

# A study of the use of symbolism in the great gatsby essay sample

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



The Great Gatsby was written by a famous American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald. Firstly published in 1925, it was one of the greatest novels in the history of American literature [waste of space to restate common sense knowledge], for it truly reflects the life of different classes in America and the decline of American dream during the Jazz Age. In order to display these moral degeneration and corruption lying deep under the surface of American society, Fitzgerald uses a series of writing techniques in this novel. One popular technique is the use of symbols. This paper is basically divided into three parts with each part mainly focusing on the analysis of most frequently occurred symbols of characters, colors, and geographical locations used in The Great Gatsby.

Key words

Symbol, characters, colors, geographical locations

The symbolism in characters

The characters in The Great Gatsby are all the epitomes of their own social groups and have typical personalities. Here I would like to analyze what Gatsby, Daisy and Tom symbolize in this novel. 1. the great Gatsby—the lost American dream in Jazz Age To begin the analysis of Gatsby, it is important to explain the history background. Gatsby lived in the Jazz Age, the period after the First World War. America was not among the main belligerent states and sold plenty of armaments to other countries, which gave rise to countless wealth and the economic boom; therefore, America's 1920s was also called the roaring twenties; it was also called Jazz Age because the jazz music and dance emerged at that time. The economic development

stimulated people, especially young people's desire of material life which was encouraged to be pursued by the Protestant work ethic and the Declaration of Independence. In Bible, "Freedom includes the opportunity for prosperity and success, and an upward social mobility achieved through hard work." In the United States Declaration of Independence, "All men are created equal" and they are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights" including "life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". The pursuit of material life was legalized, young people in Jazz Age, including the author Fitzgerald and the protagonist Gatsby, making every effort to make a fortune.

The fortune had another name, the American dream, a positive word at the beginning. Along with the rising economy, however, there was a decline of morality and responsibility. Youth used the influence of jazz to rebel against the conventional culture of previous generation. The overarching cynicism, greed and the empty pursuit of pleasure became the main social trend, the traditional values decaying. People joined the speculative and illegal business, like Gatsby, to get rid of the underclass status. The reputation of the American dream was eroded and labeled with hypocrisy and materialism by the money-seeker and parvenus who made up the lost generation. As I see, it is better to regard Gatsby more precisely as the symbol of the lost American dream than the general term "lost generation" for the character Gatsby was developed in three steps that was also the process of the lost American dream. The relation between common people and the history of a country explains why Fitzgerald appreciates this novel as "one of the most

wonderful American novels in history". At first, Gatsby was a simple young man whose main motivation in acquiring his fortune was his beloved Daisy.

It was the same as the original American dream—the motivations were pure and innocent. Then, Gatsby and American dream became the objects that were produced artificially. " Fitzgerald uses the technique of delayed character revelation to emphasize the theatrical quality of Gatsby's approach to life, which is an important part of his personality. Gatsby has literally created his own character, even changing his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby to represent his reinvention of himself." The American dream provided many people the chance to change their lives and they enjoyed the totally new themselves. They labeled themselves with " upper class" and avoided mentioning the miserable old days; it was the self-reinvention spirit of the American dream that attracted more and more people. " This talent for self-invention is what gives Gatsby his quality of ' greatness': indeed, the title ' The Great Gatsby' is reminiscent of billings for such vaudeville magicians as ' The Great Houdini' and ' The Great Blackstone,' suggesting that the persona of Jay Gatsby is a masterful illusion." Not only Gatsby's image was an illusion but also his fantasy about Daisy.

Next comes to the disillusionment of Gatsby and American dream. What Gatsby loved was not Daisy herself but the innocence and purity represented by her in the early days. All those years Gatsby lived with the faith produced by him. He had " paid a high price for a long dream." When he found out Daisy, was not the goddess in his heart, the bubble of fantasy burst out along with the bubble of American dream. People gradually witnessed that

although they worked very hard, they still could not lead a life decent enough. Just like the father in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, people and the society collapsed in the high speed imperialism system; the following Great Depression proved so. In general, the three stages of *Gatsby* and the American dream are almost at the same pace; therefore, I prefer that Fitzgerald used *Gatsby* to symbolize the lost American dream—lost refers to both going astray and disappearance. 2. Daisy and Tom—the hollowness of the falling aristocracy One of the major topics explored in *The Great Gatsby* is the sociology of wealth, specifically, how the newly minted millionaires of the 1920s differ from and relate to the old aristocracy of the country's richest families.

In the novel, Fitzgerald creates Daisy and Tom as two representatives of the aristocrats to symbolize the rotten heart of that social group. Daisy and Tom lived in the East Egg, the sign of the traditional upper class. In the novel, Fitzgerald not only portrayed the tragedy of *Gatsby* but also criticized the hollowness of the old aristocracy that was symbolized as Daisy and Tom, making obvious contrasts between them and the newly rich. One aspect of the hollowness is hypocrisy and materialism. *Gatsby's* dream of Daisy was established upon love, while Daisy and Tom's marriage was the result of their hypocrisy. What Tom loved was Daisy's look, not her personality. He married her as a beautiful vase, a decoration that could be put in the living room and bring him other people's praise and admiration. Similarly, Daisy was fond of Tom's wealth which could guarantee her luxurious lifestyle and support her parents. Like Zelda Fitzgerald, all in her eyes were the

extravagant life and admirable social status. No trace of love or responsibility could be found: Tom had affairs with Myrtle openly, and Daisy was indifferent even to her own infant daughter. Another aspect is the decline of morality.

Daisy drove Gatsby's car and killed Myrtle, but she and Tom made up lies to escape from the punishment and caused the death of Gatsby. Finally, rather than attend Gatsby's funeral, they moved away and continued their flamboyant life like nothing had happened. Being used to getting people's appreciation and flattery, they were egoists who never worried about hurting others. Gatsby, on the contrary, always acted out of his love for Daisy. In the chapter seven, he stayed outside Daisy's window until four in the morning simply to make sure that Tom did not hurt her. In the end, still out of love, he took the blame for killing Myrtle rather than letting Daisy be punished, which led to his death. The differences between the aristocrats and the newly rich clearly show that although the couple came from upper class and had a descent background, they were just like a rotten cabbage whose fickle and selfish heart could not be seen from the seemingly glorious surface; although Gatsby's wealth was accumulated from criminal business, his heart still had a corner for loyalty and love. Thus Fitzgerald satirizes and criticizes the hollowness of the falling aristocracy through portraying Daisy and Tom as the symbol, comparing them with the newly up American dream. The symbolism in colors

The colors used in *The Great Gatsby* are the symbols to reflect the social situation at that time, to show the feelings of the characters and to indicate

the development of the entire novel. The following part aims to analyze how the colors used in the novel, as symbols, through the conversation, description and clothes of the main characters, are closely connected with the characters' personalities, mood, future and their social surroundings, which are the embodiment of the "Lost Generation" in the "Jazz Age".

### 1. Green

"Green light" in the novel is the most important symbol of the hope for Gatsby to meet Daisy together with the disillusion. Generally speaking, green is the symbol of peace, comfort and hope, as well as the resurrection of every living creature. However, there is a long distance between Gatsby's house and Daisy's house, meaning the distance serves as the killer to smother the hope of love between Gatsby and Daisy. This implication appears frequently in the novel. The number of "green light" appearing in the whole novel is 5, and one in Chapter I, two in Chapter V and Chapter IX. When it first appears in the thought of Nick, implying that the hope from Gatsby to regain Daisy's heart is so strong that even Nick has come into the room, Nick "was alone again in the unquiet darkness". Daisy lives at East Egg, where the green light gleams. Gatsby lives at West Egg, from which he can see the green light from the window in his house. Even though the "green light" is "single", "minute and far away", the desire arousing from Gatsby's mind for getting together with Daisy is becoming increasingly strong.

Fitzgerald also mixed the "green light" together with the distance and the mist to make the symbol with deeper layers. When the green light appears in

Daisy's sentence " You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock", Fitzgerald intensified Gatsby's transitory hope and the implicit contrast: the long distance between the green light and Gatsby's house and the short, intimate distance between Daisy and Gatsby at the moment. " It had seemed as close as a star to the moon" is mentioned here to show the intensity of light of a star and the moon is far brighter than that of the green light. Nevertheless, in Nick's description, " Now it was again a green light on a dock.". This is the doomed fate of the love of Daisy and Gatsby. Their love will finally die away. The clue is hidden in Gatsby's sentence before Daisy's: " If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay." In this sentence Daisy's house is covered with the mist, indicating with the mist, the green light cannot be seen clearly. This is like a gradual process of Daisy's change, from what she used to be five years ago to what she is now. When she was young five years ago, Gatsby knew her so well then; five years later after her marriage, she became strange, unlike what she used to be to Gatsby anymore.

The green light in Chapter XI is the most explicit one, a symbol to reveal the previous green light and the distillation of the theme. " Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" shows that from the beginning till the end, Gatsby cherishes the hope that he will finally be with Daisy. Unfortunately, this hope is merely from Gatsby himself, as Daisy is no longer what she used to be. She is not naive anymore. Therefore, Gatsby's idealized process of falling in love of Daisy is only his own aspiration. Gatsby's hope is the miniature of the



disillusion of American Dream that was dislocated to the society of the time. When the idealist American Dream of the both spiritual and material improvement collides with the reality, the dream will be shattered as at that time, materialism was laid great emphasis. The American Dream had to give way to the reality.

## 2. Blue

Blue should be the exclusive symbol to show Gatsby's sorrow. From the sentence " In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars", we can know that Gatsby decorates his garden with blue. But blue is a favorable color and a melancholy symbol in many countries, and this is no exception in The Great Gatsby. Gardens for parties are usually decorated with the warm color to arouse participants' excitement and interest. So blue, a color classified into the cold color category, gives readers the hint of Gatsby's sorrow caused by the fact he has not seen Daisy face to face for five years. The sorrow collides with the desperate eagerness to see Daisy, resulting from the deep, gigantic love for Daisy.

Apart from what has been mentioned above, the subjects in blue contribute to the establishment of the grievous atmosphere. His chauffeur wears blue, the water separating him from Daisy is his " blue lawn," mingled with the " blue smoke of brittle leaves", " birds began to sing among the blue leaves", all the above fit in the typical emotional impact of " blue", arousing the looming sorrow of the later events, the departure of Daisy and Wilson's murder. Another obvious symbol of blue is implicit: the color of Doctor T. J.

Eckleburg's eyes. "The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic" in Chapter I concludes the special feature of his eyes. Blue here implies that he may foresee Gatsby's tragic life. The pair of eyes are fading, bespectacled, and they represent God's supremacy, all-seeing eyes, foreseeing and making judgement on American society.

### 3. White

Fitzgerald made a underlying irony by using white as a symbol in the novel. Traditionally, white is the symbol of innocence, purity, virginity, perfectism, and idealism. When a sheet of white paper appears, the first thought of people will be "there is no spot on it". So Fitzgerald made good use of white to magnify Daisy's purity and innocence. Daisy's car, the rooms of her house, and about half the adjectives of hers are white. Daisy is a "white girlhood", and "She dressed in white, and had a little white roadster" as she met Gatsby at the first time. In order to evoke Daisy's slumbering love for him, Gatsby is "in a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold-colored tie, hurried in.". In Gatsby's mind, Daisy is the most perfect and idealist girl. Nonetheless, her cruel, vulgar, selfish and destructive character shows that the white things are only the coating of her real character, and this is really ironic and sarcastic. She cries "What'll we do with ourselves this afternoon". What she really knows is "everything's so confused", so her response is "Let's all go to town", implying her abandon of the simple life long time ago, her void, and her preference of the modern and materialistic life.

In terms of color categories, the expansion color and the contraction counterpart take effect in the description of white objects, the exclusive

symbol of Daisy. Expansion colors make things larger, concrete, and exerting stronger and perpetuating influence, but the contraction ones make things smaller, vague, and showing less strength. When red is put together with white, obviously, red is the expansion color, white being the contraction color. These two colors are Daisy and Tom in an abstract level. “ Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water”, this sentence is a vivid description of Daisy’s house, which is consistent with her first encounter with Gatsby five years ago.

But when Nick “ drove over to see his friends”, he finds out that “ Their house was even more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red-and-white”. White here is for Daisy, without doubt, while red here is for Tom. Red is put in front of white, not only from grammatical perspective (when two words are in the same classification, the word with fewer letters should be put in front of that with more letters), but also from who gains the upper hand, who is the controller. It is obvious that Tom’s influence on Daisy cannot be overlooked. Tom being red, Daisy being white, is doubtless in the novel. Fitzgerald did not need to illustrate this. Through the contrast, readers gradually figure this out.

#### 4. Yellow

Yellow is actually the symbol of a contrasting color compared with green, not because they belong to different color categories, but because they stand for two opposite objects: gold and note. Yellow stands for gold, the old substance of transaction, while green stands for the modern American notes that are green. To be more abstract, yellow indicates the American society

that is realistic, materialized, and authentic at that time, but green is equal to the future, the idealized future of the America. So everything in yellow is mixed with the concept of “ old money”, that is, tangible, traditional gold, not these new-fangled dollar bills. So Gatsby, who cherishes “ the green light” so much, becomes ambivalent. On one hand, he really hope to be together with Daisy with only their true love; on the other hand, he cannot help fitting in the stereotype and the cruel reality. “ Yellow cocktail music” playing at Gatsby’s party where the turkeys are “ bewitched to dark gold”, Jordan and Nick sit with “ two girls in yellow”, all of these symbolize the luxurious atmosphere of Gatsby’s party, and the his car is also yellow. This touchable, authentic subject is the major substance of “ old money” and the cruel society.

Tom’s description of this car indirectly leads to the death of Gatsby. Yellow also symbolizes Gatsby’s shift from the past to the present. Gatsby dresses himself differently from five years ago in the first reunion with Daisy. He is “ in a white flannel suit, silver shirt, and gold–colored tie, hurried in”. His blue coat disappeared, replaced by the new dressing style. The change of dressing style is because Gatsby’s determination to melt into the society, to abandon and conceal his past of being a bootlegger. Another essential symbol of yellow to represent the reality is the description of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg’s eyes. His eyes are “ blue and gigantic...instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose.” Even though the blue eyes are the “ God’s eyes”, they have to be covered by the gold byspectacles. The concept of the wide-spread materialism, realism were



significant role in the novel. The locations where characters live in basically represent the classes that they come from and the typical features of the main characters. This essay will only focus on the Long Island where three main characters—Gatsby, Daisy and Tom live in and analyze how West Egg and East Egg symbolize characters typical features and the classes they come from. The Long Island

In the first chapter of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick (the narrator) described “ It was on that slender island that lies thirty kilometers east of New York City. There, two pieces of land, shaped just like huge eggs, and separated by a bay, stretch out into the waters of Long Island Sound. I lived at West Egg, the less fashionable of the two.” This description of Long Island is regarded as “ a highly reliable picture book of the world of Long Island” by Shane Leslie, who is a connoisseur especially of Long Island. In the letter he wrote to Fitzgerald in praise of his book *The Great Gatsby*, he said the whole background “ is real” . In the novel, Gatsby was a bootlegger who sold liquor through illegal ways because of American prohibition, and during that time that just after World War I, the prohibition made countless millionaires through bootlegging. As one *New York Times* said:

Boom times have come to Long Island...Long known in fiction as the abode of English butlers and American millionaires, suspected of undemocratic snobbery, vaguely visualized as a piece of land bounded on the north by the Prince of Wales and on the south by an ocean of rum runners. The setting of Long Island symbolized most of American society in the 1920s, when the old upper class was gradually integrated by the emerging new rich. Though they

cared little about bootlegging or rum running, they enjoyed the luxurious mansions and the extravagant life. Old aristocratic families and new millionaires preferred to move here and build their homes, for this was a place that full of challenges and opportunities. Nowadays the Long Island which lies in the southeast of the state of New York is basically divided into two parts. The west part is two boroughs of New York City—Queens and Brooklyn—which are New York metropolitan areas; two counties (Nassau and Suffolk) mainly from the east part, the suburban areas. In spite that there isn't a clear demarcation between the west part and east part, the imbalance and differences remains similar as the case in the novel. West Egg

West Egg is where Gatsby lived in. He represents the emergence of the new rich middle class in American society. They gain wealth by either legal or illegal ways after World War I and they live rather extravagant life. Their buildings, as the novel describes the mansion of Gatsby's: " absolutely enormous...with a tower on one side, and a marble swimming pool, and more than a hundred hectares of lawn and garden." Gatsby's glimmering mansion is like a mirror of himself, which reflects his bright appearance; however, under the surface it is dim, vague and mysterious. People can never tell where Gatsby is from, how he gain his fortune, or what kind of business he is doing. People come and enjoy his great parties held every Saturday night, but they never really care the owner of this mansion—the most famous man living in the West Egg—though sometimes they nose about the background of Gatsby only out of curiosity. At last, no one go to his funeral except his

father, Nick and the owl-eyed man: " I couldn't get to the house," the owl-eyed man remarked. " Neither could anybody else."

" Go on! Why, my God! They used to go there by the hundreds." He took off his glasses and wiped them again, outside and in. " The poor son-of-a-bitch," he said. Indifference and coldness of middle and upper classes in American society can be shown in this dialogue between Nick and the owl-eyed man. Through the tragedy of Gatsby, the author blurs the line between West Egg and East Egg in an ironic way and implied that the young people's American dreams about wealth and social positions of upper class are doomed to collapse just like Gatsby. East Egg

East Egg is where Daisy and Tom live in, representing the old noblesse of American society. The description of East Egg is different from that of West Egg: " Across the bay, the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the beach." The simile of " white palaces that glittered" shapes some kind of remote and holy image of American old nobility. They represent some part of American dream and become the ideal of lots of young American people who come from ordinary or even poor families. They are the goal of Gatsby. Not only Daisy, but also a part of Tom composed Gatsby's dream. Daisy owns almost everything that Gatsby admires—wealth, beauty, elegance, ease and aristocracy. Tom also comes from an enormously rich family, though rather arrogant and hypocritical, is the man who Daisy chooses to marry at first and be together with at last. Their house in East Egg is " even more luxurious" than Nick expected: " The lawn started at the beach and ran towards the front door for four hundred meters."



They don't have to work hard but own a large fortune: " They drifted here and there—wherever people played polo and were rich together. This move East was permanent, Daisy said on the telephone to me, but I didn't believe it. I felt that Tom would drift on forever, seeking that perfect football game he had once played." This is proved to be true in the last chapter when Daisy and Tom left East Egg after Gatsby's death. Such permanent drift demonstrates the blank in their hearts and universally exist in American old noblesse. In spite that both the houses in West Egg and East Egg are luxurious and extravagant, their aims to show such wealth are totally different. Gatsby deliberately throws big parties just in order to let Daisy know his richness and win Daisy back. He wants to tell the world that he has almost achieved his dream, at least materially; while the gorgeousness in East Egg is completely a symbol of hollowness in their spiritual life. Like their " four-hundred-meter-long lawn" and the " white palaces", ' I'm p-paralysed with happiness,' Daisy's words sarcastically imply the old rigid thoughts and dissolute reckless living styles in American upper class.

Furthermore, as the author depicts in the novel, there is a huge difference in living style among East Egg, West Egg and the Valley of Ashes. And the city of New York, where the story happens is described as simply chaos, indicating the various life and moral standard in American society. Through these depictions of geographical locations, Fitzgerald draws a picture of 1920s' America—a dim, blurred grey tinge that forebodes the crumble of American dream—the best but also the worst of the time.

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### Conclusion

The symbolism used in this novel plays an important role of enriching the theme and shaping the characters. Despite that it is a story that mainly happens in the Long Island, every main character is typical enough to represent the features of different social class in American society in the 1920s; the use of colors embodies more concrete information of characters; the important geographical locations clarify the distinctions among different social classes. The use of symbolism basically generalizes the whole story, thereby deepens the main theme of the doomed crumble of American dream.

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