

Existential Interpretation of *The Great Gatsby*

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ABSTRACT

The Great Gatsby by Fitzgerald is a representative masterpiece of 1920s American "Jazz Age". Since its publication in 1925, critics home and abroad commented this novel from various perspectives, such as new criticism, traditional historical and cultural criticism, biographical criticism, psychoanalysis, feminism, sexual studies, cultural studies and so on, which laid a good foundation for its review and research. This paper is devoted to interpreting *The Great Gatsby* from the perspective of existentialism to explore the tragic origin.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Gatsby, Absurd world, Freedom of choice, Anxiety and fear.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Great Gatsby, first published in 1925, is a classic fiction of hope and disillusion by Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), who was regarded as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century. *The Great Gatsby* is a moving portrayal of the power of romantic imagination, as well as the pathos and courage entailed in the pursuit of an unattainable dream, for which Fitzgerald is regarded as the spokesman of American Jazz Age. T. S. Elliot commented this novel as the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James, because Fitzgerald depicted the extolled grandest and most boisterous, reckless and merry-making scene. ^[1]

The Great Gatsby mainly tells a tragic story in which Gatsby, a young man who pursues his dream of making money and love under the concept of "money comes first", during which, he loses his sense of morality, finally becomes disillusioned and gets killed by mistake.

Existentialism is a philosophical concept about human being existence originated in the first part of 19th century in Europe. Representatives of existentialism are Danish theologian Kierkegaard, German philosopher Martin Heidegger, French philosopher and writer Jean-Paul Sartre.^[2] The paper is devoted to presenting the existential interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* on the basis of principles of Sartre's existentialism which advocates that the world is absurd and life is painful. Gatsby, Wilson and Myrtle are the incarnation of this principle. Existentialism also upholds that human being have the freedom of choice in the godless and absurd world, which is true to Daisy. Daisy's husband. As an old aristocratic, Tom lived in

anxiety and fear. The five protagonists' life evidently embodies existential ideas.

Through the exploration of the protagonists' pursuit of the essence of life, the paper presents Gatsby, Wilson and Myrtle's absurd situation, human alienation, personal will and Daisy's freedom of choice, and reveals human's survival dilemma and spiritual crisis. The existential interpretation of *The Great Gatsby* from the perspective of Sartre's existentialism provides a more unique perspective for the study of the works home and abroad, enriches the research content, and arouses readers and researchers to rethink the masterpiece and life.

2. GATSBY: ABSURD WORLD AND PAINFUL LIFE

The Great Gatsby depicts the complicated social reality of the 1920s in the United States. Under the concept of materialism and money supremacy, people's living conditions at that time presented the spiritual wasteland in the process of pursuing money and hedonism.

2.1. Young and Poor Gatsby

Young and poor Gatsby fell in love with Daisy, but the first World War broke, and he was sent to the war. Five years later, he returned to Daisy but Daisy was married to aristocratic Tom Buchanan. Gatsby built a luxurious mansion where Daisy's house can be seen and he often held grand party in order to attract Daisy to come to his mansion because of his deep love towards

Daisy. His (Gatsby) clothes, his car, his house, his parties--all brand him as newly rich, unschooled in the social graces and sense of superiority ingrained not only in Tom Buchanan but also in Nick Carraway.^[3] Gatsby left Daisy for one reason that he was poor and only the rich can deserve Daisy's love and he must try his best to earn enough money. This thought urged Gatsby to gain wealth even via bootlegging wine and other illegal business.

2.2. *New Rich Gatsby*

Gatsby achieved material wealth through his hard-working and persistent efforts and opportunity and even illegal transaction in five years. When he was confident enough to marry Daisy, soon he found that his dream was disillusioned. Daisy had married Tom Buchanan soon after Gatsby left. He was still in the shadow of the distorted love towards Daisy until he was killed in the swimming pool by Wilson, Daisy's husband's lover's husband. Existentialism can give some explanation on its tragic origin. For Gatsby, the world is absurd, and life is painful. He fell in love with Daisy at first sight, but he was too poor to love Daisy. Five years later, when he was rich enough to pursue his love, all has changed. He paid his life for love and believed that all was unreasonable. Gatsby's life experience proved the world was absurd, therefore, life was painful, which conforms to existential principle.

2.3. *Gatsby's Tragedy*

Although Daisy was not happy with his husband Tom, she still indulged in rich aristocratic life and would not like to elope with Gatsby. Tom got involved in extramarital love affair with Myrtle Wilson, the wife of a car repair shop owner George Wilson. Daisy hit Myrtle Wilson to death unintentionally when driving Gatsby's car. Tom told Wilson that Gatsby hit his wife. Finally, Gatsby was killed by Wilson in his swimming pool. Only Nick and Gatsby's father and several servants attended Gatsby's funeral. Obviously, it's a tragedy which arouse reader's sympathy and reflection.

Sartre proposed that hell is other people, which mainly refers to human's loneliness and alienation. Gatsby often held boisterous party in his grand mansion, but many people attending his party even didn't know who was Gatsby. The narrator Nick tried to know Gatsby, but his loneliness was obvious when all visitors left the party. He waited Daisy's call until his death, but Daisy didn't give Gatsby any message about her fault in hitting Myrtle Wilson. Meanwhile, Daisy's family went to Europe for a trip in order to escape their responsibility in the car accident. Gatsby's funeral presents alienation of human being. People enjoyed Gatsby's party and happiness based on his wealthy and generous entertainment in the grand mansion. After his

death, nobody cared about him and they were reluctant to attend his funeral although Nick called many ever visitors to invite them to attend his funeral. Human's relationships were so alienated during Gatsby's funeral, which is not individual's tragedy, but also human being's tragedy and alienation.

3. DAISY: FREEDOM OF CHOICE

Daisy, as the heroine in this novel, is a frequently-commented character. When Gatsby first met Daisy, she was so innocent and beautiful that they fell in love at first sight. When Gatsby left for war and wealth, she married to aristocratic Tom who had a mistress after marriage. They lived a rich but dull life, but Daisy was accustomed to enjoying aristocratic lifestyle. Existentialism advocated that human being had the freedom of choice. Daisy exercised her freedom of choice in marriage and still was responsible for her choice when Gatsby returned to persuade her to even elope with him. Daisy refused Gatsby's request and cherished her own marriage, which manifested existential freedom of choice.

3.1. *Before Marriage*

In the 1920s, America experienced unprecedented economic prosperity and hedonism and money worship became the dominant mood of society. The new rich represented by Gatsby and the old rich by Tom indulged in affluent material wealth, but they presented the spiritual wasteland and lived aimless and dull life. Human has the freedom of choice according to existentialism. After Gatsby left, Daisy often attended several parties in one day and enjoyed the luxurious life. Tempted by wealth and enjoyable life, Daisy chose to marry Tom soon after Gatsby left, which can be interpreted as Daisy's conducting her freedom of choice. Some critics believed that Daisy was immoral in love and marriage because she married to Tom for his wealth and social status. However, it's not fair to Daisy because Gatsby left no message or hope to Daisy. Adding to the money-worship social morale, Daisy's marriage to Tom was appropriate for her status and social norm.

3.2. *After Marriage*

Daisy's action defined her existence and then her freedom of choice gave essence to her existence, which endowed meaning to her life and essence. Therefore, Daisy is the incarnation of existential freedom of choice. When Gatsby returned and tempted her by manipulating his great fortune and persuaded her to leave Tom, Daisy refused and still was responsible for her marriage even though her husband had a mistress. Daisy's action manifested that she was the practitioner of freedom of choice.

In fact, Daisy was deeply influenced by the money-worship morale, which can be seen from her reaction to Gatsby's grand mansion and too many clothes. Gatsby believed he could be successful to regain Daisy's love. However, Gatsby had the illusion that Daisy should still love him. If Daisy loved money, Tom had the stronger basis than Gatsby. They both behaved themselves on the basis of the major principles of existentialism, which is their tragic origin.

4. TOM: ANXIETY AND FEAR

Anxiety and fear are Sartre's important ideas. Sartre believed that it was through anxiety that human became aware of his absolute freedom. Sartre understood anxiety as a form of free consciousness. Tom, as an old aristocratic, possessive and arrogant, had natural superiority compared to the new rich such as Gatsby.

4.1. Extravagant Life

Although he enjoyed material wealth, his life was filled with anxiety in many occasions such as in his relationship with his mistress Myrtle Wilson, who was a vulgar woman with no social position, depending on her husband's car-repairing shop for a living. Tempted by Tom, they had the illegal love affair regardless of morality. On the one hand, Tom enjoyed this relationship because he had enough economic strength to pay for Myrtle's expense, but on the other hand, Tom's mind was full of anxiety when facing with Daisy and Wilson, which can be perceived when he received the call from Myrtle in his house together with Daisy, and in the car-repairing shop talking with Myrtle.

4.2. Anxiety and Fear

The complicated relationship with Myrtle made Tom anxious but reluctant to end it, so anxiety haunted him. Every time he went to the Wilson's car-repairing shop, he also was anxious because he must conceal his relationship with Mrs. Wilson meanwhile talking to Wilson. Tom was anxious and nervous when enjoying the transitory joy in his private house together with Mrs. Wilson and her friends. It seems that Tom was enjoying his wealthy life, but his life usually was full of anxiety.

When Gatsby met Daisy and Tom, Tom was very anxious, and even irritable as soon as he knew that Gatsby had fallen in love with Daisy. He even showed his aggressive attitude towards Gatsby when Daisy talked to Gatsby because Gatsby was so wealthy and generous that formed great threat for her marriage. His fear of losing Daisy or betrayal was evident. Life for Tom was tragic in some sense although he possessed great wealth.

When Daisy hit Myrtle to death by driving Gatsby's car, Tom told Wilson that it was Gatsby who knocked

down and killed Myrtle, which caused Wilson to kill Gatsby and then kill himself. After Gatsby and Wilson died, Tom's mind was full of fear, so that he and his family went to Europe for a trip for escaping their responsibility for the death of three people. Although they were far away from the criminal scene, Tom's anxiety and fear would not diminish. Tom's life manifests Sartre's idea about anxiety and fear.

5. WILSON AND MYRTLE: VICTIM OF SOCIAL STRATUM

Every one in this novel explores the essence of life in different ways. Hostile relationship could be perceived everywhere in the story, which proved Sartre's idea that hell is other people. Mr. Wilson and his wife Myrtle Wilson represented the American lower class. No matter how hard they tried, they still could not transcend their social class to enjoy the aristocratic life.

5.1. Myrtle's Transitory Joy

Myrtle's smoldering sensuality attracted Tom Buchanan, and through the illegal extramarital with Tom, she enjoyed the transitory joy that transcended her social class. Married the pallid proprietor of a gas station in the ash-heaps, Myrtle must cross a vast social divide to reach the territory of the upper class. Meanwhile, Tom needed the chance to show his social superiority on the basis of Myrtle's inferior stratum. In the private apartment rented by Tom, Myrtle, inspired by whiskey, indeed enjoyed transitory joy in material and sensuality.

5.2. Doom and Gloom for Myrtle

Undeserved enjoy caused troubles for Myrtle, for example, she often quarreled with her husband Wilson because she could not love her husband but Tom could not marry her due to their disparity in social stratum. Therefore, her life was as gray as her husband and the ash valley. Although she could be together with Tom occasionally, her behavior, her clothes, and her consumption revealed her status clearly, especially when she bought the dog. Tom despised her from his action. Some critics even compared Myrtle to a dog. This unsteady relationship predicted Myrtle's tragic end and Tom could be away from any trouble by manipulating his grand wealth. When Myrtle was hit to death by Daisy, it seemed that she finished her task as the comparative tragic character.

5.3. Wilson's Death

As the lower class, excited by his wife's death, Wilson killed Gatsby as the scapegoat and then killed himself. His gray and pallid life ended with Myrtle and Gatsby. However, the American old rich represented by Buchanans could still continue to enjoy their luxurious life,

which presented that the weak are the prey of the strong.

Sartre's major idea that the world is absurd and life is painful was very true to Mr. Wilson and his wife Myrtle. They lived in the ash valley and operated a gas station. The environment was polluted by industrial waste gas and urban garbage. Although they worked hard, they only made ends meet and there was no chance to enjoy prosperous life and finally fell victim to the rich.

6. CONCLUSION

Gatsby lived in the absurd world and a painful life until his death, while Daisy acted on her freedom of choice and was responsible for her choice, and Tom lived in anxiety and fear, which presented a vivid tragedy. Mr. Wilson and his wife Myrtle also lived in the absurd world and lived a painful life until their death. Existential principles provide the answer to their tragic origin. *The Great Gatsby* and its author-Fitzgerald presented the real American prosperity in 1920s "Jazz Age" by exploring the material and spiritual world of human beings, which can provide inspiration and reflection for modern people.

FOUNDATION

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