

A Deconstructive Analysis of *The Great Gatsby*

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Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) is universally recognized as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century. He is also considered a member of the “Lost Generation” of the 1920s, and with the publication of *The Great Gatsby* he was catapulted to fame by a night which gives a concrete illustration to the Jazz Age. Taking the novel as a case in point, this paper, based on the theory of deconstruction, seeks to undertake a deconstructive interpretation towards the binary oppositions on which the projects rest—dream and reality, and the past and the present, in order to subvert logos-centrism represented by Gatsby’s disillusionment with his American dream.

Keywords: deconstruction, *The Great Gatsby*, logos-centrism, Lacan

Introduction

When analyzing *The Great Gatsby* with the theory of deconstruction, scholars tend to center upon the tragic life of the younger generation who experienced the bloody War World I and the representation of the Gatsby’s disillusioned dream. As an example, Lois Tyson interprets this work from the deconstructive relationships between past and present, between innocence and decadence, as well as between West and East (Tyson, 2015, p. 256). Well-established as such an analytical perspective is, it fails to consider the microscopic causal elements for the tragic ending of Gatsby. The author to this end strives to give a detailed demonstration to *The Great Gatsby* by taking into account of the deeply-rooted cause of Gatsby’s disillusioned American dream.

This paper revolves around an analysis of the deconstruction on logos-centrism from two parts. The first part strives to explore the deconstruction to dream and reality, where some of the Lacanian theories will be applied to identify the deeply-rooted cause of Gatsby’s confusion between fantasy and reality. The second part aims at examining the deconstruction to the past and the present, in which how Gatsby’s American dream comes to naught will be interpreted. The conclusion will be reached in the last part, that the tragic ending of Gatsby can be ascribed to the Symbolic Order he constructs on the basis of the subjective cognition. Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* can be seen as replete with universal value, as it serves as an alarm for the multitudes struggling to construct their own disillusioned Order.

A Deconstruction to Logos-Centrism

Although it is traditionally read in a cultural context and has inspired several perceptive analyses, F. Scott

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Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* also lends itself well to a deconstructive reading. Deconstruction is an essentially formalist reading method that emphasizes a predetermined fall into meaninglessness resulting from the self-cancellation of oppositions in any text. This term arises from Derrida's desire to "deconstruct, or undo, a text, to take it apart in order to analyze its meaning, which according to Derrida can never be unequivocal" (Haney, 1990, p. 422). It aims at deconstructing such traditional centrality as logo-centrism, in order to subvert the so-called structure and center. Logo-centrism stems from the Greek term logos, identified with "the absolute source of truth, which Derrida claims to be an illusion" (Haney, 1990, p. 243). "In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy", noted that Derrida, "[...] one of the terms dominates the other, occupies the commanding position. To deconstruct the opposition is above all, at a particular moment, to reverse the hierarchy" (Derrida, 1970, pp. 56-57). Derrida also argues that logo-centrism generates and depends upon a framework of two-term oppositions, through "[...] assuming the priority of the first term and conceives the second in relation to it, as a complication, a negation, a manifestation, or a disruption of the first" (Culler, 1982, p. 93). The disillusionment of Gatsby's American Dream, serves also as a deconstruction to logos-centrism, represented by two main binary oppositions, that is, dream and reality, together with the past and the present. This falls in line with the characteristic of deconstruction, which strives to "[...] seek out the contradiction, gap or play, that defines and undermines the 'structuration of structure', the transcendental signified that stands behind and authorizes the very possibility of stable and centered structures" (Blackwell, 2013, p. 160). In the same vein, Gatsby's failure to win back his beloved Daisy subverts phallogocentrism, where "social and cultural powers are invested in a symbol of pure abstract presence (phallus) and articulated in the unchanging concepts of reason (logos)" (Blackwell, 2013, p. 160).

A Deconstruction to Dream and Reality

Fitzgerald's emphasis on the Gatsby's disillusioned dream makes the deconstruction theory a natural way to shed light on the intricately entwining texts of Gatsby's unconsciousness, his cognition and pursuit, all of which play a part in Gatsby's attempt to constitute himself. The deconstructive approach for the analysis of *The Great Gatsby* coincides with the literary representation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, complete with such Lacanian theories as self-constitution, the Name-of-the-Father, and the Symbolic Order. Disillusionment manifests itself largely in Gatsby's inability to separate fantasy from reality.

From a deconstructive perspective, no clear boundary can be seen between love and desire. However, it is love and desire that hold together Gatsby's longing for Daisy. Gatsby's affection for Daisy is not so much love as possessiveness pandering to self-constitution. Patrick Colm Hogan describes self-constitution as "an act of synthesis which involves the fusing of discrete perceptions and beliefs into a unified conception of a single object" (Hogan, 1990, p. 18). In connection with this, Hogan underscores that there are "two conditions for full responsibility of the subject: social similitude and personal identity" (Hogan, 1990, p. 18). For Gatsby, although knowing this fusion into a single identity and the understanding of these responsibilities are the norm, he is not capable of such conditions. In this regard, redeeming Daisy's heart would mean not more than becoming a winner of love, but also a declaration on male dignity.

As Lacan puts it, there is a close and necessary connection between language and the unconscious. He additionally not only states the unconscious to be structured like a language but, in content, "the unconscious is

the discourse of the other” (Lacan, 1977, p. 193). Therefore, when a person enters the Symbolic Order, he enters the realm of language, gains a connection with the Name-of-the-Father, finds a place in the world of others, and is provided with “the foundation of the objectification and unity of the self” (Laplanche, 1977, p. 70). As with Gatsby, he is unable to obtain either a sense of communality or self-identity, because he, barred from entering the Symbolic Order, cannot symbolize the Name-of-the-Father. The basis of this inability, which lies at the origin of the psychotic phenomenon, is foreclosure, which consists of a primordial expulsion of a fundamental signifier. Thus, Gatsby is devoid of normal connection to society or language. As he has no established relationship with the Name-of-the-Father, he is “in deep trouble with the ensemble of signifiers, with the signifiers as such” (Walsh, 1990, p. 78). Therefore, “the psychotic seems to pursue [...] a reinvention or re-imagination of this signifier in such a way that it does not partake of the other”, that is, “the psychotic is someone who seeks to initiate or institute a Symbolic of his own device”. As the individual cannot enter into the communal Symbolic Order, he attempts to create a new order in which he can find his own sense of “social similitude and personal identity” (Walsh, 1990, p. 78).

Lacan posits that “for the psychosis to be triggered off, the Name-of-the-Father, foreclosed, that is to say, never having attained the place of the Other, must be called into symbolic opposition to the subject” (1977, p. 217). Daisy precipitates a confrontation with an A-Father and therefore is a catalyst in the initiation of Gatsby’s disillusioned cognition. Gatsby’s aspiration for Daisy necessitates that he faces the Name-of-the-Father in the symbolic opposition mentioned above.

As is evident, although Gatsby has faith in what he believes to be the logical, reality-based strength of his Order, Gatsby’s rags-to-riches success fails to ensure him any social identity. This serves to indicate that the formal elements of cognition, are not anchored to a single point of reference, and do not refer back to a center. This condition produces that curious flux and uncertainty in the consciousness which is sensed intuitively by the individuals. It goes without saying that the Symbolic Order does not gather its strength from the logic of reality, but from the family-oriented western tradition that engendered it. However, his strong possessiveness for winning back Daisy leads him to believe that he can establish an alternative order. That is why Gatsby fables about his lot to brush aside his old self. From this viewpoint, Gatsby who has been able to constitute himself fully within this order, may either fail to recognize or choose to reject the supposed logic inherent in it. Therefore, Gatsby who is not only a Mr. Nobody from nowhere, but also a smuggler that becomes rich overnight, and is twice removed from the perception of Symbolic Order.

As the story progresses, Fitzgerald indicates that Gatsby recognizes at least some level of incompatibility between order and imagination, that is, between the Symbolic Order and the Imaginary Order. He vents his emotions to Nick that he “knew different things from her”, and “was way off ambitions, getting deeper in love every minute [...]” (Fitzgerald, 1974, p. 164). This mirrors Gatsby’s deconstructive relationship with the ruling order, which stems from his inability to inherit the ancestral laws, that is, the Name-of-the-Father. In addition, it can also be seen from his epiphany “[...] What was the use of doing great things if I could have a better time telling her what I was going to do?” (Fitzgerald, 1974, p. 87), that his Symbolic Order clashes with his Imaginary Order.

A Deconstruction to the Past and the Present

To win back Daisy, what Gatsby strives for is not only wealth, but also social status, in order to gain a sense

of identification from the upper class. By achieving this, Gatsby has to cast aside his disgraceful past and fabricate an honorable one. He makes up himself into the one born with a silver spoon in his mouth, "living like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe ... collecting jewels ... hunting big game, painting a little" (Fitzgerald, 1974, p. 70). He leaves his hometown and changes his name, while changing his parents from "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people" (Fitzgerald, 1974, p. 70) to the one died but left him with a great fortune. Because of Gatsby's non-relationship with the Symbolic Order, and his correspondent inability to fully constitute himself, he endeavors to create his own order. What he attempts is to construct a structure, which implies a center or presence, and also implies a formal wholeness of the unity, in which each of the particular elements refer always back to the center. As can be seen, his endeavors are directed not only to earning money, but also to a green light looming across the bay from East Egg in the distance. This absolute devotion to Daisy, epitomized in the idealized image of the young lover "stretch[ing] out his arms" (Fitzgerald, 1974, p. 25) toward the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, "trembling" (Fitzgerald, 1974, p. 26), speaks well of Gatsby's expectation for a promising present.

It is important to note that Gatsby's devotion to Daisy can be deemed as his determination to repeat the past, and further to escape the past. "Through bootlegged liquor and fraudulent bonds, Gatsby makes his extraordinary fortune in record time and [...] succeeds in a world of predators and prey" (Tyson, 2015, p. 262). Although eventually realizing that what Daisy aspires for is his wealth and status, Gatsby still struggles to win back his love for Daisy. "He let [Daisy] believe that he was a person from much the same strata as herself" (Fitzgerald, 1974, p. 156). As is evident, this struggle is closely linked to his resolution to repeat and escape the past. However, the past that Gatsby is determined to repeat is undoubtedly built on imagination and illusion. "Unfortunately, Gatsby's unique romantic qualities, which echo the chivalry of ages past, ill suit him to survive the shallow vulgarity of the time in which he lives" (Tyson, 2015, p. 260). In the present modern America bound up with corrupt civilization, Gatsby's endeavor to pursue his money-oriented love can only be a fishy story. The relation between the imagination and the reality further deconstructs the opposition between the past and the present.

To be sure, Tom will never allow Gatsby to gain possession of the illusory present and therefore his own order. That is also why Gatsby doubts about whether Daisy had ever loved Tom, who cheats on her most of the time and never cares about her feelings. It is apparent that Tom's self-reported love for Daisy is not much more than a selfish desire to maintain the order of his own life. His attempt to blow Gatsby's cover can be interpreted as his intention to intensify the outside pressures that Gatsby feels bearing down upon him. The substitutability of parts for one another, the variability and uncertainty of the order's structural elements, represent a decentered universe, one which lacks the center that defines, gives meaning designates, and holds the structure together by holding it in immobility. Tom who wants merely to maintain his status and life sees only that he suppresses this disturbance, and is satisfied that for the moment his order is intact. In this sense, Tom deconstructs Gatsby's framed-up present which is on the basis of disillusion.

As Tom exposes Gatsby's ins and outs in board daylight, Gatsby's identity is totally destructed. Tom in this regard deprives him of the only hope he had clung to. Gatsby is thus compelled to transform from a blue-blooded wealthy man to a bootlegger getting rich overnight. The deconstructive impact of this exposure becomes clear in view of the history of the past, which Derrida characterizes as belief in being as presence: The whole history of the concept of structure, before the rupture, must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as

a linked chain of determinations of the center (Derrida, 1970, p. 249). Due to a series of blows Gatsby suffered at his younger and more vulnerable years, such as the cruel reality, the ruthless war, and the abandonment by his beloved Daisy, Gatsby is liable to get hold of his past dream. By reliving the past he can re-experience the vitality of youth, as well as an aspiration for the future. Such an aspiration will in turn keep his present moment alive, and endow him with the meaning of life. Nevertheless, Gatsby can never relive his past, as the past he reinvents is merely a castle in the air, and the present is perpetually a combination of the past. The story itself comes as a deconstruction between the reinvented past and the disillusioned present, leaving a nebulous boundary in between. The past in some sense is characteristic of the present, as the glistening past is but a disillusioned dream. In the end, Gatsby finds that money cannot buy him Daisy's affection, and instead of ending up in happy matrimony, all that awaits him is death. For Fitzgerald, all of Gatsby's greatness is finally reducible to a great rubbish heap of disillusion, with bits of worn-out concepts still adhering to them, bound together in cliched and stratified relationship.

Conclusion

As Gatsby does to some extent disengage himself from his past, he believes that he succeeds in creating his own Symbolic Order of achieving rags-to-riches success. However, it can be seen from the tragic ending of Gatsby that Gatsby fails to construct his identity even at the cost of his inexhaustible pursuit and his negation of the past. Gatsby loses his identity, floundering in what he perceives as the new order. The decentered structure becomes apparent in the difficulty of locating a point of reference in any aspect of *The Great Gatsby*. The expression of a decentered unity may be seen as the major theme of this work, particularly the disintegration of order and law subsequent to the fall of the Name-of-the-Father. From a deconstructive perspective, it seems safe to say that Gatsby achieves no more at the end of the story than at the beginning. His love for Daisy represented by symbolized dream brings to light the fact that Gatsby's pursuit is incompatible to social status and distorted values. Depicted naturalistically in Gatsby's frame-up past and present, the fall of the Symbolic Order looms large, which marks the disillusion of Gatsby's American dream.

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