A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Gatsby’s Faulty Perception of Reality in *The Great Gatsby*

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**Abstract**

The study explores how the use of images and symbols helps readers to comprehend the novel *The Great Gatsby* and further appreciate works of literature. Jay Gatsby is a romantic tragic hero, who idealistically believes that he can bring the past into the present—to regain Daisy Fay and “repeat the past.” However, his idealistic, romantic dream is betrayed by reality and the impossibility of his goal. Through a series of archetypal images and symbols, readers are taken into the romantic, idealistic world of Gatsby, who is unwilling to compromise with reality and hence becomes a victim of the material world. A psychoanalytic analysis of Gatsby was used to help readers understand Gatsby’s faulty perception of reality and his irrational idealization of Daisy Fay.

**Keywords:** archetypes, images, symbols, psychoanalytic analysis

1. **Introduction**

Psychoanalytic criticism takes the techniques of psychoanalysis, a treatment of neuroses developed by Freud (1966), and applies them to examine literature works. It is a science concerned not only with the interaction between conscious and unconscious but also with the way of mental function. According to Freud (1966), each individual can be divided into three parts—a conscious, a preconscious, and
an unconscious. The conscious includes sensory perceptions, thoughts, and feelings an individual is aware of. The preconscious contains memories and thoughts an individual is not aware of, but sometimes these memories and thoughts can be recalled. The unconscious is the repressed desires, inner fears, or traumas that an individual never be aware of, but can be revealed through dreams. Jung (1990), a Swiss psychiatrist, also believed that there are three parts making up of individuals’ human psyche: the shadow, the anima, and the animus. The shadow consists of the part of self that an individual would like to neglect, consciously or unconsciously. The anima/animus is the spirit of an individual that he/she would like to be, usually represented via the opposite gender. Men have a female anima while women have a male animus. Jung also invented the term “archetypes” to refer to symbolic elements which can disclose universal human conditions.

In psychoanalytic criticism, Freud’s and Jung’s theories are always used to let readers comprehend the latent content of literature works to reveal specific meaning or condition shared by all humanity. The study intends to recognize archetypal images and symbols in *The Great Gatsby* to help readers work with the novel and further appreciate other works of literature. Through the analysis of images and symbols, such as a clock and green light, which represent timelessness and eternity, readers are taken into the romanticized ideal world of Gatsby, who cannot survive in reality, leading to his disillusionment and destruction.

2. **Gatsby as Archetypal Hero**

With no privilege, wealth, or education, Gatsby manages to upgrade his social status and become someone he is not, changing his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby (Schreier, 2007; Slater, 1973, Steinbrink, 1980), “at the age of seventeen and at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 124). His parents “were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 124). With a “Platonic conception of himself” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 124), Gatsby voluntarily cuts himself off from his parents, creating the personal history and image he wishes to project. His copy of Benjamin Franklin’s schedule also qualifies him as an archetypal hero, a person who is industrious, ambitious, romantic and thirsty for adventure (Lehan, 1980). When he was a young soldier on his way overseas, Gatsby was attracted to Daisy Fay at a party. Since then, “his life ha[s] been confused and
disordered” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 140). Believing that if he can return to a certain point and begin over again, he may “find out what that thing was” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 140). Hence, in order to recapture the past and win Daisy back, Gatsby devotes himself to accumulating wealth and upgrading his social position for a single purpose—to recapture Daisy’s love and to “repeat the past” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 140).

He romantically believes that his money and love can rescue Daisy from a bad marriage, and at the same time redeem his own life, which has been meaningless for years (Mandel, 1988). With this romantic dream, he entertains lavishly only because maybe someday Daisy will “wander into one of his parties” and see his possessions—his house and shirts. For Gatsby, “Daisy’s reaction was the only thing that mattered.” He “revaluated everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 116).

3. Fay as Careless Leisure Class Women

Daisy Fay, Tom Buchanan’s wife, represents the women of the rich, careless leisure class, born to social class and wealth. She was “the most popular of all the young girls in Louisville” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 95). Like Tom, she has “been everywhere and seen everything and done everything” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 24), travelling around Santa Barbara, Cannes, Deauville, and then settling down in Chicago. With money and status, it is supposed that she has a chance to be educated as a woman of wisdom, but ironically, she is hollow despite her beauty, always planning something but unable to make decisions for herself (Mandel, 1988). Although she fell in love with Gatsby years ago, she knew that beauty cannot last long without money or status, and instead chose to marry Tom Buchanan, a man with money, status, and identity, hence willingly becoming imprisoned by money.

She is also a woman who has no capacity to live in the present, only having “gay, exciting things” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 14) in her past and future. For instance, Daisy always waits for the longest day of the year but always misses. While Gatsby forces her to choose between him and Tom Buchanan, she can do nothing but prevaricate. As Nick Carraway mentions when he hears of Tom’s adultery, he thinks that “the
thing for Daisy to do was to rush out of the house, child in arms—but apparently there were no such intentions in her head” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 28). Daisy is a wealthy, indecisive and irresponsible woman, willing to be “shaped” by some outside force—“of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand,” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 189) and hence she is dominated by her husband Tom Buchanan.

4. Buchanan as the Established Rich

Tom Buchanan also represents “the established rich,” who are born wealthy and inherit large family fortunes. Tom Buchanan is illustrated as a person with inherited wealth and position, for “[h]is family were enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 9); “He’d brought down a string of polo ponies from Lack forest”; he can offer Daisy pearls “value[d] at three hundred and fifty thousand dollars” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 96). With money and power, he is “a sturdy straw-haired man of thirty, with rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner.” Also his “two shining arrogant eyes” that have “established dominance over his face” make people learn to dread him (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 10-11). Even Nick is awed by the power of his imposing wealth and manner. After all, his physically imposing body turns out to be “a cruel body” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 10-11): for instance, he “shouted Mrs. Wilson” and “broke her nose with his open hand” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 48).

Travelling around the world and finally settling down in East Egg, New York, Tom Buchanan is used to showing off his possessions, including his garden, his stable, his Georgian Colonial mansion, and even his mistress and his wife Daisy. He treats people far beneath him in fortune and position, such as George Wilson and Jay Gatsby, with open contempt (Mellow, 1992; Slater, 1973). With money but no purpose in his life, he is corrupted by the meaninglessness and ease of the money, getting lost in the lost generation, for whom “all gods are dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken” (Ghasemi & Mitra, 2009; 2010). The house of Tom Buchanan is “a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 10), a house displaying the “red” chaos of unbridled emotions (the id), and the “white” purity of conscience, the superego. To put the conflict into psychoanalytical terms, the red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion symbolizes
the conflict people struggle with between the pleasure principle (“red”) and the formalities of reality (“white”). Tom Buchanan and Daisy Fay lose their struggle and are devoured by chaos. As Nick says, “[t]hey are a rotten crowd” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 193): Tom commits adultery with Myrtle Wilson; Jordan Baker drives carelessly (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 75); and Daisy runs over Myrtle Wilson while driving Gatsby’s car (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 173-181). They all share a moral carelessness, with no “interior rules” to act as “brakes” on their desires (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 76).

5. East Egg versus West Egg

East Egg is a place full of moral corruption and lavishness, in which people hold no sincere attitudes toward love, desiring to play at life rather than to take part in it, as represented by Daisy Fay’s insincere attitude toward love and Tom Buchanan’s adultery. When Nick visits the Buchanans, Daisy playfully suggests “arrang[ing] a marriage” for Nick and Jordan Baker, saying to Nick that “I’ll sort of—oh—fling you together. You know—lock you up accidentally in linen closets and push you out to sea in a boat, and all that sort of thing” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 26). Moreover, while Gatsby is visiting her house, as her husband Tom leaves the room again, Daisy carelessly “got up and went over to Gatsby and pulled his face down, kissing him on the mouth,” murmuring to Gatsby, “[y]ou know I love you.” Her insincerity causes Jordan to criticize her, calling her “a low, vulgar girl!” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 146). Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson are just as indiscreet: Tom shows off his mistress openly and she invites everyone to a party, unashamed to let people know of her adulterous affair.

Unlike Tom and Daisy, who have no purpose in life, Gatsby has his idealistic, romantic dream—to win Daisy back and to repeat or reinvent his past (Steinbrink, 1980). However, like Tom’s, his house is also quite chaotic: When he throws a party, in “his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 50). The parties in the novel always end in “a bizarre and tumultuous scene”, with “women having fights with men said to be their husbands” and drunken guests driving their cars into “the ditch beside the road” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 68-71).
Although he increases his instant wealth by shady means, Gatsby has a transcendent goal in his life, which is symbolized by the green light in the novel. The green light represents Gatsby’s hopes, his history, his romantic illusions, and his emotional complex—to win Daisy back again and fix “everything [back] just the way it was” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 140) five years earlier. The first time Nick sees Gatsby, Gatsby “stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and far as I [Nick] as from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 29). The green light becomes a visual symbol reflecting Gatsby’s dream to reunite with Daisy Fay and his longing for eternity (Jung, 1990). He buys the house in West Egg just so that maybe someday Daisy can “be just across the bay”; as Nick says, “[Gatsby] had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths—so that she he could ‘come over’ some afternoon to a stranger’s garden” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p.100).

6. Dream of Regeneration

However, Gatsby’s dream of regenerating the past must be broken (Ghasemi & Mitra, 2009; Steinbrink, 1980), for Daisy is a woman with no substantial nature, having no willpower to make any decisions. Empty and unreal, she cannot make decisions, but “the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 190).

*The Great Gatsby* can be interpreted as an archetypal tragedy, for the novel begins in the spring season, building up the dramatic tension in the climatic summer season, and ends in the fall (Mandel, 1988). The fall season also heralds the fall of Gatsby, a romantic tragic hero who mistakenly believes that he can use his money to renew the past. There are definitely some tragic flaws in Gatsby, for he holds a dream that cannot be tested in the reality (Lehan, 1980; Schreier, 2007). Although Gatsby says that the reason why he is always “among strangers,” drifting “here and there is because he tries to forget the sad thing that happened” to him long ago (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 85), in fact, he manages to ask Nick to invite Daisy to come to Nick’s house for tea, so that he can meet Daisy again. However, the reunion cannot recreate Gatsby’s past and bring back Daisy’s innocence, as Gatsby himself acknowledges when he says afterward: “This is a terrible mistake” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 111).
Although he knows that the reunion is a terrible mistake, Gatsby cannot face reality but sticks to his romantic illusions (Donaldson, 1983; Lehan, 1980). Moreover, he attempts to use his will power to persuade Daisy to say that she never loved Tom. By rejecting the fact of Daisy and Tom’s four-year marriage, Gatsby idealistically believes that he and Daisy can go back to Louisville to be married—“just as [if] it were five years ago” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 139). As he cannot erase the reality of Tom and Daisy’s marriage, Gatsby cannot erase the reality that Daisy has a daughter, undeniable evidence that Daisy is no longer a virgin. This is why, when Gatsby sees Daisy’s little girl, it makes him uneasy: “[H]e kept looking at the child with surprise. I don’t think he had ever really believed in its existence before” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 147). The little girl becomes a substantial obstacle, shattering Gatsby’s romantic illusion that Daisy is a virgin and not yet married. His determination to erase reality forces Daisy to cry to him that “I did love [Tom] once—but I love you too” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 167). Disregarding Nick’s advice that “[y]ou can’t repeat the past” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 140), Gatsby’s obsession makes him unable to fully comprehend it when Daisy says that she “can’t help what’s past” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 167).

7. The Test of Reality

We can see how fragile Gatsby’s dream is when it is put to “the test of reality.” How reality “can’t help what’s past” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 167) is revealed in the broken clock, a foreshadow of the inevitable outcome of Gatsby’s actions. During the crucial initial reunion with Daisy, Gatsby’s head “leaned back so far that it rested against the face of a defunct mantelpiece clock, and from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 110). After Gatsby says that “we’ve met before,” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 110), “the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head, whereupon he turned and caught it with trembling fingers and set it back in place (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 109-110). The defunct clock, which points at an hour already passed, symbolizes the past moment that Gatsby wants to return to. The tilt of the clock implies the danger and fragility of returning to the past, which hints that Gatsby’s idealistic romantic dream cannot survive the test of reality (Lehan, 1990). Gatsby’s determination to win Daisy back and to fix “everything just the way it was” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 140) five years before brings about his tragic ending.
After his first reunion with Daisy, Gatsby realizes that it is “a terrible mistake” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 111). Later, he “feels far away from [Daisy]” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 139), beginning to realize that even the real Daisy cannot replace the romantic illusion he has created. Maybe Gatsby is not in love with Daisy as much as he is in love with the youthful image he has made for himself (Donaldson, 1983). Gatsby is around thirty, an age that fits into the “menacing decade” and “the dead calm [of] middle life.” As Nick says, that age represents the passing of youth, the turning point of life, and the death of the youthful dream—“Thirty, the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 170-171). Afraid that his youth is going to slip away, Gatsby returns to recapture his youth through recapturing Daisy Fay. When Gatsby mentions that Daisy’s “voice is full of money” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 151), it is possible that Gatsby cares what money has done to her soul,” as it has done for Daisy’s charming voice and beauty—symbols of her youth. As Gatsby himself says, he is “overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 188).

8. Carraway’s Individuation Journey

For Nick Carraway, his life on the east coast can be interpreted as his “separation-initiation-return” journey to achieve autonomy and individualization (Jung, 1990). Coming from a mid-western city, Nick has an inherent moral capacity. One reason that Nick comes to the east coast following the Great War is that he “came back restless. Instead of being the warm center of the world, the Middle West now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe—so [he] decided to go East and learn the bond business” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 5-6). On the other hand, he has “no intention of being rumored into marriage” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 27). However, although he wants to have a clean break with a girl in his hometown, Nick is still “even vaguely engaged” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 32) and keeps up his romantic involvement with her, writing letters “once a week and signing them: ‘Love, Nick’” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 76).

However, in the East he becomes entangled with people who are insensitive and careless—the brutal and unfaithful Tom Buchanan, the adulterous Myrtle Wilson, the dishonest and careless Jordan Baker, and the insincere and empty Daisy Fay.
Almost at the symbolic age of thirty, Nick, with a sense of morality based on his mid-western heritage, quickly sees through the carelessness and insensitivity of these people. He shows that such people can only degrade themselves into becoming ruthless exploiters and leading empty lives.

After Gatsby’s death, Nick goes home, feeling that he “wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 4). In order to leave things in order, he ends his love affair with Jordan Baker, saying that “I am thirty, I’m five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 224). He says that he is “going to bring back all such things into my life and become again that most limited of all specialists, the ‘well-rounded man’” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 7).

Unlike the Buchanans, Nick is “slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on [his] desires” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 76). Better than Gatsby at perceiving what is really going on, Nick reminds Gatsby that “You can’t repeat the past” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 140). Gatsby’s idealistic, romantic dream is betrayed by his own failure to recognize reality (Donaldson, 1983). Though disapproving of Gatsby, Nick admits that he is “on Gatsby’s side, and alone,” saying that “[t]hey were all very careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made…” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 225-226). Tom Buchanan, Daisy Fay, and Jordan Baker are all part of the “lost generation.” The war has cost them their traditional passion for life, and the only way they have found to revive it is to idle their lives away by drinking, dancing, and socializing (Ghasemi & Mitra, 2010).

In the end, Gatsby becomes a scapegoat. It is actually Daisy who runs over Myrtle Wilson, but Gatsby is blamed and punished for the car accident. Gatsby cleans up the mess the Buchanans have made, while all they can do is leave, taking their “baggage with them” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 206). Increasing his fortune through bootlegging, with extraordinary romantic ideals, Gatsby needs a high-status woman to substantiate his American dream, without realizing that his dream girl, Daisy Fay (Fay, a synonym of “fairy”), is actually not substantial but as unreal as her
namesake (Ghasemi & Mitra, 2009). Maybe Gatsby’s tragedy lies in his attempt to create a fetishized identity, using material means to make his dream come true, which instead leads to his destruction (Mellow, 1992). Nick Carraway implies that once we to use materialism to attain our goals, it turns “a fresh, green breast of the new world” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 227) into “a valley of ashes” (Fitzgerald, 1968, p. 30). The overreliance on materialism turns the spiritual world into a wasteland.

References


