



Symbols Used in *the Great Gatsby*

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the novel from the perspective of symbolism in terms of three parts. The first part introduces the Fitzgerald, his work and background; analyze the background of works to explore the connotation of the works. The second part illustrates the definition of symbolism and literary significance, analyzing how to use symbol to embody the connotation of the novel. The third part discusses the application of the symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*: the green light located at the end of the Buchanan's dock, the valley of ashes, West Eggs and East Eggs. The green light, situated at the end of the Daisy's dock, symbolizes Gatsby's hopes and dreams for future. East Egg represents the established aristocracy; West Egg represents the newly rich. The Valley of Ashes consists of a long stretch of desolate land created by the dumping of industrial ashes; it represents the moral and social decay due to the uninhibited pursuit of wealth. The images of the Valley of Ashes are used to interpret the disillusion of Gatsby's American Dreams as well as the social moral decay. *The Great Gatsby* is filled with symbols, which convey Fitzgerald's attitude and ideas to the readers. And the symbolism greatly contributes to the success of this novel.

Keywords: Symbolism; Green Light; Geography

1. Introduction

The Great Gatsby with its unique literary glamour attracts many domestic and foreign scholars on the in-depth research. In 1945, since the critic Edmund Wilson ushered in "Fitzgerald revival", American scholars have begun to study Fitzgerald and his work in full swing. In the 80s, foreign scholars' study of Fitzgerald reached its peak, and gained remarkable achievements. All results make the research of Fitzgerald more comprehensive, in-depth and mature. Scholars mainly study Fitzgerald's classic novels; some scholars also change traditional research method to the new and profound research.

The Great Gatsby has been recognized and loved by the readers, since it was translated into Chinese. Domestic scholars have studied this work only about thirty years, but the scope is broad. The domestic scholars mainly focus on the novel itself, such as the narrative point of view, artistic features, and symbolism and so on.

2. Introduction to *The Great Gatsby*

2.1 Fitzgerald and his works

F. Scott Fitzgerald, a famous American writer, is best known for his novels and short stories, which chronicle the situation of America's Jazz Age during 1920s. His greatness lies in the fact that he has the intuitive view of the nation; he has personal experience and takes full advantage of it, even beyond it. His works embody the spirit of a country in specific period and creates a myth out of the American life. At the time of his death Fitzgerald was considered as a failed writer, but since the 1940s his literary reputation has steadily risen. Today he is regarded as one of the major American writers of this century; no other novelists are as influential in the development of modern American novel as F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Ernest Hemingway.

The Great Gatsby, published in 1925, is taken as the best novel written by Fitzgerald. It is generally considered as a novel of American Dream. However it is also famous as a description of the Jazz Age—a phrase which is coined by Fitzgerald himself. The story mainly concerns the young and mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and he is crazy for the beautiful former debutante Daisy Buchanan.

The Great Gatsby is the master works of Fitzgerald, because *The Great Gatsby* expresses the writer's feelings of the social upheaval. "Fitzgerald's fiction reveals the hollowness of the American worship of riches and the unending American dream, desires and shows what America meant in terms of the reckless 1920s". (吴定柏, 1998: 126). The 1920s witnessed enrichment of business as the religion of America. The materialism grew and dominated the country, so that the faiths in religion and culture had been transformed into the persistent pursuit of money. All these had different influences on younger generations. We should believe that, if the nation doesn't have the faith in religion and culture, the nation is hopeless, especially for the younger generations, because the younger generations are hopes of the nation.^[1]

2.2 The background of *The Great Gatsby*

Before we study this novel, we should know the plot of the novel:

The narrator, Nick Carraway, rents a house on Long Island Sound in New York and finds that a wealthy but mysterious young

man called Gatsby lives in the mansion next door, and throws luxurious parties every weekend to which everyone is welcome. No one knows where his wealth comes from. Across the Sound from Gatsby's garden are the mansion of Daisy Buchanan, Nick's wealthy cousin, Daisy; and her husband, Tom. Nick later learns that Daisy and Gatsby had a brief love affair during World War I when Gatsby was stationed in Daisy's hometown before she was married. (钱青, 2009:169)

In 1917, Gatsby and Daisy met and fell in love with each other; Gatsby was wearing the military uniform, and it was difficult to distinguish whether he was poor or rich. No one knew whether the love was true or not in Daisy's heart, but for the Gatsby, there was no doubt. Readers will indulge in Gatsby on persistence of love. Gatsby owns wealth; he thought that it was enough to make Daisy back to his side.

Gatsby dreams that he can win her back if only he has the money, so he engages in various illegal activities to accumulate a fortune. However, he has not counted on the evil nature of the very rich. Tom tells Daisy how Gatsby made his money and this is enough for Daisy to sever their relations. During back to Long Island Sound, Daisy accidentally hits and kills Tom's mistress. The husband comes to kill and kills Gatsby, then kills himself. (钱青, 2009:169)

Gatsby was dead; perhaps this was the best ending. He regarded love as faith and motive force. He thought that what he did had reached the standards—Daisy wanted the wealthy, However, Gatsby was wrong. When Daisy knew Gatsby made money through illegal activities; she had made up her mind to leave Gatsby. Only the hereditary property, the upper position, would be permanent, but Gatsby could never have it.

The 1920s was an unusual time in American history. The 1920s was a decade when the outline of contemporary Americans clearly emerged. World War I created a new generation—the Lost Generation, and a new time—the Roaring Twenties. Modern American culture busted into full bloom in the 1920s. It was a time of youth, a time of profound cultural and social changes. American people were torn between traditional values and new standards quickly adopted by young people.

3. Symbolism in literature

3.1 The definition of symbol

Symbol is something such as an object, picture, written word, sound, or particular mark that represent something else by association, resemblance, or convention. “In literature a symbol is a thing that refers or suggests more than its literal meaning”(袁宪军, 2004:229). So in literature, if you want to understand the literary works, you can't stop at the level of literal meaning. Symbols generally do not stand for just one meaning, nor for anything absolutely definite; they just point and hint. Generally speaking, a literary symbol does not have the common social acceptance; it is a symbol the writer adopts for the purpose of his works; and it is just to be understood only in the context of that work. By using symbols the writer expresses his meanings in a special method that will attracts the emotions of the readers. Most symbols in literature focus on the relationship between the readers.^[2]

3.2 Symbolism in literature works

“Symbolism can be defined as the art of expressing ideas and emotions, not by describing them directly, nor by defining them over comparisons with concrete images, but by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are, by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols.”(蒋国权, 2014:7) Symbolism was a late nineteenth-century movement of French. Poets and writers launched a literary movement that was called the Symbolism Movement. The French movement spread into other countries through different methods, such as translation, critical comment and so on. This movement has a strong influence on symbolic works, especially on American literature of the 20th century, and the 20th century also witnessed literature spectacular and significant changes.

Symbolism is used as one of the important devices in modern fiction and it is an indirect mode of expression, which suggests much more than what is actually described. In this novel, *The Great Gatsby*, symbolism is widely used. The symbolic geography: East Egg represents the established aristocracy; West Egg represents the newly rich. The green light, symbolizes Gatsby's hopes and dreams for the future. The Valley of Ashes represents the social and moral decay. This image of the Valley of Ashes is used to interpret the disillusion of Gatsby's American Dream, as well as the moral and social decay.

4. The symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*

4.1 Symbolic meaning of “green light”

Color symbolism refers to the use of colors as a symbol in various cultures. There is great diversity in the use of colors between cultures and even within the same culture in different time periods. In fact, the same color may have different associations within the same culture at any time. Just because of this reason, colors give person imagination and space. People can give the colors special meaning, even special thoughts. People also express their thoughts or get the special reference of color. Color is important to artists who create things through color, artists use colors to express what they want to convey in paintings. Green color is often used to represent hope, so you may sense what the artist wants to convey when green color is used. Litterateur always uses colors to convey feeling. Fitzgerald is like a capable artist, he conveys different feelings and emotions through colors.

Green is often associated with hope and liveliness. In *The Great Gatsby*, the most outstanding color used in the story is green. The green light that is located at the end of the Daisy's dock and that is barely visible from Gatsby's West Egg lawn will give readers a deep impression. The image of green light appearing three times, respectively in the crucial points of development, plays an important role in the novel. I want to analyze of the three appearances of the “green light” from three parts.

4.1.1 The first time

The first appearance of the “green light” in *The Great Gatsby* is in the end of Chapter One which the hero Gatsby appears:

I didn't call to him, for he gave a sudden intimation that he was Content to be alone—he stretched out his arms towards the dark water in a curious way, and, for us I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and

distinguished nothing expect a simple green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness (Fitzgerald, 2003:16)

When the narrator first comes across Gatsby, he is confused by Gatsby's action. Gatsby is reaching out for the green light, or even worshipping it. Finally, we find out later that this green light is at the end of the Daisy's dock. So, at the end of the Chapter One, the first appearance of the "symbol" in *The Great Gatsby* which attracts our attention is that mysterious green light. Gatsby stretches out his arms, just in order to embrace what he has long been keeping in his dream. But she is not there, which makes his action seems a little "curious", Although Nike is far from him at that time, he writes "I could have sworn he was trembling", as if suffering from great painful experience. Perhaps there are many reasons for Gatsby's "trembling": one reason is certain that Gatsby can't wait to let her back to his side. Gatsby's love for Daisy is the source of his hopefulness and the meaning of his yearning for the "green light", and he attempts to make the love come true, but the "green light" is "minute and far away", which means Gatsby's longing for Daisy is doomed to be so unreachable that it will fade away some day. No matter how faithful he is, he can never realize his own dream. The writer catches a vivid representation of light, and gives an unforgettable impression on readers.

4.2 Symbolic meaning of geography

The geography of the novel can be divided into two parts: the West and East. Within the West and East, there exist many locations which make up the whole world of the novel. We analyze the symbolic geography in terms of the major geographical locations: the East and the West, the East Egg and the West Egg, the Valley of the Ashes. Throughout the history, these places are associated with themes, and the symbolic meanings of these places are conveyed.

Setting plays an important role in developing some of Fitzgerald's themes; East Egg, West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes all assume symbolic significance. If we want to introduce the West Egg and East Egg, we should know the division between East and West of America. The West represents the new territory of hope and the old pioneer spirit. There is a certain old-fashioned stability resting on the old, unchanging values and close relationships. The East is associated with the fast-pace lifestyle, decadent parties, crumbling moral values and the pursuit of wealth.

Next we will study the West Egg and the East Egg from Nick's comments:

I lived at the West Egg, the—well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them. My house was at the very tip of the egg, only fifty yards from the Sound, and squeezed between two huge places that rented for twelve or fifteen thousand a sea so." "Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable, East Egg glittered along the water. (Fitzgerald, 2003:12)

One of the most important themes in the novel is class and social status. It is a barrier for almost every character. East Egg and West Egg act as a symbol of this in its physical makeup.

5. Conclusion

Fitzgerald is one of the greatest writers in American literature. *The Great Gatsby* is regarded as the core of Fitzgerald's artistic achievement. Symbol is commonly used in literature to deepen meanings or instill a different meaning to the mind of the readers. *The Great Gatsby* is filled with symbols, which convey Fitzgerald's attitude and ideas to the readers. Symbolism greatly contributes to the success of this novel. There are many symbols that have important significance in the symbolism of the novel. The "green light" in the novel has its deep meaning and multiple implies, Gatsby's dream of Daisy causes him to associate her image with everything he values, just as he associates the green light with his dream for the future. The Valley of Ashes, West Egg and East Egg, all of the images are used to explain the disillusion of Gatsby's American Dream as well as the social and moral decay.

The story of *The Great Gatsby* is very simple, but the meaning is profound. The symbolism is the most strikingly artistic feature, which reveals Fitzgerald's perfect artistry; the symbolism can give readers a better understanding of the profound theme and the Jazz Age of American. Fitzgerald realized that the era of dreaming and the American Dream is over.

Bibliography

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