

An Analysis of the Disillusionment of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*—Based on the Perspective of Consumerism

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Consumption has been paid much more attention in China in recent years and it is more popular in literature as well. This paper is trying to analyze the disillusionment of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* from the perspective of consumerism. Readers can better learn about Gatsby's wasteful, luxurious and lavish consumption through the analysis of his great ambitions so that his twisted consumption impacts his wrong words and deeds and conduces his disillusionment of his American Dream.

Keywords: consumerism, *The Great Gatsby*, American Dream, disillusionment

Introduction

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was one of the most famous American writers in the twentieth century. He was called the "Poet Laureate of American Literature" in the "Jazz Age" and regarded as the outstanding representative of the "Lost Generation". He lived not so long, but led a legendary life.

The Great Gatsby is one of the greatest works of F. Scott Fitzgerald which paints a vivid picture of American society after WWI and provides the readers with a wider, panoramic vision of the American Dream.

The Great Gatsby is written in the decade of 1920s which is the most boisterous period in American history. T. S. Eliot, the famous poet, literary critic and winner of the Nobel Prize once made the comment that the novel was "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James." Since then the novel established Fitzgerald's reputation as an outstanding novelist in the circles of literature. Credited as the, most famous and elaborate work of Fitzgerald by critics, the novel keeps in step with the times and presents a penetrating dissection and criticism of contemporary American society with a tragic love story as its main thread. The novel is set against a background of prosperous and extravagant society where people regarded the pursuit of wealth and joyous life as their only goal in life. As a result, loneliness in the depth of the heart and spiritual poverty is one of the salient characteristics shared by people in Jazz Age America. This novel gives a thorough exposure of the contradiction between material prosperity and spiritual poverty which universally exists in American society.

Consumption has been paid much more attention in China in recent years and it is more popular in literature as well. Back in the 1920s the United States had been transformed from a producer society to a consumer society.

Literature Review

The Great Gatsby has been regarded as one of American classical works, and has been translated into many languages and acted on the screen and stage since its publication. T. S. Elliot commented that it is “the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James” (Donaldson, 1984, p. 268). *The Great Gatsby* published in 1925, has been widely considered to be “Fitzgerald’s perfect novel” (Aldridge, 1951, p. 40).

In the U.K., *The Great Gatsby* was not widely accepted by the readers, too, although the reviews were better than those of Fitzgerald’s previous novels received in the U.K.

In China, it had been a long time before Fitzgerald introduced and accepted. The popularity of Fitzgerald’s works can be divided into two stages. The first stage is the long period from its publication till the Cultural Revolution. During this long period, though there were some achievements about American literature, the study and translation of modern American literature were on a very slow path and Fitzgerald’s works met ignorance in China. From 1978 until now is the second stage, during which period, Fitzgerald is gradually known and accepted by Chinese people. Under the influence of extreme left trend of thought, there once was a final verdict to Fitzgerald: “Fitzgerald’s of the Jazz Age (published in 1922), propagates capitalists’ drinking, gambling and pornographic life. Another work *The Great Gatsby* (published in 1925) flatters a bootlegger as a hero” (Wu, 2002, p. 365).

In 1982, Professor Wu Ningkun translated *The Great Gatsby* into Chinese, which was the versions first published Chinese version. Till now, there are more than ten different of translation.

As consumerism is a concept much younger than the novel, few researches have been done from this perspective to explore the motivations behind the protagonist’s extravagant consumption and the causes of his failure.

A Brief Introduction to the American Dream

The American Dream has its long history in this new land, “it exists with the history of America” (James, 1931, p. 404). This American Dream, in its widest implication, can be dated back to the very beginning of the exploration of American civilization, to the time when first settlers came. They were religious refugees from Europe and were forced to flee home by persecution and hoped to find a peaceful place. The new land offered them a heaven for their religion. Later on, more immigrants came to the New World in the hope of improving their living standard and social status. To those people, America represented a new life of freedom, holding a promise of spiritual and material happiness, and most important, with infinite possibilities. There they could be free from all of the repressive hierarchies of the Old World, free from the system of control by kings, priests and great landowners.

With the development of the country, the content of the American Dream has experienced “the dream of exploitation”, “the dream of freedom and democracy” and “the dream of being strong and rich” (F. Wang, 2001, pp. 88-99) besides its original emphasis on both spiritual and material improvement. The new United States became a vast laboratory in which ideas formed in Europe were put into practice without being obstructed by rigid customs of the feudal society. Things that once could only be thought now could be done. Developing to the time of Jazz Age in the 1920s, the American Dream of freedom and opportunity gradually became a dream of material advancement. The desire for wealth and status became almost virtuous pursuit. Most Americans were born with the American Dream. They dreamed of making personal achievement, enjoying popular fame,

or getting great wealth through their hard work. And any failure in achievement could lead to keen disappointment. And this encouraged a spirit of mutual suspicion of the motives of others and led to cases where obtaining of wealth began to outweigh all other moral considerations.

As the United States entered the consumer society, the social morality was no longer the traditional one that emphasized hard work, saving, patience and temperance, but the consumption ethics that focused on the purchase of happiness and material satisfaction.

Consumerism: The Major Cause of the Disillusionment of American Dream

Consumerism is closely related to the consumer culture. In the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, “consume” literally means “to use time, energy, good etc.”. According to Featherstone, it means “to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust” (Featherstone, 1991, p. 21). The consumer culture is a dynamic concept, diversifying in accordance with the different era, society and place. The consumer culture theory refers to a set of theoretical perspectives that study the relationships between consumer actions, the marketplaces and their cultural meaning. Consumer culture is a multidisciplinary field, which converges of the idea that, in all human societies, consumption has an essentially cultural structure, and is central to the cultural as well as the material reproduction of social lives and relationships. At present, consumer culture is applied to fields like philosophy, anthropology, history, sociology, economics, psychology, literary theory and criticism. Scholars in diversified fields define consumer culture in different ways, so do those people specialize in the same field. Under the influence of the social pluralism trend, the consumer culture can be understood from various perspectives. In critical theories, the phrase “consumer culture” is more a noun phrase like “consumer’s culture”. But it seems difficult to give an authoritative definition of it.

Consumerism in Gatsby’s Pursuit of American Dream

Actually, after Gatsby makes his fortune, his pursuit of American Dream begins to be the pursuit of consumerism. He begins to live an expensive mode of living. And he pays more attention to the luxurious items to prove his wealthy to the established people.

In *The Great Gatsby*, clothes, residence and car play significant roles in the protagonists’ lives as the consumption signs. The fact that Gatsby displays such strong interests in clothes, residence, and car does not merely indicate that he needs such things, but more importantly, it demonstrates that clothes, residence and cars are the consumption signs symbolizing wealth, social status and identity they have so long pursued. Only through such consumption signs can one’s wealth, social status and identity become visible. The purpose of the purchase is to show off wealth, social status and identity one possesses.

In *The Great Gatsby*, at first, Gatsby is a great and ambitious young man. At first, he follows faithfully the requirements of the traditional “American Dream”: to cultivate physical health, learn to make public speeches, master science and technology, virtues, like reading and respect the elders, etc. Through this, Gatsby fulfils his dream of winning financial success and entering the wealthy class hard work. However, after realizing his ambition of getting financial success, Gatsby doesn’t abide by Franklin’s virtues of “temperance, order, resolution, frugality, industry,” etc. On the contrary, he follows Fitzgerald’s lifestyle and participates in the consumerist activities of the “Roaring Twenties”. He falls in the consumerist trap.

Living in consumer society, Gatsby knows very well that only consumption is the symbol of his success and the symbolic value of consumption is worth his purchasing. Gatsby’s traditional “American Dream” begins

to emerge with consumerism. In other words, in the Jazz Age Gatsby's dream is to become the hero of consumption, receive social acceptance, so as to catch Daisy's attention and retrieve his lost love.

To fulfill his ambition, Gatsby begins his "wasteful, luxurious and lavish consumption". In the 1920s, several commodities had their special symbolic value. The first one is the house. As Wang Ning mentioned, "A house is not only a place to provide shelter, but also a symbol to express the social status, identity and taste of its inhabitant" (N. Wang, 2001, p. 213). In order to show off his social status and identity, Gatsby moves to West Egg, and buys a sumptuous mansion across the bay. The luxury of his mansion even astonishes Nick, who describes it as following when he first comes to the West Egg:

The one (mansion) on my right was a colossal affair by any standard-it was a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby's mansion. (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 5)

In the 1920s, though assembly lines had been applied in the automobile industry, the possession of a car was still a long dream for common American people. So the car was also a symbol of prestige at that time. As the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre once pointed out, "Automobile is a symbol of status, standing for comfort, power, prestige and speed. Except for its practical usage, automobile is mainly consumed as a symbol" (N. Wang, 2001, p. 215). Knowing that the possession of a first-class car is also an indispensable element to realize his dream of showing off, Gatsby buys a luxurious Rolls-Royce. Nick describes his splendid car:

I'd see it (the car). Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel. Swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 41)

The Impact of Consumerism on American Dream

American people are proud of their Dream. When the country was fighting for its independence, when its inhabitants were struggling for a better tomorrow on a new continent, this dream backed up people to go on and on. However, during the time of the Jazz Age, the American Dream was doomed to fail, and this tragedy of failure was to a great extent happened to a consumer society. When they still get endless desires of improving the living standards even though life is abundant, when they develop a fashion of conspicuous consumption, when they regard wealth as a gauge of happiness, this dream becomes a burden. In *The Great Gatsby* consumerism is a strong force that pushes the American Dream far away from its original meaning.

West and East embody contrasting sets of values in the America at the time of the novel. The West is associated with more traditional moral values while the East a fast-paced lifestyle, crumbling moral values, and the pursuit of wealth. The West seems dreary compared to the excitement of the East, but the East is merely a glittering surface and lacks the moral center of the West:

I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life. (Fitzgerald, 2007, p. 157)

This fundamental moral depravity dooms the protagonists in the novel to failure, as they are all Westerners. Throughout American history, the West has been seen as a land of promise and possibility, a very emblem of American ideals. Tom and Daisy, like other members of the upper class, have betrayed America's democratic ideals by perpetuating a rigid class structure that excludes newcomers from its upper reaches. Gatsby has the

audacity and nobility of spirit to dream of creating a radically different future for himself. But his dream ends in failure for he can never gain acceptance into the American aristocracy, which is a must if he wants to reclaim Daisy. Gatsby's failure questions the idea of an America in which all things are possible if one simply tries enough. The consumerism and the American Dream are closely related to each other in *The Great Gatsby*. From the above discussion, it can be drawn that consumerism has impacts on the American Dream. The first one is in order to realize the American Dream, one needs spiritual and intellectual support, but the consumerism puts emphasis only on the material side. The other one is that the American Dream needs an environment of fair competition, but in consumer society moral values are discarded. Therefore, under the influence of consumerism, the American Dream gradually loses its positive roles that once were so glorious.

The Disillusionment of American Dream

Gatsby is successful in his material achievement with his millions wealth, he is confident that happiness will come their way naturally. While Daisy was not the former Daisy, she presents insignificant and illusive value and thus can't bring any meaning or fulfillment to Gatsby's life. She can't match Gatsby's lofty expectation. So, fundamentally speaking, what Gatsby pursues is an unattainable goal. He blindly believes in the power of money, makes a blind imitation of leisure class and loses himself in process of excessive and conspicuous consumption. He adopts the most naive way to deal with the cruel reality of life. Therefore, we can conclude that Gatsby's distorted psychology of consumption makes his downfall inevitable.

Gatsby's murder seems an incidental case. However, his tragic death is inevitable since he lives in a consumption-oriented society where he becomes a mania for consumption. This unrestraint, purposeless and illusive consumption directly contributes to his spiritual breakdown. Material wastage and spiritual crisis combined put him on the verge of ruin. Gatsby's death is tragic and deplorable. It ends hastily as a slaughter which is radically different to his glorious and heroic life. Gatsby's funeral is lonely and desolate without many people to attend which forms a striking contrast to the tumultuous party in his life time. Gatsby's lover escapes hastily only leaving him as a scapegoat to shoulder responsibility and his friends, except Nick, also refuse to attend the funeral on the excuse of no interference with other people's affair. The former guests to his party disappear without any trace. Therefore, it is obvious that the consumer culture on the sole basis of materialism would result in indifferent and diluted human relationship. The contrast between crowded visitors to the house during Gatsby's life time and few visitors after his death is painfully evident.

Conclusion

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald presented a clear map of consumerism and indirectly showed its influence on the people's daily life at that time. He intends to awaken his contemporaries from the tragedy of the decade. He wants to make them aware of that what they pursue by the pure material consumption is no longer the traditional American Dream but American nightmare instead. He also revealed that American consumer society of 1920s causes the spiritual crisis of human beings. Since the youth of that decade equaled their pursuit of materials with the pursuit of spirit, measured whether they are successful with the amount of the material wealth and pursued the material comforts by all means, which would inevitably cause the disillusion of American Dream.

On the one hand, it has to be admitted that on the whole, the development of the human civilization enables a wealthier and wealthier life for human beings and human beings are striving endlessly to attain this goal. On the other hand, it should not be ignored that abundant material may not definitely bring mental

satisfaction to people. In a money-oriented society to a great extent like that of the United States in the 1920s, the author of the paper presents that consumerism is the most evident element that leads to the disillusioned American Dream. Consumerism is a strong force that pushes the American Dream farther and farther away from its original meaning. To a great extent, we are also experiencing a society transformation with material prosperity, like that of the process in America. A lot of Chinese become rich and live extravagantly and the vast majority are longing for such a life. Never has money been so vital. However, if we regard money as the most important thing, our beautiful hope of a splendid tomorrow might be hopeless. After all, consumption is not the sole solution to our economy, not to mention a solution for our life dream.

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