

Original Paper

The Causes of Tragedy in *The Great Gatsby*: The Failed Conversion of Economic Capital into Cultural Capital

Zhang Zhicheng¹ & Liu Yuxuan¹

¹ Yanbian University, Yanji City, Jilin Province 133002, China

Received: April 30, 2026

Accepted: May 18, 2026

Online Published: June 3, 2026

doi:10.22158/sll.v10n2p188

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v10n2p188>

Abstract

*This paper examines Gatsby's tragedy in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* through Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, habitus, and distinction. While previous studies have often interpreted Gatsby's failure as the result of moral corruption, personal idealism, or the collapse of the American Dream, this paper argues that Gatsby's exclusion from the East Egg elite stems from the structural limits of social mobility itself. Although Gatsby acquires enormous economic wealth and successfully imitates many visible symbols of upper-class status, he remains unable to obtain the embodied cultural competence required for genuine elite recognition. Through close analysis of Gatsby's performances, speech, social interactions, and ultimate isolation, this study demonstrates that economic capital cannot be fully converted into embodied cultural capital. The East Egg elite further reinforce this exclusion through distinction, transforming inherited privilege into standards of legitimacy while dismissing Gatsby's performances as artificial and excessive. From this perspective, Fitzgerald's novel exposes the illusion that wealth alone can overcome entrenched class boundaries in American society.*

Keywords

American Dream, cultural capital, habitus, distinction, social mobility

1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is widely regarded as a major critique of the American Dream and its promise of upward social mobility. Traditionally, the American Dream has been associated with the belief that individuals can be successful and improve their social status by working hard and striving (Adams, 1931). In the Jazz Age, *The Great Gatsby* shows the tension between material success and entrenched class boundaries in American society. Previous studies have often viewed Gatsby's tragedy as a symbol of the disillusionment in the American Dream, pointing out that either the

illegitimacy of his wealth (Bhatti & Haroon, 2022), his personal idealism and moral blindness (Li & Wei, 2005), or the structural contradictions of American class society (Hossain et al., 2025).

Despite the above perspectives, the current studies have failed to answer a fundamental problem: why does Gatsby remain excluded from the East Egg old-money elite even after acquiring enormous wealth? Gatsby is able to live in the style of life of the upper class in West Egg, but he never gains genuine recognition or acceptance from them. Recently, studies have begun to examine Gatsby's tragedy through the lens of class reproduction and social stratification (Bechtel, 2017). However, the reasons for this exclusion have not been specified.

Based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1986 and 1990), this paper argues that Gatsby's tragedy is not due to his inability to accumulate wealth, but in the non-convertibility of his economic capital into the embodied cultural capital valued by the old-money class. Therefore, his tragedy shows that the structural limits of the social mobility promised by the American Dream.

2. Literature Review

A substantial body of criticism attributes Gatsby's failure to the illegitimacy of his economic success. Such studies argue that Gatsby's fortune, his wealth was obtained by means such as bootlegging and illegal financial ventures during the Prohibition era; thus, it is morally and socially corrupt and cannot be accepted by the East Egg old-money elite (Bhatti & Haroon, 2022). From this perspective, the difference between "new money" and "old money" is not only in wealth but also in morals and culture. Erdem (2014) argues that the old-money class feels entitled to its status because it is a continuation of the family, and thus cannot be matched by Gatsby's wealth acquired through illegal means. Therefore, regardless of how much wealth he accumulates, Gatsby can never truly equal the East Egg elite. These interpretations offer some insights into the connection between wealth and class consciousness in the novel. However, the above reasons cannot fully explain why Gatsby is still out of place among the East Egg elite despite his considerable fortune.

Another body of criticism interprets Gatsby's tragedy primarily as the result of his personal moral flaws and intellectual blindness. These studies have shown that Gatsby is too idealistic, blindly loves Daisy, and cannot be rational. Li Yuemian and Wei Guijuan (2005) are a typical example; they compare Gatsby to Jack London's Martin Eden and argue that both protagonists' lives ended tragically due to their own "individualism and blindness". Bewley (1954) interprets that Gatsby is a romantic idealist whose obsessive pursuit of an unattainable dream ultimately leads to self-destruction. These interpretations provide valuable insight into Gatsby's psychological complexity and the self-destructive dimensions of his pursuit. However, by reducing Gatsby's flaw of excessive idealism and moral failure, such approaches fail to consider that this is a result of the system of class distinction in the novel. Even if Gatsby were more reasonable and morally upright, even a more rational and morally restrained

Gatsby, equipped with legitimately acquired wealth, would not necessarily have been accepted by the East Egg elite.

More recent studies have started to view Gatsby's tragedy in a sociological perspectives, paying attention to class inheritance, social division and exclusion of the upper class in the novel. Zheng Hao (2025) uses a New Historical school to link Gatsby's personal tragedy with the deeply entrenched class system of the Jazz Age and argues that this social system at that time was the main reason for protagonist's fate. Bechtel (2017) has drawn on Bourdieu and argues that Gatsby is still "bound and confined by the class structure he desperately wants to escape." From this perspective, Gatsby's failure is not only a matter of individual character but also reflects the continuing inheritance of class divisions despite changes in the economy. Moon (2023) also uses the concept of cultural capital by Bourdieu and the theory of conspicuous consumption to demonstrate that Gatsby's extravagant display of wealth cannot compensate for his lack of elite cultural literacy. Fussell (1983) further suggests that class division in American society is preserved not only by economic means but also through inherited culture, habits, and behaviour; these will remain closed to people from different backgrounds, such as Gatsby. The studies mentioned above have paid attention to the structure of inequality and the mechanism of class reproduction. Nevertheless, the particular cultural mechanisms for the exclusion of the elite have not been well-studied. Fewer people have paid attention to how embodied cultural capital and habitus limited Gatsby's attainment of genuine social status after getting rich.

Existing scholarship on *The Great Gatsby* has gradually shifted from moral and economic interpretations of Gatsby's tragedy toward sociological analyses of class structure and social exclusion. However, insufficient attention has been paid to the cultural mechanisms that sustain the division of classes. In particular, existing studies have not fully examined the role of embodied cultural capital and class habitus in shaping elite exclusion in the novel. Based on Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital and habitus, this paper argues that Gatsby's tragedy was not a lack of wealth, but rather his inability to transform economic capital into genuine social legitimacy. His failure therefore reveals the structural limits of the social mobility promised by the American Dream.

3. Theoretical Basis: Bourdieu's Concept of Cultural Capital, Habitus and Distinction

3.1 The Forms of Capital Gatsby Could Buy and the One He Could Not

Bourdieu defines cultural capital as existing in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (Bourdieu, 1986). Objectified cultural capital refers to the material cultural goods, such as property, works of art and luxury items; institutionalised cultural capital is the socially recognized credentials and titles. Embodied cultural capital is a kind of long-lasting disposition that takes the form of manners, speech patterns, aesthetic preferences and ways of life. Embodied cultural capital is not the same as other forms of capital; it cannot be acquired quickly through wealth but is formed over time in the particular class environment.

Gatsby's lofty social status demonstrates that economic capital can successfully purchase certain forms of cultural capital, but not all of them. His mansion, luxury cars, lavish parties and the careful construction of a public image are all attempts to turn wealth into objectified cultural capital. Gatsby also tries to obtain institutionalized capital by claiming that he was educated at Oxford University and thus uses the symbolic authority of the elite educational institution to reinforce his. These factors allow Gatsby to appear wealthy and socially elevated, but they cannot fundamentally enable Gatsby to achieve a change in class status.

The limits of this transformation become most visible in Gatsby's attempt to imitate embodied cultural capital. His repeated use of the phrase "old sport," for example, reflects a self-conscious performance of upper-class identity rather than the effortless ease associated with the East Egg elite. Such details show that Gatsby's upper-class behaviour is not innate but consciously performed. Therefore, what sets Gatsby apart from the old-money class is not only the lack of wealth, but also the absence of the disposition formed through long-term elite upbringing.

Gatsby can buy the visible symbols of the upper class, but he cannot internalize the cultural competence that grants genuine social legitimacy. His tragedy shows the constraints of economic capital: wealth may imitate elite identity, but it cannot automatically emanate the embodied cultural authority of the old-money elite.

3.2 Habitus as an Embodied Class Boundary

Pierre Bourdieu defines habitus as a system of durable and transposable dispositions unconsciously acquired through long-term immersion within a particular social environment (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus is not a conscious rule or custom; it is something that occurs without awareness and is contained in one's body. It can be expressed in small ways, such as body language, tone of voice, gestures and patterns of speech. Habitus is embodied and not learned consciously, so it cannot be fully imitated through economic success alone.

This distinction explains why Gatsby, despite his immense wealth, remains unable to achieve genuine acceptance within the old-money class. He is very self-aware of his high-class identity and often performs accordingly. Gatsby's repeated use of the phrase "old sport", his extravagant displays of wealth, and his carefully constructed public image all suggest an anxious effort to emanate elite identity rather than the effortless ease associated with East Egg society. Nick notices that Gatsby "spoke as if he was choosing his words with great care" (Fitzgerald, 2004). "Great care" is particularly important as it shows that Gatsby's words are always being observed and deliberately presented. Therefore, his behaviour seems studied rather than natural, exposing the instability of the identity he attempts to construct.

The fragility of this performed identity becomes most visible during the confrontation scene at the Plaza Hotel. When Tom Buchanan asks about the background and fortune of Gatsby, he immediately loses the composure he has carefully maintained:

He looked—and this is said in all contempt for the babbled slander of his garden—as if he had “killed a man”. For a moment the set of his face could be described in just that fantastic way. It passed, and he began to talk excitedly to Daisy, denying everything, defending his name against accusations that had not been made (Fitzgerald, 2004).

Gatsby’s loss of control in terms of emotions shows that the tension beneath his carefully managed social performance. Unlike Tom Buchanan, whose class authority appears natural and unquestioned, Gatsby must constantly defend and perform his legitimacy. Therefore, the confrontation shows the instability of Gatsby’s habitus; his elite status depends on continuous self-construction, while the East Egg elite possess the embodied ease of inherited privilege.

Habitus thus functions as an embodied class boundary. Gatsby can imitate the visible behaviour of the upper class, but he cannot internalize the unconscious traits that structure elite belonging. His tragedy is not that he failed to perform well, but in the impossibility of transforming performed identity into embodied legitimacy.

3.3 Distinction as Invisible Exclusion

Bourdieu defines distinction as the process through which dominant social groups legitimize their own tastes, manners, and cultural practices as naturally superior while implicitly devaluing those of other classes (Bourdieu, 1984). There is rarely an explicit prohibition against it. It functions through aesthetic judgment, a preference in culture, and the seemingly natural recognition of who does and does not belong. Through this process, social hierarchy becomes disguised as a matter of personal taste rather than structural inequality.

This mechanism is vividly reflected in the social atmosphere surrounding Gatsby’s parties. Although Gatsby’s mansion, champagne, and extravagant entertainment are all symbols of his wealth, but the parties themselves are characterized by excess and instability. Nick observes that “People were not invited—they went there” (Fitzgerald, 2004), and this shows that Gatsby’s social world is open and not exclusive. Unlike the restrained and self-contained culture of East Egg, Gatsby’s parties are public performances of wealth designed to attract recognition and visibility. The constant movement of strangers, drunken celebrations and ostentatious displays of wealth create an atmosphere that appears excessive rather than refined in the eyes of the old-money elite.

Distinction therefore operates not through direct exclusion, but through cultural judgment. Gatsby frequently uses the term “old sport”, and although he intends to signal upper-class ease, it actually appears too deliberate and artificial to the East Egg society. Similarly, Tom Buchanan dismisses Gatsby and other “newly rich” figures as “big bootleggers” (Fitzgerald, 2004), showing that how inherited privilege disguises itself as moral and cultural superiority. What is being judged is not just Gatsby’s wealth, but the manner in which that wealth is displayed. East Egg culture is reserved, understated, and inherited ease precisely because these qualities conceal the material foundations of privilege itself.

The power of distinction lies in its invisibility. Gatsby does not question the standards by which he is judged; rather, he has come to accept East Egg's definition of refinement and legitimacy as naturally valid. Therefore, his tragedy is not only that he is excluded but also that he has internalized the very cultural standards that deny him a place. Gatsby's ideal world of the elite seems to all people, but its standards of legitimacy are already structured around inherited privilege. Therefore, Distinction is a form of symbolic domination; Gatsby seeks recognition from a system that has been built to recognize people like Tom Buchanan, not people like himself.

3.4 The Non-convertibility of Economic Capital into Embodied Cultural Competence

Viewed through Bourdieu's theory, Gatsby has a large amount of economic capital and objectified cultural capital, but cannot obtain the embodied cultural capital required for genuine elite recognition. The fundamental problem is therefore not insufficient wealth or personal failure, but the structural limits of capital conversion itself. Economic capital can afford material luxuries, social visibility and the appearance of refinement, but embodied cultural competence is obtained only after a long period of socialization in privileged class environment. Unlike wealth, it cannot be accumulated instantly or consciously performed into existence.

The bounds of economic capital are most evident after Gatsby's death. Hundreds of people have attended his grand parties, but hardly anyone has shown up for his funeral. Nick's attempt to find people to mourn Gatsby has been unsuccessful.

I wanted to get somebody for him. I wanted to go into the room where he lay and reassure him: "I'll get somebody for you, Gatsby. Don't worry. Just trust me and I'll get somebody for you—"

But it wasn't any use. Nobody came. (Fitzgerald, 2004)

The contrast between Gatsby's crowded parties and his empty funeral reveals the fragility of the social relationships created through wealth and spectacle. Although Gatsby has rich economic power and attracts many people's attention and interest for a time, he lacks genuine social belonging or recognition. The guests are hosted by Gatsby, without ever truly acknowledging him as part of their social world.

From this perspective, Gatsby's tragedy reflects the structural limitations of the American Dream itself. Gatsby believes that with enough money, performance, and determination, he can overcome the boundaries of class and be accepted into the circle of the elite world represented by the green light. However, Bourdieu's theory reveals that social belonging depends not only on economic success, but also on forms of embodied cultural capital that cannot be rapidly acquired. Gatsby therefore fails not because he lacks ambition, but because the social order he admires is structured around inherited privilege rather than equal mobility.

4. Conclusion

This paper argues that Gatsby's tragedy results not from personal failure or insufficient wealth, but from the structural limits of converting economic capital into the embodied cultural capital valued by the old-money elite. Through Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, habitus and distinction, the analysis demonstrates that although Gatsby acquires enormous wealth and the visible symbols of elite status, he lacks the embodied cultural competence required for genuine social recognition. Because habitus is formed through long-term class socialization, Gatsby can never move beyond imitation or performance.

The East Egg elite further excludes him through distinction, transforming cultural privilege into standards of legitimacy while dismissing Gatsby's performances as artificial and excessive. From this perspective, *The Great Gatsby* reveals the limitations of the American Dream more profoundly than a simple critique of materialism. Fitzgerald reveals the illusion that one can overcome the deep-rooted class divisions in society that are based on inherited privilege by means of wealth and ambition.

References

- Adams, J. T. (1931). *The epic of America*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Bechtel, D. E. (2017). Jay Gatsby, failed intellectual: F. Scott Fitzgerald's trope for social stratification. *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*.
- Bewley, M. (1954). Scott Fitzgerald's criticism of America. *The Sewanee Review*, 62(2), 223-246.
- Bhatti, J. A., & Haroon, M. A. (2022). Corruption of the American Dream: A study of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. *Pakistan Journal of Society, Education and Language (PJSEL)*.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (R. Nice, Trans.). Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The logic of practice* (R. Nice, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Erdem, S. (2014). *To what extent the novel The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald reflects the post-war socio-cultural differences of America with regard to decaying moral values and the concepts of new money and old money* [Unpublished thesis]. TED Ankara College.
- Fitzgerald, F. S. (2004). *The Great Gatsby*. Scribner. (Original work published 1925)
- Fussell, P. (1983). *Class: A guide through the American status system*. Summit Books.
- Hossain, M. S., Zobayer, M. A., & Haque, M. M. (2025). The myth and reality of the American Dream as depicted in *Death of a Salesman* and *The Great Gatsby*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*.
- Li, Y., & Wei, G. (2005). *The disillusionment of the American Dream in Martin Eden and The Great Gatsby*.

Moon, S. (2023). The Great Gatsby: Class and race in the society of distinction. *American Fiction Studies*.

Zheng, H. (2025). Great but tragic: A study of The Great Gatsby from the perspective of New Historicism. *Journal of International Social Science*.