

Consumer Culture in *The Great Gatsby*

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* successfully portrays the "Jazz Age". In the early 20th century, the United States transitioned from a production-based society to a consumer-based society, leading to an era of unparalleled prosperity. However, in the context of consumer culture, individuals often transition from being masters of their possessions to becoming enslaved by them. As a result, their behaviours and values become increasingly associated with extravagance and consumption. This paper uses Baudrillard's theory of consumer society and textual analysis to explore the impact of consumer culture on human beings through the symbolization of men and objectification of women in *The Great Gatsby*. The meanings embedded in the novel are revealed from a different perspective.

Keywords: consumer culture, symbols, objectification, *The Great Gatsby*

Introduction

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has been a literary sensation since its publication in 1925. It caused a literary sensation, with T. S. Eliot hailing it as "the first step in the American novel since Henry James" (Ousby, 2017, p. 364). This novel was written and published in Jazz Age and post-industrial America. The influence of consumer culture on people has grown from a subtle influence at the end of the nineteenth century, to a sensational influence at the beginning of the twentieth century, to total control at the end of the twentieth century. The extravagant parties and dazzling splendor stimulated people's desire to consume. People fell into the world of material things and could hardly get out, and the extreme consumption led to the extreme objectification and alienation of people in the consumer society. This paper takes Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* as an interpretive text and explores various social problems caused by extreme consumption in American society in the twenty-first century through the different manifestations of the two sexes in consumer culture. This novel can be called a classic work for diagnosing the symptoms of contemporary American society and culture, and the various problems of the consumer society and the worries of modern people shown in it are of great practical significance for correctly guiding the development of the consumer culture and constructing a harmonious view of the consumer culture.

Male Characters in *Gatsby*—The Symbolic *Gatsbys*

According to French sociologist Baudrillard's theory of consumer society and culture, the acceleration of industrialization and the development of commodification in the twentieth century led to the emergence of a consumer society in which people are surrounded by material possessions and consumption has become, to some

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extent, the ultimate purpose of life. Baudrillard argues that people have lost their rationality and sense of self in the pursuit of material things. Nowadays, when commodities are consumed by people, the use value in the initial sense of the word has been relegated to a secondary position, and consumption and people's social status are linked together, and the symbols of commodities and their meanings have become the symbols of the identity and social status of the people who consume them, etc. This kind of "consumption system" is not based on the urgent demand for needs and enjoyment, but rather on some kind of symbols (objects/symbols) and distinctions between them. This "system of consumption is not based on the exigencies of need and enjoyment, but on the encoding of certain symbols (objects/symbols) and distinctions" (Yu, 2008, p. 215). To consume a product is to consume what it symbolizes. In *The Great Gatsby*, the male characters are portrayed as more symbolic than the female characters, particularly through their association with cars and decorations.

Under the influence of consumerism, transportation represented by automobiles mediates class differentiation and assumes the role of class separation. "Automobiles are a symbol of social status and power (Meng, 2008, p. 476). People "buy cars more and more to show off themselves or to impress their neighbors" (Sivo, 1999, p. 184). Different classes of people in the novel mark their social status by using different brands of cars. Wilson, the lower class in the text, only has a "battered old Ford" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 27). While Nick, a middle class man who has just arrived in New York to make his mark, drives an "old dodge" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 4). Gatsby was well aware of this material-based symbolic system and became actively involved in it after he made his fortune, spending large sums of money on mansions, motorboats, Rolls-Royce automobiles, station wagons, and seaplanes in order to gain an upper-class identity. Gatsby successfully flaunted his so-called nouveau riche image through the symbol of power and wealth, the luxury automobile, in an attempt to achieve a social status that matched that of the old money family. The cars used by Gatsby have gone far beyond their practical value and often serve to symbolize and face-palm the individual. And in Gatsby's case, the dress became a symbol to show the status. In the social environment of material prevalence, under the influence of consumer culture, people's understanding and definition of their own identity has changed (Chen, 2015, p. 40), many Americans in the 1920s, "ordering finished garments in batches from London Gentleman's attire became a symbol of power that men had to control regardless of race" (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 10). After making his fortune, Gatsby spent a fortune on expensive clothing to mark his change in status in order to get Daisy back. He kept up with the fashion by hiring specialists to buy fashionable clothes in England. He used the finest materials and unique styles to show that he had risen up the social ladder. In addition, Gatsby wanted to emphasize his "masculinity" (Yuan, 2019, p. 130) by "wearing a white facecloth suit, a silver shirt, and a gold tie" (Fitzgerald, 2013, p. 93) when he was to meet Daisy. Here, the suit is not only a social etiquette, but also a prop for high-profile showing off. People rely on their clothes to show off their high-profile and extravagant status through their bright colors and expensive materials. This shows that clothing is also an important representation of consumer culture.

Meanwhile, the traditional wealthy class takes a different approach, eschewing ostentatious displays of wealth and instead showcasing their aristocratic status through activities such as polo and horseback riding. The language used to discuss consumption should be objective and avoid categorizing individuals into social classes based on their spending habits. The distinction between objects was historically used to display one's status through their wealth.

Female Characters in Gatsby—The Objectified Daisies

Compared to male characters in *The Great Gatsby*, female characters are often objectified and subjected to the male gaze. However, they do not escape the trap of consumerism and instead willingly become commodities themselves. The consumption of goods as a means of expressing one's unique personality has become a new trend among women. However, this behavior can lead to the alienation of individuals. It is important to note that the consumption of goods should be based on their symbolic and meaningful value rather than simply for the sake of pursuing a certain personality. This behavior and personality contribute to the alienation of human beings. The female characters, led by Daisy, are portrayed as vain and ruthless, valuing material possessions, comfort, and pleasure above all else. This type of alienation is primarily reflected in their distorted views of morality and marriage.

The novel's protagonist, Daisy, embodies the self-centered and independent spirit of the "Jazz Age". Prior to her marriage, she had an intimate relationship with Gatsby. In the first chapter, Nick, the narrator, describes her as angelic in appearance. Daisy, a charming girl from Louisville, is described as pretty and beautiful. However, the text also suggests that she can be cold and unfeeling when it comes to her own interests. In the seventh chapter of the novel, the protagonist accidentally hit and killed Maltese Wilson. She then conspired with her husband Tom to put the blame on Gatsby, who was deeply in love with her. This led to George Wilson, Maltese's husband, believing that Gatsby was responsible for the accident, ultimately resulting in Gatsby's murder by Wilson. Jordan Baker is a close friend of Daisy. Daisy is described as both young and beautiful, with a keen sense of fashion, but also as someone who is obsessed with fame and fortune, cynical, and irresponsible. During a championship golf match, Daisy moved a ball from an unfavorable position, which was against the rules, because she did not want to be at a disadvantage. This cheating ultimately led to her victory. The Daisies embraced their materialistic alienation, in contrast to traditional Puritanical ideals of abstinence and self-restraint.

Similarly, the consumer society has brought about not only a change in its own morality, but also a dramatic change in its view of marriage. "Then wear a golden hat, if you can move her heart; if you can jump high, jump for her, too, until she shouts: 'Lover boy, wearing a golden hat, jumping high, I must have you!'" These are the first few sentences of the novel, which vividly depict the image of "money girl". The female characters in the novel are exactly some of these "money girls". First of all, the "money-oriented" image of Daisy, the heroine of the novel, is vividly reflected in her experiences of love and choice of marriage: she abandons the insecure Gatsby twice and chooses the vulgar but rich Tom. In the fourth chapter of the novel, Jordan Baker recounts the episode of Daisy's abandonment of Gatsby to marry Tom five years ago. During World War I, Daisy was a charming young girl in the town of Louisville, and many of the officers stationed there were fond of her, Gatsby being one of them, but Gatsby lied to Daisy to make her believe that they were a good match, so that Gatsby eventually won Daisy's love. Later, when Daisy realizes that Gatsby has no financial or social status, she ruthlessly abandons him and marries the vulgar but wealthy Tom.

Individuals often equate wealth with success or failure in life and pursue material pleasures at any cost. This can lead to spiritual and moral decay. The female characters in the text are portrayed as greedy, vain, and cold, with an extreme focus on money and pleasure. It is important to note that these are subjective evaluations and should be clearly marked as such. These values reflect the moral climate of the time.

Conclusion

In the age of consumerism, neither men nor women can escape being objectified and symbolized. While objectifying others and measuring them with values, others are also measuring themselves with values and objects. The novel depicts objects interacting with the subject, demonstrating their ability to define and regulate the subject, and exercising the function of class differentiation by creating meaning. This highlights the increasing objectification of the relationship between human beings. The meaningless materialization and symbolization in the novel correspond to the emptiness of people in the Jazz Age and reveal the missing spiritual core of people in that era. In today's materialistic society, individuals often struggle with the conflict between their material desires and emotions, as well as the tension between their aspirations and the harsh realities of life. *The Great Gatsby* offers valuable insights into these complex issues.

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