

The Great Gatsby: An Analysis of Cultural Representations in Literature and Film

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Abstract: *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald highlights various cultural characteristics of the Jazz Age. This paper will explore the cultural elements of the original novel and the 2013 film adaptation and its impact on its audience. Specifically, this paper focuses on the themes of a materialistic culture, hegemonic culture, the American Dream, the portrayal of women in the 1920s, and the racist ideology. During the Jazz Age, a period of economic prosperity and social change, materialism shaped people's values and pursuits. Through an in-depth analysis of the novel and the film, this paper will explore the characters' endless pursuit of material wealth and social status to show that there was also impatience, emptiness, and ruthlessness behind this era's wealth. Moreover, this paper will explore the concept of hegemonic culture and the dominance of upper class characters over the lower class people. By examining the class conflicts between old and new money, the nature of the upper-class social circle, and the set of society that the aristocracy benefited from, this paper aims to show how *The Great Gatsby* highlights the power dynamics between different socio-economic classes and the injustices caused by this hegemonic culture. Despite Jay Gatsby's pursuit of wealth, status, and desire for personal fulfillment, the pursuit of this ideal often comes at a price, and this paper will explore the downfalls and disillusionment of the American Dream, as well as the complexity and ambivalence of the American Dream in the Jazz Age. In addition, the paper explores the portrayal of women in *The Great Gatsby* and the limitations of these female characters as well as the broader context of gender dynamics during the Jazz Age, where despite the progress made by women in terms of their social status at the time, some limitations and negativity still existed for women. Finally, the paper will look at racist ideology through the character Tom Buchanan as an aristocratic white man. Although this is not the main theme of the story, the fact that racism still exists is reflected in this character. *The Great Gatsby* portrays many elements of American society during the Jazz Age in both the novel and film highlighting the social dynamics and values of its time.

1. Introduction

The Great Gatsby is a well-known piece of literature that has been adapted into films and TV series several times. The author of the novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald, depicted America in the 1920s for the public with delicate strokes, effectively capturing the cultural characteristics of the Jazz Age in America. By analyzing the original novel and film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, this paper will

delve into the themes of materialistic culture, hegemonic culture, the American dream, the portrayal of women at the time, and racism, which are the cultural traits reflected in the story. By studying these cultural traits, one can gain a better understanding of the novel and film's plot and characterization, as well as a deeper understanding of the social dynamics and values of the time.

2. The Original Novel

The Great Gatsby, written by American author Francis Scott Fitzgerald and first published in 1925. The novel is set in New York City and Long Island in the United States in the 1920s, and engages with its audience by showcasing the complexities of that time. The novel focuses on four main characters: Nick Carraway, the narrator; Tom and Daisy Buchanan, a wealthy young couple; and Jay Gatsby, a wealthy and mysterious man. *The Great Gatsby* is regarded as a great representation of the “Jazz Age” in American literature, and the characteristics of the era are well presented in the novel. It shows the luxury and indulgence of the upper class, as well as the illusion and vulnerability of chasing dreams and pursuing happiness. Through the characterization of Gatsby, Fitzgerald explores the conflict between wealth, love, dreams, and reality. The novel is not only a tale of love and desire, but also explores the divisions and hypocrisy between social classes. The author's brilliant writing sheds light on the complexity of human nature and people's pursuit of wealth and status. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* has become a classic in American literature, which is evident as this classic work of literature has been adapted into films and TV episodes many times.^[1]

3. The Adaptation Film

This paper will use the latest film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* as the primary sample for analysis. The movie was directed by director Baz Luhrmann and was released in 2013. The film stars renowned actor Leonardo DiCaprio as Jay Gatsby, and other major roles include those of Daisy Buchanan, played by Carey Mulligan, and Nick Carraway, played by Tobey Maguire. Although the film differs from the original in some of its settings, director Baz Luhrmann has brought the story of *The Great Gatsby* to life and sparked much discussion with his unique directorial style and visual elements. The film shows the prosperity and flamboyance of the “Jazz Age” through the costumes, the sets, and photography techniques. Luhrmann also creates a vivid image of the social scene of the 1920s in the United States, which makes people think about the cultural and social characteristics embedded in the original novel.^[2]

4. Historical Context: The Jazz Age and the Prohibition Era

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* defines the era known as the “Jazz Age.” The author uses the social and technological features of the 1920s to build the story of Jay Gatsby, from minor details such as the automobile, the evolution of jazz, and dance styles such as the foxtrot. Some more prominent themes include the author's portrayal of class and income inequality, materialism and consumer culture, the culture of organized crime, and the bootlegging that was the source of Gatsby's wealth. Fitzgerald takes these elements of the 1920s and creates a timeless and relatable narrative with the historical backdrop of the extravagant society of the Jazz Age in the 1920s.

Notably, the “Jazz Age” was a period of energy, prosperity, and social entertainment, but it was also a time of great suffering. At the same time, it was also the period of Prohibition. In the United States in the 1920s, the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcoholic beverages was prohibited. However, this did not stop people from finding their way to alcohol. Illegal alcohol trading activities sprang up, and speakeasies and private parties became places for people to gather and enjoy themselves. The story of *The Great Gatsby* also alludes to the involvement of some of the main

characters being involved in the illegal alcohol trade. Overall, this was a time of desire and disorientation, and at that time, wealth and social status in people's lives were a high priority.^[3]

5. Materialistic Culture in the Jazz Age in Novel and Film

Kasser et al. point out that the combination of aims, beliefs, goals, and behaviors of consumer culture can be described as a materialistic value orientation (MVO), which consists of the belief in the importance of pursuing culturally sanctioned goals such as achieving financial success, owning nice possessions, having the right image (which is largely achieved through consumer goods) and having high status, where high status is primarily defined by their financial wealth and possessions (2004). In other words, when materialistic values are biased towards these goals, people will care more about the material conditions of money and status than peoples' personalities or ethics. The story of *The Great Gatsby* takes place in a time when materialism was prized and prosperity and vanity went hand in hand. The characters are all influenced in one way or another by the materialistic culture, which is reflected in the lifestyles and values of the upper class in the novel and film.^[4]

In the original novel, the author paints a vivid picture of the 1920s to highlight the line between people from different social classes and the intense worship and pursuit of material wealth by these people. Through imagery and symbols, Fitzgerald gives a more realistic portrayal of the American culture at the time. These symbols illustrate the evolution of a materialistic and capitalistic society and the accompanying social phenomenon of corruption (Yilmaz, 2022). For example, the author refers to the affluent and traditional neighborhood where Tom and Daisy Buchanan live as “East Egg.” The author explains that people who live in “East Egg” have had social prestige and power for generations, as these families' wealth and social status took years to build up. These people are widely recognized and accepted in the community. Fitzgerald refers to them as “Old Money” (Fitzgerald, 2009). Meanwhile, “West Egg,” where Jay Gatsby lives, is an up-and-coming and vibrant neighborhood. In the author's portrayal, residents of West Egg are referred to as “New Money” and are considered outsiders by East Egg residents due to their lack of a distinguished family background. There are also plots involving geographical discrimination in the novel which reflect the materialistic culture of the time. For example, when Nick Carraway visits Daisy and Tom Buchanan in East Egg for dinner, Tom expresses his disdain for the people who live in West Egg, and he cannot understand why Nick lives in West Egg. Tom claims it is a place for social climbing primitive new-money types. It is evident that in that era of materialistic culture, even those who have become “New Money” are still despised by the more powerful “Old Money.” Thus, a hierarchy is established even among the most wealthy. Moreover, the clothes and mansions depicted in the novel are symbols of materialism. For instance, when Gatsby shows Daisy his clothes that are made of materials such as pure linen, silk, and fine flannel, Daisy's excitement underscores not only Gatsby's wealth but also the era's fascination with material possessions. Besides, the author describes Gatsby's mansion in vivid detail as a castle with a marble swimming pool and over forty acres of lawns and gardens. It is evident that all of these elements symbolize money and wealth. This materialistic culture is the basis for the construction and unfolding of *The Great Gatsby* and is an essential theme that must be brought to life in the film adaptation.

The success of a film depends on the accuracy of the production design and set decoration details (Esperdy, 2007). When the scenes and atmosphere of the story are accurately recreated, the story and characters can move on. Great set decorations can make a specific time-period come to life in a film in order to convince the audience to believe its authenticity and take them to that era (Tashiro, 2004). In this case, the film cleverly recreates the flamboyant era of materialism depicted in the original novel. For example, Gatsby's mansion is shown bustling with activity during his parties, capturing the era's opulence and excitement. The ballroom is decorated with fancy tables, an abundance of food,

and massive crystal chandeliers. Other corners of the mansion feature displays of precious jewelry and works of art, while the walls and corridors are adorned with oil paintings and sculptures. The fireworks and performances round out the display of wealth, immersing the audience in the extravagance of the party. However, after Gatsby's death, the film presents a completely different view of the mansion. It is no longer as glittering and bustling as it once was, but has become gloomy, desolate, and cluttered, with broken crystal lamps on the ground and withered leaves and dust accumulating in every corner. When news of Gatsby's death spread, the people who once flocked to his parties vanished, and no one attended his funeral except for Nick Carraway. The film's visual presentation of the story helps highlight how people were primarily concerned with money and status in an era driven by materialistic values, often appearing heartless and unsympathetic. Additionally, clothing is also an important symbol of materialistic culture in the film. The movie features many popular costumes of the Jazz Age, including glamorous evening dresses and expensive jewelry worn by the female characters, as well as the well-tailored suits, high bowler hats, and bow ties worn by the male characters. All of these elements show the audience how much the upper-class of the time valued their appearances and possessions, and give the audience a sense of the unique materialistic cultural atmosphere of the Jazz Age. However, while the movie succeeds in recreating that materialistic era, it is clearly communicated to the audience that the Jazz Age, with its emphasis on money and social status, was characterized by its impulsiveness and vanity. Both the author of the original novel and the film's director, while presenting the Jazz Age, convey their irony about the social atmosphere of that time, suggesting that underneath the wealth and prosperity lies emptiness, deprivation, and ruthlessness.^[5]

6. The Representation of Hegemonic Culture in Novel and Film

In his book *Cultural Hegemony*, Antonio Gramsci argues that hegemony is “manufactured consent established by intellectual articulation in a public space in which conflicting articulations are likewise articulated” (Yilmaz, 2022). Here, ‘manufactured consent’ refers to consent dominated by particular social groups or power structures that manipulate and influence public opinions and beliefs through discourse, media, and educational channels. ‘Intellectual articulation’ refers to those views expressed that are capable of influencing and shaping public perceptions and attitudes through public space. Although there are different voices and opinions in the public space, a consensus always dominates, and this is called a ‘hegemony.’ The hegemonic culture of the United States in the 1920s is a prime example of this concept. After the First World War, the rise of industrialism and entrepreneurship led to significant changes in American society, which became divided into two dominant hegemonic groups: the wealthy elite and the aristocracy. These influential groups exercised great control over the general populace. Both the original novel and the film adaptation vividly depict the dominance of these two hegemonic groups and the prevailing hegemonic culture of the time.^[6]

First, the geographical class separation in the novel is retained in the film. The audience can see modern castles like Jay Gatsby's home in West Egg and grand, stately mansions like Daisy and Tom Buchanan's residence in East Egg. These affluent areas are later contrasted against the dilapidated and grim homes in the Valley of Ashes where the lower class lives. Moreover, in the film, when Tom visits the car repair shop in the Valley of Ashes, the story introduces George B. Wilson, the repairman, as a lower class individual serving the upper class. Tom's condescending treatment of George highlights the upper class's hegemony over the lower class in addition to the geographical divide and differences in their physical appearance. However, even though both new money and old money people are rich, the more prestigious and dominant class represented by old money forms a hegemony over those with new money. The conflict between the aristocracy represented by Tom Buchanan and the self-made Jay Gatsby in both the novel and the film ends with Gatsby's defeat, regardless of his

efforts. Notably, in the novel, Tom Buchanan exemplifies a typical upper class demeanor, retaining his composure and poise, whereas the film portrays Tom with heightened hostility towards Gatsby, emphasizing the hegemony. In the film, Tom's character is exaggerated to one who deliberately shrugs off his responsibilities and drives Gatsby to his death, thereby providing the audience with a more profound understanding of the hegemonic culture of the 1920s.

Second, the social circle of the upper class depicted in both the novel and the film reflects the hegemonic culture. In the novel, many “celebrities” always come to the party on weekends and have fun on the lawn of Gatsby's house. In the film, even though the party is portrayed as open to anyone from all walks of life, the people at the party are all dressed up in glamorous outfits and include financial tycoons, famous actors, and government officials, but not ordinary or poor people. The extravagance of these parties underscores the power and influence of the upper class, naturally attracting people from this social tier. These attendees are clearly fixated on their social image and personal interests, seeking to expand their networks and resources. As a result, a power dynamic emerges within the social circle of the upper class, which values wealth, power, and social status while excluding those outside their class. This exclusivity fosters a culture of hegemony within upper class social circles.^[7]

It is also worth noting that the hegemonic culture in *The Great Gatsby* is also reflected in the special rules and tolerance afforded to the privileged class. In Daisy and Tom Buchanan's marriage, both engage in extramarital affairs without facing moral or legal repercussions. However, unfortunately, both Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson, Tom's mistress, meet tragic ends. As Nick observes in the film, “Tom and Daisy, they smashed up things and people, and then retreated back into their money and their vast carelessness.” This disparity highlights the unfairness of the prevailing hegemonic culture, in which people in positions of power are allowed to indulge their own interests without consequence, escaping the moral constraints and responsibilities that affect everyone else.

7. The American Dream in the Novel and Film

James Truslow Adams defines the American dream in his book *The Epic of America* as “a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” He describes it as “the American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank” (2009). It can be seen that the American dream is an idea deeply rooted in American culture that represents the belief that individuals can achieve their own success and happiness through hard work and opportunity. Jay Gatsby's pursuit of his dream is one of the central themes both in the novel and the movie. Gatsby was not previously a wealthy man, but he grew up with a vision and a determination to achieve success. In the original novel, Gatsby's personal schedule highlights his dedication and hard work toward achieving his dreams. Although both the novel and the film suggest that the source of Gatsby's wealth may have been acquired through illegal activities during prohibition, he ultimately becomes a wealthy man.^[8]

In addition to his material success, Gatsby harbors a deep desire for love. When Gatsby becomes rich, he still holds on to the love he had for Daisy when he was young and wishes to be with Daisy again, while in Tom's view, the gap between Gatsby and them is not only in terms of wealth but in terms of the difference in their origins. Tom believes that this gap is one that Gatsby's financial success cannot bridge. Nonetheless, Gatsby remains steadfast in pursuing Daisy, even taking responsibility for her mistakes. Gatsby's continued pursuit of Daisy reveals his remarkable determination, perseverance, and distinctive qualities. He has a mindset of optimism and belief in the future and is skilled at creating belief in himself. Even though other wealthy characters, particularly those with old money, continue to ridicule his origins, Gatsby remains convinced that he will achieve everything he

wants through his endeavors, and these qualities make him uniquely appealing in those materialistic times. However, Gatsby's relentless pursuit of Daisy ultimately leads to his eventual downfall, which symbolizes the darker side and destruction of the American Dream. While the American dream is often portrayed as a noble quest for success, wealth, and social status, there are many hidden injustices and cruelties behind it. The pursuit of this dream frequently encounters social barriers and class conflict, highlighting its illusory and often unattainable nature.

8. The Portrayal of Women in the Novel and Film

Literature from the 1920s is full of conflicting views about the portrayal of women. Scholars argue that the post-suffrage generation both rejected and embraced feminism. Although a range of characteristics of the new woman were defined in the literature of the period, women's independence was still limited (Honey, 1990). Considering the female characters in the story of *The Great Gatsby*, despite the fashionable dress and relative freedom of individuality of the women of that period, they are still influenced greatly by the expectations and limitations placed on women by society at the time. Daisy Buchanan, as a typical female figure of the upper class, is beautiful in appearance and passionate in character, especially through Carey Mulligan's portrayal of Daisy Buchanan in the film, which vividly displays the image of a female of the aristocratic class. In the film, Daisy Buchanan appears in exquisite clothing adorned with expensive jewelry and elaborate makeup, emphasizing her aristocratic charm, conforming to upper class expectations of women. However, at the same time, these opulent external images of Daisy also symbolize that Daisy is a woman who worships money and social status. Daisy marries Tom Buchanan, a man of high social standing when Gatsby is impoverished. Yet, when Gatsby re-emerges onto the scene as a wealthy man, Daisy's fascination with his material wealth rekindles her old feelings for him and fuels her desire to leave Tom. Ultimately, when faced with a choice between Tom and Gatsby, Daisy hesitates because of Gatsby's upbringing and origins, and decides to return to Tom. Besides that, Daisy's comment about wanting her daughter to be a “beautiful little fool” and does not hold the quest for a broader development for her child. It reflects the restrictive nature of women's roles in society, where even the women themselves subconsciously have narrow expectations of themselves and even their children. Daisy Buchanan's characterization demonstrates that while she is an upper-class woman of the Jazz Age, she is portrayed as someone who is not a fully independent or autonomous figure. Instead, she embodies superficiality, materialism, passivity, and willingness to conform to the standards set by the men of the upper class in the 1920s.

Furthermore, Nick Caraway describes Jordan Baker in the novel as “a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet.” This description highlights Jordan as the typical modern girl, where even her name, derived from two major automobile brands at the time, speaks to her modernity and mobility (Nicholas, 2018). However, this female figure, which symbolizes the confidence and ambition of the era, is also described in the novel as an “irredeemably dishonest person” (Fitzgerald, 2009). This duality suggests that while these female characters pursue freedom and self-realization, they also exhibit negative traits such as vanity, materialism, and dishonesty. The portrayal of female characters in both the novel and film reflects societal attitudes toward women at that time. Despite some individuality, women in this era are depicted as accessories or ornaments to men. The societal restrictions, prejudices, and stereotypes of the era prevented women from emerging as fully independent with genuine autonomy and rights.

9. Racism in the Novel and Film

The term “racism” was first introduced in the Larousse dictionary in 1932, where Larousse

described it as a system that affirms the superiority of one racial group over others. Robert's definition, meanwhile, described it as a theory of racial hierarchy based on the belief that social conditions and societal roles are determined by racial characteristics. Furthermore, this notion was further elaborated in UNESCO's 1978 "Declaration on Race," which defined racism as "any theory claiming the intrinsic superiority or inferiority of racial or ethnic groups which would give to some the right to dominate or even eliminate others, presumed inferior, or basing value judgments on racial differences." (De Benoist, 1999). The racism is reflected in the novel *The Great Gatsby* and is carried over into the film adaptation as well. Tom Buchanan, a member of the white aristocratic class, enjoys considerable social privileges, which he openly displays through his prejudiced attitude and remarks. While having dinner with Nick, Daisy, and Jordan, Tom mentions that he is reading a book called *The Rise of the Coloured Empires*, which carries the message that the dominant race to watch out, or other races will seek to seize control. Also, he obviously states that the Nordic race they belonged to was the builders of civilization (Fitzgerald, 2009). Tom's overt racism is further evident in his disdain for people of other races. When he discovers Gatsby's relationship with Daisy and senses that Daisy may leave him, he feels anxious and uneasy about his marriage. He complains that nowadays, people increasingly disrespect traditional family life and family institutions, and next, they may throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white (Fitzgerald, 2009). This perspective shows that in Tom's consciousness, as a white aristocrat class, he is not only superior from his social status richness, but also from his inherent superiority of his race.^[9]

While the primary focus of *The Great Gatsby* is not on racism, both the novel and its film adaptation subtly highlight the prevalence of racial prejudice during the 1920s. Tom comes from the most privileged group and is unimpressed by people of other races. His character serves as a reflection of the entrenched racist attitudes of the time, reinforcing the notion that despite the novel's broader themes, the author and director silently remind the readers and viewers that racism was a pervasive and influential force in the social fabric of that era. This portrayal of racism is an important reminder that even as the story focuses primarily on exploring the extravagance of the Jazz Age, there remain other issues in society that shaped people's lives in the 1920s.

10. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper examines the pursuit of material wealth and social status during the Jazz Age through the analysis of symbolic elements, scenes, and themes in both the novel and its film adaptation. It highlights how the quest for social status and hedonistic pleasures leads to a society characterized by overindulgence and emptiness. This paper also explores the hegemonic culture of the 1920s as depicted through class domination, the social circles within the upper class, and the moral and legal leniency afforded to the most wealthy and privileged. It indicates the inequality of power and double standards caused by the hegemonic culture. Moreover, the American Dream is a central theme in both the novel and the film. By analyzing Gatsby's pursuit of the American dream, as well as its realization and his ultimate destruction, this paper demonstrates the illusory and often disillusioning nature of chasing social status and wealth. Furthermore, this paper addresses the representation of women's culture in the 1920s by analyzing the female characters of Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker in *The Great Gatsby*. The analysis reveals how, despite many advancements in social status and influence, women remained largely subordinate and constrained by societal stereotypes and pressure from the men in their lives. The novel and its film adaptation provide valuable insight into the complexity and inequality of gender dynamics during the Jazz Age. Finally, although racism is not a central theme in the story, it is nevertheless reflected through the character of Tom Buchanan. His portrayal underscores the persistence of racial privilege and discrimination during the 1920s. Through these analyses of the cultural characteristics of the time, this paper

illustrates that *The Great Gatsby* not only captures the social dynamics and values of the Jazz Age but also reflects the mindset and lifestyle of its people. Understanding these cultural characteristics is crucial for gaining a deeper insight into the historical context and societal changes of that time. In today's world, people can draw lessons from these cultural traits and examine modern society's values and cultural tendencies. By reflecting on these differences, contemporary society can make more informed contributions to social development.

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