

CONSPICUOUS CLOTHING OF THE LEISURE CLASS IN THE GREAT GATSBY

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ABSTRACT

The Great Gatsby is an outstanding work in the 1920s of the United States which vividly depicts the extravagant life of people in the Jazz Age. Their life seem to be unrestrained, but behind it is the frustration and bewilderment that money can not dispel. The novel is a true portrayal of the social climate and public psychology at Jazz Age. Scholars at home and abroad have made a full analysis of *The Great Gatsby* from the aspects of themes, characters, artistic and narrative techniques. There are also a lot of interpretations based on consumer culture, but few studies observing from the perspective of clothes consumption. In *The Theory of Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen put forward that clothing is a manifestation of economic condition. To sum up, the paper, from the perspective of conspicuous consumption, analyzes how the clothes in *The Great Gatsby* expresses economic and social status, and how the protagonists acquire their identity from the clothes consumption.

Keywords: Conspicuous Clothing; Sign of Clothes, Identity.

1. Introduction

The Great Gatsby is Fitzgerald's masterpiece which was written in the 1920s, the period after the World War I and before the great depression. During this period, the traditional Puritan morality had disintegrated, being replaced by hedonism and consumerism. In Fitzgerald's own words, "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire"(Fitzgerald 56). He called it "Jazz Age". In *The Great Gatsby*, there are a lot of descriptions of the life style, luxury houses, high-class parties of the upper class, and their leisure activities, such as playing golf, driving luxury cars and riding horses. The extravagant and luxurious life seem to be unrestrained, but behind it is the frustration and bewilderment that money can not dispel. The novel is a true portrayal of the social climate and public psychology at Jazz Age.

2. The Composing Background

The age described in *The Great Gatsby* was distinctive. American society enjoyed prosperity during the "roaring" 1920s as the economy soared. After the end of the first World War, the United States entered a period of prosperity never seen before. In a short period of more than ten years, the economy developed at a high speed and great progress has been made in politics, economy and culture. It is called "Jazz Age".

2.1 The Great Gatsby

The Great Gatsby describes the short life of a young man, James Gatz, who was born in poverty but had ambition to become a great man since his childhood. He struggled all the way and finally left his country home and changed his name to Jay Gatsby. When serving in a military camp, Gatsby fell in love with Daisy, a beautiful girl from an upper class family. However, the call of war separated them. When Gatsby came back with his war medal, he found that his Goddess of gold had married Tom Buchanan, a vulgar but wealthy dandy. In order to win back Daisy's love, Gatsby bought a splendid mansion on the Long Island, just across the sea is Daisy's home. Extravagant parties are held all nights in his house in an attempt to attract Daisy's attention. He tried his best to get close to Daisy's cousin, Nick Carraway, the narrator of the book, just to have an opportunity to see Daisy again, relive his lost love and "repeat the past". Finally, Gatsby's unremitting efforts succeeded. Daisy was attracted by his fame and wealth. After five years from their departure, although everything has already changed, although Gatsby clearly recognized that "her voice is full of money", Gatsby still fantasized that Daisy would leave her husband and be with him forever. When Daisy accidentally killed Tom's mistress, Mrs. Wilson by driving, Gatsby volunteered to take the blame for her. Tom took the opportunity to put the blame on Gatsby and instigated Mr. Wilson to kill Gatsby, so as to remove his rival. Daisy and Tom left the United States without even attending Gatsby's funeral. Eventually, Gatsby's dream about his Goddess of gold and imaginative happiness that he has been pursuing with tenacious vitality is worthless and completely broken. Seeing the cruelty and hypocrisy of the upper class, the narrator Nick left New York and return to his Midwest hometown.

2.2 Social Background

With the growth of economic strength, there are many new generation rich people in the United States, and the number of leisure class swelled day by day in the 1920s. In the period of monopoly capitalism, the doctrines of the consumerism and hedonism weakened the traditional Puritan morality such as thrift and self-restraint. It seems that individual material interests is more important than spiritual perfection. The capitalists, through advertising and media, persuade people to buy more and more products, most of which were unnecessary for people's life, to control the working class. The Frankfurt school pointed out that in the capitalist society, the behaviors of consumption became irrelevant with people's real need---consume for the sake

of consumption. "From a Marxist perspective, because the survival of capitalism, which is a market economy, depends on consumerism, it promotes sign value as our primary mode of relating to the world around us" (Tyson 62-3). People's cognition about consumption has undergone a fundamental change, and consumption has a new significance to show class superiority and their wealth. Conspicuous consumption, a kind of leisure behavior which obtains attention and recognition by showing off one's wealth to others, has begun to rise. In all the ways of consumption, clothes consumption is more obvious in showing a person's wealth and social status. In literary works, the costume of characters is a kind of silent language, which contains important information. It can imply characteristics, atmosphere and even plot. The same is true in *The Great Gatsby*, and the clothes in the book is further analyzed below.

3 Clothes VS Wealth and Social Status

Dress, also called apparel or attire, clothing and accessories for the human body. The variety of dress is immense. The style that a particular individual selects is often linked to that person's sex, age, socioeconomic status, culture, geographic area, and historical era. Clothes not only refer to dress, but also includes the matching shoes, socks, gloves, scarves, ties, as well as all kinds of accessories, such as jewelry, bags, umbrellas, etc. Clothes culture is an important achievement in the development of human society, which contains important information. Like human language, clothes is also a kind of language to convey information. In Roland Barthes' *The Language of Fashion*, he compared "dress" and "dressing", an individual action, with the linguistic concepts "langue" and "parole" by Saussure, defining clothes a nonverbal communication. "Dress" is social directive, systematic and regulated while "dressing" is specific and individual manifestation of clothes. "Dressing can have morphological, psychological and occasional meaning, but it is not social one" (Roland 9). Wendy Leeds Hurwitz pointed out in his *Semiotics and Communication: Signs, Codes, Culture* (1992) that clothes of the wearer can reveal the personal information (age, gender, etc.) and social attributes (occupation, social class, social political identity, etc.). The signs of clothes, established not by individuals but culture, guides us toward a definitive meaning category including classes, age, group, occupation, personalities, social relatives and fashion, etc.. For the leisure class, clothing is the best way to express social status and wealth.

3.1 The Theory of the Leisure Class

The Theory of the Leisure Class is the masterpiece of Thorstein Veblen, a famous American economist and sociologist in the 19th century, and also a classic work of the institutional school. In the book, he first put forward the concept of "leisure class" and explained the emergence and development of the leisure class through a detailed analysis of the American social system. After the emergence of private ownership of property, there has been a competition for possession of

goods among people. After winning the competition, the dominant class tries to live a leisure life to show their superiority. Different from the working class, the leisure class regard labour as an unseemly thing, and only when they have leisure can they show their superiority over others. "Abstention from labour is not only a honorific or meritorious act, but it presently comes to be a requisite of decency" (Veblen 31). In order to show their superiority, the leisure class consume in a extravagant and conspicuous way.

In all fields of conspicuous consumption by the leisure class, the clothes consumption is the most appropriate expression to meet the rule of the conspicuous waste of goods. "Other methods of putting one's pecuniary standing in evidence serve their end effectually, and other methods are in vogue always and everywhere; but expenditure on dress has this advantage over most other methods, that our apparel is always in evidence and affords an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at the first glance" (Veblen 111). Veblen holds that all classes spend money on clothes more for a decent appearance than for protection. This demand for clothes is more spiritual, that is, consumption for display. Therefore, people naturally prefer expensive clothes, and think that cheap goods are lack of value, the so-called "cheapest is the dearest". The aesthetic value of a commodity depends on its price level. The more expensive a commodity is, the higher its aesthetic value and commercial value are. In addition, in Veblen's opinion, "our dress, in order to serve its purpose effectually, should not only be expensive, but it should also make plain to all observers that the wearer is not engaged in any kind of productive labour" (Veblen 113). All the upper class celebrities and dignitaries in *The Great Gatsby* are elegant, exquisite and fashionable, especially women's dressing which not only needs to show that the wearer has a rich family and never engaged in labor, but also needs to keep catching up with the fashion to show that the wearer has both leisure and money.

3.2 Conspicuous Consumption in *The Great Gatsby*

In *The Great Gatsby*, there are many sentences describing the characters' dress, including Gatsby, Daisy and Tom from the so-called "upper class society", and the Wilson couple from the working class. The upper class people are dressed up every time they appear and never wear the same dress in different occasions. There are corresponding costumes for them in different time, such as Tom's riding clothing, Daisy's evening dress, Miss Baker's Golf suit, and Gatsby's gorgeous shirts piled up in the closet, one of the most classic scene in the book. According to Roland Barthes' view in *The Language of Fashion*, clothing can not only indicate a person's identity, social status, occupation, but also express personality and the fashion trade. Whether it's Gatsby, Daisy, or anyone else who comes to the party, their clothes are elegant and decent. The men were well-dressed, with patent leather shoes and bowler hats. The ladies' dresses were spotless with smooth fabric. These dresses convey the impression that the wearer is not used to any labor from the design of clothes.

A prominent sign of the leisure class is conspicuous consumption, that is showing off money and leisure. "It not only shows that the wearer is able to consume a relatively large value, but it argues at the same time that he consumes without producing(Veblen 113)." There is a sharp contrast between the working class and the leisure class. Take Tom's mistress, Mrs. Wilson as example, before she went to New York with Tom, she wore "a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine",which shows that she has to help her husband to fix cars or cook. When she came to New York with Tom, "she had changed her dress to a brown figured muslin, which stretched tight over her rather wide hips", and then "she had changed her costume sometimes before, and was now attired in the elaborate afternoon dress of cream-coloured chiffon"(Fitzgerald 38). Even if she was not from the upper class, when she was with Tom, she wanted to dress up as a respectable lady who did not have to engaged in labour. "With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change...Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment"(Fitzgerald 38).

4. Clothes VS Identity

In *The Great Gatsby*, Clothing is crucial for the protagonist to find identity. Identity is an important concept in Western cultural studies, which refers to individual identity in a specific social cultures, that is, a kind of cognition and description of the individual. It encompasses the memories, experiences, relationships, and values that create one's sense of self. There are many aspects of Identity, such as cultural identity and national identity. In *The Consumption Sociology*, Wang Ning proposed that there is obvious relationship between consumption and identity (53). Our identity dominates our consumption, and vice versa. Our consumption is the expression of identity. Consumers are social man, with a specific social position and group belonging. Through identification, we can exist in the society and communicate with others. People consuming goods, in essence, is just to create, maintain or change their own identity. As an important field of consumption, the choice of clothes consumption not only reflects the identity, but also shows different identity order after consumption through showing and flaunting. The construction of identity through clothes consumption is mainly reflected in two aspects: class identity and female identity in *The Great Gatsby*.

4.1 Class Identity

There are contradictions and conflicts between classes in any nation, and the criteria for class division include economic, social, political, human capital and cultural capital. Generally speaking, the commonly used criterion is the double standard of economic status and social status, defining class in the hierarchical difference of economic status and social status. There is a gap between economic status and social status when using this standard. People with high economic status may not have high social status which is well reflected in *The Great Gatsby*.

The novel mainly describes the American leisure class lifestyle in the 1920s, and Gatsby is the typical representative of the imbalance between economic status and social status, so he has been trying his best to balance the two. After learning that Daisy had married someone else, he thought it was money that hindered their love. As a result, he determined to become a rich man by any means and accumulated wealth being a bootlegger. After his economic status improved, even if he bought a villa across the bay from Daisy's house and held luxurious parties that anyone could attend at night, he was still ostracized by the upper class. In other people's eyes, he was still just a "nouveau riche" who has nothing but money. How can Gatsby gain a sense of identity when he first enters the leisure class? The way is to package himself in an all-round way, not only abandoning his former name and beautifying his past experience, such as claiming to have graduated from Oxford University; but made extravagant consumption to attract the attention of the leisure class, or more precisely, Daisy's attention.

As the development of capitalism is accompanied by the development of civilization, the rich class understand the importance of cultural identity and cultural image to maintain social status and social evaluation, so they attach great importance to improving their literacy and taste in culture. Gatsby's luxurious library is "panelled with carved English oak, and probably transported complete from ruin overseas"(Fitzgerald 57), in which full of books, but most of them aren't even cut out. Books are of no practical value to Gatsby, just a symbol of taste."Through the way of consumption and style, the privileged class thinks that he is different and unique. From showing off to prudence (showing off excessively), from showing off in quantity to being elegant and outstanding, from money to culture, he absolutely maintains the privilege" (Baudrillard 167).

After the reunion with Daisy, the description of Gatsby's clothes played a key role in Daisy's coming round, because his extravagance was not only to gain the recognition of the leisure class, but also to regain his goddess of gold. He showed her around his mansion, and Daisy was full of praise for the magnificent decorations. In his bedroom, "he opened for us two hulking patent cabinets which held his massed suits and dressing-gowns and ties, and his shirts, piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high"(Fitzgerald 120). Here Gatsby tried his best to prove his financial ability to Daisy, and it was this moment that he longed for. "He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-coloured disarray"(Fitzgerald 121). There are "shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, and monograms of Indian blue"(Fitzgerald 121). What is Daisy's reaction? After seeing all this, "suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily"(Fitzgerald 121). Even she has married Tom a rich man, it is hard to resist the temptation of wealth, crying that:"It makes me sad because I've never seen such--such beautiful

shirts before"(Fitzgerald 121). Gatsby's profligacy and wealth are revealed through the mountain of clothes. For him, the greatest value of commodity lies not in its use value, but in its symbolic function, that is, the function of revealing one's wealth and status. Only by imitating the way of life and consumption in the upper class, can he obtain the cultural identity which is suitable for his economic status, so as to improve his social status. Through his extravagant behavior, he soon became famous in New York. This series of conspicuous consumption behavior not only won Daisy's attention, but also gained the recognition of his identity by the leisure class.

4.2 Female identity

Gender norms and roles are the most common and deeply rooted social identity order. According to Wang Ning's viewpoint in *The Consumption Sociology*, women, as a basic gender consumer group, usually try to embody "femininity", that is, female identity (Wang 73). The society has constructed a norm and ideal about female beauty. Women must make themselves perfect and sexy according to this ideal. They must use all kinds of commodities prepared by various manufacturers for them to build an image and identity of female beauty. Women's consumption action to please men visually is the embodiment of women's dependence on men in the patriarchal society. In addition, in a family, women must also represent the family's conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption. "The women being not their own masters, obvious expenditure and leisure on their part would redound to the credit of their master rather than to their own credit; and therefore the more expensive and the more obviously unproductive the women of the household are, the more creditable and more effective for the purpose of reputability of the household or its head will their life be" (Veblen 119). As William Gelson put it, Daisy is the "medal", "prize" and "trophy" of her class, because she is obviously separated from any labour. According to Veblen's theory, her existence can better improve her husband Tom's "sense of money honor".

Throughout the novel Daisy has been trying to gain social recognition of her female identity. The first time Nick visit Tom and Daisy, he saw Daisy and Miss Baker "were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house"(10). In American traditional culture, white has a special meaning, which has been integrated into the ideology of American culture. White represents the superiority of social structure, and is often loved by the upper class celebrities. White people usually look at themselves, others and society from the perspective of white. Dressed in a white dress, Daisy looks noble, pure, and elegant, fully in line with the public's expectations of an upper class woman. White is one of Daisy's favorite colors, but it is also the most easily defiled color, that's why Daisy eventually became a morally degraded woman in the patriarchal society. When Tom and Daisy got married, the grand and luxurious wedding was unheard of by Louisville. On the eve of the wedding, Tom gave Daisy a string of \$350000 worth of pearls. Maybe the material

temptation was so strong, even Daisy then received Gatsby's letter, she till married Tom wearing that pearl necklace. When she gave birth to her daughter, she cried when she learned that she had given birth to a girl. "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"(22). In a patriarchal society, women are defined. They should be beautiful, docile, willing to be the appendages and housewives of men. Otherwise, they will not be appreciated and recognized by society or men.

5. Conclusion

A prominent sign of the leisure class is conspicuous consumption, that is showing off money and leisure. They strives to show their wealth through the appearance, and pay more attention to the symbolic value of commodities rather than practical value. However, what extravagant clothing can not conceal is their inner emptiness and vanity. The leisure class, especially women, use the consumption of clothing as a way to maintain and reproduce a higher social status, to obtain the identity of the same class. It is hard to tell whether they utilize clothing or they are manipulated by it.

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