

# Gatsby's "Greatness" in "The Great Gatsby"

Fuhua Liu

School of Foreign Languages, Dalian Jiaotong University, Dalian, Liaoning 116028, China.

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## Abstract

The present paper analyzes Gatsby's "greatness" in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel "The Great Gatsby". Gatsby's "greatness" is shown in his pursuit of wealth, love, American Dream and the past respectively. The analysis of the four "pursuits" helps readers better understand Gatsby's "greatness".

## Keywords

Gatsby, Greatness, Pursuit, "The Great Gatsby".

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## 1. Introduction

A member of "the lost generation", F. Scott Fitzgerald, like any other member, also appears to have got lost in the fast-developing society in the early 1920s following World War I. However, in Fitzgerald's novelette "The Great Gatsby", the protagonist Gatsby definitely knows what he desires and how he can get what he desires through various means. As readers, what we do feel unsure about are the very things that Gatsby is in lifelong pursuit of, while it is the things Gatsby pursues that can truly highlight his greatness. Therefore, the paper will elaborate on the analysis of the things that Gatsby is after in "The Great Gatsby" in a bid to help readers better understand the main character Gatsby's "greatness".

## 2. Body

### 2.1 Gatsby's Greatness Shown in his Pursuit of Wealth

Being the son of a poor farmer from North Dakota, Gatsby is in fact of humble origin. When Gatsby is a little child, he sets his ambitious goals and makes specific schedules to achieve the goals set by himself. Obviously, Gatsby is a hard-working and smart boy different from most of his peers. Gatsby's ambition, determination, diligence, action, smartness and self-discipline all contribute to his unique character and future success in the adult world. It turns out later that through five years of hard work, Gatsby manages to rise from a poor young man to a well-known millionaire. So his greatness first and foremost lies in his self-made millionaire and rags-to-riches legendary tale.

During Gatsby's collecting a large fortune, two facts deserve readers' special attention. The first revealing fact is that Gatsby has acquired an incredible amount of money through illegal means---bootlegging. By inventing such a plot for such an outstanding man with a decent growing past, the writer Fitzgerald seems to suggest that it is practically impossible for any individual from lower classes to become a millionaire through hard work and honesty and that almost all the "old money" from the upper class have accumulated their wealth through illegal or unfair means such as exploitation of the lower-class workers and monopoly of all kinds of resources. So Gatsby's "greatness", like the "old money", is also based on exploitation and cheating.

The other striking fact that reveals Gatsby's greatness is the attitudes that Gatsby holds towards material comforts after he becomes a millionaire. The narrator Nick once praises Gatsby, "Jay! They're rotten crowd. You're worth the whole damn bunch put together!"[1] In the grand parties he holds, instead of stuffing himself with all the delicacies or indulging himself in alcohol, Gatsby is more spiritually concerned, gazing at his lover Daisy's villa and pondering on ways to win his ex-

girlfriend back. In a word, Gatsby attaches little importance to the material comforts brought about by wealth. For Gatsby, wealth has become a means, not the ultimate goal of enjoying material comforts.

## **2.2 Gatsby's Greatness Shown in his Pursuit of Love**

Gatsby and Daisy are from strikingly different classes. Being an officer lieutenant junior grade, Gatsby falls in love with Daisy who is from the upper class. Daisy loves Gatsby despite their different social backgrounds, which has left a lifelong impact on Gatsby. As readers, we may conclude that Daisy used to be in nature a most innocent and kind-hearted lady without prejudice against lower-class people. Unluckily, Daisy later gets married to a super rich man called Tom Buchanan who is rude and uncivilized.

For Gatsby, acquiring a large fortune has become a means to win Daisy back. Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy is hot and persevering. To show his determination to win Daisy's heart again with the money he has accumulated, Gatsby first builds a luxurious villa that faces Daisy's to approach her physically. And he spends piles of cash holding grand parties for free merely to attract Daisy's attention. He also asks Nick to help him to introduce Daisy to him after the failure of attracting Daisy's attention through parties. Gatsby knows clearly that Daisy has ceased to be that innocent girl and has changed into a worldly greedy money girl, but he still clings to his affection for her. When Daisy, driving Gatsby's car, hits and kills Tom's mistress Myrtle Wilson, Gatsby even agrees to serve as the murderer for his beloved. In a word, Gatsby would like to do whatever he can to win Daisy back, even at the cost of his life.

## **2.3 Gatsby's "Greatness" Shown in his Pursuit of "American Dream"**

"The American Dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born or what class they were born into, can attain their own version of success in a society where upward mobility is possible for everyone. The American Dream is achieved through sacrifice, risk-taking, and hard work, rather than by chance." [2] According to the definition of "American Dream", Gatsby seems to be a typical American dream pursuer, as he is born into the working class but attains success through risk-taking and hard work. The upward mobility for Gatsby seems to have proven possible in reality. Gatsby has seemingly become a member of the upper class and has achieved great success.

Gatsby's "greatness" is weakened by his illegal means of making a large fortune. But his "greatness" should never be denied or underestimated because even in such nasty dealings he shows his very wisdom, talent and risk-taking spirit. In my opinion, the invention of such a plot by Fitzgerald does not intend to highlight Gatsby's dishonesty but the corrupted society as a whole. That is, the bourgeois society never truly allows an individual of humble origin to climb the social ladder to the upper class. A lower-class individual can never make it to the top through justifiable and fully legal means. Only the corrupted can survive. Therefore, Gatsby is still "great" in that by following the jungle rules of accumulating wealth adopted by the super rich, he, with a contrasting social background different from the rest of the wealthy, stands out and succeeds.

Gatsby's "greatness" is better shown in his further pursuit of upper-class acceptance and appreciation after his economic success. Gatsby yearns for respect and recognition from the upper class, so he fabricates his family background and educational experience. His lover Daisy, a symbol of "American Dream", is what he wants to win back, as such a marriage to a traditional upper-class lady means the true acceptance of the upper class. The bankruptcy of their marriage suggests that the upper-class society is exclusive to any new invaders. The "old money" will never readily accept a new comer--Gatsby despite his material achievements. Gatsby makes himself a success economically but ends up a failure socially. At the parties held by Gatsby, many guests just come for recreation instead of admiring Gatsby and they raise doubts about Gatsby's identity and past experiences. And nobody attends his funeral except the narrator Nick and his father. In the end, Gatsby's American Dream finally fades away and returns to the original state.

## 2.4 Gatsby's "Greatness" Shown in his Pursuit of the Past

Gatsby strives for the future, but at the same time he remains true to his original aspiration. He tries his best to gain material wealth, spiritual love and a partly unattainable American Dream. What is great about Gatsby is that he is in essence not lost in the lost generation and keeps trying to go back to the past that once enchanted him. "Gatsby's enchantment with Daisy contains an awareness of reversed time travel and going back to the past." [3] The past tender days with Daisy is most memorable for Gatsby. Though poor at that time, Gatsby is spiritually nourished by his love from Daisy. Gatsby and Daisy might both believe then that their love can transcend class differences and overcome all obstacles. To win Daisy's heart back, Gatsby is actually trying the impossible. Gatsby in the depth of his own heart realizes the impossibility of returning to the past. He realizes that Daisy has deteriorated into a money girl, and the once innocent Daisy shall never come alive. Nick once reminds Gatsby, "You can't repeat the past." [1] But Gatsby would like to try the impossible. Perhaps at the very beginning of executing his plan, Gatsby has realized that his act is doomed to failure. But he has a strong yearning to go back to the past tender days, a goal which can only be achieved by re-interacting with his first lover Daisy again. Just as Nick has suggested, Gatsby is unable to "repeat the past" however rich he is at present. It is human nature that a person looks forward to the future in one's prime time of life, and after gaining fame or fortune, he or she will keep looking back on the prime days which are mostly characterized by innocence, hope, love, even poverty, and unyielding struggle for a better future. Of course, Gatsby is no exception. The only difference is that he reaches his prime time earlier and becomes nostalgic earlier than most other celebrities.

The novel ends with the following line, "So we beat on, boats against the currents, borne back ceaselessly into the past." [1] For my understanding, "So we beat on" means like it or not, life has to be continued. As for "boats against the currents", "boats" refer to the stage of life and "against the currents" refer to life full of challenges and ups and downs. "Borne back ceaselessly into the past" means that while people strive on, they more often than not have to rely on some of the past happenings for inspiration, courage and spiritual nourishment in order to bravely move on. Upon dying when they are reaching the destination of life, there will be no future for them, and all will have become past happenings. "Ceaselessly" means they will have been most likely to go back to the farther past---the childhood perhaps full of poverty but at the same time worry-free innocence.

## 3. Conclusion

Gatsby's "greatness" lies in his action and is mostly shown in his hot and lasting pursuit of wealth, love, American Dream and the past. Firstly, Gatsby is a self-made millionaire whose wealth is acquired through illegal means. Gatsby's greatness is shown in his attitudes towards material comforts after he becomes wealthy. For Gatsby, money is a means to get spiritual satisfaction, not the ultimate goal of getting money for money's sake. Secondly, Gatsby's "greatness" is shown in his determination and persistence to win Daisy's heart back. He would do whatever he can to achieve this goal, even at the cost of his own life. Thirdly, Gatsby is a typical American Dream pursuer despite the illegal means he employs. The invention of such a plot intends to deconstruct the term "American Dream" itself rather than devalue Gatsby's "greatness". Moreover, Gatsby's American Dream is not confined to material gains. He intends to get the acceptance and appreciation of the "old money" from the upper class. Lastly, paradoxically, while Gatsby strives forward, he has a strong yearning to go back to the past. Through the detailed analysis of Gatsby's four "pursuits", readers can better comprehend the protagonist Gatsby's "greatness".

## References

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