APPLICATION OF SYMBOLISM IN THE GREAT GATSBY

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INTRODUCTION

Francis Scott Fitzgerald was one of the most famous American novelists in the 1920s. The 20th century was considered the “Jazz” and “golden age” of the United States, a period of dramatic changes in social life and ideology. As the spokesman of this era and the representative writer of “The Lost Generation”, Fitzgerald disclosed in his works the young generation’s disillusionment of the “American Dream”: a kind of confusion caused by the First World War. Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, published in 1925, is the most profound description and criticism of that era. It fully shows the author’s extraordinary writing talent, especially his flexible use of symbolism, which “connects subjective with objective, amplifies personal experience and endows it with typicality” (Howard Wolf, 1996).

The novel describes a rapidly changing era: the tradition gave way to the fashionable culture with jazz as the pioneer; bold and unrestrained clothes and behaviors became fashions; and people were all in pursuit of hedonism. The main characters of the novel were the fashionable young people in the new era, who had the typical optimism and childishness of the Lost Generation, believing in the “American Dream” and having romantic expectations for the future. The theme of the novel is about the relationship between wealth and morality. In the story, an upstart who had achieved the goal of making a fortune turned into a tragic character, and paid for his crazy behaviors. The novel uses the first person narrative technique, unfolds the story gradually through what Nick saw, heard and felt, and makes a general description of the “Jazz Age” of the United States.

Interpretation to symbolism

Symbolism is to express some abstract concepts, thoughts and feelings with the help of specific image (symbol) of someone and something according to relationship between them. It can make an article meaningful and implicit. Appropriate use of symbolism can turn some abstract spiritual qualities into concrete and perceptible images, which will leave a deep impression on readers, give the article a deep meaning, and leave readers with space for chewing and aftertaste. There is no direct connection between the ontological meaning and symbolic meaning of symbols. However, through artists’ outstanding description of the ontological features, art appreciators can associate such ontological meaning with symbolic meaning and further understand the meaning that artists want to express (Shao Xu, 2016).

Symbolism first appeared in France at the end of the 19th century. It was an important literary trend of thought and school at that time. This school believed that the external things and people’s hearts were communicating and interacting with each other, so they often revealed the inner world of the characters in the novels through images. In this novel,
Fitzgerald used a lot of symbols to depict the characters, highlight the themes, and describe the abstract concepts with the things that people are accustomed to, thus making narrative contents simple and easy to be understood and rendering it with dreamy colors. This paper intends to discuss the use of symbolism in the novel from the following three aspects: color, site and character.

**Application of symbolism in The Great Gatsby**

**Color symbols**

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author employed a great deal of color descriptions to reflect the strong contrast between the social pomp and the emptiness of the characters, and also reveal the character traits through the meanings represented by the colors.

**White**

When Gatsby saw Daisy five years ago, she was standing gracefully in front of a white convertible. When Gatsby and Nick visited Daisy five years later, she and Jordan were lying lazily in a white dress in a lounge. Daisy often wears white when she dates with Gatsby. White is a striking feature of the character in the novel. White originally symbolizes purity, beauty and innocence, but in the novel, it symbolizes Daisy’s laziness and ignorance. She knows nothing about the outside world and is often lost in shallow ideas (Chen Yan et al., 2012). Although Gatsby finally met her sweetheart Daisy under Nick’s arrangement, it was not Gatsby’s infatuation that awakened Daisy’s love, but the luxurious decoration inside his villa and his luxurious lifestyle. At this time, Daisy has already been changed by the environment. In the material life of the eastern United States, the desire for money and material has long distorted her into a greedy, selfish and empty vulgar woman. No matter how much wealth he possessed, Gatsby would not be able to save her fallen soul. From another point of view, white also symbolizes shallowness, ignorance, uselessness and laziness, which is the essential character of Daisy.

**Green**

Green is closely related to Gatsby. Gatsby is from the western part of the United States. Although born in a poor and humble family, he is ambitious, brave and indomitable, broad-minded, and dedicated to love. He is determined to get rid of the living difficulties and realize his “American Dream” through personal struggle. Green lamp is mentioned many times in the novel. The author skilfully links the green lamp with Gatsby, and uses the green lamp to represent Gatsby’s pursuit of ideal, love and happiness.

This green lamp is like a navigation lamp in the sea in the boundless night, guiding Gatsby out of the darkness and the predicament of his life and toward a new life. The hero often looks at the green lamp alone in the darkness, which represents his dream and desire. In the last chapter of the novel, Nick lamented Gatsby’s life: “When I sit there and start to remember that old, unknown world, I also think of the surprise Gatsby felt when he recognized the green lamp on Daisy’s wharf. It took Gatsby a long journey to reach the green lawn. His dream seemed to be in front of him, and would be realized very soon. In fact, what he didn’t know was that the dream had long been abandoned by him, in the chaos of the city, where the dark fields of the United States were constantly extending in the night” (Zhang Ruirong, 2010). The green lamp was originally Gatsby’s eternal dream, his pursuit and happiness in his life. However, the green lamp that flickered in the fog indicates that Gatsby’s dream is less and less likely to be realized. In the end, Gatsby was determined to take all the responsibilities for Daisy, who killed Mrs. Wilson in a traffic accident, and then was killed by Mr. Wilson.

**Yellow**

Yellow represents money, wealth and status, and is a symbol of money worship. Every corner of the society is filled with yellow, echoing the voice of money. For example, Daisy, obsessed with money, firmly believes that her marriage must be combined with money. Gatsby’s tragedy stems from his superstition of this kind of yellow right. He wrongly takes Daisy, the incarnation of money, as the goal of his struggle. He naively believes that as long as he gets money, he can have love and find happiness.

In order to regain his love, he always shows Daisy his wealth. Gatsby held a grand and luxurious banquet in the garden. Cars, food, bars, etc. were all yellow. When he met Daisy, he wore a gold tie. His gorgeous and expensive car was light yellow. The comb displayed to Daisy was also pure gold. Even the music played was yellow cocktail music. The author uses yellow to render a kind of atmosphere of money society, but yellow, like the falling leaves in autumn, also indicates Gatsby’s death and the immorality of the American society. In Fitzgerald’s view, money is the basic reason for Gatsby’s tragedy. His failure is not due to his weak economic strength, but because he bases his dream on money.

**Site symbols**

**East Egg**

Daisy and her husband Tom live in the East Egg at Long Island in southeast New York. East Egg has always been the place where the upper bourgeoisie live, and it is the symbol of the old bourgeoisie with stable status. The residents living in East Egg are hereditary aristocrats who have been rich from generation to generation. Although the new bourgeoisie like Gatsby is very rich, they cannot live in this “hereditary territory”. People in East Egg are gentle and cultivated on the surface, but empty inwardly. As reflected in the novel, they are indifferent to their surroundings, domineering, used to solve problems with money, never worried about hurting others, living in luxury, self-centered and exclusive. It is not only the place where hereditary aristocrats live, but also the place where lacks intelligence and morality.

**West Egg**

The emerging bourgeoisie live in West Egg, and their wealth is not acquired through heritage, but through legal or illegal accumulation in the period of American economic prosperity. The novel does not explain how Gatsby got great wealth, but indirectly reveals that his wealth was obtained through improper ways. This article describes the magnificence of Gatsby’s house but also its lack of fashion, which confirms Gatsby’s naive idea that he intended to step into the upper society and capture his sweetheart through money. This also reflects the vulgarity and vanity of the new emerging bourgeoisie. At the same time, the description of ivy buds also has symbolic significance, indicating that Gatsby still needs time to accumulate in all aspects, so as to become mature both.
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**Character symbols**

**Gatsby**

Gatsby is the embodiment of American individualism. He was born in a humble background, naive but enterprising. He believed that anything could be bought with money, and money and success could be achieved through personal efforts. After the war, American spirit was empty and wandering. People tried to find themselves and express their emotions through wealth. Gatsby’s character and dream are the epitome and sublimation of Americans. Young Gatsby was poor, diligent and progressive, determined to become a Franklin style figure. His pursuit of material was the continuation of the Franklin style American dream. In Gatsby’s eyes, Daisy was not only the symbol of beauty, power and wealth, but also the embodiment of his dream. His arduous pursuit of Daisy is actually the pursuit of the materialistic American dream.

**Daisy**

In Gatsby’s eyes, Daisy seems to be an embodiment of truth, goodness and beauty. On the surface, Daisy is rich and beautiful, but her spiritual world is extremely empty. Although there is no more perfect existence in Gatsby’s heart than Daisy, it is only based on the huge property. So Gatsby gained wealth through illegal means; Tom had an affair with Ms. Wilson; Daisy killed Ms. Wilson with Gatsby’s car; and Mr. Wilson shot Gatsby finally.

**Valley of Ashes**

Valley of Ashes symbolizes barrenness, despair and death, but it is also the place where most American laborers gather at that time, and the by-product of the development of modern industrial civilization. Valley of Ashes represents the moral rubbish and spiritual desert, namely the spiritual world of the modern western world. People living here lack belief, pursue material enjoyment endlessly, lose morality and live aimlessly. In the spiritual desert, cars and trains pass by quickly, producing a lot of dust, and toxic substances erode the land of the United States. The visible dust symbolizes that in spite of creating material wealth, the industrial society leads to people’s ideological and moral wasteland. In this moral wasteland, Daisy is just a springboard for Gatsby to realize his dream, but at the same time, Daisy would not give up the benefits that she possesses for the sake of Gatsby. Therefore, Daisy, a vain woman, in order to prevent Gatsby from reappearing in her world, finally tried to wipe out Gatsby completely, which resulted in Gatsby’s death. Although it’s not Daisy’s fault, it’s her superficiality and hypocrisy that make it a reality.

**Nick**

Nick is the ideal character in the novel. He is the narrator and an important character in the novel: Gatsby’s neighbor and friend, Daisy’s cousin, Tom’s college classmate and Jordan’s lover. With so many people connected, he has the opportunity to observe and experience their lives. On the one hand, he learned the darkest side of human nature -- hypocrisy and coldness -- exposed by rich people like Tom and Jordan; on the other hand, he saw the noble quality hidden under Gatsby’s decadent appearance -- to take all responsibilities for the sake of ideals. As an intermediary who is “both in and out of it, intoxicated and disgusted with the ever-changing life”, he plays the role of judge and the embodiment of moral principles.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The Great Gatsby makes use of symbolism throughout the novel, and vividly describes the defects of the society at that time. Through this series of symbolic techniques, the author Fitzgerald explains to us the declining situation of American spiritual civilization in the materialistic society, and expresses his concern for the society in that era.

**References**