

Ethical Pendulum: The Reinterpretation of *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

Fitzgerald presented a vivid picture of ethical chaos in American Jazz Age through his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*. By describing the characters’ different ethical consciousness, ethical choices, ethical identities and ethical behaviors in the novel, Fitzgerald maybe intend to give expression to his ethical orientation: if the American society alienates itself from the traditional ethics completely, a disaster would fall on it, a gloomy vision of a world without ethical order and moral norm.

Key words: Traditional ethics; Modern ethics; *The Great Gatsby*; Ethical literary criticism; F. Scott Fitzgerald

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INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald was one of the famous American writers, and is widely acknowledged as a spokesman of the Jazz Age. T. S. Eliot commented that “no other novelist were, collectively, so influential in the development of modern American fiction as Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Earnest Hemingway” (Elliot, 1988, p.873).

Fitzgerald presented readers a panorama of the roaring twenties through his works and gained himself a fame of a chronicler of America in 1920s. His masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, displayed some vivid pictures of Jazz Age, a phrase coined in his works, demonstrating the social changes happened in that period of time and is regarded as a modern classic in American literature. Gilbert Seldes ever claimed *The Great Gatsby* was “one of the finest of contemporary novels” (Rielly, 2005, p.50). It just ranks the second after *Ulysses* by James Joyce among the 100 Best English Novels. *The Great Gatsby* has attracted more and more attention of writers, critics and readers from home and abroad after Fitzgerald’s death and it has been analyzed from different perspectives. This paper will explore the works from a new angle: ethical literary criticism.

Ethical literary criticism was proposed by a Chinese professor, Nie Zhenzhao, from Central China Normal University in 2004. He put forward that ethical literary criticism should be taken as a new approach to literary study at a conference named “Study on British and American Literature in China: Reflection and Looking Forward. Professor Nie illustrated the relationship between literature and ethics in such way: “Literature describes the life and society, which are inseparable from ethical and moral problems... No matter you are a writer who creates the literature, or you are a reader who reads the works, you are involved in ethical problems consciously or unconsciously, and you will make your judgment and comment based on the ethical system” (Nie, 2004, p.22). “Ethical literary criticism is an approach of literary criticism to read, analyze and interpret literary works, study writers and problems related to literature from the ethical stand” (Nie, 2010, p.14). It is a methodology coming out of both ethics and morality and assimilating them into literary critical methods. Ethical literary criticism emphasizes that all kinds of moral phenomenon in literary works should be analyzed,

understood and interpreted based on the ethical context of the specific period of history, by adopting the method of dialectical materialism. According to professor Nie, the application of this kind of criticism can date back to Aristotle, Plato, Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud and Lacon in western countries and Confucius and Liu Xie in China, whose works all concerned with ethical thinking and moral ideas. Professor Nie (2005, p.8) pointed out “The main purpose of literature and art lies in serving moral education rather than the appreciation of literature and art beauty”. Thus, the ethical value and moral norm in literary works can be better understood by adopting the ethical literary criticism, which has its own essence and core terms such as ethical taboo, ethical consciousness, ethical choice, ethical identity, ethical situation, ethical knot, ethical line, and ethical confusion etc.. Since then, many Chinese literary scholars have helped to develop ethical literary criticism, including professor Zhou Jianjun, Zhang Jie and Liu Maosheng and so on. Ethical literary criticism provides a new way and perspective to study literature and is beneficial to reinterpret classical literary works and modern works. Moreover, it is of significance to advocate new humanistic spirit and improve humanistic quality and cultural accomplishment (Zhu & Zhu, 2013).

1. THE BUCHANANS: THE SPOKESMAN OF THE MODERN ETHICS

The Great Gatsby vividly showed the picture of America in the 1920s, which is also known as Jazz Age or Roaring Twenties. Dramatic changes took place in American society during this period of time. Large scale industry was developed rather fast, and stock market and bond business were wild spread. The economy was prospering and the living standards of people were enhanced essentially. Electrical appliances, such as telephone, radio, television, entered into thousands of households and some families could even afford consuming cars. Common people were enjoying the convenient and comfortable life. With the economical changes, not only the lifestyle but also the ethical value of American changed greatly. The majority of young American abandoned the traditional ethics and immersed themselves in modern ethics, for whom the Buchanans are the spokesmen. The Buchanans can be taken as the representatives holding cold-blooded interpersonal ethics, who are wealthy, belonging to the upper class, but are irresponsible, disloyal, selfish, indifferent, and cold-blooded.

1.1 Daisy's Interpersonal Ethics

Ethical literary criticism attaches importance to the analysis of ethical identity, “because almost all the ethical problems are connected with ethical identity” (Nie, 2010, p.22). The traditional ethical identity of Daisy should be a good wife and a loving mother, but instead, she

showed no maternity to her daughter and no loyalty to her husband. Daisy failed to take the responsibility to care for her daughter Pammy, only asking nanny to take place of her role as a mother. She only indulged herself in pleasure and fun, always ignoring the existence of Pammy. She felt no obligation to raise and educate Pammy, and in her eyes, Pammy was not her daughter but a toy to play with, “I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.13). As a matter fact, what Cooperman said is true, “her child was indeed a dream—a mere shape or decorative object in her life, the echo rather than substance of emotion” (Cooperman, 1996, p.45). In addition, Daisy is not a loyal wife. She married Tom only due to his large wealth and high social status and gave up her beloved one, Gatsby. Money was the most important thing in her life and living a luxurious life is her pursuit. When Gatsby came back with a large amount of fortune, she was attracted and volunteered to be his mistress immediately, with no shame at all for her disloyalty to her husband and her marriage. Daisy's pride was so fully satisfied with Gatsby's passionate love and huge fortune. However, Daisy's love to Gatsby in fact was fashioned and shaped by material desires. Knowing Gatsby money was made by illegal means, she hesitated to admit her love to him. Daisy was depressed, resulting in killing Myrtle accidentally. She and Tom schemed to evade legal punishment rather than to shoulder the responsibility, which led to the death of Gatsby. She was so indifferent and cold-blooded that she even didn't attend Gatsby's funeral but travel with her husband Tom.

1.2 Tom's Interpersonal Ethics

Tom Buchanan and Daisy are the birds of the same feather. Tom always believed that money could make the mare go. In order to marry Daisy, Tom bought her valuable jewelries and held a grand and gorgeous wedding ceremony for Daisy. “He came down with a hundred people in four private cars, and hired a whole floor of the Muhlbach Hotel” (Fitzgerald, 2001). But the marriage didn't bring any changes to Tom, he still had no concept of consideration, love, respect, duty and responsibility, failing to realize the ethical identity as a qualified husband and father. When Daisy was in the delivery of a baby, he was not around, taking care of his wife. Even worse, he kept a relationship with Myrtle, who was the wife of Wilson and came from low class. Tom couldn't realize such relationship was immoral and could be harmful to his wife and introduced Myrtle to Nick without any shame. Besides, just like Daisy, Tom was not a good lover, in that he viewed Myrtle as his private possession, not a human being. He was rude and brutal to his lover when Myrtle disobeyed him. When Myrtle challenges the right to call Daisy's name, he made a short deft movement, and broke her nose with his open hand (Fitzgerald, 2001). After Myrtle died accidentally, Tom was not sad and guilty and

instead, he engaged himself in plotting with his wife to escape the responsibility.

“Obligation, interests and responsibilities are the elements of morality” (Store, 1980, p.100). The Buchanans are rich in materials, but poor in morality, giving up completely traditional ethics of obligation, responsibility, loyalty, kindness and honesty and taking up modern ethics of selfishness, disloyalty, indifference, cruelty and cheating. The traditional moral norm on sex, deriving from the Bible, requires people to be loyal to his partner. As to the puritan thoughts, people should remain sexually abstinent. But the Buchanans broke these ethical taboos in that animal factors defeated human factors in them, thereby their ethical consciousness faded away. At the same time, they failed to obtain the correct ethical identity and gain the right ethical regulations and guidance from the society, in which such kinds of behaviors were widespread.

2. GATSBY: THE SACRIFICE OF THE MODERN ETHICS

This is an era of indulgence and drunkenness, when consumerism and hedonism are popular. During this period of time, consuming ethics spreading through all of the country and the traditional production ethics, emphasizing thrifty, dribbled away. The reputation and status can be established by a vast amount of consumption. Gatsby immersed himself in consumption ethics rather than sustained the traditional ethics of frugality.

2.1 Gatsby's Consumption Ethics

When he was in the army in the south, Gatsby met and fell in love with Daisy, a beautiful and charming lady from high class. They spent a period of good time together. At that time, he began to realize the importance of money and status. Later, he had to leave his lover Daisy for the war and looked forward to a bright future. He was brave in the war and got many awards, which gained him an ethical identity as a national hero. But after he returned from the war, Daisy married Tom for the sense of security brought by Tom's tremendous wealth and high position, which was a big blow to Gatsby. In fact, Gatsby lives in a society which considers the material collection as the ultimate goal. He was aware of that he was inferior in money and social status compared with Tom and other upper class people. In order to get Daisy back, he had to accumulate a great deal of money to defeat his rival. With this ambition, he finally succeeded in becoming rich by bootlegging, which was his new ethical choice. As a result, his ethical identity of national hero changed into a criminal.

To win the fame and attract his goddess Daisy, Gatsby started his consuming life. He bought a grand mansion on the West Egg and held wasteful, luxurious and lavish parties. Every weekend in Gatsby's mansion, “In his

blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars” (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.26). “On weekends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city...And on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden-shears, repairing the ravages of the night before” (ibid). “At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough coloured lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden... On buffet tables, garnished with glistening hors d'oeuwe, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold...”(ibid). All these descriptions exhibited Gatsby's lavish and wasteful life without any moderation, and Gatsby threw himself without any hesitation into the modern consumption ethical tide, which destroyed this man eventually.

2.2 Gatsby's Interpersonal Ethics

At first, Gatsby was a mystery to all the people who came to take part in the grand parties he held and nobody knew where this great man came from. Many rumors on this man spread. Only at the end of the novel, when his father appeared to attend his funeral, his background was revealed. Gatsby came from a poor peasant family in Chicago. When he was young, he was influenced by American traditional ethics profoundly, which can be reflected from his schedule and resolves his father showed to Nick. They are as the following:

Rise from bed	6:00 A.M.
Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling	6:15-6:30 ”
Study electricity, etc.	7:15-8:15 ”
Work	8:30-4:30 P.M.
Baseball and Sports	4:30-5:00 ”
Practise elocution, poise and how to attain it	5:00-6:00 ”
Study needed inventions	7:00-9:00 ”

General Resolves

No wasting time at Shafers or [a name, indecipherable]

No more smoking or chewing

Bath every other day

Read one improving book or magazine per week

Save \$5.00 [crossed out] \$3.00 per week

Be better to parents

Judging from his schedule and resolves made in his youth, Gatsby is a self-disciplined, industrious, clean, frugal and filial person. These valuable virtues of young Gatsby could be traced back to Benjamin Franklin's thirteen virtues in *Autobiography*. As to the relationship with parents, Chinese sticks to the ethics of “parents shows love to their children and children should be filial to their parents”. The ethics of Chinese is a little different from that of Western countries, but the traditional western ethics also emphasizes the filial piety, which

was mentioned in the Bible, and gratitude to parents and harmonious relationship with parents in Aristotle's works etc.. With the tremendous changes in American society, Gatsby abandoned his traditional ethics on filial obedience eventually and made new ethical choice: broke up with his parents by changing his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby and finding a relatively decent rich adopted father. He felt shameful about his unsuccessful farm parents and even once told Nick that his family all died. Besides, he didn't contact and communicate with his parents for a long time. Although two years before his death, he suddenly appeared before his parents and bought them a house, he just wanted to show how successful he was and believed money could solve everything. Even after his death, Nick couldn't find anything about his parents, thus, Nick couldn't reach his parents to tell the news. It is ironical that his father knew the sad news in the newspaper. Gatsby's ethical identity changed from a filial child to an ingratitude son since he made new ethical choice. It is satirical that at last, Gatsby was deserted by his beloved lover and a crowd of so called friends except Nick and his father he once broke up with.

3. NICK: CONSERVATIVE TO THE TRADITIONAL ETHICS

It is Nick, the narrator of the story, who sticks to American traditional ethics in the novel. Nevertheless, he also could not avoid being influenced by the insistent modernity, attracted by the luxurious lifestyle of the upper class and modern mechanical vitality and feeling puzzled at the codes of ethics for a period of time. Fortunately, Nick determined to return to the west, realizing the moral decadence of modern ethics and embracing traditional ethics again. It seems that every time when Nick took his side and made the judgment, it is also the time for the author to show his moral stand and ethical values, thus, Nick indeed is the spokesman for Fitzgerald himself.

Nick, coming from a wealthy Midwestern family, educated at a prep school and a graduate of Yale, is a member of elites. Nick is the cousin of Daisy and a classmate of Tom. He sustained a harmonious relationship and often communicated with his father, who taught him to be tolerant. "I'm inclined to reserve all judgements" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.3) for "Reserving judgements is a matter of infinite hope" (ibid). Besides this virtue, Nick possessed other virtues in terms of traditional ethics: honest, reliable, upright, unselfish and loyal to friends. After graduation, Nick decided to go East and take on the bond business because "the Middle West seemed like the ragged edge centre of the world" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.4), which revealed that the changing life of the East had an impact on Nick too. For a period of time after he arrived in New York, Nick showed kind of admiration to the Buchanans for their wealth and their lifestyle, fascinated

by the city full of neon glamour and the cheap prettiness and even attracted by the shallow, vanity and dishonest girl, Jordan. The traditional ethics is in the conflict with the modern ethics in Nick during that period of time. Luckily, Nick still preserved his ethical consciousness. Gradually, Nick became a good friend of Gatsby and get to know the love affair of Tom and Myrtle, the delicate relationship between Daisy and Tom, and the cheat made by Jordan Baker in the game and witnessed so much of the immoral things happening around. Losing trust on the wealthy Buchanans after knowing the reason leading to the death of Gatsby, Nick said, "They were 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, 2001, p.114) Those people who were scrambling to take part in the gorgeous parties by hundreds and enjoyed themselves in Gatsby's mansion were so indifferent that none of them would bother themselves to attend his funeral except one owl-eyed man who once visited Gatsby's mansion and was obsessed in Gatsby's books. Nor would Gatsby's close friend Meyer Wolfsheim attend the funeral, because he was afraid to be involved in the matter. The indifference and cruelty of those people made Nick extremely disappointed and he began to reconsider and question the modern ethics popular in that society. Nick found that this glamorous city and the prosperous decade indeed were filled with moral decay and degeneration and lack of correct ethical regulations and "wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" (Fitzgerald, 2011, p.3). Nick's ethical consciousness drove him to tell the story of Gatsby so as to share his ethical experience with more people. He realized the traditional ethics shouldn't be forgotten or disappear, otherwise, it is hopeless for American society due to its ethical confusion.

CONCLUSION

To better comprehend the ethical choices and ethical behaviors of the characters in *the Great Gatsby*, readers need to return to the ethical scene of the special historical period. Fitzgerald once said Jazz Age is an age of wonders, art, immoderation and irony (Bercovitch, 2009). Although America in the 1920s experienced the economic thriving, resulting in the material abundance, the spirit of people was a wasteland without any exaggeration. The only purpose of the government and people at that time was to create a business empire and money dominated and decided the prestige and status of people. The popular modern value of ethics in the roaring twenties composed of the indifferent interpersonal ethics, extravagant consumption ethics and unrestrained sex ethics, but meanwhile, the traditional ethics still exerted influence to some extent. Therefore,

there was the ethical chaos in the society, just like a pendulum swinging from one side to the other—a few people influenced by modern ethics to a certain degree but still sticking to traditional ethics, like Nick, some people influenced by modern ethics and ultimately giving up the traditional ethics, such as Gatsby, and the majority of people obsessing in modern ethics, like the Buchanans. Naturally, it can be understood much easily why the characters in this novel had different ethical choices in such decade of ethical confusion.

Fitzgerald himself took immense delight in the roaring twenties and lost in careless enjoyment, and however, he could keep a cool head, observing the things happening around him objectively, and judge everything with strict moral principles. He himself admitted he was a moralist in the letter to his daughter, “I am too much a moralist at heart, and really want to preach at people in some acceptable form, rather than entertain them” (Turnbull, 1963, p.79). Perhaps he wanted to express his ethical orientation through the novel: if the American society alienates itself from the traditional ethics completely, a disaster would fall on it, a gloomy vision of a world without ethical order and moral norm.

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