

The Paradox of Environmental Identity in the Context of Consumerism: The Material Landscape and Social Psychological Vanity Mechanism in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract: This article focuses on the construction of material landscapes in F. S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and the profound socio-psychological mechanisms behind them, revealing the paradoxical dilemma of individual identity construction within a consumerist culture. Through a detailed analysis of material symbols such as the geographical space of East and West Egg, Gatsby's lavish parties, clothing, cars, and mansions, the article explores how these symbols became central vehicles for class division and identity performance in 1920s American society. The study finds that Gatsby's carefully constructed identity as "Jay Gatsby" is deeply rooted in his extreme possession and display of material symbols, aiming to achieve social class mobility and win back Daisy through consumption. However, this identity, solely supported by material possessions, is inherently fragile and illusory. Daisy's ultimate choice, and Gatsby's tragic ending, cruelly expose the powerlessness of material symbols in transcending entrenched social class barriers. More profoundly, Gatsby's identity performance is caught in an endless "symbol chase": the more he attempts to affirm himself and reach his dreams through the accumulation and display of material possessions, the more his true self becomes obscured and alienated by the complex symbols, ultimately leading to complete loss of identity and disillusionment. The novel profoundly criticizes the alienating effect of the material landscape on individual identity under the logic of consumerism, revealing that identity construction strategies centered on material possession ultimately lead to self-dissolution and spiritual emptiness, and provides a lasting warning for understanding identity anxiety in contemporary consumer society.

Keywords: Consumerism, Environmental Identity, Material Landscape, Social Psychology, Vanity Mechanism, *The Great Gatsby*, Symbolic Consumption, Identity, Class Division.

1. Introduction

In the United States of the 1920s, amid the hustle and bustle of the "Jazz Age," consumerist culture rose at an unprecedented pace, profoundly reshaping social structures and the logic of individual identity. F. S. Fitzgerald's classic novel, *The Great Gatsby*, with its keen insight, accurately captures and artistically recreates the socio-psychological landscape of this transitional period, particularly how material wealth became a central tool for individuals to define themselves and seek social identity. The novel's meticulously constructed "material landscape"-from the geographically distinct East and West Egg districts to Gatsby's lavish parties, to the dazzling clothing, cars symbolizing speed and status, and palatial mansions-is more than a simple backdrop or display of wealth. These form a powerful symbolic system, a crucial arena for the novel's characters to define their social status, perform class performances, and construct their identities. Amidst the tide of consumerism, the concept of "environmental identity" has become prominent: individuals assert their social belonging and self-worth through the possession, display, and integration of a specific material environment. *Gatsby* embodies this logic to its extreme. The material kingdom he painstakingly builds is the sole foundation for his new identity, "Jay Gatsby." His core goal is to transcend the social class divide and win back Daisy Fay, who represents the world of "old money" and ultimate desire. However, the inherent contradictions and fragility of this identity construction, which relies entirely on external

material symbols, are precisely the source of the novel's tragic power. This article aims to deeply interpret the semiotic significance and operation of the material landscape in the novel, revealing how it drives characters to act out of vanity, ultimately leading to profound paradoxes and disillusionments in their identity. This, in turn, reveals Fitzgerald's profound critique of the alienation of human nature and the dilemma of identity under the logic of consumerism.

2. Material Landscape: The Silent Inscription of Class

Upon arriving on Long Island, New York, Nick's gaze was as precise as a chisel, dissecting not just a map but the social fabric embedded within it. The division between East Egg and West Egg was no ordinary geographical boundary; it was a stark spatial projection of the source of wealth and historical roots, a silent inscription of the rigid barriers of social class into the physical landscape.

East Egg, home to Tom and Daisy, was an impenetrable fortress of "old money." Its red and white Georgian colonial mansion, towering over the bay and its quarter-mile-long lawn, flowed like a stream of aristocratic blood, unspokenly declaring hereditary privilege. Land itself was a silent declaration, its architectural style a natural emblem of "noble" ancestry[1].

In stark contrast, Gatsby's massive mansion in West Egg, "a faithful imitation of a town hall in Normandy," stood. Despite its towering towers, tangled vines, and the radiant

marble pool and forty-acre gardens, this deliberate imitation of opulence is, in the eyes of the old money, merely a stigma of the "vulgarity" of the nouveau riche. This "imitation" City Hall, like Gatsby's carefully woven fantasy of status, its underlying superficiality and overreaching tastes ultimately fail to unlock the door to East Egg's solidified lineage.

Nick's cramped little house, "squeezed between two behemoths," is a minor footnote in this hierarchy. And further away, the desolate landscape of the Valley of Ashes offers the most glaring image of the lower class. There, "ashes grow like hills of wheat," the dust devouring everything, the utterly abandoned detritus of a consumerist feast. George Wilson's dilapidated car dealership is a chilling reflection of this drained, underclass existence.

From the hereditary bastions of East Egg, to the dreams of the nouveau riche of West Egg, to the despairing wasteland of the Valley of Ashes, the novel constructs a chain of sharply stratified material landscapes. Every inch of land, every building, precisely corresponds to an insurmountable social identity[2]. As characters traverse this landscape, their class affiliation is first and foremost cruelly defined and framed by their surroundings-geographical space becomes a solid container for social identity, silently engraving the eternal divide between classes.

3. A Lonely Phantom on the Altar of Vanity

The night-long feast in Gatsby's West Egg mansion was an elaborate extravagance of money, so extravagant it nearly scorched reality. Guests, both men and women, flew like moths to a flame, "among laughter, champagne, and stars." The gardens were "splendid with light, bright enough to feed an army," and perfume flowed freely from the rims of enormous cocktail barrels. Rivers of champagne, mountains of delicacies, and a relentless orchestra—this endless extravagance piled up into a dazzling pyramid, a grand masquerade that Gatsby had erected for himself.

On this stage paved with money, Gatsby diligently staged a grand transformation of identity. His outpouring of wealth and generosity was like a powerful searchlight, designed to pierce the murky night of the bay and lock onto the faint green light of Daisy Buchanan. Every noisy banquet and every carefully arranged stream of light were his carefully rehearsed testimony to Daisy and the whole world - he was no longer the officer with empty pockets, he had already grasped the heavy gold medal that was worthy of her. The party itself was an empire of symbols: its scale, the intensity of its extravagance, the eclectic mix of guests, all carefully woven by Gatsby into a golden garment of his "success" and "influence."

However, this grand performance was, at its core, a fragile, utilitarian creation. Guests flocked like a tide, merely to sip the free nectar; the glittering glitter of the feast could not illuminate the host's deep loneliness and anxiety. Rumors permeated the laughter like a poisonous fog—the ambiguous shadow of the source of his wealth constantly lingered over Gatsby's figure. When the tide of glitz receded, what was revealed was not the solid reef of acceptance, but a vast crack in the performance of identity: the river of champagne had failed to truly carve out a path of class identity, and the mountains of delicacies could not fill the abyss of belonging. The more ostentatious material abundance is, the more jarring its hollowness as a status passport becomes[3].

Gatsby's party was ultimately a costly yet ineffective status-marketing ritual. The boisterous cocktail pool reflected the soul, leaving only a pale loneliness. The staircase of consumer wonders failed to truly reach the shore he longed for. When the glitz faded, only the cold moonlight reflected in the vast pool and a heart beating alone in a golden cage confirmed the inherent vanity of this grand performance—the splendor turned out to be nothing more than a carefully constructed altar of loneliness.

4. Fluid Symbols: The Vanity Abyss Beneath Clothing and Objects

In the glitz and glamour of *The Great Gatsby*, clothing and objects transcend mere practicality; they become fluid symbols of status, carrying the characters' carefully crafted, vain projections of their self-image. Gatsby understood this well. His signature "gorgeous pink suit" was a deliberate statement, creating a subtle tension with his carefully woven "Oxford" background—the halo of wealth couldn't conceal the ostentatiousness of the nouveau riche and the fragility of their foundations.

The scene where he presents Daisy with his mountain of luxurious shirts is a classic: pure linen, thick silk, fine flannel, stripes, paisleys, checks, coral, apple green, light purple, pale orange, and initials embroidered in deep blue thread... This is no longer just a display of clothing, but an extreme accumulation of symbolic value, a dazzling display of materialism for the sake of pure display[4]. Daisy breaks down in tears, tears not for the shirts but for the vision of a luxurious life she once missed, symbolized by these dazzling symbols. The automobile, the ultimate totem of speed, wealth, and modernity in the Jazz Age, plays an even more destructive symbolic role in the novel. Whether it's Tom's blue sports car or Gatsby's yellow Rolls-Royce, "cream-colored and gleaming with nickel," they roar across Long Island, becoming mobile displays of status. As Gatsby speeds with Nick and Daisy, his luxury cars are a dazzling testament to his success. However, it is when Daisy, driving this yellow behemoth, kills Myrtle Wilson, that the automobile is instantly transformed from a badge of prestige into a deadly weapon[5].

The destructive power of object symbols is fully revealed at this moment. The luxurious symbols that Gatsby strives for to attract Daisy ultimately become the rope that strangles his dreams. The yellow car, from a mobile palace of illusory glory, is transformed into the cold steel that crushes life. It cruelly reveals the quicksand-like futility of identity constructed around material possessions, becoming a deadly metaphor for the pursuit of consumerism—when the halo of symbols fades, what's often revealed is the hideous underbelly of desire.

Gatsby collapsed, leaving behind a rainbow of shirts and the fatal yellow car. Once gilded steps, they ultimately became tombstones crushing dreams. When material symbols are stripped of their luster, what's revealed is nothing more than the vast illusion cast by our time.

5. Daisy: The Symbolization of Ultimate Luxury and the Projection of Desire

In Gatsby's dream-driven vision of the world, Daisy Fay has long been stripped of the warmth of flesh and blood. Her fragile shadow has been forged into a radiant emblem, the

most expensive "luxury" imaginable, the ultimate embodiment of his entire class's dream of transcendence.

The voice that flowed from her lips and teeth was repeatedly engraved by Fitzgerald-"full of money." The magic of that voice flows through the lines, likened to "a clang of cymbals," the swan song of "the golden girl in the high white palace." This is more than just a description; it is an echo deep in Gatsby's soul: Daisy's voice has been completely transformed into a symbol, a perfect resonance of wealth, privilege, and ancient dignity[6].

Gatsby invested all his wealth in building a dream palace on the shores of West Egg, where nights of revelry flowed like water, but his core driving force was not vanity itself. He simply aimed to build a new world with material monuments, a world worthy of the ancient gates of East Egg, a kingdom worthy of the "old money" bloodline symbolized by Daisy. Winning Daisy, for him, was a complete scorching of his own humble roots, a glorious seal of approval from the old aristocratic world. The phantom of Daisy as the "Golden Girl" was the ultimate medal for which he longed to redeem his wealth and role-playing.

However, when living beings are imprisoned within the framework of pure symbols, tragedy follows. What Gatsby watched over day and night on the shores of Long Island wasn't the real Daisy before him, but the symbolic icon he had spent five years wrapping and meticulously polishing in the silken fabric of memory-an icon that embodied all his fervent desire for social belonging and his upward mobility. When the real Daisy could no longer bear the heavy crown of symbolic gold, the temple of identity Gatsby had painstakingly constructed crumbled and shattered into dust[7].

Daisy's symbolism as the "ultimate luxury" and her ultimate disillusionment ironically exemplify the paradox of Gatsby's fate: the ultimate accumulation of material possessions and the spectacle of extravagance ultimately cannot truly purchase or exchange for the class identity and emotional connection he craves.

Ultimately, what Gatsby pursued his entire life was merely the phantom echo of the "golden girl" cast within the maze of desire. The cymbals of that sound once resounded throughout the palace of his soul, only to be shattered on the rocks of reality, leaving behind only a symbolic wreckage and a sigh of class.

6. Prisoners of Symbols: Gatsby's Tragedy and the Illusion of Identity

James Gatz's transformation into Jay Gatsby was an elaborate illusion of identity, orchestrated amidst the frenzy of consumerism. This glamorous transformation was driven by a deep-seated desire for social mobility-a yearning for dignity, recognition, and the pure love of the "upper world" symbolized by Daisy. However, the path Gatsby chose led him into a fatal vortex of paradox.

He firmly believed that only the ultimate material symbols-the palaces of West Egg, the endless feasts, the endless array of fine clothes and cars-held the only ticket to a glittering world. These symbols were essential props in his meticulously crafted "Gatsby" mythology; without them, his carefully constructed castle in the air would dissolve in an instant. Ironically, it was precisely this almost obsessive reliance on and accumulation of material symbols that weakened the foundation of his identity, transforming it into a glamorous symbol with a hollow interior. The more he

frantically acquired and displayed, attempting to use these external halos to validate his existence and value, the deeper James Gatz, the impoverished boy from North Dakota, was submerged in the flood of symbols, alienated, and ultimately completely replaced. Ultimately, Gatsby became a hollow, symbolic shell, created and consumed by his own desires[8].

His obsession with Daisy was also tainted by this symbolic logic. In his eyes, Daisy had long transcended the existence of a physical lover, becoming the "ultimate luxury" worthy of his symbolic identity, a dazzling medal declaring the fulfillment of his life. Therefore, when Daisy retreated before the pressure of reality, when Tom Buchanan, with his ingrained class arrogance, coldly tore away the veil of "doubt" surrounding the source of her wealth, and when George Wilson's bullet whizzed by-this edifice of identity built on quicksand unsurprisingly collapsed.

The bustling bustle of the past and the desolate indifference at his funeral constitute the most glaring irony of Gatsby's life. This stark disparity ruthlessly declares the utter failure of consumer symbols in constructing a true and lasting identity. Gatsby's death is the ultimate disillusionment of the individual's dream under the logic of consumerism-it reveals a cold reality: when identity is completely tied to external material symbols, when self-worth is defined solely by the ability to consume, individuals will eventually lose themselves in the endless pursuit, leading to spiritual desolation and destruction[9].

The green light of West Egg ultimately could not illuminate his lost path to the other side, ultimately becoming only a tragic sacrifice on the altar of a grand symbol.

7. Conclusion

The Great Gatsby, with its unparalleled literary power, constructs a vivid, ethereal image of the material landscape of American society during the rise of consumerism. Through the spatial contrast between East Egg and West Egg, Gatsby's lavish parties, the dazzling array of clothing and objects, and the symbolic image of Daisy, Fitzgerald profoundly reveals how the material environment becomes a core representation of social class identity and a crucial stage for the performance of individual identity. Gatsby's tragic life is a perfect illustration of this logic: he expended all his resources in a frantic pursuit of glittering material symbols-mansions, fine clothes, lavish banquets-trying to construct a new "Jay Gatsby," a perfect identity capable of transcending class divides and winning back Daisy, the "Golden Girl." However, this inherent dilemma posed a formidable obstacle: the more he fanatically pursued and displayed these external possessions, the more his meticulously crafted spectacle expanded, while his true self was gradually squeezed and distorted, ultimately lost in this dazzling jungle of symbols. Daisy's withdrawal, Tom's unwavering contempt, and the piercing desolation at the funeral ruthlessly punctured the illusory bubble of identity constructed solely on the accumulation of material possessions, a bubble destined to burst. Gatsby's disillusionment is a pointed indictment of the core ills of consumerist culture: its temptation to completely mortgage one's identity to external possessions and environmental symbols. In this endless "symbol race," people's true self-worth and meaningful social connections are severely alienated, ultimately sliding into a bottomless state of identity loss and spiritual emptiness. The extinguished green light at the end of the pier is a brilliant metaphor for the American Dream, built on the quicksand of material desire.

Fitzgerald's insight, made a century ago, remains resonant today, amidst the ever-increasing material landscape and the rapid evolution of consumer symbols: when identity becomes overly tied to external possessions, the self can completely dissipate in the illusion of vanity. Gatsby's story serves as a warning: amid the surging tide of consumerism, safeguarding the true coordinates of one's inner self and guarding against the complete "colonization" of one's identity by material symbols remains a fundamental question for the survival of the individual spirit.

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