



MASCULINITY, POWER, AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE GREAT GATSBY

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Abstract

This article offers an extended analysis of masculinity, power, and identity construction in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Situating the novel within the socio-cultural framework of 1920s America, the study examines how competing models of masculinity—hegemonic, aspirational, and reflective—are constructed through class hierarchy, economic capital, and symbolic performance. Drawing on gender theory, particularly R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, this paper argues that Fitzgerald exposes masculinity as a performative and unstable construct deeply intertwined with wealth and social recognition. Through close reading of Tom Buchanan, Jay Gatsby, and Nick Carraway, the article demonstrates that masculine identity in the novel is shaped not only by personal ambition but also by structural inequalities embedded in the American Dream. Ultimately, Fitzgerald critiques the illusion of stable masculine power, revealing its dependence on social validation and inherited privilege.

Keywords: Masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, identity construction, power, class hierarchy, American Dream, performance, Jazz Age, gender studies.

Introduction

Published in 1925, *The Great Gatsby* occupies a central place in American modernist literature. The novel reflects the contradictions of the Jazz Age: economic prosperity alongside moral uncertainty, social mobility alongside rigid class boundaries, and expanding freedoms alongside persistent patriarchal norms. In the aftermath of World War I, American masculinity faced a crisis of definition. Industrial capitalism, consumer culture, and urbanization transformed traditional markers of male authority. Yet expectations of dominance, economic success, and



emotional restraint remained powerful cultural ideals. Within this historical moment, Fitzgerald constructs male characters who embody conflicting responses to these pressures.

This article investigates how masculinity in the novel is constructed through the interplay of power, wealth, and social legitimacy. Using gender theory and socio-cultural criticism, the study argues that masculinity in *The Great Gatsby* functions as a performance sustained by class privilege and symbolic capital. Fitzgerald does not merely depict male ambition; he interrogates the ideological structures that define and destabilize masculine identity.

Theoretical framework: Masculinity as social construction. Modern gender theory rejects the notion of masculinity as a fixed biological essence. According to R. W. Connell, hegemonic masculinity refers to the culturally dominant ideal of manhood that legitimizes male power and subordinates' alternative masculinities. This concept is particularly relevant to Fitzgerald's portrayal of elite white American men in the 1920s.

Masculinity in the novel operates through social recognition. Wealth, education, race, and class become mechanisms through which male authority is affirmed. Thus, identity construction is inseparable from systems of power. Fitzgerald anticipates later theoretical discussions by revealing how masculinity depends on performance, repetition, and validation by others.

Tom Buchanan: Hegemonic masculinity and inherited authority. Tom Buchanan represents hegemonic masculinity in its most traditional and aggressive form. As a Yale-educated heir to old money, Tom's authority derives from lineage rather than achievement. His physical strength, athletic background, and imposing presence reinforce a model of masculinity based on dominance.

Tom's adherence to racist ideology and patriarchal entitlement reveals his investment in maintaining social hierarchy. He views women as possessions and perceives Gatsby's rise as a threat to established class boundaries. His violent behavior toward Myrtle Wilson underscores his need to assert control physically when symbolic authority feels challenged.

However, Fitzgerald destabilizes Tom's apparent superiority. Beneath his confidence lies anxiety about social change. Gatsby's wealth unsettles Tom



because it exposes the vulnerability of inherited privilege. Tom's masculinity requires constant defense, suggesting that hegemonic power is sustained through exclusion and aggression rather than inherent strength.

Jay Gatsby: Aspirational masculinity and the performance of success.

Jay Gatsby embodies a self-made model of masculinity rooted in reinvention. Born into poverty as James Gatz, he constructs an identity aligned with aristocratic refinement and economic success. Gatsby's transformation illustrates masculinity as a deliberate project—carefully curated through clothing, speech, gestures, and spectacle.

His lavish parties function as performative displays of wealth, designed to attract Daisy Buchanan and secure social legitimacy. For Gatsby, economic capital equates to emotional and masculine fulfillment. He believes that material success will erase class boundaries and validate his romantic aspirations.

Yet Gatsby's masculinity remains precarious. Despite his fortune, he lacks the symbolic capital of old money. The elite tolerate but never fully accept him. His dream depends on Daisy's recognition, making his identity contingent upon female approval and social acknowledgment.

Fitzgerald portrays Gatsby as both admirable and tragically naïve. His relentless hope reflects the seductive promise of the American Dream, yet his death reveals its structural limitations. Gatsby's masculinity collapses because it is built on illusion rather than institutional power.

Nick Carraway: Narrative authority and moral masculinity

Nick Carraway presents a more introspective and ambiguous masculinity. Unlike Tom or Gatsby, Nick does not aggressively pursue dominance or spectacle. Instead, he occupies the role of observer and narrator, exercising interpretive power.

Through narration, Nick shapes readers' perceptions, demonstrating that storytelling itself is a form of authority. His Midwestern background and claims to honesty construct an image of moral masculinity. However, his selective judgments reveal complicity in the very system he critiques.

Nick's admiration for Gatsby and condemnation of the Buchanans position him as ethically reflective, yet he ultimately retreats to the Midwest rather than



challenge systemic injustice. His withdrawal suggests the limitations of passive morality within a corrupt social order.

Class, capitalism, and masculine competition. The rivalry between Tom and Gatsby illustrates masculinity as competition for dominance within a capitalist framework. Wealth becomes both a weapon and a measure of worth. Masculine identity is evaluated through material success, romantic conquest, and social status.

The novel's geographic symbolism—East Egg versus West Egg—reinforces class divisions. East Egg represents inherited stability, while West Egg symbolizes newly acquired wealth and instability. Gatsby's residence in West Egg signifies his liminal position: economically powerful yet socially inferior.

Fitzgerald critiques the capitalist ideology that equates financial accumulation with personal value. The relentless pursuit of success produces isolation rather than fulfillment. Masculinity, shaped by capitalist competition, becomes emotionally sterile and morally compromised.

The American dream and the crisis of masculinity. The American Dream promises upward mobility through hard work and determination. For Gatsby, this dream defines his masculine purpose. However, the novel exposes the Dream as selective and exclusionary. Structural privilege protects figures like Tom, while self-made individuals remain vulnerable.

Gatsby's death symbolizes the failure of aspirational masculinity in a society governed by inherited power. Meanwhile, Tom and Daisy retreat into their wealth, shielded from consequences. Fitzgerald thus presents a bleak vision: masculine ambition cannot overcome entrenched social hierarchies.

The novel ultimately reveals masculinity as historically contingent and ideologically constructed. It is shaped by race, class, and economic structures rather than innate qualities. Fitzgerald anticipates modern gender theory by demonstrating that masculine authority is sustained by illusion and performance.

Conclusion

In *The Great Gatsby*, masculinity emerges as a complex and unstable construct intertwined with power, wealth, and social hierarchy. Tom Buchanan represents hegemonic masculinity grounded in inherited authority and aggression. Jay



Gatsby embodies aspirational masculinity rooted in performance and self-invention. Nick Carraway offers a reflective yet limited alternative based on narrative control and moral observation.

Through these contrasting figures, Fitzgerald critiques the ideological foundations of masculine identity in 1920s America. Wealth does not guarantee legitimacy; dominance masks insecurity; aspiration confronts structural barriers. Masculinity, like the American Dream, proves to be a fragile performance sustained by social validation rather than inherent truth.

Thus, the novel remains a powerful exploration of gender, power, and identity—revealing that masculine authority is neither natural nor stable but socially produced and historically contingent.

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