

The Meaning of Green Light in *The Great Gatsby* Based on Consumerism Perspective: Umberto Eco's Semiotic Study

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Abstract

One of recent problems in our country is the habit of being consumerist – buying things which are not needed to update the trend. Some people think that it is not a big problem, but some do not. Avoiding its negative effect is the answer to this problem. This can be done through learning past experiences in the literary works, in this case Fitzgerald's novel. The Great Gatsby depicts not only love but also consumerism. Through analyzing the sign of green light using Umberto Eco's semiotic theory, we can see the bad effect of consumerism in the past and anticipate it for our future by applying its oppositional structure. The sign of green light is not merely an orgiastic feature. It is a tool for Fitzgerald to 'fight' consumerism effect.

Keywords: green light, opposition, consumerism

Introduction

The Great Gatsby is a literary work which is able to represent the change of American way of thinking in the twentieth century (Cady, 1956: 531). In that century, after World War I, industrialization led to the great consumption. A lot of companies had its surplus and it forced the companies to sell products soon. Their advertisement expanded its wing to credit system. Finally, American bought things which were not actually needed. This was the beginning of great mass consumption which tended to consumerism (William, 1996: 159). Applying Eco's theory, this consumerism is the context to gain the meaning of green light. Eco states that a chair will have its meaning when it is put in a room (Eco, 1976: 72). "Chair" is the green light as the object of the study and "room" is consumerism as the environment or concept of the object.

The concept of consumerism is defined by several experts (Buskirk, Turner, Pendergast, Miles, etc). Miles' definition is appropriate in this study. He states that consumerism itself is a broader study than the process of purchasing and consuming some goods or service. It is full of complexities that lie behind the act of consumption. Consumerism is a way of life while consumption is an act (Miles, 1998: 4). This study discuss the value that lies behind the act of consumption as its complexity of consumerism.

First, the act of consumption as the context of green light. There are several things to be consumed: drink, jewelry, clothes, and cars. The characters in this novel used to drink a lot of liquor and to fulfill their need, some provided a juice machine:

We drank in long, greedy swallows
(Fitzgerald, 1925: 118).

Every Friday five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulpless halves. There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb (Fitzgerald, 1925: 39).

Not only drink, clothes and jewelry were over consumed too. Clothes were provided not only for one season but for three seasons. A piece of women clothes cost for two hundred and sixty-five dollars (Fitzgerald, 1925: 172). The ornaments such as jewelry cost three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The interesting part, however, is the characters' pride of having expensive clothes and jewelry.

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, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily.

"They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before." (Fitzgerald, 1925: 93-94)

"My dear," she cried, "I'm going to give you this dress as soon as I'm through with it. I've got to get another one tomorrow. I'm going to make a list of all the things I've got to get. A massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, and one of those cute little ash-trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother's grave that'll last all summer. I got to write down a list so I won't forget all the things I got to do" (Fitzgerald, 1925: 37).

Then he went into the jewelry store to buy a pearl necklace—or perhaps only a pair of cuff buttons—rid of my provincial squeamishness forever (Fitzgerald, 1925: 181).

Having luxurious goods became the basic need of high class people. Besides that, the characters in this novel also bought very expensive cars or wagons. Cars and yachts, however, were not used as transportation means. They were bought for the characters' prestige.

I'd seen it. Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here 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 (Fitzgerald, 1925: 64).

"I adore it," exclaimed Daisy. "The pompadour! You never told me you had a pompadour—or a yacht." (Fitzgerald, 1925: 95)

American life style was described as extravagant. Conducting and having great parties was enjoyable for characters. Parties were a place where people met and showed their pride or their houses. Therefore, good preparation was necessary and it meant spending large amount of money.

By seven o'clock the orchestra has arrived, no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums, The last swimmers have come in from the beach now and are dressing up-stairs; the cars from New York are parked five deep in the drive, and already the halls and salons and verandas are gaudy with primary colors, and hair shorn in strange new ways, and shawls beyond the dreams of Castile. The bar is in full swing, and floating rounds of cocktails permeate the garden outside, until the air is alive with chatter and laughter, and casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on

the spot, and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's name (Fitzgerald, 1925: 40). On week-ends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains. And on Mondays eight servants, including an extra gardener, toiled all day with mops and scrubbing brushes and hammers and garden-shears, repairing the ravages of the night before (Fitzgerald, 1925: 39).

Across the courtesy bay the white palaces of fashionable East Egg glittered along the water (Fitzgerald, 1925: 5).

Their house was even more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay (Fitzgerald, 1925: 6).

He came down with a hundred people in four private cars, and hired a whole floor of the Seelbach Hotel (Fitzgerald, 1925: 77).

Buying luxurious goods was the habit of rich people in *The Great Gatsby*. There were polo ponies, stable, gold pencil, gold toilet set for some characters.

They had spent a year in France for no particular reason, and then drifted here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together (Fitzgerald, 1925: 6).

He'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that (Fitzgerald, 1925: 6).

"I've heard of making a garage out of a stable," Tom was saying to Gatsby," but I'm the first man who ever made a stable out of a garage" (Fitzgerald, 1925: 119).

His bedroom was the simplest room of all—except where the dresser was garnished with a toilet set of pure dull gold. Daisy took the brush with delight, and smoothed her hair, whereupon

Gatsby sat down and shaded his eyes and began to laugh (Fitzgerald, 1925: 93).

"Go ahead," answered Daisy genially, "and if you want to take down any addresses here's my little gold pencil." (Fitzgerald, 1925: 107)

All the data above reveal the depth of consumption. Each character's act of over consumption leads to consumerism although the aims which underlies their consumerism are different. Applying Eco's semiotic method to reveal the different value of each character is useful to know the oppositional group. Eco isolated fourteen structures from popular work *James Bond*:

Fourteen such structures: four point to oppositions between four characters (Bond-M; Bond-Villain; Villain-Woman; Woman-Bond); the others constitute oppositions between values that find their personification in the four different characters (Free World-Soviet Union; Great Britain-Non Anglo Saxon Countries; Duty-Sacrifice; Cupidity-Ideals; Love-Death; Chance-Planning; Luxury-Discomfort; Excess-Moderation; Perversion-Innocence; Loyalty-Disloyalty) (Bondanella, 1997: 62-63).

The structures above are based on the positional and oppositional relations. Eco himself states that code system is a structure (i) which every value on it is decided from its position and difference and (ii) which appears when different phenomena do not reverse to the same relation system (Eco, 1976: 275). Because of that, it is important to know the position, opposition, and difference in the same internal system. Furthermore, value is defined based on how it is put in contrast with other elements.

Oppositional Value behind Consumerism

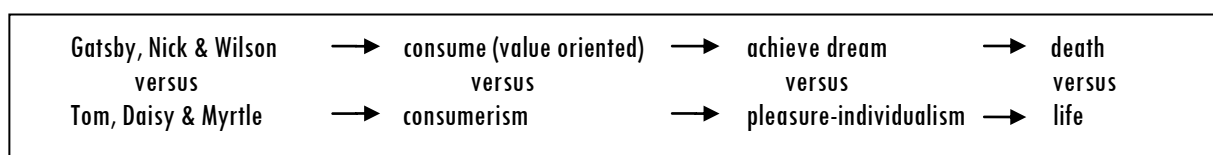
There are two main parallel groups in a relation between characters based on the value which is believed by characters. The first group consists of Nick, Gatsby and Wilson who were consumerists to achieve their own dream. The second group consists

of Tom, Daisy and Myrtle. They consumed all luxurious goods for their pleasure and joy. Between those groups there is an oppositional relation. Although the characters in the first group also consumed, the act of consumption was not only for themselves. Meanwhile, the characters in the second group tended to consume in a large number, very expensive and exaggerated things for only their own pleasure, joy, and happiness.

The big opposition between Nick – Gatsby and Tom – Daisy is based on the motif.

Gatsby consumed because of his love to Daisy; Tom consumed for the sake of his individuality. The death of Gatsby is the defeat of the consumerism system that bet Gatsby. This was caused by his inability to be corrupt like others and it made Gatsby a member of the minority. It is clear that consumerism was generally done by the American wealthy society in 1920s and it led to individualism and materialism which was the opposition of the poor which in this novel was described as a class that prioritized morality.

Figure 1. Oppositions in the structure



The last opposition between Gatsby's group and Tom's is life and death. In this case, the general description was consumerism and individualism which developed fast and became the goal of the majority in the 1920's. The development of consumerism and individualism in this novel could defeat the characters which did not follow the main stream of consumerism and individualism. Gatsby and Tom had their own idealism and their own way of thinking that represented two strongholds in that era. Gatsby represented the minority group which opposed to consumerism value for individual comfort. The majority was represented by Tom. The death of Gatsby-Wilson and the life of Tom-Daisy mean the fight of both groups that results in the defeat of the minority which did not value individualism and materialism in that era.

Another proof of the decadency of moral value and the decrease of individualism in *The Great Gatsby* can be seen in the followings:

It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.... (Fitzgerald, 1925: 180-181)

"Well, the fact is—the truth of the matter is that I'm staying with some people up here in Greenwich, and they rather expect me to be with them tomorrow. In fact, there's a sort of picnic or something." (Fitzgerald, 1925: 170)

"Let us learn to show our friendship for a man when he is alive and not after he is dead." (Fitzgerald, 1925: 173)

The first quotation shows Nick's point of view toward Tom and Daisy, that they are clumsy and money oriented. The second and the third quotations are the comments about Gatsby's death. In this novel everyone except Nick did not pay attention to Gatsby's funeral. They only prioritized their own business.

The poor can represent the empathy as described in the character of Gatsby's father:

It was Gatsby's father, a solemn old man, very helpless and dismayed, bundled up in a long cheap luster against the warm

September day (Fitzgerald, 1925: 167-168).

Gatsby's father was so simple a man, but he knew Gatsby, his ambition, and his way to achieve his dream well. The moral value in Gatsby's father opposed individualism. This is analogous with the rich versus the poor, which implies individualism versus moral orientation.

Through extravagant description, we can discover deep meaning beyond the narration. This is clarified by Nick's personality change. Nick in the beginning of story always pays attention to his own appearance. Then he changes into someone who does not pay attention to someone else's appearance, but pays full attention to someone's personality. He pays more attention to someone's point of view on spending their life time. Nick also said that Gatsby did not realize that his dream was far away behind him when the darkness of America occurred:

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night (Fitzgerald, 1925: 182).

There are three things: green light, blue lawn, and the dark fields of the republic. Green light which is known by Gatsby and Nick can not be associated to Daisy any more. It can represent the view of Gatsby and Nick. Blue lawn can represent high class society, which Gatsby wants to enter, and which is full of consumerism, individualism and materialism. The dark fields of republic signify the large area of America covered by the darkness. If we trace back to the era before *The Great Gatsby*, we will come to the era before World War I when industrialization – individualism took place.

Through Gatsby and characters, Fitzgerald tried to deliver his thought of

fighting the main stream. He traced back to the previous era but unfortunately could not avoid the present era which tended to individuality and consumerism:

Gatsby believed in the green light. The orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning---(Fitzgerald, 1925: 182).

One new generation will return to the past and decrease the bad effect of industrialization, which are individualism, consumerism, and materialism. They beat the main stream: *So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past* (Fitzgerald, 1925: 182).

The combination between green light and the phrase "boats against the current" explains the view of better situation before industrialization, individualism, consumerism, and materialism emerged, in which Nick believed. Although Gatsby was dead, the spirit of fighting consumerism and individualism still existed. America should not reach American Dream by ignoring humanity at that time.

Consumerism cannot be separated from the aim of each character to consume. The difference in the aims makes the difference in the core value of consumerism. There is a strong tendency of the society to consume. This leads to high life style and moral degradation: to be more materialistic and individualistic. The priority of most characters in this novel was the achievement of physical (not mental) pleasure by consuming luxurious goods. This was proven by Blake when he compared it to European people who were socialists:

Hoover compared the flourishing American economy with its faltering European counterpart and attributed American success to "the American system of rugged individualism" as contrasted with "a European philosophy of diametrically opposed doctrine-doctrines of paternalism and state socialism." (Blake, 1963: 484)

Fitzgerald seemed to predict the degradation of moral value, the tendency to physical things for joy, and the individualism which scraped America. Blake also stated that the development of industrialization increased individualism and peaked to Great Depression:

But this noble dream was shattered under the savage assaults of the Great Depression. By 1932, the voters had lost their faith that the nation could be saved through the magic of rugged individualism (Blake, 1963: 484).

The degradation as a cause of consumerism is also stated by Pendergast. He argues that materialism gave contribution to the decrease of cultural life and social customs in prelapsarian past. Consumption has bread materialism and it should have been viewed as a negative component of the growth of capitalist prosperity (1998: 25).

Apart from Scrimgeour's opinion (1966: 76) that criticizes the objectivity of Nick Carraway as the narrator, it is clear that there is similarity between the main character Gatsby and Nick. It strengthens the point that Fitzgerald used Gatsby and Nick to deliver his point of view toward consumerism that led to individualism. The green light is viewed as a past perspective against the bad effect of consumerism.

Conclusion

The act of consuming things, which should actually be done based on primary need, was described exaggeratedly in this novel. Most characters prepared for their best appearance, ignore others' presence, and underestimated others. One was not recognized because of one's personality or achievement, but because of one's appearance.

The competitiveness among characters were also obvious. Characters were forced to be individualists and egoists. The orientation was not the values but the material things. of consumerism. The worst effect of consumerism in this novel was that all characters except Nick sacrificed Gatsby. Although he had sacrificed all his belongings

to others including Daisy, other characters ignored him. On his funeral, no one was there except Nick and his father.

From the discussion on the meaning of green light, we can see that there was a movement to criticize consumerism (although the main character could not avoid it). He consumed based on the value of love that he believed. Appearance is not the most important thing. It is only a way to achieve valuable things. It does mean that to associate the green light with American Dream is not less worthy as stated in the book of Rule (2009: 1).

Finding out the meaning of green light can be related to recent problems, as Eco said that we could take one of the branches of the compositional meaning tree to find out what we need. Additional information is taken from Burnman (1952: 7), that green light is a representative of 'go ahead'. The symbol of green light can have different meaning due to its branch of compositional tree. Based on the explanation above, Green light is an opposition toward the current of consumerism.

From this, we learn that we do not need to consume very expensive things only to get people's attention. It is better to appreciate one's positive side, and to prioritize humanity. Avoiding the main stream which we is not good for us will lead us to great thing.

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