Examining the American Dream Under the Influence of Consumer Culture *From The Great Gatsby*

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**Abstract:** Since the United States changed from a production-oriented society to a consumption-oriented society in the 1920s, the concept of “consumerism” also appeared in American literature and has become a hot word. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* was written at that time. This paper aims to discuss the embodiment of consumerism and the American dream in *The Great Gatsby*. The thesis presents a brief analysis of the changes of Gatsby and others in the novel under the influence of the consumer culture at that time, as well as the reasons for the failure of their American dream from the perspective of consumerism.

In summing up it may be stated that while the development of the country has made people’s material life rich, the endless consumption desire and distorted consumption psychology cannot have a positive impact on the realization of the American dream. This paper has profound enlightenment and guiding significance for all people in a well-off life, and helps us to think about solving the spiritual crisis in people’s hearts under the background of current consumption culture.

**Keywords:** *The Great Gatsby*; Consumerism; American Dream; Disillusionment

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1. Introduction

In recent years, China has been emphasizing the term “Chinese dream”. On the road to realizing the Chinese dream, the material conditions of our people have developed rapidly in a very short time, and the wealth of the people is growing rapidly. In this new era, which people’s life become more and more satisfied, the consumption concept of the Chinese people has also changed. These changes have some similarities with the American dream on the Jazz Age.

The 1920s was a short but special period in American history, known as the “tumultuous years,” referring to the decade between 1919 after the end of World

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War I and 1929 before the Great Depression of the U.S. economy. Several factors constitute the particularity of this era. First, the United States is at the crossroads of the old age and the new. The boom in capitalism has propelled the United States from an agrarian civilization to an industrialized modern society. At the same time, the United States, which attended the war at the end of World War I, became a creditor nation instead of a debtor nation before the war because it was not severely damaged by that but made much money from it. At that time, the dominant government implemented “laissez-faire” economic policies, which advocated letting the free market work as it will. The less government intervened in economic activities, the more efficient the economy would be. This created the miraculous “Coolidge boom”. Therefore, at that time, the domestic economic situation in the United States was booming: Transportation, mining, construction industry expanded rapidly, electrical appliances, automobile manufacturing industry suddenly took off; cars, electrical equipment, household machinery, processed food and clothing began to enter the home, which has brought unprecedented comfort to many Americans’ life. Property trading and stock markets were particularly active, and some speculators made sudden fortunes in such gambling businesses. The amount of wealth became the standard to judge a person’s success. People began to make money blindly, to make “fast” money and to make more money. To get rich, to get richer... At the same time, the American hedonism, Spencer’s evolution theory and James’s pragmatism philosophy became popular in the United States, and the traditional Puritan moral concepts and religious beliefs, such as “industrious and thrifty”, were gradually replaced by the pursuit of personal wealth, the enjoyment of material life and other consumerism or hedonism.

One of the masterpieces of Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby is a microcosm of that era. From the very beginning of the word “American dream” came out, it has always been the American nation’s ideal and pursuit. It should have a strong vitality, but why does it evaporate? The answer is hidden in Gatsby’s story. His story tells the reader, if one’s dream is just a pursuit of material and the desire to become a “rich man” but he doesn’t know why he should survive after he become rich, such a dream, after all, is a mirage, is a short-sighted and unsustainable dream.

When money becomes everything, the true ideals that the American dream once contained have already changed. Although the materialistic American dream is not a dream that fully expresses the American spirit, the materialistic side of the American dream gives people something to think about: After the materialistic dream of the American dream is realized, how to realize the spiritual dream of the American dream and what principles should be included in its connotation? No society can always provide a high level of material life to maintain the meaning and interest of people’s materialistic dream. What people eventually have to live is the spiritual life, and only the spiritual life has unlimited space for development. This is a fundamental question about the meaning of human existence and the American
dream. To pursue only the dream of material things is a dream without future, a dream that will eventually be disillusioned.

The consumption of the bottom people represented by Gatsby is superficially integrated into the upper society, but in fact, they can hardly really become the upper people. The consumption of Gatsby and others is based on imitation, which is caused by their inherent inferiority complex. Gatsby’s fabrication of his life experience reflects this sense of inferiority, which means they can only find their psychological belonging in the upper class. And this sense of inferiority makes it difficult for them to get rid of the skin color, dialect, accent, habits, customs, lifestyle and behavior that inherited from their ancestors, which brings them all kinds of discomfort and makes it difficult for them to really integrate into the upper class. Gatsby can imitate, but it is difficult to make up the gap between him the upper class.

Not just Gatsby, but anyone who wanted to realize their American dream was deeply influenced by three concepts of consumption in American society at that time: using consumption to indulge, using consumption to show off one’s status and wealth, using consumption to achieve their purpose by fair means or foul. But these three kinds of consumption concepts will cause three serious consequences: Firstly, their own contradictions. The realization of the American dream requires both spiritual and material support, but hedonism only attaches importance to the material side; Secondly, contradiction between individuals. People are seeking for the cooperation with others, but they failed; Thirdly, the contradiction between the individual and the society. The realization of people’s American dream requires a fair environment for them to compete. But that was impossible in a corrupted society. These three contradictions seriously hindered the success of individuals, and even hindered the evolution progress of the society.

The chief aim of the present work is to analyse how the consumer culture influence the American dream and why consumer culture can finally destroy people’s American dream from the work The Great Gatsby. The thesis will bring readers further understanding of the distorted American society and the broken American dream in the novel. One the other hand, I hope that readers in the society which is controlled by the consumer culture can focus more on their spiritual wealth rather than material one after reading this thesis.

2. The American Dream in People’s Mind

(1) The Introduction to the American Dream

Historian James Truslow Adams first use the “American dream” in his work in 1931 The Epic Of America. In the book, the American dream is: In the United States, the land of dreams, regardless of class or background, so long as has the
ability or achievement, everyone has a chance to live more beautiful, everyone has a chance to become richer and fuller. It is a dream for the full development of everyone, for the pursuit of material wealth and for the order of society. The “American Dream” can be traced back to the time of the first group of European immigrants in the United States. It originated from the religious ideals and beliefs of Puritans in Europe. It gradually matured in the 9th century and is deeply rooted in the hearts of Americans. In the early days when the America was a vast territory with a sparse population, where the land was equal to wealth, Europeans found their lost dreams. In the Gold Rush and the Westward Movement, hard work means success, and self-made millionaires were everywhere. It can be seen that the traditional “American dream” has the following connotation: First, everyone has equal rights.

The Declaration of Independence states that all men are created equal and have an inalienable right to the pursuit of liberty and happiness. Second, everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed. This is a country where everyone has an equal chance——where anyone, regardless of birth, race, or religion, can make great progress through ability and hard work; Third, success depends on one’s ability and effort. The “American Dream”, in which success is attributed to one’s character and struggle, has been vigorously advocated by the public in the United States. It has become an ideal that ordinary Americans deeply believe in and strive for. Meanwhile, it has become a great spiritual power to promote the vigorous development of American capitalism and a maintenance of the capitalist social system. Fourth, everyone has the freedom to worship. The original Puritan immigrants came to America were to seek survival opportunities, for the ideal dream of religious freedom and wealth, and dreamed of rebuilding Eden in the New World. Fifth, the means of acquiring wealth must be within the limits of morality. As the core of the American dream, achieving material success at that time had its own moral basis, that is, its ultimate goal was to make people “the chosen one by the God”.

After World War I, the economic strength of the United States did not go down, on the contrary, it went up to a prosperity because of the war money. But at the same time, there appeared extreme spiritual deficiency. The war tore young people’s dreams of the future world to pieces. The young generation lost their work and spiritual support, indulging themselves in pleasure to eliminate their inner sense of loss, emptiness and depression. At that time, the American society was full of moral degeneration. The traditional Puritan morality of diligence and thrift had been disintegrated, and hedonism began to prevail. The idea that money is supreme and wealth is omnipotence became the driving force. As a result, the American dream gradually degenerated into the pursuit of pure wealth——free of all moral norms and try of all means to get rich quickly. In the 21st century, Bill Gates, Buffett and others have become the new idols of “American dream”. Many people seem to see
that “anyone with talent and intelligence can make their success in America”.

(2) The American Dream for the Characters in The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby vividly represents a group of people who are pursuing the American dream. The author makes them seem like real people through different arrangement and shaping of all the characters, so that we can see the real dreamers of all kinds.

Gatsby is a Dream Chaser. Gatsby is a loyal follower of the American Dream, and is also the writer’s most complete and true interpretation of the American Dream. Gatsby’s American dream is composed of two parts: “wealth dream” and “love dream”. Gatsby was born in a poor peasant family, but poverty could not prevent him from pursuing his dream. He believes to the creed of “equality of opportunity” and “reward for effort” advocated by the American dream. In order to realize his dream, he made painstaking efforts. He used a large inheritance from Dan Cody as the foundation for his fortune, and he amassed a fortune through bootlegging and gambling. After that he became a overnight millionaire. So he bought mansions and drank a lot. At that time, Gatsby has realized his “dream of wealth” and paved the way for his “dream of love”. Although Daisy, his former lover, had married Tom, son of a rich family, Gatsby had never thought of giving up. A few years later, when he became rich, he chose to buy a villa across the river from Daisy’s house and held parties every night to attract Daisy, waiting for her arrival. He met his old lover through Nick and was eager to rekindle the past.

When it comes to Nick, I consider him a Dream Defender. Nick is Gatsby’s neighbor, a distant cousin of Daisy’s, Tom’s classmate in college, and the lover of Daisy’s good friend Baker. The stories of Nick and Gatsby unfold in a parallel structure, sometimes merging into a main line. There is a sharp contrast between Nick and Gatsby, but there is no sense of abruptness. Gatsby has been struggling in the poverty of the West and has been striving to get ahead, while Nick resolutely ran away from the rich family in the West and came to the East. Gatsby’s lifelong dream is money and Daisy’s love, but Nick never believes in love. He is cynical and he insists on the pursuit of the American dream in his heart. Gatsby tries to build his own mirage of a glorious kingdom in New York, while Nick walks past the ashes every day, shuttle between the spiritual world of West Egg and the material world of New York. It can be said that Nick is the image of “the last one who is still awake” in the novel, and he is the true advocate and defender of the traditional American dream.

When we mention about Daisy, she is an important and controversial figure in the novel. Some thought she was vain and cruel, and blamed her for Gatsby’s death. But when we reexamine the character of Daisy, we find that she is also a victim. Daisy came from a rich family and was beautiful. When she was a young girl, she had infinite longing and yearning for pure love. She fell in love with Gatsby, a poor
boy, regardless of her family’s opposition. At last, under the control of her family, she resisted at first and finally accepted Tom who was rich. Therefore, Daisy was not a vain, indifferent and selfish woman at the beginning. Under the influence of the “American Dream” where money is supreme and the hedonism caused by economic prosperity, she gradually abandoned her pure and kind self and turned into an indifferent woman whose dream was only money.

3. The Influence of Consumerism on American Society in Jazz Age

(1) Changes in People’s Consuming Behavior

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the American government encouraged people to buy luxuries, so under the guidance of the consciousness at that time, the American social consumerism prevailed. The rich buy fancy houses, luxury cars and hold lavish parties frequently. In this way, the American society of the 1920s became a society of conspicuous consumption. At this time, people bought goods not only to meet the basic needs of daily life, but also for a symbolic meaning: the number of goods owned by an individual symbolizes his wealth and social status. Besides, carpe diem has become a social fashion. For that reason, the consumption behavior of the characters in *The Great Gatsby* is also more of a kind of conspicuous consumption.

In order to get Daisy back, Gatsby spent a huge amount of money and used expensive clothes to mark the change of his identity. He kept up with the fashion and hired people to buy fashionable clothes in England. With superior materials, unique style to show he was already one of the upper class. In addition, when Gatsby sees Daisy again, he wants to highlight his “self-esteem” by “wearing a white flannel suit, a silver shirt, and a golden tie”. Faced with Gatsby’s mounting pile cloth and the brand-new shirts of various kinds, the rich girl Daisy fell into the pile of clothes without any scruples. Piles of shirts were piles of money, and they were a fatal attraction to Daisy. Here, clothing has completely gone beyond its original function and become a symbol of Gatsby’s identity, wealth and taste. Apart from that, each party held by Gatsby also consumed a lot of human, material and money. And they were not some kinds of party, they were also means to attract Daisy.

In the description of Mrs. Wilson, a woman in a garage, Fitzgerald writes that she became a rich person’s mistress and began to dress up as a lady. When she saw a pet dog is being sold, she barked eagerly for the dog. Keeping a pet dog, on the other hand, represents the leisure and luxury of an aristocratic lady. The reason why Mrs. Wilson, who is of lower class, wants to buy a pet dog is that she thinks she could own the social status just like a noble wife.

In the novel, Tom Buchanan inherit the wealth of a bourgeoisie, and he is
extravagant and arrogant. At his wedding to Daisy, for example, he came inside with hundreds of guests, took a big bus and rented the entire first floor of the Murbach Hotel; The day before wedding, the groom gave the bride a pearl that worth 350,000 dollars. Such conspicuous consumption is because he want to make a manifestation of his social status. The more expensive goods he can afford, the higher his social status will be.

Clothing is also shaping and expressing Myrtle’s inner self. She changes her dress three times a day. The colors, styles and materials of her outfits are changing together with her inner identity. When she went out, she changed from a dark blue dress to a brown one. When she returned to her apartment, she changed into a milky white dress. The material of the dress is getting more and more expensive, and even her behaviors are changed with it, which is also the elevation of her inner illusory identity. The color of her dresses gradually changed from dirt-hardy navy blue for the working-class to the vibrant and emotional brown, and later to the cream color favored by bourgeois women. That turned a desperate labouring housewife lived in the Vale of Ashes into a false upper class. In New York, she let go four old colored cabs only to wait for the new lavender cab, because it was a Versailles lavender. This series of processes together create the image of a fake image that she tries to construct.

In addition to clothing, under the influence of consumerism, vehicles, represented by cars, play the role of class division. More and more people buy cars to advertise themselves or to impress their neighbors. In the novel, people of different classes mark their social status by using different brands of cars.

However, Tom Buchanan clings to the values of the upper class and despises the car culture of the new rich. Tom’s own car is very ordinary as he focuses on the utility of the car itself. But although he do not fond of cars, the leisure class represented by Tom adheres to the value of horses and still marks their class by riding horses and playing polo. When Gatsby met Tom for the first time, Gatsby said, “Did you have a good ride?” Tom shot back that he was the first person to turn a garage into a stable. Horses and cars were the wealth symbols of the aristocracy and the middle class. Tom was just the same as those who are interested in cars.

**Changes in People’s Spiritual World**

Gatsby’s crazy possession and consumption of material wealth is, on the one hand, to show off he is rich and he has high status; On the other hand, it shows his broken hopes and empty spiritual world. Gatsby believes that money is omnipotent, and he wants to win back his lost lover with money. He holds luxurious banquets to attract wealthy people to attend, at which people’s emptiness and boredom are portrayed vividly. In fact, each scene of the banquets is the miniature of the American society. The extravagance of the banquet reflects the prosperity of the “Jazz Age”, but behind the extravagance there is a spiritual crisis. Excessive
material consumption brings people decadence and nothingness of their inner world.

When it comes to Daisy, she is vain, indifferent, and addicted to the pursuit of money; She relies on men to earn her living, lacks the independence of existence, and prove the meaning of her existence depends on her extravagant life. When Nick first met Daisy, she was wearing a white dress and a three-cornered lavender hat with two rows of brass buttons that glistened in the sun. White is a symbol of simplicity and purity. Daisy uses the uniqueness of white to show that she is just like a delicate vase; The lavender triangle hat is made of exquisite fabrics gives people a sense of nobility and calmness. Daisy is a hedonist, and her value of money is clearly reflected in her choice of love and marriage: she chose Tom, the man who is rich and vulgar instead of Gatsby twice. Daisy’s money-oriented consumption values lead to the loss of her ethical spirit, this is the spirit of “era of the hustle and bustle”. When Tom sent a valuable pearl necklace to Daisy before their marriage, the underlying intent is to own Daisy’s beauty and take it as a mean to show off his wealth. On the other side, Daisy is in fact Tom’s substitute, a substitute which helps Tom to consume. Why? Because luxury consumption brings Tom an intense feeling of satisfaction. This kind of abnormal thought, affects the value orientation of people and causes the vanity of the whole society.

The same situation appears in one of Fitzgerald’s descriptions about Buchanan. Buchanan is an arrogance man, we can see through it from his attitude towards Wilson. He had been delaying his promise to sell the car to Wilson for the reason that he wanted to bully Wilson. This mentality is a privilege consciousness of the leisure class, which means, for such luxuries as cars, people of lower class like Wilson was not equal with the people of upper class and did not deserve what belonged to Buchanan, that is, his car. Letting Wilson buy the car would greatly reduce Buchanan’s comfort and pleasure.

4. The Impacts of Consumerism on the American Dream Shown in The Great Gatsby

(1) The Distortion of Morality and the Hypocrisy of Human Nature Caused by Consumerism

1) Commercial Relationship Between Characters

The vague of people’s view of the society has changed the original rich emotions of human beings. The interpersonal relationship including friendship and family affection, have been diluted, and people have completely live on the pursuit of material things. This is further illustrated in the novel’s description of Daisy’s relationship with her children. Daisy, as a mother, has no love for her children and no sense of responsibility. The reason is that her child, like her clothes and jewelry, is a symbol to show off to others, a tool to satisfy her vanity. Besides, when Gatsby
comes back to Daisy with a lot of different beautiful shirts, Daisy regrets marrying Tom and tries to get back together with Gatsby. But after Tom reveals that Gatsby became rich by selling bootlegging, Daisy’s attempt to fall in love with Gatsby is abruptly stopped. A relationship with Gatsby, a bootlegging bootlegger, would not only tarnish her identity, but also land her in jail.

At the same time, Daisy is also a commodity to show off Gatsby’s wealth. Their relationship has gone far beyond the erotic element, and it has become a trophy in social competition and also a consumer goods that symbolizes status. In Gatsby’s mind, Daisy is both materialized and spiritualized, and his pursuit of Daisy is a kind of pursuit devoted to his ideal. Daisy is like his wealth and his clothing, is the security of his ideal identity. Without Daisy, Gatsby’s dream of life was meaningless. Gatsby dreamed that by getting Daisy, he could get the authenticity he longed for, so as to correct his false identity, make outer appearance into inner and make imitation into essence. Daisy was a symbol of success for Gatsby——that is, the America Dream itself.

2) Gatsby’s Confusion Between Fantasy and Reality

Gatsby’s original name was James Gates, he is the son of a mediocre farmer. He was contemptuous of his origins. He never really acknowledged in his mind that they were his parents. To reinvent himself, little Gates ran away from home at 17. Gatsby’s ideal identity is clearly stated in the fourth chapter when he and Nick drive to New York. Gatsby said that he was a rich Midwestern kid and his families were all dead. He grew up in the United States, but he was educated in Oxford, England, because his family was educated there for many years. However, Gatsby’s own “history” was a complete copy of Nick’s proud family history. These include two important concepts: economic and cultural background. Without the support of that enviable “background”, Gatsby is obviously unable to match the social prestige of Nick and Tom’s family. His ideal identity is a “big shot,” a person with the social capital to demonstrate success and performance. But in real life, he is just a nobody. Why would Gatsby choose to apply the identity of the upper class? It is because both he and his father mistakenly believed that one could transcend their social hierarchies through talent and effort.

Gatsby practice what he preaches and dreamed of reshaping himself according to the standard of the consumer culture, trying to make himself a real gentleman at first sight and able to withstand the ruthless scrutiny from the eyes of other upper class. He even drew up a detailed schedule of personal resolutions, which he wrote on the blank page at the end of his favorite book *Cowboy Cassidy* when he was at young age.

In the construction of Gatsby’s fake identity, the core part is related to Daisy. Set wealth, social status, prominent life in one, beautiful Daisy has become a symbol of high value. And it immediately become Gatsby’s goal.
Another factor that had a big impact on Gatsby’s reinvention was Dan Cody. This is a man who made a great fortune from mining in the second half of the 19th century. Jaime Gates met him while he was drifting around Lake Superior doing odd jobs for a living. When Gates saw Cody’s yacht anchored on one of the most treacherous sandbanks, he borrowed a small boat to paddle out to warn Cody of a possible storm. Cody thought that he was smart and took him as a private employee. From Cody, Gates received a kind of “unique and practical” education: This education involves cheating for money, killing people, tabloids, legal means, womanizing. And all these tricks seem to be very different from the image of the glamorous upper class. Cody’s means is by hook or by crook, and if Gatsby wants to cross the transparent line of social class, he also needs to do that.

Thanks to Daisy, Gatsby learned how wealth could help people have and maintain youth and mystery. Gatsby’s lavish wardrobe is by no means optional. Like Myrtle, who also came from a humble background, he believed that “leather shoes” and “suits” makes a true gentleman no matter from the outward or the inner. Under this consumer culture, where clothing defines social identity and appearance represents inner identity, clothing can reveal more information about social identity than ones words.

After all, Gatsby painstakingly pieced together a new identity, hoping to be in the social class he dreamed of. But his efforts are nothing more than superficial glitz. At the same time of arrogating his identity, he must also bear all the dangers brought about by this arrogation. Gatsby’s dream of joining the upper class looks beautiful from a distance, but it is fundamentally different from what he really is, and those real upper class would never welcome this outsider. Nick, another representative of the upper class, has already given Gatsby a certain position. On a trip to New York, when Nick compared Gatsby to Mrs. Wilson, who breathes and gasps at the tanker; The exasperated policemen driving around; Mournful newcomers from southeast Europe; Three stylish black men in a big white car, he could not help himself to laugh. In the meantime, he said to himself: The emergence of Gatsby was no surprise. What made Nick laugh was Gatsby’s arrogation: from belonging to Mrs. Wilson’s working-class, or be with the colored people and the poor immigrants, he was as crazy as a Negro who wants to ride on a white man, without knowing who he was.

Even Gatsby himself was unsure of his new identity and all that it symbolized. In his romantic fantasy, he can change his social origins and reinvent himself, but in his conversation with Nick, he was lack of confidence in his self-made history. Just like Nick thought, Gatsby’s life was like copied from dozens of magazines.

3) Gatsby’s Tragic Death

Gatsby’s death was tragic and pitiful. Fitzgerald named the novel “The Great Gatsby”, it is not only to praise and regret, but also implies a strong sense of irony.
Seen from the background of the Jazz Age, Gatsby’s death is of typical symbolic significance. It symbolized the collapse of the gaudy American dream at that time and the weakness of the ideal under the pressure of reality.

Gatsby’s death was yet inevitable. First, Daisy is a typical representative of selfishness and ruthlessness in the upper class. After the car accident, she passes the responsibility to Gatsby without any guilt. With Tom’s malicious “help”, Gatsby finally shot by Wilson. To say the least, even if Gatsby was not dead, he would surely go and take the punishment instead of Daisy without any regret. Second, Gatsby has given up moral ethics in pursuit of his American dream. For money, in order to succeed in the upper society, Gatsby had to rely on his gang friends. But the means by which he became rich by breaking the law were not acceptable to the upper class. Tom has found out the truth behind Gatsby’s wealth, and when Daisy knows all this, only fear and alienation are left to return to Gatsby. So the only outcome for Gatsby is death.

It is clear that the direct cause of Gatsby’s death was Wilson’s murder. With the help of Tom, Wilson discovered that it was Gatsby’s car that killed his wife. He then went straight to Gatsby’s house and killed Gatsby, even though Daisy is the real driver. Gatsby spent five years doing everything possible to win Daisy back, but suddenly it all falls apart, until Wilson ends his life. Gatsby was full of hope in the dream he pursued, and even Daisy’s betrayal could not destroy his faith——this damned fool held his dream until he died. Gatsby is a model of idealists who are always loyal to their dreams. Gatsby was so romantic and naive that he never lost his dream even at the moment of his death. His personality decided that he will never commit a suicide, but in such a decadent society, he is doomed to fail to fit in, so he was killed by other is his only possible outcome.

Through the inevitable death of Gatsby, Fitzgerald implies the inevitability of the broken American dream. The American dream is inherently deceptive. In an age which has serious class differences, the dream of Gatsby to become rich through hard work was simply an unattainable dream. Under the impact of one failure after another, he have no choice but to give up their original pursuit and use fraud and illegal to meet their material needs. Under the influence of consumerism, people of the lower class had to go with the flow, or they could only abide by the ideal that was out of touch with reality. What’s more, even after drifting with the tide and one day climbed to the upper class, the sudden riches like Gatsby were despised and shamed by the old aristocracy. The upper class, which considers itself noble, will never allow any poor man to destroy the upper class’s nobility by breaking the law.

(2) The Constraint of Social Class on Gatsby
Gatsby was born poor, although he called himself “the son of God”, but his birth has actually determined his social status. An upstart without any noble background like him, could never be accepted by the upper class in any way at
that time. Gatsby has always had a wrong cognition: money equals to status, with money, he can enter the upper class. It can be said that the idea of “money first” has successfully brainwashed Gatsby. After the war, there were many differences between the East and the West. The hereditary bourgeoisie in the East was full of rejection and hostility to the new aristocracy from the West. Tom represents the decadent forces of the East while Gatsby is the typical representative of the new rich. Among the American bourgeoisie, there is not only a difference between “more” and “less” rich, but also a difference between “new” and “old”. So, even if Gatsby’s wealth is comparable to Tom’s, but he lacks noble family history. No matter how rich he is, he will not be recognized. He thinks he has completed the upward class transition, but he does not realize that money can not be the “capital” to break through the class boundary, which also explains why he becomes angry after being exposed by Tom. His gaffe at that moment made him lose the accomplishment of being a gentleman, which is derived from the inferiority in his bones.

5. Conclusion

In the Jazz Age, when individual behavior was scrutinized like never before, personal identity took on an unheard of dimension, and how you presented it mattered far more than what you had. Gatsby’s attempt to present himself as a son of a wealthy family and leap into the upper class through his personal wealth was not a unique case.

However, his self-image constructed by clothes, famous cars, houses and other foreign objects is false and weak. It only reflects the powerful influence and limitations of consumer culture, which makes people unable to realize their own reality. The plan and specific content of Gatsby’s self-shaping also reflect the development and change of American society: from the early capitalist emphasis on production to the 1920s consumer society’s emphasis on image, packaging and self-promotion, reflecting a vulgar and gaudy beauty. And this kind of gaudy beauty is the charm of the consumer culture that makes people dazzled and lose their true selves.

Gatsby’s “ideal identity” is designed according to pop culture standards of that age. After meeting Gatsby again and visiting all his collections, Daisy was so captivated by all the landscapes displayed by Gatsby but she could not find even one word to describe her feelings. This scene was really a true portrayal and ironic picture of the consumer society.

Although the era of the novel The Great Gatsby is far away from today, it still has reference significance for the social development of the present society. Nowadays, people’s living standard is gradually improving, but we must realize that
the real element that makes our life better should be spiritual abundance rather than material enjoyment. When we look at Fitzgerald’s depiction of American society in the 1920s and the broken American dream, we should try to avoid the same tragedy in Chinese society. If we make money our dream, then we have already lost the dream.

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