearly grasp the deep roots of the disillusionment instead of attributing the tragedy to personal fate of Gatsby. As a matter of fact, such an unhappy ending foreshadows the corruption of the whole society, it is also a critique on the society. Capitalist system is to be blamed, and should take all the responsibility for this.

## 2. An Overview of F.Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*

### 2.1 *The Introduction of F.Scott Fitzgerald*

F.S. Fitzgerald is a great litterateur in 1920s. He is a writer and scriptwriter, born in St. Paul, Minnesota in September 24th, 1896. He tried to write script when he studied at Princeton where he organized a troupe on his own and wrote for campus literature. Although he dropped out for his poor health, he insisted writing at leisure.

In 1920, he published his first novel—*The Side of Paradise*, which made him achieved great reputation in American literary circle. After married, he took his wife to Paris, in which he got acquainted with Anderson, Hemingway, etc.

In 1925, his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby* came out, which established his status in modern American history. Fitzgerald became one of the representatives of Lost Generation and the spokesman of the Jazz Age. Even when he had attained much fortune and fame, Fitzgerald still worked hard. His wife, however, was vain, glorious and extravagant and mentally wrong, which made him trapped in sheer agony. Then he lived a tough living, since he wrote scripts for Hollywood in order to survive. In 1936, Fitzgerald got lung disease and his wife was confined to the bed for her illness. Finally he was on the brink of collapse and hit the bottle all the day. On December 21st, 1940, he died of a heart attack in Los Angeles, aged 44.

Although Fitzgerald has a short life, it cannot be denied that his works exert an indelible influence on the young men in the Jazz Age and his whole life is also as legendary as Gatsby, in other words, Gatsby is a reflection of him, for they share similar life experience. The Great Gatsby is Fitzgerald's autobiography. Unlike Gatsby, Fitzgerald acquired his love, but they both got an unhappy ending and the roots of the tragedy is same. Whatever his novels like *The Great Gatsby* (1925) or short stories like *Tender Is the Night* (1934), they are vividly showed the disillusionment of the American Dream in 1920s and the "Wasteland era" of the upper social class during the Great Depression.

From Fitzgerald's novels, we can see that what he described is the mental state and social life of the youth in his age. In his novel, all the protagonists have enjoyed their best age and have made great progress in some way, while they don't realize their dreams of getting much fortune and reputation at last. In spite of their devotion and endeavor, they are fooled by their fates. In face of brutal and fake reality, they always lose themselves and even go to dogs. As what I said in the preceding part of the text, the style of his writing is autobiographical. He depicts the social appearance in his age meticulously based on his own life to show the readers a real picture of the Jazz Age, thus his lines are full of his personal thoughts and self-consciousness.

## **2.2 The Introduction of *The Great Gatsby***

The great Gatsby is written by Fitzgerald in 1925, setting in New York city and Long Island. The narrator, Nick, who narrates a story happened in a white middle upper class of the modern society. In the 1920s, America's air is suffused with singing and drinking. The protagonist, Gatsby, born in a not well-off family, but he has fallen in love with Daisy, the daughter of a rich family. And Daisy also seems to be attracted by Gatsby. She is tender, lovely and kind, which has drawn Gatsby's whole attention. Their sweet first love, however, is interrupted by the First World War. Gatsby has to go to the front so as to defend their motherland.

After the war, the glorious soldier unexpectedly discovers that the girl he deeply loves is married to another man, which makes Gatsby get into a complete depression and misery. Without Daisy, he finds he couldn't live any longer. Therefore, the young man makes up his mind to take back the woman he loves. But he is clear that he couldn't make it until he becomes rich. Only in this way, Daisy will back to him without hesitation and any scruples. With such a thought, Gatsby begins to work hard to earn money.

Several years later, Gatsby indeed earns much money and buys a grand villa in front of the Daisy's House. He invites lots of famous persons and the nobles to attend his feasts in order to catch Daisy's eyes. Fortunately, he attains his wishes with the help of Nick, the narrator of the novel. He is still fascinated by her but surprised to find Daisy has changed a lot. Daisy is not innocent and cute girl any longer as before. She has become an extreme selfish and money-worship woman. But Gatsby is so blinded by love that he isn't willing to admit her changes and defects. Although Daisy is gradually touched by Gatsby under the temptation of money, she cannot make up her mind to leave her husband, Tom. One day, Tom finds that his wife has an affair with Gatsby by accident, then he is ashamed into anger and queries Daisy. After having a big fight with her husband, Daisy leaves and she accidentally runs over and kills Mrs. Wilson, Tom's mistress. However, Gatsby insists to be her scapegoat. Finally, the sad but angry Mr. Wilson murders Gatsby under the instigation of Tom. In Gatsby's funeral, no one except Nick comes. Daisy, the woman Gatsby only loves, travels happily with her husband. Gatsby ends tragically his short life for her.

This is a tragedy for Gatsby. For him, Daisy is his hope and dream. He devotes everything to pursue his dream, even his life. However, he doesn't realize that what he has been chasing is alienated by money. He is doomed to failure under such a pompous age.

## **3. The Theory of Western Marxist Criticism**

### **3.1 The Main Theory of Western Marxist Criticism**

Western Marxist criticism began in Europe in the 1930s and developed mainly in western countries. From the perspective of social history and reality, western Marxist critics pay attention to the relationship between literature and real life, believing that literature is a dynamic reflection of real life, rather than a mechanical replication of real life. They insisted on the Marxist influence on literature, that is, the economic base determines the superstructure, and literature must reflect reality in details. The task

of art is to reflect social life in vivid language. The rise and fall of art is directly influenced by social economy.

According to Marxism, literature is the product of social economy, and western Marxist criticism still pays attention to the relationship between literature and social economy. Western Marxist criticism focuses on the reaction of the superstructure to the economic base.

Some Western Marxists regard realism as the best form for Marxist purposes because it depicts the real world with all its socioeconomic inequities and ideological contradictions, and making readers see the truths about material or historical reality. Western Marxist criticism explores the relationship between the artist and society. The sociological status of the author can reflect the feature of the authors' works. It also analyzes the social context of literary works including the aspects of culture, economy or politic.

### ***3.2 The Georg Lukacs' view on Literature***

Georg Lukacs might be the first Western Marxist. His work *History and Class Consciousness* marks the birth of the Western Marxist criticism. He believes a realist work must show the underlying pattern of contradictions in a social order. He says " literature can not only a reflection of socioeconomic reality but also a critique of this reality as well." (Zhu Gang 2002:61).

Lukacs considers realism as a means by which people understood society. The fundamental characteristic of all great realist literature is its overall reflection of reality. And such reflection is not only simple, but also a deeper and more comprehensive one. In capitalist society, the relationship between people has been alienated by commercialization. If modern writers just made a direct reflection on daily life in their works, they cannot clearly capture the nature of capitalist society, and they will take the commodification caused by capitalism for granted. So, in his opinion, the reflection of social life can be achieved by shaping a typical image, because such image is the embodiment of conflict of the literary works caused by capitalist commodification. Therefore, Lukacs believes that the realistic novel is not only a copy of the social reality, but also permeates the internal contradictions of capitalism. And the study of literary works should be combined with certain social ideologies. Only in this way can we ensure the normal contact between literary creation and ideology.

## **4. The American Dream in The Great Gatsby**

### ***4.1 Gatsby's American Dream***

As we can see, the story of the *Great Gatsby* happened in 1920s in the United States. At that time, the United States, benefiting from WWI, has entered a short, unprecedented period of prosperity. So the American Dream dazzles the Americans' eyes. Such prosperity changed their early attitude towards the American Dream, which requires hard work, courage, creativity and determination. With the growth of capitalist economy, the excessive quest for wealth became the first demand of most Americans.

And Gatsby is also one of them who believes that if he achieve the material satisfaction, his life will be better. However, it is the sign of the degeneration of American idealism at that time. Gatsby has been struggling with the American Dream since his youth, and has always been able to retain the childish instincts necessary to sustain it.

Gatsby's American dream includes three parts: wealth, position and love. Gatsby hopes he could get rich and enter into the upper society, and then win Daisy's heart. Finally he succeed in seeking happiness. However, Gatsby only achieved his dream of getting rich in reality, and his other dreams are shattered into pieces by the brutal reality. Even he himself becomes the victim of the American society and his own dreams. Lover's fantasy and real cruelty are like bubble economy, falling from peak to abyss overnight.

From the perspective of Lukacs, literature can be a reflection of socioeconomic reality. So it is obvious that Gatsby's American dream reflects the Jazz Age he lived in. The age inspired his ambition and gave him opportunity to earn much money by some illegal means. Fitzgerald recounts the story in his own delicate and sad writing, making readers feel as if they were listening to the author's own story. The novel deeply reveals social conflicts in the United States. Absolute money-worship made the whole traditional moral value collapse.

#### 4.2 *The Disillusionment of Gatsby's American Dream*

There is no doubt that Gatsby is the representative of the American dream in the novel, and he is full of illusion about life and love. Finally he found that everything is just a mirage, a castle in the air, and which also is the theme of the novel. Gatsby desperately pursues wealth and social status. But the purpose of his pursuit of all is to get Daisy back to him. And he also pays a painful price for this. Daisy is the one who indeed "contributes" a lot to the disillusion of Gatsby's American Dream.

As for the description of Daisy, Fitzgerald also spares no effort to depict her character through symbol and metaphor. It is not difficult for readers to understand the characteristics of Daisy in the book where Fitzgerald mentions her tinkling singing, beautiful sonorous voice, but it seems to be full of the smell of money. It incisively and vividly shows the material nature of the girl. Gatsby comes from an ordinary family, so no matter how deep love he could give to Daisy, if he doesn't have money and status as a cornerstone, everything is vain.

Therefore, in the novel readers may remember that when Gatsby and Daisy meet again in Gatsby's luxurious villa, it seems that Daisy recovers her lost love. When she knows that her former lover has already possessed a huge property she has dreamed of, she chooses Gatsby. However, when Tom has disclosed Gatsby's wealth was illicit, Daisy's heart struggles so fiercely that she madly drives a car and kills someone. And then she leaves all the consequences to Gatsby, while she goes on a holiday with her husband who she doesn't love at all. She doesn't even present a bouquet of flowers in front of Gatsby's tomb. Gatsby's dream is shattered completely. What he pursues all his life abandons him, and there his American Dream is impossible to be realized in that flashy era, which is doomed to the tragic ending of Gatsby.

In Lukacs' view, literature also is a critique of this reality. Such a tragic ending is a kind of critique of the social reality. In the capitalist society, the relationship between people has been alienated by commercialization. Daisy can marry Tom just for his wealth and social status. Gatsby can earn some so-called reputation and make Daisy look back to him for a while because he has money. All this is connected with material wealth. The whole society has already been alienated by money. People are like goods in the store and transferred to different places depending on how much the buyer can afford. It is an unavoidable consequence that results from the unrestrained consumption, which also revealed the corruption of capitalist system.

#### 5. Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Gatsby's American dream is broken and ends his life in tragedy, which is inevitably related to his specific social environment. Love and friendship, at such an age, are stained by money and material pursuits. Humans chase after his own interests, and interpersonal communication is shot through with selfishness and indifference, reflecting the depraved social morality under the appearance of short-period American prosperity. In some way, Gatsby's failure manifests the disillusionment of the American dream.

The study on the American dream in the Great Gatsby from Lucas' view helps us to grasp the story from a broader view and pay much more attention to the influence of social and economical background to the life of people. What's more, the evils of capitalism can be vividly shown to us.

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