

## Archetypal Interpretation of the Hero in *The Great Gatsby*

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**Abstract.** The Great Gatsby depicts the mysterious image of Gatsby in his relentless pursuit of dreams and his final illusion. The author wrote a paean to this tragic hero of America. Myth-archetypal critics believe that, the author unconsciously combined the image of heroes in ancient myths and legends with Gatsby's story, since religious rituals and archetypes permeate the whole book. This paper takes Gatsby's double pursuit of American Dream in the movie as the main line, using archetypal criticism to analyze the inextricable relationship between Gatsby and the heroes in ancient Greek myths and biblical stories, trying to discover the mythological color of the book and confirm that The Great Gatsby work is a very touching mythical epic.

### Introduction

The Great Gatsby, known as the masterpiece of Scott Fitzgerald, has a profound influence on modern American novels, and is regarded as the encyclopedia of American society in 1920s. In 2013, the book was adapted into a movie for the fifth time. The film has well-arranged plots, as well as typical characters, language, actions and scenes. It represents audiences with the lustrous and dazzling New York and the changing and impetuous people at that time, which serves as the foil to Gatsby's pure and persistent, and provides an aesthetic romantic epic full of dreams and tragedies for audience.

According to the theory of Archetypal Criticism, all great works reflect the most primitive needs of human beings. By using his superb artistic skills, Fitzgerald strode over the limitation of time, casted the heroic spirit in myths and legends to the life trajectory of the protagonist. When reading the book, readers can find something very familiar, for it reflects peoples' overall expectations for heroes. The author may not deliberately do this, but his pure art pursuit dug out the "collective unconsciousness" rooted in the depths of human mind. The author unconsciously put the image of Gatsby together with the hero archetypes which can represent the common psychological dispositions of Americans. Only through the analysis from myth-archetypal perspective, can we truly reveal the connotation of the heroic image of "Great Gatsby".

### Myth-archetypal Criticism

Myth-archetypal Criticism is founded on the basis of Frazer's interpretation of myths from the perspective of Anthropology and Carl Jung's explanation from the perspective of psychology. British anthropologist Frazer proposed in his book *The Golden Bough* that the death-rebirth myth is present in almost all cultural mythologies, and is acted out in terms of growing seasons and vegetation. For example, natural phenomena, like sunrise and sunset in a day, the circulation of four seasons, plants grow in spring and wither in winter, and the tides of the sea, are corresponding with the fate of gods from birth to death [1]. This reflects the low productivity of primitive society. People have limited abilities in understanding and controlling the nature. It also explains the most primitive needs of human. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung divided personality into consciousness, individual unconsciousness and collective unconsciousness. The collective unconscious surpasses individual unconsciousness, for it is the accumulated experience of generations of human beings. It's a number of innate thoughts, feelings, instincts, and memories that reside in the mind of all people. Collective unconsciousness represents in literary works as repeatedly images. These images are called as archetype. Hence, mythological images are symbol of collective consciousness. Human beings create the legend of gods to reflect their inner world, which is the projection of collective mind [2].

Canadian literary critic Northrop Frye epitomized the archetypal criticism, and introduced the concept of archetype into the field of literature. He believes that literature is the displacement of myth. The survival modes of different gods create the survival modes of different characters in literature. The experiences of protagonists copy and repeat the experiences of gods. As an organic element in literature, mythological archetypes are images that appear repeatedly in literary works. The secret of enduring and infectious art works lies in authors' search, excavation and activation of archetypes of collective unconsciousness. Once the archetype is established, the author, even the readers will be deeply impressed by this powerful image. Their deepest desire as human being will be awakened and echoes for a long time [3]. The Great Gatsby adopts archetypes in Greek myths, hero legends and Bible stories. The protagonist repeats the experience of heroes, which raises the book to the height of a tragic epic, and shows humans' most profound collective experience and visions.

### **Comparison of Gatsby and Mythological Archetypes**

Shi-jun Zhang believes that mythological images include classical mythological images and the religious images. Classical mythological images refer to archetypal images in ancient Greek myths, heroic legends and Homer Epic. According to the Myth-archetype Theory, several types of archetypes can be found, including male archetypes, female archetypes, hero archetypes and hero's journey [4]. Fitzgerald put Gatsby's double pursuit of American Dream with mythical hero elements. Readers can find stories similar to experiences of Heracles, Odysseus, Achilles and Jason.

Gatsby's conjecture of his noble identity, his relentless pursuit of career and love are most similar to Heracles' pursuit of personal identity. Heracles was the son of Zeus, the supreme ruler of the gods and the mortal Alcmene. His demigod identity could not be recognized by gods. Hera, the wife of Zeus and the Queen of Heaven, wanted to get rid of him. But accidentally, Heracles sucked her milk and got strong and powerful. Hera tried to kill him for several times but failed. After grown-up, Heracles was not willing to become a mortal servant, and asked god to help. Then he was required to carry out ten labors set by his archenemy, Eurystheus, who had become king in Heracles' place. If he succeeded, he would be purified of his sin and, as myth says, he would be granted immortality. Heracles completed these tasks with strong perseverance. He dared to fight against the fate, never bowed to humans and gods. Therefore, Heracles becomes the favorite hero archetype of writers and artists. Gatsby, formerly known as James Gates, was a man of humble birth. He was unwilling to become as mediocre as his father, and believed that he was the son of God, and was destined to chase the glory of the future. He exiled himself at 16 years old. Under the arrangement of the destiny, he encountered his benefactor, and was renamed as Jay Gatsby. In order to obtain the identity of upper society, he experienced innumerable trials and hardships, and finally achieved material conditions for the life in the upper class. Then he created his noble birth. He plunged into the dream of love with creative passion; this great vitality surpassed his love towards Daisy. Gatsby and Heracles share similar origin, character, mentality and experience. What's more, they died in exactly the same way: being framed and murdered at home. They have several things in common: extraordinary talent, courage to grasp the fate of individual, persistence to the belief, and ability of creating hope. Gatsby can be seen as the modern incarnation of Heracles. Homer's Odyssey describes the story of a Greek hero, Odysseus, and provides the archetype of "hero's journey" for later literary works. After the Trojan War, Odysseus wanted to return to his hometown. He drifted on the sea for 10 years, fighting against sea monsters which symbolized the will of Poseidon, the god of sea, and resisting temptation of goddesses and witches. After all these hardships Odysseus finally got together with his wife and son. In order to pursue the American Dream, Gatsby left his hometown and drifted around. Although Gatsby's experience was not as mysterious as Odysseus' sea journey, it was still thrilling and moving, and revealed the true quality of a hero. Odysseus was inspired by God, while Gatsby met his benefactor who helped him to enter the upper society. Another archetypal image in Greek mythology is commercial hero, such as Odysseus and Jason. Odysseus is calm and wise. He built a huge wooden horse and conquered Troy, gained Achilles' weapon by cheating, pretended to be beggar and killed his wife's suitors with his son, and finally won back the huge fortune. As a handsome and calm young hero, Jason got the help from Medea, an infatuated Princess. He overcame all difficulties and got the

Golden Fleece, and then abandoned Medea in order to marry the king's daughter. Gatsby was frank and stalwart. He regarded the search for love as a part of his American Dream. In order to win Daisy's heart, he endured hardships and ultimately achieved success and recognition. He built a luxurious house which located across the river with Daisy's mansion. In order to enter the upper society, Gatsby engaged in illegal business to accumulate wealth, just like Odysseus and Jason, who showed the same traits of hypocrisy, cunning, sinister and ruthless when they tried to realizing personal purposes. The gods and heroes in Greek mythology are personified gods and heroes as bodies of flesh rather than a bust of marble.

Most of the heroes in Greek myths, including the idealized Hector and the mixed Jason, have sad endings. Even with excellent talents and noble status, Heracles and Achilles died young. The tragedy of Greek mythology can be explained by Frye's classification of myths. Frye believes that there are four modes of myths, legend, comedy, tragedy and irony, corresponding with four types of hero. At the same time, the cycle of natural phenomena, like sunrise to sunset and the four seasons, are corresponding with the cycle of human destiny. The tragic consciousness in Greek mythology reflects humans' awareness of man's limitations. The transformation of natural environment in *The Great Gatsby* predicts the tragic ending of Gatsby. Gatsby made careful arrangement for his reunion with Daisy, but a sudden downpour came and made the atmosphere embarrassing. Gatsby passed a coal yard which was always covered by heavy smoke and black clouds, could be regarded as the omen of his fate. There were large numbers of servants in Gatsby's mansion; the house was magnificent. In order to attract the attention of his former lover, Gatsby held luxury party every night. However, depression came shortly after the climax. The mansion became bleak, and was full of fallen leaves over the night. Before Gatsby's death, the gloomy weather and the cold swimming pool predicted the tragic ending. In contrast with the environment, Gatsby smiled calmly and confidently when he died. The heroic spirit reminds readers of the brief reunion of Hector and his wife and children, and the heroic utterance of Achilles before the battle.

### **The Analogy of Light Image**

According to the arrangement and classification of Biblical Archetype of Shi-jun Zhang, Gatsby is the Adam in original sin archetype, the scapegoat in sacrifice archetype, and the snake in Satan archetype. He is also the Mose in hero archetype, the Jesus in redemption archetype, and the baptized object in baptism archetype. There are some recurring natural images in biblical literature, such as water, fire and light. The description of light is associated with the light of God and the hero, symbolizing light, hope, faith and courage. Light is a sign of God's presence; the God is the light. Jesus spoke, "I am the light of the world: he that followed me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Mose, a national hero, was adopted by the daughter of Pharaoh in his infancy, and he did not admit his identity as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, and was unwilling to enjoy the joy of sin. He was willing to suffer with the people, because he was faithful to his belief.

The heroic image of Gatsby was always linked to light. His smile was shining; his love was a gold girl; his memory of Daisy was plated with gold; even his domicile and luxury cars were shining, too. What the work describes the most is the green light. Green is the most common color in nature, symbolizing hope and dream; so as the green light. Green light flashed everywhere with Gatsby. Gatsby was the son of God, the hero in the light. Green images repeatedly appear in the film, served as the main line throughout the movie. The story began in the dazzling shine of green light. Then the green light flashed along with the ups and downs of the story. After the death of Gatsby, green light extended to the entire screen, and then gradually disappeared. It was the soul of the protagonist, the embodiment of his faith and hope. There were his love and his pursuit in the light. At the beginning of the film, Nick said to himself, "Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness." Green light became the embodiment of Gatsby. It was mysterious and hopeful, belonged to the light of god. One night, Nick saw someone standing in the dock. Alone in the darkness, the man put his hand slowly forward,

trying to touch something in the dark. Later Nick learned that he wanted to touch the shining green light from Daisy's house. Gatsby planed and arranged family parties, but he hid behind hilarious people who were immersed in the pure material enjoyment. Standing alone in the dock, Gatsby kept his faith, and looking forward to the green light. It is clear that the author uses the worship of light in the Bible to describe the piety of Gatsby. By using this kind of religious depiction, Fitzgerald shows Gatsby's heroic image of a saint.

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