

Original Paper

Topographical Space, Social Space, and Textual Space *in The Great Gatsby*: A Spatial Narrative Analysis

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Abstract

With the space turn at the end of 20th century, Fitzgerald, an important figure in the literary map of New York has drawn the critical attention. This article employs the theory of spatial narrative to analyze The Great Gatsby from three aspects: topographical space, social space, and textual space. The study finds that Fitzgerald employs the juxtaposition and contrast of geographical spaces to express the gap of classes; the social space determines the disillusion of American dream; and literary techniques such as juxtaposition, repetition, and flashback are used. The spatial narrative has played an important role in the portrayal of characters and the depth of the theme, enhancing the artistic charm of the work.

Keywords

Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, Spatial narrative

1. Introduction

The Great Gatsby is considered to depict the mental crisis and moral decay during the 1920s in America. Some papers review Chinese scholars' achievements in the study of the novel in the new era, and extracts the core themes of "American Dream", narrative art, and interdisciplinary research to explore and reflect on the scholars' overall status of the work (Chen, 2018). Traditional research mostly focuses on the characters, themes or historical background of novels, while spatial narrative theory provides scholars with a new approach for interpretation.

Literary geography, which explores the relationship between setting and narrative space, offers a critical lens through which to understand how Fitzgerald uses physical locations to articulate complex social and psychological landscapes (Hones, 2011). Spatial depiction in fiction, conventionally understood as the stage for the action of characters, has long been seen as furnishing the backdrop for

narrative plots, characterization, and thematic development. The late-20th-century spatial turn in Western critical theory, however, redirected scholarly attention toward the operations of power underlying spatial transformations. When analyzed through the lens of discursive power, spatial description ceases to function merely as narrative ornamentation. Rather, it becomes saturated with the ideological consciousness of the narrative subject, thereby assuming a narrative capacity to illuminate the ideological formations of a given historical milieu. In this sense, space actively contributes to the production of the novel's themes and reflects the deeper conceptual underpinnings embedded within the textual architecture.

With the space turn at the end of 20th century, Fitzgerald, an important figure in the literary map of New York has drawn the critical attention (Xu, 2019). The spatial narrative in *The Great Gatsby* is intricately woven into its thematic concerns, reflecting social stratification, the pursuit of the American Dream, and the moral decay of the Jazz Age. Accordingly, the geographical settings of novel are not mere backdrops but active components that shape characters, plot, and symbolic meaning. Based on the theory of spatial narrative, this study, in combination with Cheng Xilin's classification of spatial narrative in *The Great Gatsby* (Cheng, 2009), will conduct an analysis from the following three levels—Topographic space (the specific physical locations in the novel and their juxtaposition); Social space (the class and identity carried by physical space); Textual space (the techniques of spatial elements in the structure of narrative). This study will systematically explore how spatial construction works in the novel, aiming to reveal the profound critique of modern capitalist.

2. Topographical Space

Gabriel Zoran's theoretical framework, particularly his work *Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative*, has significantly influenced narrative theory by shifting focus from a predominantly temporal understanding of narratives to a more spatial one (Parker, 2018). This shift acknowledges that space is not merely a static background or setting but an active, constitutive element that shapes narrative meaning, character, and the experience of readers (McAllister, 2018). Zoran's approach to narrative space typically involves categorizing and analyzing space at multiple levels within a text. For example, he distinguishes between topographical space, chronotopic space, and textual space. According to the paper of *Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative* written by Gabriel Zoran, topographical space is on the highest level of reconstruction that space exists as a topographical structure. This structure is independent both of the temporal structure of the world and of the sequential arrangement of the text. The text can express it by means of direct description—the famous openings of Balzac's novels are a good example; but, in fact, any textual unit—narrative, dialogue or even discursive—may contribute to the reconstruction of the topographical structure.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald primarily constructs the structure of topographical space through direct description and narration. By employing techniques of juxtaposition and contrast, the author

accentuates the disparities and symbolic significance from different topographical spaces, thereby revealing the divisions in the environments of characters. This narrative strategy not only demonstrates cultural differences at the topographical level—particularly those related to geographically embedded values—but also reflects deeper social divisions. Such spatial narrative techniques play a crucial structural role in shaping the atmosphere of novel, characterizing the figures, and deepening the theme.

2.1 *East Egg and West Egg*

Fitzgerald establishes the physical and symbolic distance between these two crucial spaces from the outset through the tone of voice of the first-person narrator Nick:

Quote 1 - “I lived at West Egg, the—well, the less fashionable of the two, though this is a most superficial tag to express the bizarre and not a little sinister contrast between them”. (Chapter 1)

In Quote 1, the phrase “less fashionable” denotes West Egg’s lower spatial hierarchy directly. The “bizarre and not a little sinister contrast” implies a profound and subtle social animosity underlying this geographical proximity.

The Buchanan mansion in East Egg is described as:

Quote 2 - “a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay”. (Chapter 1)

Its architectural style (Georgian Colonial) and colors (cheerful red-and-white) mentioned in Quote 2 highlight the stability and tradition of old money. In contrast, Gatsby’s prodigious mansion, to the right of Nick’s place, is depicted as followed:

Quote 3 - “a factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden”. (Chapter 1)

The crucial term “factual imitation” exposes the nature of West Egg’s wealth in Quote 3—it is mimicry rather than authenticity, lacking generations of possession characteristic of East Egg.

2.2 *The Valley of Ashes*

The most stark and poignant spatial element is the Valley of Ashes, a desolate industrial wasteland situated between West Egg and New York City. This area is characterized by poverty, despair, and moral decay, inhabited by the working class, such as George and Myrtle Wilson. The description of this landscape littered with industrial refuse and shrouded in dust, serves as a powerful metaphor for the hidden costs of unchecked industrialization and the destructive consequences of the pursuit of wealth.

The initial presentation of this space is visually arresting:

Quote 4 - “This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air”. (Chapter 2)

In Quote 4, the paradoxical metaphor “ashes grow like wheat” juxtaposes the source of life (wheat) with the residue of death (ashes), critiquing industrial civilization’s alienation of nature and life. Here, even men are composed of ashes (men who move dimly and already crumbling), embodying the dual material and spiritual ruin of the lower class.

2.3 New York

New York, less explicitly detailed than the Eggs or the Valley of Ashes, functions as a space of both allure and corruption. It is the place where illicit business deals are conducted, where characters indulge in reckless hedonism, and where the moral boundaries are blurred. The city represents the fast-paced lifestyle associated with the Jazz Age, often superficial, offering a backdrop for clandestine meetings and impulsive decisions. New York is depicted as a labyrinth allowing for the temporary identity and the uninhibited release of desire of people. The scene in Tom and Myrtle’s apartment is particularly emblematic:

Quote 5 - “The apartment was on the top floor—a small living-room, a small dining-room, a small bedroom, and a bath. The living-room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles”. (Chapter 2)

The furniture “entirely too large for it” symbolizes the conflict between inflated desire and the constricted physical space. The tapestry depicting Versailles gardens represents a cheap romanticization of vulgar desire. In this anonymous space, insulated from the social rules of the Eggs, alcohol, music, and strife are mingle with a moral chaos:

Quote 6 - “Making a short deft movement, Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand”. (Chapter 2)

Violence occurs behind closed doors. The apartment in New York becomes a stage where the disguises of classes are revealed and their primal impulses are exposed. Tom inhabits a domineering body; his money is embedded in a proto-fascist mass of muscle. He vents a thuggish cruelty, as when he lashes out at his mistress Myrtle Wilson. Tom adheres to the norms set by their middle class in a violent way. To maintain these norms, he will not hesitate to resist the intrusion of other classes fiercely. In Quote 6, he breaks the nose of his mistress as he does not tolerate the mistress calling out the name of his wife. This is not out of love for his wife, but for he believes that the mistress has no right to infringe upon his class status (Gao, 2018).

3. Social Space

Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work, *The Production of Space* (1974), stands as a foundational text in critical spatial theory. This work challenges traditional understandings of space as a pre-given or neutral container for social activities, arguing instead that space is actively produced through social relations, practices, and power structures. Lefebvre’s theories propose a dialectical understanding of

space, emphasizing its complex interplay with human experience and social dynamics. At the core of Lefebvre's theory is the concept of the "production of space", which posits that space is not merely a physical entity but a social construct. He asserts that space is political, as it is shaped by and, in turn, shapes social and political processes. This perspective moves beyond viewing space solely in terms of physical geometry or abstract coordinates. Lefebvre emphasizes that space is imbued with meaning and value through human interaction, production, and reproduction.

Lefebvre's tripartite conceptualization of space—spatial practice, representations of space, and spaces of representation—is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of its production. (1) Spatial practice refers to the perceived space, encompassing daily routines, social interactions, and the physical pathways and networks that structure daily life. (2) Representations of space pertain to conceived space, which is the domain of planners, and technocrats. This category involves maps and plans that reflect dominant ideologies and power structures. (3) Spaces of representation (or representational spaces) denote lived space, which is the space of inhabitants and users, experienced through imagination, symbols, and emotions. This is where people appropriate and transform conceived and perceived spaces through their daily lives, often in ways that challenge official meanings. Therefore, we only apply two types of social space issues—the practice of space and the space of representation—to analyze *The Great Gatsby*.

3.1 *Gatsby's Mansion*

The main reason why Gatsby fails to realize his American Dream is that, from the perspective of social space, there is a huge gap between him and Daisy. Gatsby is born at the bottom but possesses spirit and determination. To rise to personal fulfillment, Gatsby wants money, an immense amount of it, which he procures by lawless means, so that he can capture Daisy's heart, who represents for his privilege and status. He tries to create an upper-class space by changing his surroundings—he bought a mansion on Long Island, a Rolls-Royce and a yacht, has countless beautiful designed clothes and often holds grand parties and extravagant banquets. Essentially, the opulence of Gatsby's parties is a carefully choreographed spatial performance aimed at a specific person, Daisy:

Quote 7 - "There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars". (Chapter 3)

The guests in Quote 7, likened to "moths", suggest the transience, blindness, and phototaxis of this socialization. Gatsby is often seen "standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes"—he is also the host, the director, and the lonely audience of his own spectacle. The space reveals his sense of loss due to his failure to merge with the new place. The ever-changing and placeless Long Island produces in Gatsby feelings of strangeness and alienation (Xiong & Zhu, 2012).

When Daisy finally visits his mansion in Quote 8, space serves as the most direct testament to his wealth in the following quote:

Quote 8 - “He hadn’t once ceased looking at Daisy, and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes”. (Chapter 5)
Gatsby’s gaze shifts from Daisy to the objects in his house and back to Daisy, completing a cycle that transforms material space into emotional capital. He even literalizes his material accumulation by flinging shirts:

Quote 9 - “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”. (Chapter 5)

Quote 9 is about the space where Gatsby clutters the clothes he has brought, to show Daisy his wealth. Daisy’s reaction—“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”.—indicates that this “many-colored disarray” appeals to her material senses successfully. Such a scene shows the spatial effect.

3.2 Restaurant and Hotel

Although the social space Gatsby constructs is extraordinarily lavish, his wealth is from illegal enterprises. In his social network, most individuals such as Wolfsheim involved in his illicit dealings, often carrying an air of mystery.

Quote 10 - “He becomes very sentimental sometimes,” explained Gatsby. “This is one of his sentimental days. He’s quite a character around New York- a denizen of Broadway”.

“Who is he, anyhow, an actor?”

“No”.

“A dentist?”

“Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he’s a gambler”. Gatsby hesitated, then added coolly: “He’s the man who fixed the World’s Series back in 1919”. (Chapter4)

Gatsby takes Nick to meet Wolfsheim at a restaurant on “Street in Manhattan”. After Wolfsheim departs, Gatsby introduces him to Nick as “a man of some importance in New York—a Broadway gambler” who “fixed the World’s Series back in 1919”. Nick also recounts that Gatsby receives mysterious phone calls frequently, which come from associates engaged in his unlawful business ventures in reality.

Represented by Tom, upper class views nouveau riche like Gatsby with suspicion and contempt.

Quote 11 - “Who are you, anyhow?” broke out Tom. “You’re one of that bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim - that much I happen to know. I’ve made a little investigation into your affairs - and I’ll carry it further tomorrow.”

“You can suit yourself about that, old sport,” said Gatsby steadily.

“I found out what your ‘drugstores’ were”. He turned to us and spoke rapidly. “He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drugstores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That’s one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw

him, and I wasn't far wrong"....I glanced at Daisy, who was staring terrified between Gatsby and her husband, and at Jordan, who had begun to balance an invisible but absorbing object on the tip of her chin...Her frightened eyes told that whatever intentions, whatever courage she had, were definitely gone.

During a confrontation at the parlour of a suite in the Plaza Hotel—in the presence of Daisy, Nick, and Jordan—Tom challenges Gatsby directly: “What kind of a row are you trying to cause in my house anyhow?...I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong”. Though Daisy is captivated by Gatsby's display of wealth initially, her conviction wavers as soon as she learns of the dubious origins of money. When she hears the accusations of Tom, she stares “terrified”. Tom is hugely rich; Daisy's family has social standing and money. The social distance between Daisy and Gatsby makes it impossible to leave Tom and stand by the side of Gatsby.

Concerning the lower-class status, the network of underworld, the daily activities of Gatsby in that social space, it can be seen that the very spaces that are constructed painstakingly as the superficial “upper-class social space” is nothing more than a mirage. Ultimately, these endeavors are futility, because few can enter the upper class without noble bloodline.

4. Textual Space

Joseph Frank's seminal concept of spatial form reshaped literary criticism fundamentally by proposing a non-linear approach to narrative analysis, challenging traditional temporal readings of literature (Arac, 2020). Frank's theory, first introduced in his three-part essay, *Spatial Form in Modern Literature* (1945), posits that certain modernist narratives eschew chronological progression in favor of a spatial arrangement, where individual elements, such as “word-clusters,” image patterns, leitmotifs, analogies, and contrasts, are apprehended simultaneously by the readers (Blacklock, 2017). This approach encourages readers to perceive the work as a unified whole, much like a painting, rather than as a sequence of events (Matelo, 2014).

The core of spatial form lies in its departure from causality, emphasizing instead the relationships between narrative segments based on their form, imagery, or thematic resonance. This nonsequential system of meaning-making demands a different mode of engagement from the reader, where the coherence of the text emerges not from a step-by-step unfolding of events but from the interconnections and juxtapositions of disparate elements across the narrative. This concept gained significant traction during a period when literary criticism, particularly New Criticism, largely put historical and temporal considerations on hold, making spatial form a prevalent analytical framework (Wood, 2020).

From the perspective of the textual space, Fitzgerald employs techniques including juxtaposition, flashback and recollection, and the recurring imagery to achieve an artistic effect in *The Great Gatsby*. These various techniques in the textual space play a significant role in the portrayal of characters and the depth of theme.

4.1 *The Juxtaposition and Flashback of Stories*

In *The Great Gatsby*, the main plot is the love story between Gatsby and Daisy. It tells how Gatsby made unremitting efforts to find his past love and realize his American Dream. Alongside this story, there are two secondary plots: Tom's sexual escapades with Myrtle Wilson and Nick's romance with Miss Baker. These two secondary plots, placed with the main story, play an important role in depicting characters like Tom, Nick and Baker, which highlight the greatness of Gatsby, the ruthlessness of Daisy and the despicableness of Tom. In the structure of this novel, these two secondary plots serve to disrupt the chronological sequence of the main plot. Their juxtaposition with the main plot has a synchronic effect, endowing the narrative structure of the novel with the character of space.

In the narrative, Fitzgerald also employs techniques such as flashback to disarrange the entire storyline that was presented in chronological order. He transforms the linear narrative into a non-linear one through the use of flashbacks. The novel follows the chronology of the events, with Gatsby experiencing several stages— his youth, working on a yacht, his relationship with Daisy, their reunion after the war, and his death. However, when Nick narrates the story, he breaks this sequence and presents it in the order of the relationship of Gatsby with Daisy → his experience working on a yacht → their reunion after the war → Gatsby's death → Gatsby's youth. This non-linear structure highlights the jumpiness of the work, providing a three-dimensional influence in theme (Wang, 2014).

4.2 *Repeating Images and Symbols of Space*

One of the novel's most central spatial images is the green light at the end of Daisy's dock:

Quote 12 - "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". (Chapter 1)

Initially, the light in Quote 12 is the focal point of the dream of Gatsby. However, when the dream seems to be beyond his reach, Fitzgerald reveals its illusion:

Quote 13 - "If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay," said Gatsby. "You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock". ... Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (Chapter 5)

The bay in Quote 13, a geographical gap, is a metaphor for the chasm of social class, ultimately unbridgeable by wealth. Green is the color of life, renewal, nature, and energy; it is associated with growth, harmony, freshness, safety, fertility, and the environment. But green is also associated with money, finance, banking, ambition, greed, jealousy, and Wall Street. This duality makes green the appropriate color for the light that Gatsby has gazed at: it has become a symbol for him, at a distance yet clandestinely close, his secret. The mist implies more than Gatsby realizes. Now he is with Daisy. But how clearly is he seeing her? "Your home": Gatsby does not register the implications of his words. Tom is a brute, but he is Daisy's husband, and they have a child. Their luxurious, wasteful lifestyle, and Tom's addiction to adultery do not change the cozy connotations of "home". It is a family and they do have a home. But this is also the structure and history that Gatsby thinks he can blot out.

The reduction of “enchanted objects” signifies that the shortening of distance results in the dissipation of symbolic meaning. The lines of Nick convey the depletion in Gatsby even as, at this moment, Gatsby is making contact with her. It can be known that it is increasingly impossible to realize American dream for Gatsby from the ambivalent interpretation of Nick.

To put all into a nutshell, such recurring images expose the illusory nature of the scene and serve to disrupt the chronological order, presenting a spatial effect in the structure of narrative.

5. Conclusion

Space is a domain for individuals to achieve self-awareness and identity, and also a place where the power of opposing social classes confronts each other. Through exploration of the spatial issues (topographic space, social space and textual space) in *The Great Gatsby*, it can be concluded that the narrative art of this work is closely related to the thematic expression and artistic techniques of spatial narration. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald transforms the urban spaces—East Egg, West Egg, the Valley of Ashes, the rooms of New York—from static backdrops into active forces that shape characters and generate meaning. The novel depicts the solidified class and morality in 1920s through the spatial practices of characters. In reality, the social map is inscribed with insurmountable lines of gap, as *The Great Gatsby* is rooted in a time and place and nation. The finding helps to enrich the research on spatial storytelling, and demonstrate that individual migration does not guarantee social ascent but may merely be the illusion of moving from one margin toward the center. Future scholarship can relate the narrative of *The Great Gatsby* to interdisciplinary research. Continuously exploring the artistic achievements and cognitive value hidden within this work from new perspectives remains an important research topic for the academic community in the future.

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