

# Place, Class, and the Destruction of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* From the Perspective of Space

Yue Wu

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

Jinsong Shen

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

**Abstract**—This study is a spatial analysis of *The Great Gatsby* (1925). This novel presents the power game among various white classes in American society in the context of the Roaring Twenties, with obvious spatial characteristics. The geographical distribution between East Egg, West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes presents the high-and-low-class distinction of different classes in social space. The upper classes practice class oppression and exploitation through space, while the lower classes also use space to resist oppression and climb the class ladder. This paper draws on French philosopher Henri Lefebvre's spatial ideas, especially the *spatial triad*, to explore the close connection between space and class in the novel. *The Great Gatsby* encompasses various class groups in white society, including the hereditary aristocracy like the Buchanans, the new money represented by Gatsby, and the lower class represented by the Wilsons. To modify the spatial order, different classes use space as a medium to preserve their class identity and seek their social presence, which reproduces the illusion of the American Dream of the Jazz Age and reveals Fitzgerald's humanistic concern for people in spatial relations.

**Index Terms**—*The Great Gatsby*, Lefebvre, space, class

## I. INTRODUCTION

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was one of the spokesmen of the “Jazz Age” and one of the representative writers of the “Lost Generation” in the 1920s. Fitzgerald's personal experience is extremely similar to that of Gatsby, the main character in *The Great Gatsby*. Born into a small business family, Fitzgerald was dissatisfied with the status quo of life and worked diligently to pursue a better life. The Long Island depicted in *The Great Gatsby* was the place where he lived and experienced: Having lived in St. Paul, Minnesota, for well over a year, the Fitzgeralds arrived in Great Neck, Long Island, in October 1922. Like Gatsby, He also met his true love, the beautiful and wealthy Zelda. Most of his novels are autobiographical, and thus the richness of Fitzgerald's personal experience contributes to the richness and breadth of his novels. Based on his real life, he meticulously portrays his own time and society through his fiction, thus authentically recreating the Jazz Age.

*The Great Gatsby* is his best work, for which he has received many accolades. Scholars at home and abroad have mainly analyzed this novel from the perspectives of psychological analysis, feminism, gender studies, and cultural studies, especially consumer culture studies. In terms of the class factor involved in the text, Chun (2009) delineated the classes of the main characters in the novel and explores the efforts of each class to preserve their class identity (Chun, 2009). Kim (2018) investigated Gatsby's commodification of himself, revealing new avenues for breaking down class barriers-not through traditional class struggle but through self-reinvention (Kim, 2018). In terms of the existing spatial research for this novel, Hee et al. (2016) explored the space and time in the novel, arguing that “personal space is highly variable, and can be affected by cultural differences and personal experiences” (p. 69). Yeonman (2016) analyzed the urban space in the novel and concluded that “the tragedy of the novel is the tragedy of a big city of the early twentieth century” (p. 307). While these studies are certainly valid, they do not explore the close relationship between class and space. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre elaborated on the relationship between space and the class struggle: “As for the class struggle, its role in the production of space is a cardinal one in that this production is performed solely by classes, fractions of classes and groups representative of classes. Today more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 55). Therefore, interpreting the issue of space in the text is crucial to understanding the class structure of American society.

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses the social space of Long Island in New York City as a backdrop, juxtaposing three physical spaces: the East Egg, the West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes, to illustrate the lives and consumption patterns of different classes in America. This paper breaks through the previous fragmentation between the study of space and the study of class in the study of this novel and reveals how space in the text presents the relationship between class and power. By exploring the spatial metaphors in *The Great Gatsby*, this paper presents the class structure

and power relations in white American society in the 1920s, exposing social issues such as class divisions and class barriers at the time.

## II. SPATIAL CRITICISM

Traditional literary criticism attaches more importance to the element of time, and the view that the mode of writing literature is the mode of writing time and that “immediacy and history are more important than space” has emerged. Around the 1980s, in the context of the “spatial turn” in Western society, spatial studies broke away from the previous definition of space as inanimate and static. Space is no longer subordinate to time or a purely geographical landscape but gradually becomes an important cultural entity. Spatial criticism is an important critical theory and method that has emerged in Western academia in the past thirty years. Studying literature from space provides a new perspective and approach to literary research, thus making it a hot spot for literary research and criticism at home and abroad, as well as one of the most challenging research fields. In addition, spatial criticism evolved as a method of literary criticism, breaking away from the traditional approach of studying textual landscapes and beginning to explore the metaphors of culture, history, and power hidden behind the space of texts, transforming into a comprehensive study encompassing social, historical, political, geographical, and architectural disciplines.

Among a host of space researchers, Henri Lefebvre’s spatial theory covers a wide range of areas, and its influence extends from architecture to social theory as well as literary and cultural studies, which can provide a new perspective and analytical method for literary and textual critical studies. Lefebvre was the first to propose in his book *The Production of Space* that “(social) space is a (social) product” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26), arguing that contemporary society has shifted from the production of things in space to the production of space itself. We should not treat space as a container, but rather as the relationships that exist within it and the production of space itself. The *spatial triad* is the core finding of Lefebvre’s research on social space, including *representations of space*, *spatial practice*, and *representational spaces*. *Representations of space* “which are tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose...” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). It is a spatial order conceived by a socially powerful group. It is constructed as a result of the struggle between the various groups in society, reflecting the ruling class’s conception of society and the dominant ideology under its dominion. According to Lefebvre’s view, “*spatial practice*, which embraces production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). Therefore, the *spatial practice* encompasses almost all social practices and “enables individuals to participate effectively in a spatial event” (Watkins, 2005, p. 213). *Representational spaces* “is the dominated-and hence passively experienced space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). The *spatial triad* is an interlocking and inseparable dialectical unity: *representations of space* constantly regulates the *spatial practice* of members of society to maintain the spatial order dominated by the ruling class, while members of society identify with or question the regulations of *representations of space* with challenging or submissive *spatial practice* and thus produce challenging or interpretive *representational spaces*. Lefebvre proposes to read space in terms of society and history, and to read society and history in terms of space and uses the close relationship of “*spatial practice-representations of space-representational spaces*” to emphasize the dialectical unity between society-history-space.

## III. CLASS DICHOTOMY EMBODIED IN PHYSICAL SPACE

In *The Idea of Spatial Form*, Frank (1993) points out that the means of literary space are “juxtaposition”, “repetition” and “flashback” (Frank, 1993). In terms of geographical space, *The Great Gatsby* juxtaposes and gives symbolic meaning to three physical places: the West Egg, the East Egg, and the Valley of Ashes. Lefebvre states that “the fields we are concerned with are, first, the physical nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, social” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 11). He divided space into physical space, mental space, and social space. Physical space is a static space, which includes geographical landscapes with natural properties and architectural entities with human characteristics. *The Great Gatsby* describes in detail the spatial layout of Long Island:

It was on that slender riotous island that extends itself due east of New York and where there are, among other natural curiosities, two unusual formations of land. Twenty miles from the city a pair of enormous eggs, identical in contour and separated only by a courtesy bay... (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 5).

*Gatsby*’s mansion was placed in the West Egg, next to Nick, a middle-class man from the Midwest, who rented a dilapidated house. In West Egg, mansions with rents ranging from \$15,000 to \$25,000 per quarter could coexist with small houses at \$80 per month. This means that the hierarchical boundaries of the West Egg are not so clear, and it is a good place for the newly rich to show off their wealth and status. The East Egg, on the other hand, has a reputation for being a wealthy neighborhood: “Across the courtesy bay, the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water... Their (the Buchannans) house was even more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red-and-white Georgian colonial mansion, overlooking the bay” (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 6). The residential character of East Egg highlights the deep-rooted family history of its owners, in keeping with the upper-class status of their prestigious families. The Buchanans, who lived in the East Egg, scorned the West Egg. Daisy once said that she hated everything in the West Egg. The division of social classes is reflected in the location and division of geographic space. The bay that separates the East Egg from the West Egg visualizes the division of social classes in the United States, with an unbridgeable gap

between the middle class, such as the new money who made their fortunes during prohibition, and the traditionally wealthy. The opposition between the East Egg and the West Egg in physical space mirrors the opposition between old and new capital in social space. The main determinant of spatial possession or non-possession is power relations within space.

The hereditary bourgeoisie, which once held a dominant position, was always on guard against the newly rich from the West. According to Lefebvre, *representations of space* “is the dominant space in any society (or mode of production)” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38). In *The Great Gatsby*, the powerful group is old money, represented by the Buchanans. Tom represents the hereditary aristocracy in the East, while Gatsby, who started from nothing, is a typical representative of the emerging bourgeoisie in the West. In the *representations of space* of class planned by the upper class, capital is not the only element to break through class boundaries. Being of noble blood is also an important criterion for entering high society. Although Gatsby’s wealth is comparable to Tom’s, he lacks lineage status and is unaware of the laws of upper-class behavior. Therefore, Gatsby, who comes from a humble background, is still isolated from mainstream society. Even though he is among the nouveau riche through his efforts and huge wealth, he will never be integrated into the circle of the upper class of the East Egg. His tragic end demonstrates the sadness of the post-war “lost generation” for the illusory nature of the American dream.

Long Island is known for its wealthy population, and Manhattan, with its most luxurious restaurants and stores, is the center of American commercial civilization and consumer culture. The Valley of Ashes, which lies geographically between the first two, stands in stark contrast to them:

About halfway between West Egg Village and New York the motor road hastily joins the railroad and runs beside it for a quarter of a mile, to shrink away from a certain desolate area of land. This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and oddly grotesque gardens; where ashes take the form of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air. After a remarkable effort, they became a group of earthy gray people who were vaguely walking but were about to disappear in the billowing dust (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 16).

In the Valley of Ashes, there are no colorful lights, splendid mansions, or extravagant clothes and food like those in Manhattan and New York. Life here takes on a gray color. This is a place where people from the bottom struggle to make a living. Most of them are workers from the lower strata of society, selling cheap labor to maintain the most basic living. Here, Wilson, a poor auto mechanic, is pale and spiritless, working all day long to make ends meet, like many lower-class people. “A white ashen dust veiled his dark suit and his pale hair as it veiled everything in the vicinity...” (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 18). His dilapidated garage is all he has left to make a living. The stark contrast between the illustrious mansions of the upper class and the dilapidated houses of the lower class shows the great difference in the possession and domination of space by different classes. The class dichotomy embodied in the three geographic spaces of East Egg, West Egg, and the Valley of Ashes reveals the political and economic differences between the various social classes of the Jazz Age. The current living conditions of the lower classes in the inferior social space and the class barriers faced by the new rich testify to the harsh reality of social stratification at the time. Sociologists point out that the phenomenon of class division and class solidification in society is a major threat to the stability of the social structure. Society can only be dynamic when everyone in it has the opportunity and hope for upward mobility, but if the hopes of the people at the bottom are dashed and their paths narrowed, they are likely to be filled with resentment and despair, which is undoubtedly quite dangerous for the whole society.

#### IV. SPATIAL PRACTICE OF THE LOWER CLASS

*The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925 when the American economy was booming like never before and the financial and trade markets were extremely active due to the massive capital gains brought about by World War I and the technological revolution. Of America in the Jazz Age, Fitzgerald says both that it “was the greatest nation and there was a gala in the air” and that it “was bloated, gutted, stupid with cake and circuses” (Wilson, 1945, p. 25). The American Dream advocated by the bourgeoisie has led to an extreme desire for the pursuit of money, and thus everyone was intoxicated in the pursuit of fortune, fame, and pleasure, imagining that they would become rich overnight, but there were not a few people who lost their fortunes overnight. The gap between the rich and the poor in the society is huge. The white social class of America at that time can be roughly divided into three classes: the traditional rich class, the emerging bourgeoisie, and the working class at the bottom of the social ladder. The upper class spent their days drinking and having sex all day long and living in extreme luxury. The lower class, on the other hand, works hard to earn a living, thirsting for a chance to improve their lives. In the novel, Gatsby, Wilson, and Myrtle come from the bottom of the social ladder, but they try to improve their lives through different *spatial practice* and achieve a leap in class. The *representations of space* set by the ruling class always regulates the *spatial practice* of the members of the society to maintain its dominant spatial order, while the members of the society identify with or question the regulation of such *representations of space* through submissive or challenging *spatial practice*. In the social space constructed by the upper class, power is everywhere. It uses space as a medium to discipline people’s bodies and spirits and influence their *spatial practice*.

Gatsby was born on a farm in North Dakota and made his living by digging in the sand or fishing in Lake Superior.

As an ambitious boy, Gatsby was convinced that he was the son of God, so he wanted to be a big shot and proclaim his presence in the social space. He joined the Army and found his specific purpose in Daisy's home in Louisville, Kentucky, in the Midwest. Daisy's home was typical of the wealthy families of the midwestern agrarian society. Its revealed affluence, comfort, and the sweet, melancholy memories between him and Daisy allowed Gatsby to mystify and idealize it, merging it with his ambitious ideals as a concrete goal to strive for. From then on, therefore, Gatsby makes the acquisition of Daisy the goal of his struggle, contributing to his much-needed *spatial practice* of acquiring wealth and crossing class: firstly, renaming and fabricating his origins to enter high society; and secondly, making every effort to assert his spatial presence through the appropriation and transformation of physical space. "James Gatz—that was really, or at least legally, his name. He had changed it at the age of seventeen and at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 62). In all cultures of the world, "naming is a political carrying act" (Hayes, 2004, p. 669), and Gatsby's renaming of himself carries the politics of class. The rule under the *representations of space* enacted by the upper class refuses to include the lower class in the social space in which the poor, like other livestock, are subordinate and dependent on the upper class. Gatsby desperately desires to get rid of the subordinate body space, to get rid of the label of the lower class, and to reconstruct his own class identity. His renaming attempts to transform his body, which belongs to the lower classes, into an independent body. Besides, he left his hometown, cut himself off from his poor family forever, and made up his own life: "I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 42). To be convincing, he looked to the possession of physical space to assert his social presence: he bought a mansion on Long Island. The house was extremely luxurious, with Rolls-Royce cars and yachts, countless beautiful costumes, extravagant banquets, and frequent grand parties. Gatsby's *spatial practice* was designed to gain the attention of the upper classes and eventually join that class. Similarly, the Wilsons, struggling at the bottom of society, were as desperate as everyone else in the Jazz Age to find opportunities that would make them rich overnight and cross the class line. They show the principle of altruism and the law of survival of the poor. They are burdened with both material and spiritual pressure and are unable to escape from this inferior space. They all pinned their hopes on the upper class. Wilson wants Tom to fulfill his promise to sell him a second-hand car to improve his life. His wife Myrtle, on the other hand, becomes Tom's mistress, hoping for the day when she can replace Tom's wife and become a real noblewoman. Therefore, the *spatial practice* of these three people at the bottom of society is submissive. They internalize the order in the *representations of space* set by the ruling class and acquiesce to the phenomenon of class division in society. They attempt to climb the class ladder through various means while ignoring the cruel reality of class oppression and exploitation under the order of the *representations of space*. This also presents another aspect of the illusion of the American dream, where people are dazzled by the pomp and glory of the upper class and fail to see the flaws of society. Therefore, like most Americans in the Jazz Age, the three little people's dreams were invariably dashed. As a socially powerful group, the upper class, with its aristocratic origins, divides and arranges the spatial order to maximize its interests and maintain the ruling order of *representations of space*. The upper classes were therefore alert to the lower and middle classes that might threaten their social status and fought back against the incursions of other classes, nipping in the bud their attempts to cross class boundaries. So, Tom does not take Wilson's aspirations seriously, and he repeatedly dismisses and threatens Wilson and treats Myrtle as a toy for his amusement. He could not tolerate his mistress calling his wife's name, because a mistress of humble origin had no right to offend the class to which he belonged. The *spatial practice* of Gatsby and the others is thwarted by the planners and rulers of *representations of space*, and ultimately these three people from the lower strata of society who attempt to cross class boundaries all pay the price with their lives.

#### V. MANSION OF GATSBY: THE CONSTRUCTION AND DISINTEGRATION OF REPRESENTATIONAL SPACES

"In *The Great Gatsby*, time and space are partly real and partly symbolic" (Vince, 2006, p. 93). The physical space presented in the text is usually an externalization of the character's emotions. Gatsby's mansion in West Egg not only exists as a physical space but also as a symbolic projection of Gatsby's spiritual world.

The one on my right was a colossal affair by any standard—it was a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby's mansion (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 5).

Owning such an extremely luxurious and spacious house was seen by him as an important step in crossing the class line. He wanted to use it as a tool to attract Daisy. He held large parties in it every week: "In his blue gardens, men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 26). Grand banquets, magnificent villas, and the Rolls-Royce limousines used to transport guests were all means used by the nouveau riche to highlight and enhance their status. Gatsby acquired mansions, imitating the Eden of the West of his dreams, wanting to build spaces that were his own and gave him a sense of belonging. According to Lefebvre, *representational spaces* "is alive: it speaks. It has an affective kernel or centre: Ego, bed, bedroom, dwelling, house; or: square, church, graveyard. It embraces the loci of passion, of action and of lived situations, and thus immediately implies time" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 42). It is the "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'..." (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). Therefore, *representational spaces* is a spiritual space that is given symbolic meaning by an individual or a group, through which the values and consciousness of an

individual or a group can be projected. In this novel, this mansion becomes a *representational spaces* constructed by Gatsby, through which his desire to cross class is projected. His mansion was far more luxurious than it needed to be, not just for the practical purpose of living in it. Gatsby wanted to create the impression that he was from a family with deep roots by showing a vintage and luxurious mansion. However, Gatsby's house is only a fake landscape without content, without the history and depth presented on the surface, but an ineffective symbol that cannot fulfill its owner's ideological purpose.

The role of the home is analyzed in detail by Bachelard (1964) in *The Poetics of Space*, where he distinguishes between the "home" that brings happiness and the "house" that is merely a building. A home is not only an "object" but also a place where people receive protection and support (Bachelard, 1964). Without a home, a person becomes a displaced person. Home enables one to survive the storms of nature and life. But for Gatsby, the mansion clearly could not be called home. In this luxurious house, "his bedroom was the simplest room of all (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 59). This suggests that Gatsby is not concerned with the material, but with the spiritual. He only wants to have a place in the social space through the possession of physical space. His *spatial practice* eventually attracted Daisy. He showed her around the house. Just when he thinks he is about to succeed in getting Daisy, the revelation of his birth keeps this upper-class woman away from him. The *representations of space* of class saturate everyone's consciousness, and the ideology of class division is internalized and absorbed by each class group. The ruling class manipulates hegemony through space to exclude the lower classes. Gatsby's improper source of wealth and his lower-class origins make Daisy subconsciously believe that Gatsby is not worthy of her and that only Tom, who also belongs to the upper class, is her ultimate choice. But Gatsby did not recognize this fact, death is the price he paid for trying to cross class boundaries. And the house that once held his dreams was finally empty: "Gatsby's house was empty when I left-the grass on his lawn had grown as long as mine... I went over and looked at that huge incoherent failure of a house once more" (Fitzgerald, 1993, p. 115). The mansion, which overlooks the East Egg, was once a *representational spaces* for Gatsby to transcend class and realize his dreams, but eventually decayed. From a house full of guests to the present desolation, it represents the demise of Gatsby's dream as well as the demise of the American dream in the Jazz Age.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Space is not natural, but political, and it is the product of the competition between classes. The spatial writing in *The Great Gatsby* depicts the relationships and competing interests between different white classes in 1920s American society, where spatial relations represent the unequal social relations between classes in a hierarchical society. Gatsby's relentless pursuit of the American dream, as well as the class factors alluded to behind his tragic end, have sparked widespread reflection, making it an ideal text for studying the class structure and mobility of American society during this period. The relationship between class and space in the novel is explored through the spatial theory of Lefebvre, which reveals the great political and economic differences among the various social classes in America. Fitzgerald incorporates his own experiences into his profound reflections on the ills of American society and truly presents the spiritual crisis, moral test, political, economic, and cultural dilemmas faced by the various class groups in their search for a voice and a sense of belonging.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Bachelard, Gaston. (1964). *The Poetics of Space*. New York: The Orion Press.
- [2] Chun, Jin-Nong. (2009). Re-reading *The Great Gatsby* with a Focus on the Question of Class, Love, and Sexuality. *Studies in Modern Fiction*, 16(3), 327-350.
- [3] Frank, Joseph. (1993). *The Idea of Spatial Form*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- [4] Fitzgerald, F. Scott. (1993). *The Great Gatsby*. UK: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- [5] Hayes, E.T. (2004). The Named and the Nameless: Morrison's 124 and Naylor's "the Other place" as semiotic 'Chorae'. *African American Review*, 38(4), 669-681.
- [6] Hee, Jung Shin & Han, Sangsoo. (2016). Spatial Relativity on *The Great Gatsby* and About Time. *The New Studies of English Language & Literature*, 63(1), 69-83.
- [7] Lefebvre, Henri. (1991). *The Production of Space*. trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Cambridge: Blackwell.
- [8] Kim, Myungsung. (2018). Commodity Culture, Class Anxiety, and the Deconstruction of Old American Aristocracy: The Valentinian Allusion in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. *The Jungang Journal of English Language and Literature*, 60(1), 23-40.
- [9] Vince, Raymond M. (2006). The Great Gatsby and the Transformations of Space-Time: Fitzgerald's Modernist Narrative and the New Physics of Einstein. *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, 5(1), 86-108.
- [10] Wilson, Edmund. (1945). *The Crack-Up*. New York: New Directions.
- [11] Watkins, Ceri. (2005). Representations of Space, Spatial Practices and Spaces of Representation: An Application of Lefebvre's Spatial Triad. *Culture and Organization*, 11(3), 209-220.
- [12] Yeonman, Kim. (2016). Cityscape and Tragedy in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. *Modern Studies in English Language and Literature*, 60(1), 307-318.

**Yue Wu** was born in Anhui, China in 1999. She is currently a postgraduate student at the School of Foreign Languages, Southwest University, Chongqing, China. Her research interests include English & American literature.

**Jinsong Shen** is currently an associate professor of School of Foreign Languages at Southwest University, China. He has more than ten years of teaching experience in American literature.