

Analysis of Myrtle's Identity Crisis in *The Great Gatsby* from the Perspective of Consumerism

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Abstract

The Great Gatsby is one of the most important representative works of "Jazz Age", which profoundly reflects the prevailing social atmosphere of consumerism. The identity crisis of Myrtle in the novel reflects the relationship between the values of consumerism and identity: under the influence of the value system of consumerism, people associate the symbolic meaning carried by things with themselves, so that the meaning of human existence is given by things. People are keen to find their identity through the consumer goods they possess, and blindly imitate the lifestyle of the upper class. The powerful influence of consumerism has covered up the solidified class stratification, makes it difficult for people to realize their true selves, and one's dream of crossing the class boundary is doomed to become futile.

Keywords

F. Scott Fitzgerald; *The Great Gatsby*; Consumerism; Identity.

1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald is known as the spokesman of the "Jazz Age", and his representative work *The Great Gatsby* is also known as the most important masterpiece of that age. His work accurately portrays the whole atmosphere and status quo of that age, and shows how the consumerism prevailed at that time.

The United States has become a power with developed industries and global influence after half a century's industrialization since 1856. And the World War I gave the United States an economic boost. During the decade after the war, important changes had taken place in the American economy, not only in the aspect of quantity, but also in the aspect of quality. The core of economic life shifted from production to consumption. In accordance with it, a new value system had formed in social life. The pattern and meaning of the consumption had undergone a fundamental change. According to Jean Baudrillard, "Commodities are no longer defined by their use, but rather by what they signify. And what they signify is defined not by what they do, but by their relationship to the entire system of commodities and sign.[1] The symbolic value of commodity surpassed its use value, becoming an important symbol of the consumer's social status and identity. The prevailing atmosphere of consumerism also affects the identity of the characters in the novel, and provides the social background for this study.

After World War I, people are disillusioned and disenchanted with the world. They are spiritually empty, blinded by consumerism in their search for comfort. It is just because of the prevalence of consumerism that the traditional identity reference system has changed, making it more difficult for people to find their own identity. The characters in *The Great Gatsby*, living in such a world, have to think about what role they play in this era, what kind of life they hope to live, and how to achieve a kind of self-satisfaction. Under the influence of consumerism, each character has his or her ideal identity or has a potential positioning of his or her identity, and such identification also affects the development of that character. Myrtle is the most tragic character in the novel. She has two roles to play in the story: the wife of the automobile

mechanic Wilson, and the mistress of the aristocracy Tom Buchanan. Under the influence of consumerism, Myrtle tries hard to enter the upper class and at the same time get rid of the working class she belongs to. However, she cannot be accepted by the upper class. At last, she could not give a clear definition of her own identity and suffers an identity crisis. In the end, the identity crisis cannot be resolved, and Myrtle's tragic fate is inevitable.

2. The Comparison of Myrtle's Real and Ideal Identity

Myrtle is the most tragic character in the novel. She has two roles to play in the story: the wife of the automobile mechanic Wilson, and the mistress of the aristocracy Tom. Under the influence of consumerism, she forms the idea of her ideal life and has a position of her identity. But there is a great gap between her ideal identity and real identity.

2.1. The "real" Myrtle

In the early twentieth century, under the influence of the feminist movement, the 19th constitutional amendment in 1920 enacted alcohol prohibition and endowed women with the right to vote. However, women had no actual voting rights at that time. And it was almost impossible for them to achieve economic independence. For most women, their socio-economic status nearly depended entirely on their husbands. And Myrtle was no exception. Her socio-economic status relied on her husband and her lover.

Myrtle was of humble birth before she married Wilson. It is easy to infer although not mentioned in the text. The main reason why she got married with Wilson is that she believed he had some characteristics of upper class and "knew something about breeding". She wanted to improve her social status through marriage, but she did not expect that even the suits her husband wore on their wedding day were borrowed from others. They lived a hard life after getting married. Wilson owned a garage on a street with only three shops in the valley of ashes. But the garage was unprosperous and bare, with only one old Ford covered with dust. Myrtle and Wilson had been married for 12 years and had lived in the valley of ashes for 11 years. According to the description of Myrtle in the novel, she was not an attractive woman. She was rather plain, full-figured in her middle thirties. However, she was filled with perceptible vitality. This is typically the characteristic of a working-class woman who lives at the bottom of society. However, she strongly rejected this identity and tried to get out of the working class. She thought her husband "wasn't fit to lick her shoe", and coarsely gave orders to him in the garage. These behaviors show that she strongly rejected her identity in real life.

2.2. Myrtle's ideal identity and reference group

In social psychology, the most important thing for identity is to find an appropriate "reference group". This group can give individuals a sense of belonging and allow them to compare themselves with other members in it. There is also a reference group which plays an important role in the formation of Myrtle's ideal identity.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the middle class in America usually imitated the consumption behavior of the rich people who earned a lot more than they did. These people were the celebrities at that time. And only this group had a lot of time and money to spend on consumption. And the media and advertising had played an important role during this period. In the novel, several magazines purchased by Myrtle have important symbolic significance. These magazines include "Town Tattle", "small scandal magazines of Broadway" and "a moving picture magazine". The main content of these magazines is about the photos and scandals of the celebrities. And this represents a new cultural phenomenon in the United States: the birth of "gossip culture" and "celebrity culture". In the past, the fame of celebrities was still related to what they did, and their fame was something earned. But due to the development of consumerism and mass media, some newspapers and magazines started to focus on the lifestyle

and scandals of the celebrities in order to attract readers, which had promoted the imitation of the consumption behaviors of the rich by the middle and lower classes. "The New Yorkers who made up Fitzgerald's original audience would have recognized these references for what they were: a New York in-joke and an incisive criticism of the period's loss of moral direction with the rise of the gossip industry and the beginnings of America's celebrity." [4] And the real Town Topics even dealt frankly with "extra-marital affairs ("If I were the charming matron impeded by a husband and child, I would be a little more circumspect in my meetings with a certain 'Royal Gentleman'"). [4] Myrtle takes these celebrities being propagated by the mass media as reference group. And her ideal identity is a lady of upper class who can completely get rid of labor. Therefore, she wants to marry Tom and step into the class of aristocracy. But she doesn't know that all of this is a dream and their marriage would never happen.

In real life, Myrtle is a working class who has neither wealth nor education, but her ideal identity is the wife of an aristocrat who does not need to work and still owns a large amount of wealth to support his consumption. She tries hard to get rid of her current identity and wants to step into the upper class. However, the huge gap between the two identities causes serious conflicts and affects the development of her life in the novel.

3. Myrtle's Reconstruction of Identity Under Consumerism Research Methodology

Under the influence of consumerism, Myrtle wanted to realize her ideal identity and get rid of the working class she belonged to. Therefore, she reconstructed her identity according to the standard of consumer culture. However, the new identity she created was a false one, which was not accepted by the upper class she wanted to step into. The result of Myrtle's reconstruction of identity was her identity crisis.

3.1. Myrtle's behavior of identity construction

According to Wu's analysis of the psychologist Freud's theory of personality structure [6], the human personality consists of three components: id, ego, and superego. Id is guided by the pleasure principle. Ego is guided by the reality principle. And superego consists of two subsystems: ego-ideal and conscience. With the help of his research, we can analyze the personality structure of Myrtle. At the level of id, Myrtle is driven by her desire for Tom. At the level of superego, her ideal identity is a lady of upper class. And at the level of ego, she tries to reshape herself and realize her ideal identity. Under the influence of consumerism, Myrtle reshapes her identity and tries to make herself look like an aristocrat. In Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, he thinks that the aristocracy belongs to the "leisure class" [5]. He came up with the concept of "leisure class" for the first time. "Leisure" here does not mean members of this class have nothing to do, but it is used to prove that they do not need to engage in any productive activities because they already have enough money to maintain their leisure life. The leisure class has two main features: "conspicuous leisure" and "conspicuous consumption". According to Veblen, it is not enough to only possess wealth and power. Showing the wealth to others is of the same importance. This is called "conspicuous consumption". And "conspicuous leisure" refers to not taking part in any social labor. Myrtle tries to reconstruct her identity according to the lifestyle of the leisure class.

In the book, Myrtle's reconstruction of identity begins with changing clothes. When working in the garage, she wore "a spotted dress of dark blue crêpe-de-chine" and when she left for the New York, she replaced the former one with the "brown figured muslin", and finally, she dressed on a skirt of "cream-colored chiffon" before having a small party in the apartment. The color of clothes gradually becomes lighter from the dark blue which is less prone to dirtiness to the brown which means emotional and finally to the light cream color. And the fabric of the

dress changes from muslin to the fashionable synthetic fibers. The clothing here not only has the use value, but also has the symbolic value. Clothing can prove the wearer's ability to pay and distinguish the classes. According to Veblen, the symbolic value of clothing makes it easy for others to tell whether the wearer has engaged in social labor.[5] If there are any signs of productive labor, such as the spots on Myrtle's dark blue dress, then the owner of the clothes will be considered as a member of the lower working class. The clothes of the leisure class give people the impression that their owners are not used to any work, such as clean white shirts and the "cream-colored chiffon dresses". The reason why these clothes are elegant is that they contain a hint that the owners of them will not be exposed to any social labor. Myrtle tries to pack a brand new self with clothes, making herself look like an elegant and respectable lady.

Myrtle's identity reconstruction is also reflected in many other aspects. For example, when she was about to take a taxi in New York, she "let four taxicabs drive away" and finally chose a new one with "lavender color". Lavender color is endowed with special meaning by the cultural mode at that time: romantic and noble. And Myrtle's choice contains the hint of class division. In addition, there are a lot of descriptions about Myrtle's series of "conspicuous consumption behavior". As soon as the train arrived at New York, she started her consumption, buying "magazines" at the news-stand, and "some cold cream and a small flask of perfume" in the station drug-store. And the author also describes in details how Myrtle wants a dog. She showed a strong interest in dogs. It is not because this kind of pets has any use value, but because they are the important element in the ladies' life at that time, which carries the symbolic meaning of the leisure and luxury, and it is a sign of "leisure". What's more, at the party held by Myrtle in her apartment, she told Mrs. McKee she would make a to-do list. All the things she need to do on the list, including "a massage, a wave, and to buy many other things", belong to conspicuous consumption behaviors with the purpose of showing off wealth. Myrtle also made great effort to decorate her house. The room was filled with various furniture and ornaments that were used to show her taste, including "large tapestried furniture, scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles, and an over-enlarged photograph". Her extravagant consumption reflects her desire to quickly step into the leisure class. She tries her best to create an ideal identity: a lady of the "leisure class".

3.2. The result of Myrtle's reconstruction of identity: identity crisis

Myrtle tries to realize the transformation from the working class to the rich leisure class. However, such a great leap has brought about great changes in her behaviors, such as holding parties, changing clothes frequently, extravagant consumption, and being arrogant and pretentious. This series of behaviors reflects her maladjustment to the change of her class and her desire to acquire identity.

However, the new identity she creates with great effort is false and vulnerable. Although she owns a luxury apartment, the unmatched furniture and the "scandal magazines" put on the shelf in the apartment reveal her taste. The dog she bought symbolizing the leisure life of the upper class is just a mongrel one which costs only ten dollars. Even her "cold cream" and "perfume" are bought in the station drugstore. And the wreath she wants to buy for her dead mother is made of artificial flowers so that it can last for a whole summer. All these can show that the identity she creates is a fake one. And the leisure class she dreams of joining does not welcome this outsider with a false identity. This class represented by Tom is insular and strongly exclusive. When Tom attended Gatsby's party, he scoffed at all kinds of people who get rich by taking shortcuts and refuses to make acquaintance with them. And when Myrtle mentioned Daisy's name, he broke her nose. In his opinion, Myrtle still belonged to the lower working class and she had no right to mention the name of an aristocracy. The leisure class Tom represents rejects any attempt of people who are inferior to them crossing the class boundary. And the identity Myrtle creates would be never accepted.

In fact, even Myrtle does not have enough confidence in the ideal identity she has created. In her fantasy, she could get rid of her humble origin and reshape herself. But when she saw Tom driving past the garage with Jordan, her eyes opened wide, showing panic and jealousy, because she mistook her for Daisy. In Myrtle's mind, Daisy was the biggest threat to prevent her from realizing her ideal identity, and when this "threat" really appeared in front of her, she was filled with panic. The possibility of the disillusionment of her ideal identity brings her great identity anxiety, and leads to her identity crisis. So when she saw Tom's car again, she ran toward it, waving her hands and shouting. But she did not know it was Daisy who drove the car. Later Daisy killed her by accident, and then she left even without stopping. No one really cared about Myrtle's death except her husband. She was born with nothing and returns to nothing at last. She wants to cross the class boundary, but is forced to accept the punishment of death.

Myrtle is doomed to fail in her attempt to overstep her own class and integrate into the leisure class with strong exclusiveness. She cannot give a clear definition of her identity and couldn't find the sense of belonging neither.

4. The Root Cause of Myrtle's Identity Crisis

In an era boomed with consumerism, the mass production of cheap goods and the development of mass media have made people keen to find their own identity through the possession of goods. And the trend of imitating and counterfeiting was prevalent. The development of media and advertising also played an important role in fueling the flames. From 1870 to 1910, the circulation of daily newspapers in the United States increased by 9 times, and various popular consumer magazines also flourished. In these magazines, there were articles tracking fashion trends and the promotion of all kinds of products. The prevalence of imitative consumption made it more difficult for people to identify the identities of their colleagues and neighbors. Guy Debord mentioned in *Society of the Spectacle* that in the era of consumerism, society has become more and more representational, from existence to possession, from possession to manifestation[3]. The definition of the identity has also been reversed: the appearance represents the essence. The thing an individual possesses, even the thing he pretends to possess, becomes a proof of his identity. Consumerism seems to have blurred the boundaries between classes. At that time, the media was also hyping the gorgeous "American Dream". In the myth of the "American dream", it seems that everyone can break through the restrictions of the social class into which they are born and step into the upper class through their own efforts. In fact, however, the social class has already become solidified, and the division of classes is still clear. The emphasis on authenticity promotes imitation and forgery. If one wants to cross the class boundary, he must change his appearance and looks like a member of the class in which he wants to enter. The existence of imitation and disguise just proves the lack of class mobility. If there is a space for class mobility, the individual can just present the real self to others.

The limitation of consumerism determines that the individual's personality cannot be fully expressed. In the seemingly active choice of the consumption behavior, people associate the symbolic meaning carried by things with themselves, so that the meaning of human existence is given by things. In order to gain self-identity and find the sense of belonging, one must compromise to the symbolic meaning represented by consumer goods. The particularity of human beings and man's independence of thought are extremely suppressed. People lose themselves in face of the consumerism. They blindly imitate the lifestyle of the upper class, and hope to be accepted by this class. Even without enough social capital, they begin to reject the original class they were born to. At last, they lose the sense of belonging, and cannot give a clear definition of their own identity. They are very likely to fall into identity crisis.

Myrtle is not the only one who dreams of crossing the class boundary and stepping in to the upper class. Her failure of identity reconstruction and the emergence of her identity crisis also

reflect the powerful influence and limitations of consumerism, which prevents people from realizing their true self.

5. Conclusion

This research analyzes Myrtle's identity crisis mainly from three aspects: the comparison of Myrtle's ideal and real identities, her identity reconstruction under consumerism, and the root cause of her identity crisis. First of all, this research makes a comparison between Myrtle's real and ideal identities based on the details of the text. Her real identity is a woman of working class living at the bottom of the society, while her ideal identity is a lady of the upper class. The huge gap between her ideal identity and real identity carries a foreshadowing of her identity crisis. Next, this thesis analyzes the process of Myrtle's identity reconstruction from the aspects of personality structure and consumption behavior. Myrtle's a series of consumption behavior shows her desire to realize her ideal identity with the help of the symbolic value of commodities. She reconstructs a new identity according to the standard of consumer culture. Then this thesis reveals the result of Myrtle's identity reconstruction: the identity crisis. The false identity created by Myrtle is not accepted by the upper class, and the shattering of ideal identity brings her great identity anxiety, which causes her to suffer an identity crisis. Finally, this research analyzes the root cause of Myrtle's identity crisis: the prevalence of consumerism reverses the definition of identity. The appearance represents the essence. Consumerism conceals the solidified class stratification. The powerful influence of consumerism makes it difficult for people to realize their true selves, and one's dream of crossing the class boundary is doomed to become futile. Myrtle's identity crisis is a vivid portrayal of the prevalence of consumerism in the "Jazz Age", reflecting the great influence and limitations of consumerism.

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