

## 1920's American Society and *The Great Gatsby* With Special Reference to Automobile

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### 1. Introduction

Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1890 - 1940) is a representative author of 20<sup>th</sup> century American writers. His debut work, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) includes a number of factors that are autobiographical. Afterwards, he wrote *The Great Gatsby*, which had made him a gold standard novelist in 1920's in The United States. This novel's locale is in New York, and narrated by a third person narrator, Nick Carraway who is a neighbor of the main character, Jay Gatsby. During the 1920s, the United States entered a prosperity automobile period, which is Ford Company had invested in the T-Ford that a lot of people could finally afford. Before 1920, automobiles were more expensive than houses, but because of Ford's innovative more production techniques ordinary people could afford it. In addition, The United States faced with high economic growth after World War I that increased labor's income and company's production ratio. As well as expanded the U.S society, the foundation of the automobile society in this country was also created. *The Great Gatsby* contains some kind of automobiles that have relationships with this novel's character concepts. This paper tries to clarify what effects include between automobiles and people in this novel, and how automobiles are described in order to create *The Great Gatsby*.

### 2. Meaning of Ford automobile in *The Great Gatsby*

First of all, to analyze how the author described T-Ford in his novel as an article of the past product, which does not have values. In addition, Ford car's history is expressed as this story's foreshadowing. This novel published in 1925, at the same time T-Ford already became a popular car in the States. It is because of an economic growth as mentioned above, sales at a low price by industrial low cost, unifying a black color, and parts that used to be different in many vehicles. Fitzgerald illustrates Ford's car as "[...] the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner" (*The Great Gatsby*, 27). Positioned as valueless material due to the fact that the automobile put at "crouched in a dim corner", and expressed "dust- covered wreck of Ford". Fitzgerald analyzed it as a junk car.

There is a strong parallel between Jay Gatsby's life and the Ford automobile in *The*

*Great Gatsby*. First, the main character's life that he used to have a brilliant period. He owns massive assets and is interested by others as a rich male. However, he loses other's interest and dies near the end of the novel. So his life is expressed as prosperity to tragedy throughout this novel. Second, expression of the automobile and page 27 of this novel have same component as Gatsby's life. For instance, "The only car visible" indicates that Ford's vehicle became a common production for people and lost their interest. In 1908, Ford Company invested T-Ford that produced automobile society in the USA because the company decreased incredibly the cost of automobiles to unify parts and color of automobiles. This development gave opportunity that people could afford automobile and popularized. Moreover, the invaluable automobile appears in page 27, which is first part of *The Great Gatsby* and this story move on to decadence. As I mentioned above, these factors are strong parallel both Jay Gatsby's life and history of Ford Company, and the automobile expression is foreshadowing of the story. According to Niwa, "while flow of time 20<sup>th</sup> century, users desired to have automobile that is more functional and individual as status symbol vehicle since T-ford does not have variety, and caused losing users interest to Ford's production." This is the fact that in 1924 in The USA, sharing ratio of T-Ford in this country was more than 55%. This novel was published in 1925, as we can figure out the automobile is described as a past production in this novel and the company's historical facts included as well.

### **3. Rolls Royce and Jay Gatsby's personality**

In *The Great Gatsby*, Rolls Royce is described a valuable vehicle. Historically, Henry Royce and Charles Rolls in England invented it in 1906. A type of Rolls Royce in this novel is called "Silver Ghost" because engine of this vehicle is amazingly quiet like ghost. In addition, the automobile achieved brilliant record by car races and was known for being the best in the world. Royal family was a part of user this vehicle. "Everybody had seen it [Rolls Royce]. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes, and super-boxes and tool boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town" (63). Comparing with Ford's vehicle expression, the luxury car is depicted like extremely valuable vehicle. However, it is available to see Jay Gatsby's snobbish and superficial "Great" from it. For instance, focusing attention on color combination of the automobile. This vehicle had been seen by everybody and abnormal color. Despite the fact that body of the vehicle color is "rich cream color" and "green leather" seats in this novel, actual Silver Ghost is coated with dark color such as silver or gray and seats as well. Second, some other appearance

phrases of Rolls Royce are related with Gatsby's snobbish. For example, "monstrous length", "labyrinth of wind – shields" and many boxes are not equipment that a normal Silver Ghost has. Furthermore, Fitzgerald used these nouns and adjectives such as labyrinth, monstrous and triumphant just one time throughout in his novel, it can be seen that the author includes special meaning to the vehicle. Thus, Rolls Royce has a role of status symbol, which is people going to demand in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It can be recognized that Jay Gatsby's snobbish via appearing of his automobile.

Gatsby is snobbish and superficial. His status as a rich person appears not only in the form his possessions, but also his attitude in this novel. "He was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American – that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand" (62). As decorated Rolls Royce, Gatsby cannot be a new rich endear and also not deserve to have the best automobile in the world. He does not wear any clothes that are not made in England. In this context, he wears camel-suit while talking with Nick. Externally Jay Gatsby is a wealth person; however, his unsettling acts are described in this part of the novel and make him just like an ordinary person. For example, Gatsby is on his automobile dashboard in an improper position, which would expresses "This quality". It means he is not qualified to own the greatest automobile. Thus, this shows the main character's unstable personality: "there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand" through his attitudes, it can be seen that the automobile's circumstance is not suitable for Gatsby. The wealthy gentleman is just a creation of Gatsby's pride: wants to get the attention of others. That superficial expression demonstrates that Gatsby's actual humanity is that he is not "old money". An ironic expression "peculiarly American" means superficial rich Americans such as Jay Gatsby who spend a lot of money in order to create the appearance of wealthy person. The author includes these ironic expressions because these kinds of people exist in American society, obviously, so superficial, wealthy and snobbish and these qualities can be seen in both Jay Gatsby and his automobile in *The Great Gatsby*.

The Irony of the Rolls Royce, and Gatsby's vanity toward others appears throughout this novel. The vanity is in the fact that the central character intends to show his assets to others. "On week-ends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and lost past midnight, while his station wagon scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains" (41). The lofty vehicle, Rolls Royce is

treated with irony in this passage as an “omnibus”. Gatsby uses his decorated car as a bus in order to carry people from a station to his house. There are two purposes for Gatsby’s service. Firstly, to gather other’s attention, showing his decorated expensive vehicle is one aim of Gatsby. It is his vanity that makes him want to appear this way to others. To show off his automobile’s quality and function that makes Gatsby satisfied, since he wants to be recognized a wealthy person by others. If the purpose of using automobile were just carrying people from a station to his house, this vehicle would not be chosen. The interest of others is one expression of the identity of the main character. It has a crucial connection with why he became a superficial rich person, and also is eventually related to getting the attention of Daisy. Secondly, using the best automobile in the world as a bus includes another of Gatsby’s aims. It is to give the experience of riding in a Rolls Royce to everyone and to be further recognized a wealthy person. Giving the experience of riding the automobile is also part of his vanity because his automobile coming and going between a station and his house many times. It is a show. Further the consistent hurrying habit of his indicates his fragile mental state.

#### **4. Relationships between other characters and automobile (Daisy Buchanan and Tom Buchanan)**

*The Great Gatsby* includes many automobiles that have strong connection with characters and it is a crucial factor to analyze other people via their owned automobiles, we can learn something of each of character’s personality. First of all, consider behind Daisy Buchanan, who has an important role in *The Great Gatsby*. The whole purpose Jay Gatsby’s showing off is in order to get together with Daisy. She is the daughter of a decent family. Living a financially comfortable life and blessed with good looks. She owns a white Roadster even though she is only 18 years old that is proof she is from a wealthy family. In addition she has an obsession with England because she wears clothes made in England such as her dresses and shoes. “She [Daisy] dressed in white, and had a little white roadster, and all daylong the telephone rang in her house and excited young officers from Camp Taylor demanded the privilege of monopolizing her that night” (73). The heroine owns the white roadster in the novel. The automobile is from the USA, and the type of Roadster was convertible. It was popular in England rather than in the USA. Even though she lives in the USA, tends to live as if she were England. Hence, she has a yearning for England and tries to look like she belongs in English and living a country of life. Her roadster plays the role of making her part of English country of life. Daisy’s yearning influences the story strongly, since she affects Jay Gatsby. It can be seen that the heroine largely shapes the personality of Gatsby. That is why Gatsby wears clothes, made in England and owns a Rolls Royce.

Secondly, consider the relationships between Tom Buchanan and his automobile. He is from old money and has massive assets. Nevertheless, he is called a conservative person and this is indicated through his automobile. The conservative personality does not evoke a tragedy result as Jay Gatsby faces in the end of story, because Tom has a lot of assets, and does not have to show it to others. In this story, his vehicle is expressed as "blue coupe" (114). According to *The Cars of "The Great Gatsby"*, "Tom Buchanan's car is mentioned as a blue coupe. Tom was from old money and had no reason to impress anyone. A Marmon 34 would have been a proper car for Tom. Marmon was an expensive car that combined sport and luxury. Yet the Marmon styling was in quite good taste" (3). There are two factors that to indicate what type of automobile Tom should have in the story. One is the type of coupe sold at that time in the USA was blue in color. Marmon is an American automobile company and was established in 1902. It is an expensive car, functional, but the appearance lacks the flamboyancy of a Rolls Royce. Second, Fitzgerald owned a sports coupe. It is a fact that "His first car, published in 1920 after the publication of his best-selling first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, was a three-year old coupe; during the next two decades he would own a used Rolls Royce, ..." (*The Automobile as a Central Symbol in F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 73). These two factors illustrate the character as it relates to what type of automobile Tom has in the story. Although Marmon 34 is an expensive automobile, external appearance of this vehicle is normal as a common product. It has same relation to his character, since he is a rich person, but does not show off his assets. As a result, he is a conservative male and it is related with his owning this automobile. The conservative personality indicates good result in this novel and a real wealthy person has the personality to protect him as well, because he does not face any tragic situations, as does Gatsby. Conservative is related with successful. We can see this in Tom's personality and his owning coupe.

##### **5. Fitzgerald and Jay Gatsby's personality similarities.**

Between the author of *The Great Gatsby* and main character, there are some similarities to be found in the biography of the author. Snobs and superficial wealthy appear in the life of Fitzgerald. As mentioned above, "during the next two decades he would own a used Rolls Royce" (73). The author has strong obsession to own the best automobile because even if it was a used one he wanted to have it. It can be considered that he wanted to show his assets through his Rolls Royce and wanted to be recognized as a rich person like Jay Gatsby. In addition, the author purchased a second hand automobile in order to be together with Zelda who is his wife. She comes from a good family, as does Daisy. So to be with her, not only Jay Gatsby but also the author, had to be snobbish and

superficial people. Considering their consumption behavior, Jean Baudrillard's semiology would fit to them. Baudrillard claims that people evoke consumption behavior by semiology such as brand name that all of commodity have. The consumption behavior of Fitzgerald and Jay Gatsby create the sign of the Rolls Royce. As "the best automobile in the world", it fascinates them and motivates them to own the automobile as their status symbol. Besides, the philosopher argues that the consumption behavior is a factor in producing differences of class in society. It is because it depends on people how much spending for commodity. In the case of both the Gatsby and the novelist, they purchased expensive automobiles in order to establish different social position with others. The theory of Baudrillard appeared in 1970; however, semiology of consumption behavior existed even in 1920's in the USA consumer society. This novel anticipates the 1970's high consumption society.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, *The Great Gatsby* includes many automobiles, and each of them is related with concept of this novel's characters. Through each automobile, we can analyze the personality of the characters. Rolls Royce indicates Jay Gatsby is a snob, superficial and vanity towards others. To have the best automobile in the world is to satisfy the main character. The automobile is a necessary material thing in order to create a superficial wealthy person in this novel, and the concept of the character is based on the life of this author. Tom Buchanan appears conservative and an old money in this novel. His automobile parallels it as well. Comparing with Jay Gatsby, Tom's appearance is opposite and causes positive result for him. Because he is an old money, does not have to show to others his wealth. Daisy Buchanan aspirations for English things and it affects Jay Gatsby. Her white Roadster, which is convertible, indicates she has strong obsession for things made in England. Hence, this novel includes the automobile society and its history from the beginning of the story. Automobile factors are strongly related with characters and influence the concept of this story. Fitzgerald has obsession for automobiles that create the identity of characters, and he describes the future vision of automobile society through *The Great Gatsby*.

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