

# The Age of Moral Vacuum: Disillusionment and Rebirth of Faith--Exploring the Moving Causes of Gatsby's Tragedy in "the Great Gatsby"

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**Abstract:** This paper takes the tragic characterization of Gatsby in Fitzgerald's work *The Great Gatsby* published in the 1920s as the focus, and explores how the youthful faith represented by Gatsby is disillusioned and reborn in the moral vacuum of money. When Gatsby's American dream is poured with too much effort and imagination, what he pursues no longer points to a figurative person but to a Platonic idealized concept, which is why Gatsby's tragedy shakes people's hearts.

## 1. Introduction

In the 1920s, "The Great Gatsby" was published in New York. In a golden age of American fiction, when great works were being published, this work was highly praised by prominent literary leaders. The famous poet and literary critic T. S. Eliot called it "the first step in American fiction since Henry James. Hemingway, remembering Fitzgerald, wrote, "Since he could write a book as good as *The Great Gatsby*, I am sure he could write a better one."<sup>[1]</sup> Eliot and Hemingway, as demanding literary critics, rated this work high enough for the reader to understand the weight of the work. The work takes the mysterious background of the wealthy Gatsby as the starting point, and recounts the destruction of the American dream in "the most indulgent and gorgeous era in American history."<sup>1</sup> However, it is worth noting that Fitzgerald's tragedy of disillusionment is rich in romantic and poetic strokes, which I speculate is related to Fitzgerald's "dreamer's temperament" and "influenced by" his "most Fitzgerald's "dreamer's temperament" and the style of fiction writing "by the writer he was most attracted to, the great English Romantic poet Keats"<sup>1</sup>.

The difference with the 19th century Romantic literature is that the work shows an "anti-romantic tendency" formed by a distorted romantic mood.<sup>[2]</sup> The portrayal of Gatsby's tragedy is created by the ugly, cruel and naked reality, which contrasts with Gatsby's dream of romantic love and the romantic illusion created by money, thus This contrasts with Gatsby's dream of romantic love and the romantic illusions created with money, thus expressing the sacredness of romance and the cruelty of reality. This is what makes Gatsby's tragedy so powerful.

In this paper, we delve into the content of the novel's text to explore the reasons why the tragedy of Gatsby's disillusioned faith is so moving in an era of moral vacuum permeated by the taste of money.

## 2. Gatsby's Behavioral Trajectory Reflects the Misery of a Despicable Society

Throughout the novel, the author believes that the trajectory of the main character Gatsby's behavior can be divided into three stages, using material things as an entry point:

### 2.1 Pursuit of Material Things

#### 2.1.1 Pursuit of Material Deeds

Many scholars consider Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy to be self-destructive and dirty, and are critical of Gatsby's materialistic pursuits, such as Zhao Mei's view that "no matter how saintly Gatsby is at heart, his actions have been the cruelest form of self-destruction of his love" and Zhang Lirong's view that "by the time Gatsby's generation, the corruption of the American dream has become even more serious". The author acknowledges the illegitimacy of Gatsby's acquisition of wealth. When

Gatsby changed his name to the boat that “represented all the beauty and charm of the world”<sup>1</sup>, Gatsby's attempt to pursue material things to get rich first appeared. When Gatsby left the army wearing a medal to meet Wolf Sam, he began to pursue material things with criminal activities. The author believes that this is why Nick “has not approved of him since the beginning”. Fitzgerald wrote more ironically that Gatsby has become the moral superior in Nick's mouth compared to the greedy and selfish spiritual trash Tom Buchanan, which reflects the serious decay of the American dream under materialistic pursuits and hedonism.

### **2.1.2 Reasons for Pursuing Material Things**

However, tracing back to the reasons for Gatsby's desperate money pursuit of material conditions, the author has a sympathetic attitude toward the cruelty of his pursuit of material means. First of all, the reason behind the intentional approach to Cody's “Son of God”, a young man of seventeen, James Gates, who immediately changed his name to the Platonic idealization of “Son of God”<sup>1</sup> when he met the western pioneer Dan Cody in Lake Superior, was the desire to escape his background identity as a poor crofter. Gatsby never really acknowledges his parents because the idea of money in the American dream of the twenties shaped the perverse values of the whole society, and the corrupting power of money alienated young Gatsby's mind and made him sink into the quagmire of money. Secondly, the reason why Gatsby, as a major, “sold himself out to the big extortionist Wolf Sam”<sup>[3]</sup>, is largely driven by the stimulus of Daisy's marriage to Tom<sup>1</sup>, “a man of great size and stature”. When Gatsby and Daisy first meet, the novel reads:

Gatsby deeply experienced how wealth confines and preserves youth and mystery, how a set of clothes keeps people fresh, and how Daisy, like silver, shines brightly and stands peacefully above the fierce struggle for survival of the poor<sup>1</sup>.

It is evident that Gatsby's later scandalous behavior in Wolf Sam is driven by the invisible drive Daisy brings him. Gatsby clearly knows that wealth can give Daisy to create a sense of security, and more than anything else, he can experience the illusion of love built by material things. Daisy, who radiates the glow of money, provides the catalyst for Gatsby's desire to be rich. Thus, the powerful contrast between the purity of Gatsby's inner search for love and the sinfulness of the means to obtain it stems from the assimilation of society and the individual in it, Daisy.

## **2.2 Addicted to Substances**

The first five paragraphs at the beginning of the third chapter of the novel describe the air of singing and drinking that filled Gatsby's villa every night when a big party was held, such as: “All summer nights there was music coming from my neighbor's house”, “Men and women came and went like moths among the laughter, the champagne and the stars Every Friday, five crates of oranges and lemons arrive from a New York fruit store; every Monday, they are shipped out his back door as a little pyramid of half-pulled peels”, “bringing hundreds of feet of canvas tents and countless colored electric lights”, “the band arrives by seven o'clock, a full band, fully equipped, oboe, trombone, saxophone, big violin ..... There was everything.” Gatsby's cottage was lit up all summer nights, which is a testament to the money that enveloped him after he became rich. The wealthy Gatsby changed his usual polite face when asked how he acquired his wealth, which shows his escape from the injustice of the means of getting rich, and also reflects the side effect of the addiction to material things that led to the unwillingness to face up to the wrongdoing of his own.

## **2.3 Beyond Matter**

### **2.3.1 Scapegoating and Sacrifice for Love**

Daisy was on her way back to the West Egg from New York when she drove her car and killed Tom's mistress, Wilson, who suddenly came out of the car, and Gatsby was only concerned about Daisy's emotional state when he asked Nick about the scene. “. Gatsby, fearing that Tom would behave angrily toward Daisy, stands in the moonlight on the floor of Daisy's room, standing empty guard, and is eventually killed by Wilson by mistake. All of Gatsby's actions point to the guarding of divine love under self-idealization.

### **2.3.2 Contrast with Middle Class and Poor Class**

Tom in the novel is a representative of the typically wealthy middle class of power in American society at the time, and he is only eager to make quick gains. His union with Daisy is only a marriage of wealth and status, so it is not a matter of shame that Tom has a well-known mistress in his circle rather than a matter of bragging about it. Their moral principles are focused on superficial vested interests and superficial hedonism, and all actions that do not undermine and threaten their power and social status are legitimate.

Mrs. Wilson's cheating on Tom in the novel is typical of money worship, and Mrs. Wilson's marriage to Wilson is also attracted by his superficial gentlemanly behavior and decent suit; and the cheating after marriage is because the material life created for her by Tom makes her satisfied. Mrs. Wilson's purpose of all behavior ultimately points only to the satisfaction of materialistic desires above subsistence.

Whereas Gatsby merely sees the power, status, and materialism they see as ends in themselves as a means to pursue the idealized dream of love, Gatsby ultimately points to the spiritual dream of transcendence. Gatsby's inner romance cannot conquer Daisy's outer romance (beauty), but Gatsby's outer mediocrity conquers Daisy's inner mediocrity<sup>2</sup>. For Gatsby, wealth is only a means to achieve love, and love must trump wealth, a transcendent belief that distinguishes Gatsby from the rest of American society. Although Gatsby's means to achieve his ends are not legitimate, as he makes a fortune by selling bootleg liquor and attracts Daisy's attention with an extravagant dinner party, his means and ends are purely innocent and passionate, with the tension of life's passion.

## **3. Gatsby's Ideological Logic Against the Collapse of Real Morality**

### **3.1 Disillusionment of Faith**

The disillusionment of Gatsby's faith is not only a personal tragedy, but also represents the tragedy of the defeat of American social idealism to the pragmatism represented by Tom.

#### **3.1.1 The Disillusionment of Love Faith**

Gatsby's infatuation is similar to that of teenage Werther, who holds the illusion of purity in love, but he is confronted with a tainted world full of money lust. The most coincidental thing is that Daisy, whom he loves, is a charm cast in gold, and Gatsby is soberly aware of it. Gatsby said to Nick: "Her voice is full of money". Nick also admitted: "That's the source of the endless charm that ebbs and flows in her voice."<sup>1</sup>

Gatsby's tragedy lies in the use of personal behavior that uses money as a means to confront social behavior that uses money as an end in life, resisting society with personal beliefs and becoming a counter-current.

After the hairline, Gatsby uses Nick and Jordan as a bridge to establish a meeting with Daisy, for which he has waited five full years. When Daisy entered Nick's home to meet Gatsby, she said, "We haven't seen each other for years." And Gatsby replied offhandedly, "Five whole years to November." <sup>1</sup>Gatsby's clear memory of the date reflects everything he does: entertaining strange guests with sumptuous ingredients every night, arranging the most magnificent cottage greenery, hiring servants to take care of the cottage, all for his one simple yet deep desire - to see Daisy and relive his old dreams. Unfortunately, Daisy only loves the "silk shirts" and "huge houses" that symbolize material things, and Gatsby only uses money as a means to capture Daisy's heart, which has money as its actual purpose, and eventually faces the unfortunate end of Daisy's escape from her feelings.

#### **3.1.2 The Disillusionment of Faith in Life**

After Gatsby's death, his father, Henry C. Gates, came to the villa and showed Nick Gatsby's childhood schedule and personal determination to find that "Jamie was destined for greatness"<sup>1</sup>. He grew up with a sense of conviction and the discipline to fight for his life. On the positive side, Gatsby's education in life at Cody's or Wolf Sam's illegal business with him were all about trying to

live free from hardship and thus pursuing that idealized love that transcends material things. The tragedy of Gatsby is that he believed in the power of love and underestimated the weight of money. With Wilson's life gunshot, Gatsby's faith still lost to the manipulation of human nature by material things.

### 3.2 The Rebirth of Faith

One of the more interesting episodes of the novel is the introduction of all the visitors to Gatsby's villa that summer, from "Clarence Endy" and "The Zidlers" from the East Egg, etc., to "Mr. and Mrs. Poe" and "Mr. and Mrs. Mallard" from the West Egg, etc., to "Gus Wise" and "Horace O'Donovan" from the theater, etc. Nick singled out, "All of these people came to Gatsby's villa that summer." But all of these people did not come to Gatsby's villa at the funeral that summer. The ludicrous contrast between power and status and being victimized and reduced to a suspect in the cottage is an ironic reflection of the rotten American society of the 1920s. Wolfe Sam's line "We should all learn to talk about friendship when our friends are alive, after the death of a person, my personal principle is to stay out of the way" reflects exactly the principle of the group, so the funeral in addition to the father and Nick and no third friend to attend.

The betrayal of trust due to the supremacy of profit highlights Gatsby's transcendent qualities under the profit-oriented society and the collapse of moral order, giving hope to the few people in American society at that time who always held on to their weak ideals and making Gatsby's soul immortal.

## 4. Conclusion

Even if the American dream is shrinking and rotting, the American dream is gradually looking great due to the presence of one Gatsby after another. "So the American Dream is an ideal that is indispensable to American society, even if that ideal can never become a reality."<sup>3</sup>Gatsby's heart-shaking tragedy gives posterity the strength to persevere and gives hope to the ruins and moral void of American society. If there is at least one person working for a remote utopia, then this transcendent belief in material resistance should always persist. Although "Gatsby's tragic life was like a firework, a moment of brilliant knowledge", the resistance to the moral vacuum brought about by his disillusionment will live on forever.

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