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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER



# A Foucauldian Reading of Power Relations and Discourse in The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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### ABSTRACT

#### Keywords:

Power, Truth, Identity,  
Discourse, The Great Gatsby

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The aim of this research paper is to study the notion of power and other related concepts devised by Foucault in the novel The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Foucault's theory of power suggests that power is omnipresent, that is, power can be found in all social interactions. In fact, that power is interwoven in all social relations. Moreover, a discourse is made by the government in which identity of characters does not remain fixed and autonomous; truth, as a metaphysical concept, which is supposed to exist as a definite reality becomes a mere game by power relations. The most important aspect that can be seen in this novel is the role of discourse and power in society. Since the novel is set in Jazz age and it coincides with rise of new ideology called American dream, it could be concluded that the characters are influenced by the discourse in which they are living. In fact, the ideology of American dream controls their lifestyle – particularly, the main character – Jay – who has changed himself from a proletarian into a member of bourgeoisie society. Therefore, the identity of the characters is not a fixed concept since how they have gone through the process of changing influenced by power relationship which can be seen within them. Moreover, the concept of truth is distorted and unstable in this novel.

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## 1. Introduction

[Francis Scott Fitzgerald \(1896 - 1940\)](#), an American writer, is a member of active writers after World War I who are known as ‘lost generation’; this group have been affected by war and its consequences throughout the world. [The Great Gatsby](#) is a 1925 novel written by American author F. Scott Fitzgerald that follows a cast of characters living in the fictional town of West Egg on Long Island in the summer of 1922. The story concerns the young and mysterious millionaire Jay Gatsby and his passion and love for the beautiful girl who is now married Daisy Buchanan. The most important aspect that can be seen in this novel is the role of discourse in society. Since the novel is set in Jazz age and it coincides with rise of new ideology called American dream, the characters are influenced by the discourse in which they are living.

Foucault’s name is linked with different postmodern concepts that break the traditional norms of a society. One of the most important concepts that has been argued and elaborated by Foucault is the concept of discourse which is different from its traditional definition. Carter believes that “Foucault’s use of the term ‘discourse’ is closely related to his concept of power. The power of the human sciences derives from their claims to be knowledge” (2006, p.105).

In ordinary and traditional sense, discourse refers to the way of speech in field of language. However, in postmodern and particularly Foucauldian sense, discourse is far more complex concept. According to Foucault, discourse refers to ordered routines that determine different propositions. In the other words, these legal and accepted routines are used to justify the other ideas and meanings in society. Therefore, Foucauldian sense of discourse is closely related to social, political, cultural and religious institutions and

relations. Accordingly, discourse in society can embed power or put it simply, discourse is the mother of power.

Foucault's theory of power suggests that power is omnipresent, that is, power can be found in all social interactions. In fact, that power is interwoven in all social relations. Foucault emphasizes that 'power' is not an institution, a 'structure', nor an individual capacity, but rather a complex arrangement of forces in society. Foucault concludes that power is everywhere, and it affects all of our choices in daily life. According to Foucault, power can affect shaping truth as he says that "I would say that this has always been my problem: the effects of power and the production of truth." (1988, p.118) Foucault wanted to discover how our view of truth is influenced by power relationships. Foucault is concerned with the ways in which our power position affects how people see reality.

Foucault believes that power does not have external reality since "power is not a substance. Neither is it a mysterious property whose origin must be delved into. Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals." (1988, p.83) All relationships are power relations. Power isn't bad, it isn't good. Foucault is interested in how that power works, and how the relationships play a role in what and how we believe.

The concept "discourse" is multidimensional, broadly perceived and has several definitions. Discourse, as a social construct, is created and practiced by those who have the power and means of communication. Those who are in control decide who we are by deciding what we discuss. Foucault holds that truth, morality, and meaning are created through discourse. In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of

procedures, whose role is “to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (1997, p. Weedon 105).

## 2. Review of Literature

The novel of *The Great Gatsby* has always been exposed to different criticisms. In his book, Bloom has written his comment on this novel and compares it with other works. It is said that “*The Great Gatsby* does combine the lyrical sensibility of Keats and the fictive mode of Conrad and makes of so odd a blending a uniquely American story, certainly a candidate for the American story of its time” (2010, p.1). In another essay published by W.J. Harvey in the same book, the writer puts his emphasis on the narrator and believes:

Nearly every critic of *The Great Gatsby* has stressed the tremendous structural importance of the narrator, Nick Carraway, the character through whom Fitzgerald is able to achieve that aesthetic distance from his own experience necessary for firmness of control and clarity of perception, through whom he can express that delicately poised ambiguity of moral vision, the sense of being ‘within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life’ out of which insight into the truth of things must grow. (p.32)

Moreover, the writer gives a textual analysis of the book by working on the structures of the book; he concludes that “starting with the idea of restlessness and going by way of its enlargement into the idea of drifting we are brought to face the largest issues that the novel

Ivan Štrba (2011) has investigated the role of women in this novel. Štrba believes the majority of Fitzgerald's fiction women characters are decorative figures of seemingly fragile beauty, though in fact they are often "vain, egoistical, even destructive and ruthless and thus frequently the survivors" (p.41). As prime consumers, "they are never capable of idealism or intellectual or artistic interests, nor do they experience passion" (p.41). A feminist critic has charged *The Great Gatsby* with exhibiting actual hostility towards women: "Another American 'love story' centered on hostility to women and the concomitant strategy of the scapegoat... Not dead Gatsby but surviving Daisy is the object of the novel's hostility and its scapegoat." (Fetterley 72)

Sebastian Fälth (2013) has study social aspects in the novel of *The Great Gatsby* and believes Fitzgerald clearly shows the significance of social class and status in society and the depth of it, "as there are more factors to it than what we can assume by looking at a certain lifestyle. As is shown in *The Great Gatsby*, no matter how hard a person tries to create a different life or past, stratification by social class is very difficult, if not impossible, to escape" (p.23).

Lovisa Lindberg (2015) probes the function of the American dream the how Fitzgerald uses the American Dream as a means of social criticism of the moral implications that accompany great wealth and material excess. This is portrayed in the characters of *The Great Gatsby*. Based on the findings illustrate "how four characters act as either representative or opposite of the American Dream" and, in light of this, "how their relation to the American Dream criticizes the state of American society. Tom and Daisy, representative of old-fashioned aspects of the American society, highlight certain aspects of the American Dream" (p.2).

Lihua Zhang and Liying Cui (2014) have done a feminist reading of *Winter Dreams*. According to the critics, the story “exposes misogyny in Fitzgerald’s text” (p.513). In fact, Judy’s transformation from a beautiful fellow, “a rebellious young girl, and a luring Circe, into a meek creature of “angel in the house”, indicates that even in the 1920s of American society, women still have no ways out except to surrender to the dominant patriarchal ideology” (p.513).

### 3. Discussion

The main theme of the novel deals with the American dream that can be seen through several characters including Jay Gatsby, George Wilson and Myrtle Wilson. Jay Gatsby, as the main character, shows the American dream according to which an individual can become successful in society regardless of his own social and political condition: “and as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually, I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes...” (Fitzgerald 187). Nick mentions that this island was once a place for the soldiers and there was no life and opportunity on this island; however, the island has gone through a drastic change owing to the power of American dream ideology. In other words, the power of this ideology has been so effective that a ruined place could be changed into a prestigious place in which the richest people live.

Money is a significant tool in societies with power relationships since it gives advantages to the group who owns it. Fitzgerald has shown the significance of having money in this novel since even in his own personal life, money plays a significant role as Radeljković claims, “Fitzgerald liked money, for him money was the means by which he could attain the romantic, alluring life of rich people, witty and beautiful

women” (2005, p. 52). This advantage can be seen in the narrator’s life as Nick recall’s what his father used to tell him: “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,’ he told me, ‘just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p.3). Nick’s economic condition has given him a powerful stance in the society, so that the other mechanism in this system works for his benefit.

This novel is replete with social struggles of different classes in the ideal society of America where politics and the rank and power of different classes are considered important; however, such an idea has been used implicitly in the novel. From the very beginning of the novel, the division of people from different classes of society can be seen. Tom’s description signifies the power of wealth as an acceptable standard for the American families:

Her husband, among various physical accomplishments, had been one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven—a national figure in a way, one of those men who reach such an acute limited excellence at twenty-one that everything afterward savors of anti-climax. His family were enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach—but now he’d left Chicago and come east in a fashion that rather took your breath away. (Fitzgerald, 1925, p.8)

Throughout this novel, it could be seen that the personal relationship is based on material advantages which brings power and transfer in the society. Tom, as a married man, has a love affair with Myrtle who is married to a working-class man. She does not

love her husband and betrays her mostly due to financial reasons; her marriage with a working-class man does not work out. Therefore, she says: "I married him because I thought he was a gentleman," she said finally. "I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn't fit to lick my shoe" (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 38-39).

In the relationship between Myrtle and Tom, power is the dominant factor which replaces other significant elements that must be found in a relationship. Myrtle at first thinks that his husband can be gentleman. However, later, she finds out the reality of working class group; because of power relationships, nothing good can be found about them and there would be no value in their personality. For Myrtle, betrayal becomes the way of her objection; as a working class member, Myrtle wants to rebel against the acceptable norms and rules in the capitalist society. The reason is mostly that Myrtle has been placed in the economic relationship of production which Foucault believes "the human subject is placed in relations of production and of signification, he is equally placed in power relations which are very complex. Now, it seemed to me that economic history and theory provided a good instrument for relations of production" (1988, p.778).

Nick has realized that the function of power has brought about such differences among men as there is no inherent difference between men; there is just power which makes one group superior to another and makes the other feel miserable and guilty. Power and American dream, as an ideological construct, are deeply tied. The idea of power and material condition can be seen within Gatsby, another character who rebels against the inequality and mechanism of power throughout the society. According to the novel, the main aspect of the novel is that Gatsby is poor who falls in love with a girl, Daisy, from a respectable family. At the beginning of the war, Gatsby joins the army



and when gets back, he realizes that Daisy and Tom are getting married. It is in this situation that Gatsby is determined to get rich and to do so, he has to fight with the dominant power in society. However, since the idea of American dream is common, its power work for Gatsby and becomes so rich that Jordan tells Nick: "I was down there at a party about a month ago. At a man named Gatsby's. Do you know him?" 'I live next door to him.' 'Well, they say he's a nephew or a cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm's. That's where all his money comes from.' 'Really?'" (Fitzgerald, 1925 p.36). The power of this ideology is so strong that in a short time, Gatsby, from the bottom of poverty, changes into a rich man whom assumed to be a relative of 'Kaiser Wilhelm's.

According to what is known about him, it can be said that power plays a significant role for Gatsby. From the beginning of Gatsby's life, he wishes to show he is special, and he is a usual man from a low-class family. In fact, he is so mesmerized by the function of power that he attempts to create a life for himself which is beyond the material condition of his own class. Throughout the novel, he describes his parents as "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people," and "his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all" (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 98). This description of his parents prepares the reader for the importance of American Dream as a type of power; the transformation from ordinariness to the condition of wealth and fame, can prove the effectiveness of this power on every aspect of American person who is willing to bring about drastic changes in his life and change illusion to the reality.

In this novel, he tries to be truthful for the others and gives truth about himself since he is made up of multiple relationships, multiple responsibilities, multiple identities which show that truth is not absolute and universal; rather, it can be created and controlled by anyone who is in power relation. Each character makes a mental

picture regarding the truth he thinks is right and fits the description; in the above statement, Gatsby's truth is created in different ways.

For Foucault, there is logic of power, which guides much different patterns of thought. The new possibilities are thought and imagined regarding Gatsby's different aspects of his life. There is a wide disagreement about different versions of truth and Gatsby's situation in the novel:

And it was from Cody that he inherited money—a legacy of twenty-five thousand dollars. He didn't get it...He told me all this very much later, but I've put it down here with the idea of exploding those first wild rumors about his antecedents, which weren't even faintly true. Moreover, he told it to me at a time of confusion, when I had reached the point of believing everything and nothing about him. So I take advantage of this short halt, while Gatsby, so to speak, caught his breath, to clear this set of misconceptions away. (Fitzgerald, 1925, p.108)

In the above statement, the role of truth gets more highlighted as it starts to make confusion for the other people, and all proves that there is no absolute version of truth.

Gatsby has to go through change of identity since identity is not a fixed concept. In fact, subjectivity has a deterministic condition which depends on different elements of society. The deterministic condition is upon Gatsby and Nick recalls:

When he was gone, I turned immediately to Jordan— constrained to assure her of my surprise. I had expected that Mr. Gatsby would be a florid and corpulent person in his middle years. 'Who is he?' I demanded. 'Do you know?' 'He's just a man named Gatsby.' 'Where is

he from, I mean? And what does he do?’ ‘Now you’re started on the subject,’ she answered with a wan smile. ‘Well, —he told me once he was an Oxford man.’ A dim background started to take shape behind him but at her next remark it faded away. (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 53-54)

What Nick and Jordan say about Gatsby’s identity is in line with Foucault’s idea of identity in which Gatsby is just a name and there are more shaping factors into his subjectivity. This means that the condition which shapes Gatsby’s subjectivity is significant, and it has been made of different values in American society. In fact, Gatsby creates his own identity and seeks wealth in order to sustain his dream so that his dream of being another person with a different identity comes true.

Gatsby demands Nick to give him a description of his own identity; the reason is that Gatsby is a mystery whose identity can reflect multiplicity of layers. He wants to know how he is perceived by others in the society and Nick, as an objective member of this society, would be able to provide a proper reflection of Gatsby’s identity. However, Gatsby knows that his identity has been shaped and recreated in the relationship of power in society, so that he attempts to give Nick a picture of himself; in other words, Gatsby likes to give Nick what he wants regarding his identity since he spends his younger years dreaming up the perfect identity for himself, “and to this conception he was faithful to the end” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 98).

Gatsby’s relation with Dan Cody also provides him with social factors which equip him with “a blue coat, six pairs of white duck trousers, and a yachting cap” (Fitzgerald 100). Such factors, as determining elements of identity constitution, permit Gatsby to recreate his new identity, because they give him the outward appearance to fit

his internal desire for ambition and superiority he has always wanted. When he leaves Dan Cody, “the vague contour of Jay Gatsby had filled out to the substantiality of a man” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 101). Gatsby’s desire for material and social factors has created his new identity, and through the collection of possessions, he gets closer to the goal of denying his mortality.

The variety of discourse and the differences of thoughts can be seen in the novel as one of the characters admits such a difference and relates it to the discourse of generation: “You’re very polite but I belong to another generation,” he announced solemnly. ‘You sit here and discuss your sports and your young ladies and your——’ He supplied an imaginary noun with another wave of his hand—‘As for me, I am fifty years old, and I won’t impose myself on you any longer” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 78-79). What this statement means is that since generation has been changed in American society, so has its patterns and discourse. In other words, the American has influenced the rules of game in which material entertainment dominates throughout society now.

Daisy has been born into such discourse and accordingly she has been brought up into that discourse in which the material condition presides over other elements; therefore, this type of discourse has been tied into her personality as it has been said that “Daisy is a woman who is born into a rich family and has always lived the luxurious life of the upper class. Obviously, anyone who wants to win her love must have enough money to offer her” (Ahmed, 2009 p.7). From this discourse, it can be realized that Daisy is in search of a life which could satisfy her in terms of economic and material condition. Gatsby remembers Daisy when she was very young and gives a description of her. This description shows the existence of discourse within her personality: “The largest of the banners and the largest of the lawns belonged to Daisy Fay’s house. She

was just eighteen, two years older than me, and by far the most popular of all the young girls in Louisville” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 80-81)

In fact, the dominant discourse has determined the procedure of lifestyle. This is how Daisy life started to shape; Daisy likes to be perceived and cherished because of her beauty; this is the result of American dream on Daisy’s life and discourse: “the officer looked at Daisy while she was speaking, in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at some time, and because it seemed romantic to me I have remembered the incident ever since. His name was Jay Gatsby, and I didn’t lay eyes on him again for over four years—even after I’d met him on Long Island I didn’t realize it was the same man” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 81).

This marriage for Daisy is the result of her strong passion for wealth and there is no love and feeling in it. Accordingly, “to be a woman under such conditions was in some respects not to exist at all” (Rivkin and Ryan, 1998 p.765). In other words, the discourse and power have prompted her to marry Tom. Therefore, her marriage seems painful at first for her; on this condition, she attempts to fight the discourse. Although at the beginning Daisy is successful in changing her mind which means to change her discourse: “I was scared, I can tell you; I’d never seen a girl like that before. ‘Here, dear is.’ She groped around in a wastebasket she had with her on the bed and pulled out the string of pearls. ‘Take ‘em downstairs and give ‘em back to whoever they belong to. Tell ‘em all Daisy’s change’ her mine. Say ‘Daisy’s change’ her mine!’.’ She began to cry” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 82), eventually it is discourse which wins as “Next day at five o’clock she married Tom Buchanan without so much as a shiver and started off on a three months’ trip to the South Seas” (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 83)

### 3. Conclusion

Gatsby's situation regarding his identity is in line with what Foucault believes; at the beginning, Daisy demands Nick and asks him about Gatsby's identity, but he does not know him since subjectivity is not fixed in relation of power. Gatsby has to go through change of identity since identity is not a fixed concept. In fact, subjectivity has a deterministic condition which depends on different elements of society. Accordingly, different institutions shape and affect Gatsby's identity.

Due to power relations in the society, Gatsby creates his own identity and seeks wealth to sustain his dream so that his dream of being another person with a different identity comes true. On this condition and depending on different factors, Gatsby can have different subjectivities: He could be "Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God" (Fitzgerald, 1925, p. 98). Discourse is the significant element of society in this novel out of which the power relation is born. Capitalism and American are among the most significant discourses in the novel.

The existence of discourse results in the formation of multiple truths among the characters. Each character takes a mental picture regarding the truth he thinks is right and fits the description; in the above statement, Gatsby's truth is created in different ways. Therefore, Gatsby himself has created different versions of truth about his own identity which is completely distorted.

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