A Marxist reading of *The Great Gatsby:*

*It’s a horse… It’s a golden statue…It’s an objectified woman*

In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby,* Jay Gatsby is not only the embodiment of the American Dream’s failure to improve the lives of the proletariat class but a representative of capital itself. Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy and obtaining her favor is a direct result of his desire to escape the proletariat class. The new value she would create for him is a status symbol, a ticket into the elite group that she belongs to, the bourgeois. Consequently, I will argue that *The Great Gatsby* is a chronicle of the failings of the American Dream and the extremely negative attitude toward social climbers in a time Fitzgerald coined the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald’s murder of Gatsby is evidence of this negative attitude and in doing so proves that no matter the amount of commodification and possible access to permanent sign-exchange value, nothing can help one escape the inborn stagnant nature of their social class.

In the third edition of Critical Theory Today, Lois Tyson argues that F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby can be seen as a chronicle of the American dream in the early 1900s. Tyson’s reading has enhanced my understanding of how to read critically using the Marxist perspective through the concepts of commodification and sign-exchange value, and I believe Jay Gatsby’s aspiration to acquire Daisy Buchanan confirms that she is and will always be a commodity. In this sense, I agree with Tyson when she says “an object become a commodity only when it has exchange value or sign-exchange value…all things and all people are commodities (Tyson 66-67).” Daisy’s sign-exchange value is acknowledged both by her husband Tom, who purchases her to maintain his capital and Gatsby, who himself seeks capital and aspires to increase his own value by acquiring Daisy, the ultimate commodity. Tyson’s argument that Gatsby seeks to possess Daisy to obtain what he really wants: “a permanent sign that he belongs to her socioeconomic class (Tyson 71),” is an excellent analysis that I agree with, but I also believe that Gatsby himself represents capitalism. He is a form of capital because “in order to expand, capital must purchase a commodity, the consumption of which creates new value (Marxists).”

Marxists define capital as “a social, economic relation” between people (boundless). Gatsby’s insatiable craving for new value is what draws him to Daisy. He is the self-made man guilty of conspicuous consumption; he hides behind it in order to erase his former self and uses his possessions to gain enough capital to purchase Daisy. Conspicuous consumption “refers to the ostentatious display of wealth for the purpose of acquiring or maintaining status or prestige (Page).” As Tyson states, “He accumulated one kind of commodity sign in order to acquire another (Tyson 71).” Gatsby’s survival, therefore, depends on Daisy alone. “The survival of capitalism… depends on consumerism; it promotes sign-exchange value as our primary mode of relating to the world around us (Tyson 60).” He needs Daisy’s sign-exchange value to escape from not only James Gatz, but also Jay Gatsby the bootlegger, criminal, new money, “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere (TGG 137).” Gatsby’s driven not only by his obsession to get away from the proletariat class he was born into, but also the idea that “new money” is still not good enough, that “old money” is the true mark of a bourgeois man. Tom is also guilty of obsessing with this idea that “old money” is the only respectable form and mark of a high strata man, and this is why he needs Daisy’s value as much as Gatsby does.

Just as Tom purchased Daisy, Gatsby hoped to do the same. Tom transaction was complete once Daisy put on the pearl necklace worth $350,000 dollars. Today that amount of money in 1919, the year Daisy and Tom became engaged, is actually worth over $4 million dollars, $4,736,651.47 to be exact (inflation calculator). "Half an hour later, when we walked out of the room, the pearls were around her neck and the incident was over (TGG 76)." The necklace alone marks a permanent status and belonging to the bourgeois, but also Daisy's acceptance of being a commodified body. In a way, it is her duty as women to aid in increasing the power of men in a patriarchal society simply by remaining by Tom's side. She is just another trophy, but one with more perks than Tom's old polo accomplishments and awards. It can be argued that Daisy is one of Tom's polo horses; he purchases her, he feeds her, and he mounts her. Daisy is a powerful creature just as one of the polo horses, and Tom dominants and domesticated Daisy just as he would a horse. Tom needs Daisy to ensure his acceptance in the aristocracy, the world if old money, and Daisy needs Tom to ensure her standard of sustainable living; a world where one can afford to spend $4 million dollars on one piece of jewelry.

"Her voice is full of money," said Gatsby as he and Nick discussed just what Daisy's distinct manner of speech and tone of voice was. Nick then comes to a realization that "that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it... High in the white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl... (TGG 120)." Referring to Daisy as the golden girl could be a reference to King Midas, everything he touched turned to gold, including his own daughter. “He couldn't touch any useful object without it losing in utility what it gained in monetary value (Mythweb),” and this is what both Tom and Gatsby desired of Daisy. She is to be a life-size golden statue that represents affluence, capitalism, the bourgeois itself. John Berger once stated, "Men act; women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." This quote is further evidence that Daisy is only meant to be looked at and she is so aware of this that she in a way watches herself in order to ensure her position and fulfill her duty as a bourgeois woman. Access to Daisy could in a sense grant a man the Midas touch and this is ultimately the “American Dream.”

The American Dream is the idea that anyone of any background can come to the United States to make a living and ideally amass a large enough fortune to live comfortably, but as we know, enough is never enough in this land of opportunity. The Dream is ultimately a trap, a ruse, and does not hesitate to kill off anyone who attempts to achieve it, especially those of the proletariat class. I agree with Sarah Horning when she argues that “The Dream is largely critiqued as an illusion which preys on Americans who chase an unattainable goal like running on a treadmill (Horning 20)” because I believe that the novel is a critique of the American Dream and it’s unattainability, but I would also claim that this unattainability is the result of the inability to escape the social class one is born into. However, this unattainability does not stop the proletariat class from continuing to strive for it. “The desire for wealth and social mobility, an essential part of the Dream, has been a constant driving force in American political culture (Horning 21).”

Gatsby commodifies people in the same way Tom does. For example, when he demands that Mr. Klipspringer, the boarder, play the piano for Daisy’s and his enjoyment, and when Klipspringer protests Gatsby says: “don’t talk so much, old sport,” commanded Gatsby. “Play (TGG 95)!” Tyson says “Gatsby’s commodification of his world is linked to Tom’s, to the cold-blooded aggression with which he pursues what he wants (71).” Gatsby uses commodification, that winning smile that Nick cannot resist, and illegal practices to gain access to Daisy and be seen as a potential buyer. Gatsby is like a male peacock spreading his feathers wide to attract his mate, and his shirts act as his colorful feathers. “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 (TGG 92).” In this passage, it can be seen as Gatsby literally throwing his commodity around as a way to catch Daisy’s attention. He even became involved in the dark underbelly of Capitalist America in order to one day possess Daisy “the ultimate commodity sign” that would in his eyes ““launder” his “new money” and make it “old” …(71).” Tom commodifies Myrtle to flaunt this status and further prove his place in the aristocracy among the “old money” that Daisy has provided while Gatsby plans to commodify Daisy in order to gain the same status that Tom is flaunting. It can be argued that if Gatsby did successfully purchase Daisy then one day he might attempt to flaunt his status just as Tom does. In a sense, they are the man in different stages of Metamorphoses of Capital. Gatsby is stuck in the first stage: “The capitalist appears as a buyer of the commodity- and the labour-market; his money is transformed into commodities, or it goes through the circulation act” while Tom remains fluid in the third stage: “The capitalist returns to the market as a seller; his commodities are turned into money; or they pass through the circulation act (Marx).” I disagree with Hasnul when he argues that “Gatsby’s obsessions for the products of a growing industrial society are an accurate depiction of the cultural history of the 1920s (Hasnul)” because Gatsby’s only obsession is attaining status and not obtaining material goods. He only obtains material in order to transfer the profits into a manner of living, a higher class status.

The ultimate death of Jay Gatsby is linked to the canceled transaction of Daisy and everything that comes with her. The failings of the Dream is a direct result of his untimely death because the proletariat will not help one another to rise above their class, but they will bring an abrupt end to anyone who attempts to escape. This is evident in the end when George Wilson, who belongs to the proletariat, murders Gatsby. Gatsby who was born into this lower social class just as Wilson cannot ever get away from it. No matter the amount of commodification and almost access to permanent sign-exchange value through the purchase of Daisy, nothing can help Gatsby escape the inborn stagnant nature of his social class. When Tom tells Daisy the truth about Gatsby’s involvement in the underworld and that he is not from “much of the same strata as herself (TGG 156),” Daisy becomes cold and silent. Tyson acknowledges the fact that had Daisy known this about Gatsby from the start she would have never become involved with him. “Even Daisy’s extramarital affair with Gatsby, like her earlier romance with him, is based on a commodified view of life (69).” Daisy cannot accept Gatsby knowing where he truly came from and, therefore, cancels the transaction between them leaving Gatsby exposed and vulnerable without the protection of her bourgeois status.

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