

Analysis of The Great Gatsby from the Perspective of Western Marxism

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Abstract: Fitzgerald (1896-1940) is one of the most outstanding novelists in America of the 1920s and the spokesman of the "Lost Generation", as well as the creator of "the Jazz Age". As a typical writer of "Lost Generation" in the United States during the post-war period of the economic prosperity, he not only experienced false prosperity of "the 1920s-full of clamor" – "the Jazz Age", but also predicted that it would not last long. His representative works *The Great Gatsby*, is a novel about a typical American young man -- Gatsby's pursuit of the American dream, which vividly portraits the trend of money worship and epicureanism in America of the so-called "Jazz Age" and reveals people's selfishness and indifference in the United States during the economic prosperity period after the World War I. Georg Lukács, a Western Marxist theorist, points out in *Historical Novel*, critical works that "A historical fiction is a story in which history is set among historical events". Fitzgerald's purpose is to show the postwar social life and mental outlook of the Americans in the 1920s and try to arouse people's introspection and exploration for the value of survival. Since the advent of the novel, it has been the focus of most critics. Among a large number of comments, most focus on the analysis of the text and the subject matter of the novel, as well as the author's writing techniques. While few have tried to employ Western Marxist criticism to analyze the themes and techniques of the literature perspectives of Georg Lukács. The paper attempts to conduct an analysis of realistic themes, such as impressionism and symbolism in *The Great Gatsby* from the theory of Western Marxist criticism to reflecting the corruption of people's value.

Keywords: Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, The Western Marxist criticism, Georg Lukács.

1. Western Marxist Critical Theory

The author will analyze the *Great Gatsby* from the perspective of Western Marxist criticism, especially from the perspective of Western Marxist critics-George Lukacs. Therefore, before further study, it is necessary to understand the main theories of Western Marxist criticism.

1.1. Major Western Marxist Critical Theories

Western Marxist critical theory analyzes how the author's sociological position affects the content written. It also analyses the social context of the literary work--what cultural, economic or political values the text implicitly or explicitly promotes. As an important Western Marxist critic, Georges Lukacs concluded that for Western Marxist criticism, "literature may be an artificial product, a product of social consciousness and a world outlook; But it is also an industry. Drama is not only a collection of literary texts; It is a capitalist business that employs certain people (authors, directors and actors) to produce a commodity for the audience to consume for profit.

George Lukacs insisted that realistic works should reveal the basic patterns of contradictions in social order. He praised the old realist view that novels reflect reality, not by presenting their simple superficial phenomena, but by giving us a truer, more complete, more vivid and more dynamic reality. Lukacs pointed out that whether the author presents it consciously or unconsciously, it is not only a reflection of a large number of realistic details, but a reflection of the essence of a society. Literature is a deeper and more comprehensive reflection of reality, rather than simply copying reality. Therefore, he thinks it is certain that economic foundation is a decisive factor of ideology. However, ideology is not mechanically reflected by the economic foundation, but closely related to literature and art, and actively acts on the

economic foundation.

2. Realistic Themes Related to Lukacs' perspective

Lukacs gave high praise to realism. In his view, realism is the most obvious interaction between literature and society. In realistic texts, literature can be seen as a reflection or even criticism of society or history. As a realistic work, *The Great Gatsby* is not only a reflection of reality, but also a critique of reality. This chapter mainly discusses two realistic themes in *The Great Gatsby*, which are expressed through modernist techniques. One theme is about the disillusionment of the American Dream, mainly focusing on Gatsby's brief greatness created and destroyed by capitalist society. Another theme is about the commodification reflected in characters. Both themes have practical significance in this novel.

2.1. Disillusionment of the American Dream

2.1.1. Gatsby's American Dream

The American Dream means having a large amount of money and physical possessions. In the eyes of the world, Americans are rich, not poor. However, this is not the case. Many people interpret the American Dream as a pathway to high social status, an opportunity to obtain what they want, and through wealth and power, one can achieve happiness. At that time, the US economy was in recession and many people were unemployed every day. Even in such economic difficulties, the government still instills in people the American Dream and advocates that as long as they have the ambition to succeed and work hard for their dreams, everyone can succeed. Lukacs said, "Literature is not only a reflection of socio-economic reality, but also a critique of reality. *The Great Gatsby* "is a novel written by Fitzgerald, which tells the story of the American Dream and how those who attempt to

achieve their fantasy goals collapse. Through his novels, Fitzgerald demonstrates how the American people blindly attempt to achieve the illusionary goal of the American Dream, and how they fall under the erosion of material desires, which is precisely in line with Lukacs' realistic views. As is well known, the literature of each country and nation with unique cultural traditions has its own spiritual sustenance. For American literature, the American Dream is its spiritual sustenance. There is an eternal theme in the 20th century, which is deep frustration and the American Dream towards freedom. But in 'The Great Gatsby', for Jay, his dream is to obtain what he wants through wealth and power. In order to obtain it, Jay must return to the past and relive his old dream - Daisy. To achieve this, he must possess wealth and power. Jay Gatsby is great because he rose from poverty, had his own discipline, relied on his talent and efforts to become the wealthy man he admired, and achieved his dream of becoming rich through illegal means. He tried his best to win back his love, but he was destined to fail in the end. It was not his personality flaw that led to his destruction, but society that created his greatness and then completely destroyed him. In a word, what made him great and what destroyed him all stem from the society in which he grew up. According to Western Marxism, human beings live in a social group. In order to understand people and their world, it is necessary to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the behavior of all people in society. From this assumption of Western Marxism, it can explore the realistic theme of The Great Gatsby from Lukacs' perspective.

The central character of this novel, Gatsby, is a character who reminisces about the past. Surprisingly, he spent most of his adult life trying to recapture his beloved Daisy, ultimately dying in pursuit. Jay fell in love with wealthy Daisy. Due to their different social status, he knew he couldn't marry her, so he left her and risked committing a crime to accumulate enough wealth to meet her economic standards. Gatsby met Dan Cody on a luxury cruise ship, which was his chance to make a fortune. Nick recounted that a young Gatsby was leaning against his oars, looking up at the railed deck. In fact, that yacht represents all the beauty and charm in the world. Dan Cody incorporated Gatsby into the team, helping him achieve his goal of becoming rich and gaining the recognition he craved in society. Gatsby ultimately owned the mansion of West Egg, which was the center of his dream life.

As soon as he gains wealth, he will approach Daisy. Gatsby bought the house so that Daisy could cross the bay to get there. Gatsby held a luxurious party and hoped that she would happen to appear at one of the parties. He didn't attend the party himself, but watched from a distance. He successfully created a new image of a wealthy man, but without Daisy, he couldn't fully fulfill his dreams. Daisy is the last part of Gatsby's American Dream, and Gatsby holds a luxurious party in his mansion in an attempt to attract Daisy. Gatsby almost realized his and Daisy's dreams, but Daisy left his dreamy world - she decided to continue living with her husband and family. When his dream was shattered, he casually asked if anyone around him knew her. Soon, he met Daisy's cousin Nick Callaway and agreed to arrange a meeting.

Later, at the Plaza Hotel, Jay still believed that Daisy loved him. When he took responsibility for the death of Merkle Wilson, he firmly believed in it. Jay is confident that he can use his enormous wealth to realize his dreams. He believes that his actions are for a beautiful dream that transcends

personal interests, and his dream is destined to be realized. Nick tried to show Jay how foolish his dream was, and in Nick's eyes, he couldn't relive his old dreams.

It is easy to see from above that Jay Gatsby's dreams include money, social status, and love. In the process of striving for this dream, he lost all the truly important things, such as his family and past. Despite his wealth, he never realized his dream because he did not bring Daisy back and seemed to actually fit his newly discovered social status. When he passed away, no wealthy senior friends cried at his funeral, which made readers wonder what values were truly worth pursuing in this life and what the cost was. Gatsby will not rest until his American Dream is finally realized. However, it will never become a reality and will ultimately pay the ultimate price. But one thing about the American Dream will never change: everyone yearns for everything they want in life, and everyone strives to fulfill these wishes in some way. Gatsby is just the prototype of pursuing the American Dream.

2.1.2. Disillusionment of Gatsby's American Dream

Gatsby's values were destroyed because of the capitalist view of money supremacy. The shaping of the American Dream induces people to pursue wealth by hook or by crook, thus corroding people's morality. Fitzgerald believes that the American dream is nothing more than fascinating material wealth, which in essence will distinguish the dignitaries from other lower classes. Fitzgerald believes that blind pursuit of the American dream will only bring despair to them. The American dream has become a mere pursuit of wealth, because it is wrapped in opportunities to improve yourself and your life. Gatsby felt that he had to erase the past to create a perfect picture of elegant life. "I was the son of some wealthy people in the Midwest who are now dead in the United States, and I grew up in Oxford but was educated in China because all my ancestors were educated there for many years," Gatsby said. For him, the new life may be false, or almost unreal, because he has abandoned too much of himself in order to achieve his goal. Gatsby reshaped his past and brought himself closer to his life goal.

Lukacs pointed out that literature should not only reflect reality, but also criticize reality. In this work, Tom is not the hero, and the author thoroughly reveals his ugly soul. Tom was an aristocrat in Chicago, but he was a rude man and a snob who sought personal gain by improper means. As a member of the privileged class, he believes that he can use all means including conspiracy and frame-up to defend his privilege. At the end of World War I, the hereditary bourgeoisie in the East despised the newly affluent class like Gatsby. It is true that the American dream is certainly good for the capitalist economy, but it sacrifices the well-being of many people who fail to realize the American dream. Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald shows the disillusionment of dreams, whether they are dreams of money, status or just happiness. Of course, the biggest collapse is the American dream. The disillusionment of the American dream is inevitable, because the reality of life cannot be compared with the idealistic dream, and the ideal is often too perfect to match the reality. Dreams give life goals and end the road. As the fate of Gatsby and Buchanan family shows, without dreams, one's life is meaningless. If there is no ideal, their life will become empty. Gatsby is the prototype of the failure of the American dream. Although he was successful all his life, all his wealth came from illegal sources, such as "buying a lot of small street pharmacies in Chicago and selling grain wine over the counter". Gatsby seems to want to earn money only

by illegal means, although this practice directly violates the principle of American Dream, that is, everyone works hard to realize their dreams.

The ending of the novel indicates the tragic decline of the American dream. In Lukacs' view, Gatsby's tragedy is inevitable, and it is only a concentrated embodiment of reality and ideology at that time. Gatsby wanted to win back Daisy's love, but he didn't care if Daisy was only interested in his material wealth. Gatsby ignored the reason Daisy was interested in him again, because he would do anything to be with her, even throw "extravagant parties". Although he used his wealth to bring Daisy closer, he could not take her back from Tom. When his dream of winning Daisy back failed to come true, he collapsed. He tried his best to win her heart, but failed. Gatsby thinks he can match her, however, there is a deep social conflict between the new rich and the old rich. Therefore, Daisy believes that love cannot happen without a solid economic background. She once loved Gatsby, but her desire for material wealth was much stronger than her love for him. Gatsby admitted that he was the driver of the car that killed Mertel Wilson, which eventually led to his death. Gatsby's death doesn't matter, because his death is actually the failure of his dream. Gatsby's life is the process of disillusionment of the American dream. In a sense, his tragedy is the epitome of Americans' pursuit of the American dream all their lives. Fitzgerald firmly grasped the pulse of the times through his own tonic, vividly recorded the social reality in the 1920s, and expressed the grief of the "lost generation" over the extinction of American dreams. In this novel, Gatsby, as a typical image, is naive, romantic and compassionate. The author sees through the flash of jazz age, the moral emptiness and hypocrisy at that time, and the conflict between people's fantasy and reality, and then clearly expresses his realistic thoughts through the character Gatsby. He is a representative figure of his realistic thought, a typical figure with profound personality, and also a representative figure reflecting the social development trend.

2.2. Commercialization Features Embodied by Fitzgerald

Fitzgerald paid tribute to those Americans who didn't realize the American dream. These people are eager to succeed in the upper class. They have their own American dream and are willing to fight for it because they believe that everyone in America has an equal chance to succeed through hard work. However, few of them can succeed in the end, because they have no special background and have to face failure. Therefore, commercialization appeared: people gradually realized that money is the key factor to succeed and realize the American dream. Only when they have money can they be recognized by others or society, so they make as much money as possible at all costs, including any illegal means. Of course, in the process of making money, they are corrupted by money, or rather capitalism. In this novel, one of the themes is commercialization, which shows that people are corrupted by money, and there are two kinds of commercialization in the characters to realize this theme. One is now in Tom and the other is in Gatsby. It is easy to understand after reading this novel.

In Western Marxist criticism, economic conditions are called material conditions, and the social atmosphere produced by material conditions is called historical conditions. For Western Marxist critics, without understanding the specific historical environment, they cannot understand

human events and human production. From the perspective of Western Marxism, the differences of social and economic classes can distinguish people more than the differences of race and religion. Because of the attention of Western Marxists to the rise of capitalist economy, the value of an object is transformed into monetary "equivalent". Commercialization refers to the behavior related to objects or people by exchange value or symbolic exchange value, because from the perspective of Western Marxism, the survival of capitalism depends on commercialization, and individuals are the products of material or historical environment. Commercialization, especially in the form of symbolic exchange value, is not only a market activity. On the contrary, it is a psychological attitude, which has invaded every field of our existence.

2.3. Gatsby's Commercialization Features

Even Gatsby, who originally represented the American dream, and the hope that capitalism brings to all, reveal the emptiness of this dream. To be exact, Gatsby rose from poverty to extreme wealth in just a few years. Like his idol Benjamin Franklin, he resonated strongly with the image of the self-made man in the American dream, but he later discovered that he could only realize his dream through criminal activities in the 1920s. Therefore, like Buchanans, he commoditized his own world.

Gatsby's only room in the mansion is his scanty bedroom, and the only time he appears there is to show Daisy his wealth. He almost never uses the library or the seaplane himself, and he does not drink alcohol or meet many of his guests at lavish parties. For Gatsby, the only function of material wealth seems to be symbolic exchange value: he wants the image that their ownership confers on him, and nothing more. Moreover, his merchandise signs are almost always empty: his library is filled with unopened books that are used to adorn him. The symbolic exchange value of his owning Daisy seems to be the image of uniqueness through what he acquires. On the one hand, owning her gives him what he wants or needs: a permanent sign that he belongs to her socio-economic class, to the world of the rich that Daisy represented for him when they first met. On the other hand, in his mind, having her as the ultimate sign would make his new money old. In other words, it means that he can gain recognition from the upper class. Thus, while accumulating material wealth in order to win Daisy, he also accumulates a commodity symbol in order to gain another.

Gatsby's possession of the world is linked to the cold-blooded aggression with which he pursues what he wants. The luxurious environment in which he lived did not exist in a vacuum, as it was supported by a society rife with corruption, crime, and death. His vast wealth is derived from illegal activities, including smuggling and the sale of fraudulent bonds.

This world can be glimpsed through the "evil" servants Wolfsheim sends to work for Gatsby, as well as the phone calls Gatsby receives from apparently illegal sources. It's a dog-eat-dog world, so often fake wine is sold over the counter to anyone with the money to pay for it, in a world where fake bonds are passed on to honest investors in small towns. Some of the people who buy the booze may get sick, and some may even die as a result. In addition, any small investor who buys a fraudulent bond loses money, even though they can't afford the loss. When the inevitable mistakes happen and the law steps in, some people must be sacrificed as Gatsby did when

he gave up Walter Chase. When he first proposes to Daisy at her parents' home in Louisville, he convinces her that he and she come from the same class. However, at the time, he did not have a comfortable family behind him; he was just a poor man with no social standing. Indeed, *Gatsby* is not exempt from the novel's unappealing portrayal of the rich. His portrayal suggests that the American Dream does not provide a moral substitute for the commodified world of the Buchanans, but rather produces the same commodification of people and things as the wealth inherited by Tom and Daisy. *Gatsby's* commodification in a sense reveals the debilitating effect of capitalism on socio-economic "winners" such as Tom, Daisy and Gatsby, as well as on "losers" such as George and Myrtle. From Lukács's point of view, in realist texts, literature may be seen as reflecting or even criticizing historical society. By analyzing these two themes in the novel, we can see that Fitzgerald shows us the real life of the people in the 1920s, revealing the meaninglessness of the American dream and the indifference to capitalism through his profound criticism of the harsh reality of the time.

In view of these points, Fitzgerald uses modernist techniques to highlight the realist themes in this novel, such as impressionism and symbolism. Their application helps a

lot in the expression of realist themes.

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