

The American Dream, Identity, Simulation, and Consumption in *The Great Gatsby**

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국문초록

F. 스콧 피츠제럴드의 소설 『위대한 개츠비』는 이제까지 모더니즘 소설로 읽혀져 왔다. 그러나, 본 논문에서는 화자인 닉이라는 인물을 포스트모던 소비자라 봄으로써 새로운 해석을 제안하고자 한다. 먼저 닉을 통해 개츠비가 어떻게 “위대한 개츠비”가 되는지를 살펴본다. 『위대한 개츠비』는 주인공 개츠비를 자수성가한 사람으로 그리면서 아메리칸 드림에 대한 비판으로 해석되어 왔지만, 본 논문은 역사적으로 아메리칸 드림의 진정한 기의(記意)를 규정하기 어려움에 대해 다루고, 이러한 아메리칸 드림의 특징으로 인해 어떻게 닉이 개츠비를 미국의 영웅으로 묘사하는지 살펴본다. 또한, 아메리칸 드림의 기의들이 시간의 흐름에 따라 어떻게 변화되어 왔으며, 이를 통해 닉이 개츠비의 이야기를 하기 위해 텅 빈 기표(記標)들을 이용하고 이들을 변화된 기의들과 치환하는 방식을 논한다. 개츠비는 결국 실패하기는 하지만, 장 보드리야르의 용어를

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빌리자면, 조상 전래의 재산이 있는 사람인 척하고, 닉은 그의 이야기를 시뮬레이션하며 소비한다. 더불어, 닉은 신뢰할 수 없는 화자로서 개츠비를 미국의 신화로 표현하는 것에 대하여, 본 논문은 롤랑 바르트의 신화에 대한 이론을 바탕으로 닉이 자신의 정체성을 위해 『위대한 개츠비』를 서술하고 있음에 대해 논한다. 결론적으로, 닉은 그의 로맨틱한 아이디어들을 통해 모던에서 포스트모던으로 향하는 과도적인 인물로 볼 수 있다.

열쇠어 : 아메리칸 드림, 미국신화, 포스트모더니즘, 롤랑 바르트, 장 보드리야르, 시뮬라시옹, 위대한 개츠비

I. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has been read as a commentary on the American Dream, with Gatsby embodying the self-made man, who rises from rags to riches. If the American Dream can be defined as "the belief that every man, whatever his origins, may pursue and attain his chosen goals, be they political, momentary, ... "[in] the land of opportunity,"¹⁾ then Gatsby does realize the American Dream and may be viewed as, "a hero in the older sense of demigods and knights of myth, romance, and fairy tale."²⁾ Gatsby's mysterious past, his faithfulness to Daisy, his chivalrous demeanor, and his ideals and dreams echo "the memories of legend and fairy tale ... deeply rooted in the psyche of the western world."³⁾

1) Roger L. Pearson, "Gatsby: False Prophet of the American Dream", *The English Journal* 59:5, May 1970, p.638.

2) John Kuehl, "Scott Fitzgerald: Romantic and Realist", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1, Spring 1959, p.413.

3) *Ibid.*, pp.3~4. According to John Kuehl, Gatsby's willingness to insist after the car accident that it was he, not Daisy, who was driving and his vigilant goal of protecting Daisy from Tom are good examples of Gatsby's chivalric demeanor.

On the other hand, some scholars view *The Great Gatsby* as a story about a bootlegger, who tried to steal someone's wife, but failed and was killed by a cuckolded widower. Without the aura of Nick Carraway's admiration, that is, Gatsby loses his heroic sheen.⁴⁾ As numerous scholars have pointed out, it is Nick who distinguishes Gatsby from other characters and concludes that, "Gatsby turned out all right at the end" and was "worth the whole damn bunch put together".⁵⁾ Nick's Romanticism,⁶⁾ as articulated in his creative telling of Gatsby's story, highlights emotions, loyalty, love and friendship and therewith allows Gatsby, as Gary J. Scrimgeour puts it, to be lifted "above ordinary viciousness."⁷⁾

Clearly, even though Nick portrays Gatsby as the embodiment of the American Dream, as scholars have also emphasized, his unreliable narration creates tensions that work to nuance the novel. Thus, Scrimgeour points out that "[Jordan] accuses [Nick] of the same 'carelessness' that is the refrain in Carraway's attack on the Buchanans and the rest of the world"⁸⁾ according to Thomas E. Boyle, Nick helps Daisy to be unfaithful to her husband while he feels "confused and a little disgusted"⁹⁾ by Tom's having an affair with Myrtle.¹⁰⁾ Boyle

4) Gary J. Scrimgeour is one of the critics, who highlights Gatsby's moral error: "Gatsby is a boor, a roughneck, a fraud, a criminal. His taste is vulgar, his behavior ostentatious, his love adolescent, his business dealings ruthless and dishonest. He is interested in people—most notably in Carraway himself—only when he wants to use them. His nice gestures stem from the fact that, as one character comments, 'he doesn't want any trouble with anybody.'" Gary J. Scrimgeour, "Against 'The Great Gatsby'", *Criticism* 8:1, Winter 1966, p.80.

5) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, Penguin Books, 2000, p.6, p.120.

6) For the vocabularies of romanticism, see Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemma's of Identity in Contemporary Life*, Basic Books, 1991.

7) Scrimgeour, p.78.

8) *Ibid.*, p.81.

further indicates that readers need to be distanced even from his seemingly objective reports, since Nick introduces elements that are contrary to fact. For example, later in the novel Nick introduces Gatsby as a clam-digger and a salmon fisher along the shore of Lake Superior, even though Lake Superior does not have either edible clams or salmon.¹¹⁾ Perhaps more problematic is Nick's judgment of Gatsby; there seems to be no significant difference between Gatsby and the other characters (such as Tom and Daisy), except for his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" and "extraordinary gift for hope."¹²⁾ Indeed, Gatsby's dream can scarcely be separated from Daisy (and her social class) as Nick portrays them, for she has become an incarnation of his dream. Gatsby, "who represent[s] everything for which [Nick has] an unaffected scorn," is strangely "exempt from [Nick]'s reaction."¹³⁾ Despite Gatsby's vulgar taste and illegal behavior, Nick seems to want to believe that "there [is] something gorgeous about him."¹⁴⁾

Given the tensions in Gatsby's portrait, this article will look at how Gatsby becomes "The Great Gatsby" through Nick's meta-narration. First, the elusiveness in trying to locate the 'true' signifieds of the American Dream throughout history will be addressed, elusiveness that enables Nick to present Gatsby as an American Hero. Then, I will address how over time, the signifieds of the American Dream had changed, allowing Nick to take advantage of empty signifiers and replace

9) Fitzgerald, p.24.

10) Thomas E. Boyle, "Unreliable Narration in The Great Gatsby," *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 23:1, March 1969, pp.21~26.

11) *Ibid.*, p.24.

12) Fitzgerald, p.8.

13) *Ibid.*, p.8.

14) *Ibid.*, p.8.

them with altered signifieds to narrate Gatsby's story.¹⁵⁾ While Gatsby 'simulates' old money, to use Jean Baudrillard's term, even though he eventually fails and his identity is revealed, Nick simulates and consumes his story.¹⁶⁾

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- 15) According to Daniel Chandler, it is Roland Barthes' "Myth Today" that explicitly mentions the term "empty signifier" for the first time while others including Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Jonathan Culler also contribute to the discussion on an empty or "floating signifier." Chandler notes, "Barthes defines an empty signifier as one with no definite signified. He also refers to non-linguistic signs specifically as being so open to interpretation that they constitute a 'floating chain of signifieds.'" Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: the Basics*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2022, p. 90. Chandler references Barthes, *Mythologies*, Hill & Wang, 1957; Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950; Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967, p.25; Lacan, *Écrits*, Routledge, 1977, p.154; and Culler, *Saussure*, Fontana, 1985, p.115.
- 16) Jean Baudrillard's theory of "simulation" can be used to explain simulations in *The Great Gatsby*. In "Simulacra and Simulations," Baudrillard suggests that simulation reduces an entity or a reality to signs such as recognizable symptoms: "To dissimulate is to feign not to have what one has. To simulate is to feign to have what one hasn't. One implies a presence, the other an absence. But the matter is more complicated, since to simulate is not simply to feign: 'Someone who feigns an illness can simply go to bed and pretend he is ill. Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms' (Littres). Thus, feigning or dissimulating leaves the reality principle intact: the difference is always clear, it is only masked; whereas simulation threatens the difference between 'true' and 'false', between 'real' and 'imaginary'. Since the simulator produces 'true' symptoms, is he or she ill or not? The simulator cannot be treated objectively either as ill, or as not ill. Psychology and medicine stop at this point, before a thereafter undiscoverable truth of the illness." Jean Baudrillard, "Simulacra and Simulations," *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp.366~377. In the context of regulated, limited, and/or reduced information through the medium of communication, simulation suggests a postmodern identity by reducing an entity or a reality to signs and making the pure play of signs possible. Postmodern consumers "[seek] means of 'being' in an ever-shifting multiplicity of social contexts" and have "no self outside of that which can be constructed within a social context." Gergen, p.155, 154. Considered as the appearances or the symptoms of certain things or people, certain signs become important. These conditions of simulation are, to some extent, similar to those of simulations in *The Great Gatsby*, which suggests that Gatsby functions as an early postmodern simulacrum. For instance, Gatsby consumes a huge mansion in West Egg, across the bay, in the vicinity of Tom and Daisy's house. West Egg's geographical

Though, to my knowledge, Nick has not been characterized as a postmodern consumer, this article argues that he is; that is, Nick uses Romanticist ideas and values in modernist manner to support a postmodern phenomenon. Based on Maria Corti's observation that "every great work creates unforeseen links not only with the literature of the future, but with the literature of the past, thus transforming the sign value of earlier texts,"¹⁷⁾ this article will suggest through Jean Baudrillard's "Simulacra and Simulations," Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction*, and other postmodern theories that Nick's narration foreshadows postmodernist sensibilities in early twentieth century America.

II. The American Dream Emptied and the Making of Myth

The American Dream has been so often treated and articulated that it is not easy to pin down an exact definition: to Puritans, it was "spiritual fulfillment"; to Thomas Jefferson, "the flower of political fulfillment"; to J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur and Benjamin Franklin, "the gospel of the self-made man"; and to Walt Whitman, "the word Democratic, the word En Masse."¹⁸⁾ To some, the American Dream includes virtues like "honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, [t]he love of man ... faith, industry, perseverance, [and] probity."¹⁹⁾ Over time, however, it seems

location as compared to East Egg can be seen as a parable of West Egg's gestures to simulation in society. Between New York City and East Egg, West Egg's location represents those people in West Egg, who attempt to reach the social status of those in East Egg.

17) Maria Corti, *An Introduction to Literary Semiotics*. Indiana University Press, 1987, p.3.

18) Pearson, p.638.

19) John G. Cawelti, "The Age of the Self-made Man," *Apostles of the Self-made Man*,

that the American Dream began to focus on individual success.

Importantly here, it is mostly this idea of individual success that allows Nick to portray Gatsby as mythical. Thus, as Nick weaves his story, the Dutch sailors of the seventeenth century, Benjamin Franklin, and Theodore Roosevelt become signs of “individual success,” signs that are made to hover around Gatsby²⁰⁾ and thereby allow him to acquire mythic stature, in Roland Barthes’ sense, whereby “myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form.”²¹⁾ That is, as Barthes argues, “When [the signifier of myth] becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains.”²²⁾ Barthes uses the term, “myth,” in a more extensive way to discuss hegemonic ideologies, discourses, or stories.²³⁾ For Barthes, myth “is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it” in that “a sign ... in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second.”²⁴⁾ In other words, myth comes into being when a sign, which is a combination of a signifier and a signified, becomes another signifier and further combines with another signified.²⁵⁾ Barthes employs the black soldier saluting the tricolor on the cover of the magazine *Paris March* to explain how the image becomes myth by

University of Chicago Press, 1965, pp.39~50.

20) Roland Berman includes Theodore Roosevelt as an icon for the American Dream among others. Roland Berman, *The Great Gatsby and Modern Times*, University of Illinois Press, 1994, p.180.

21) Roland Barthes, “Myth Today,” *Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, Vintage, 2000, p.112.

22) *Ibid.*, p.103.

23) 최성민, 「현대 신화와 스토리텔링의 프로세스 - <라이프 오브 파이>와 <빅 피쉬>를 통하여-」, 『기호학 연구』45, 한국기호학회, 2015, p.84.

24) Barthes, p.99. See also figure 1 in this article.

25) 최성민, 앞의 글, p.113

combining with multiple signifieds (ideologies), each of which supports patriotism, conceals racism, or exposes French colonialism.²⁶⁾ In *The Great Gatsby*, this occurs when the American Dream's superficial elements are allowed to imply that Gatsby is an American hero, as exemplified in the three examples just listed.

Because Gatsby travels from the Midwest to Long Island, for example, Nick connects the Dutch sailors who also arrived at the same location to his American hero, as they, “must have held [their] breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation ... with something commensurate to [Gatsby's] capacity for *wonder*” for “the green light at the end of Daisy's dock.”²⁷⁾ Here, creating the analogy by means of their location (“New York”), an analogy of feeling (“wonder”) is implied, thereby losing track of the events and allowing history to evaporate. Indeed, as Barbara Will suggests, it is doubtful that their *wonder* for the New World could actually be made analogous to Gatsby's adulterous *wonder* for Daisy.²⁸⁾

It is further doubtful whether the Dutch sailors of the seventeenth century could represent those who came to New York, let alone America. In terms of population, as Maldwyn Allen Jones points out, it was not only Dutch sailors who arrived and lived in New York in the seventeenth century.²⁹⁾ In 1644, “New Netherland itself passed to the

26) Barthes, *op. cit.*, p.113.

27) Fitzgerald, p.171. Emphasis added.

28) Barbara Will points out that Nick uses “the same term— ‘wonder’—to describe Gatsby's desire for Daisy Buchanan and that of the American colonists gazing at ‘the fresh green breast of the new world.’” Barbara Will, “The Great Gatsby and the Obscene Word,” *College Literature* 32:4, Fall 2005, pp.125~144.

29) Maldwyn Allen Jones, “I. American Foundations, 1607-1776,” *American Immigration*, University of Chicago Press, 1960, pp.5-32.

English” and “[t]he population of ... the town [New York] ... had already acquired the cosmopolitan character ... Dutchmen, Walloons, and French Huguenots had been among those brought over by the Dutch West India Company.”³⁰⁾ In terms of motives, quite different from the Puritans, the Dutch had, “no strong spiritual incentive to emigrate,” since there was no religious persecution in the Dutch Republic.³¹⁾ Nor did they have “any strong ... economic compulsion to emigrate” from their country.³²⁾ “Some even had come over for the sake of the voyage only” and for the “exaggerated reports of the natural wealth of the new country in letters from earlier settlers.”³³⁾ With respect to the “Dutch” sailors’ motives, then, their claim to the different meanings of the American Dream could be placed into the “individual success” category, as the adventure of traveling to the new world might imply. And it is this aspect of the American Dream that Nick relies on to connect the Dutch sailors with Gatsby.

In similar fashion, when Gatsby’s father shows Nick his son’s copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, the “SCHEDULE” and “GENERAL RESOLVES”³⁴⁾ gesture to Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, but Gatsby’s entries bear only “a superficial resemblance” with young Franklin’s plan.³⁵⁾ As John Rohrkemper suggests, Gatsby’s plans simplify or possibly distort those of Franklin. Franklin’s industry is reduced to “No wasting time at Shafter’s

30) Ibid., p.17.

31) Bertus Harry Wabeke, “Conditions Affecting Immigration from Holland in the 17th Century,” *Dutch Immigration to North America 1624-1860*, The Netherlands Information Bureau, 1944, p.16.

32) Jones, p.17.

33) Wabeke, p.18.

34) Fitzgerald, p.164.

35) John Rohrkemper, “The Allusive Past: Historical Perspective in *The Great Gatsby*,” *College Literature* 12:2, Spring 1985, p.157.

or [a name indecipherable]”³⁶⁾ and his frugality to “Save \$ 5.00 [crossed out] \$ 3.00 per week.”³⁷⁾ More importantly, unlike Franklin, as Rohrkemper points out, except for “Be better to parents,”³⁸⁾ Gatsby “makes no mention of moral improvement.”³⁹⁾ Gatsby’s “goal appears never to be more than … material success.”⁴⁰⁾ Not surprisingly, then, Gatsby could accumulate wealth through illegal methods such as bootlegging and feel no guilt about it; when Tom accuses him of criminal activity, Gatsby “politely” responds, ““What about it?””⁴¹⁾

Gatsby’s copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* also reminds of those books aimed at self-improvement which Theodore Roosevelt read and recommended, but again, without the President’s “moral strenuousness.”⁴²⁾ According to Roland Berman, “[t]he great theme of Roosevelt’s life and writings (and of many writings about him) are ‘Improvement’ themes—specifically, the development of the self so that it may better serve the values of Americanism,” but “money or material improvement were the opposite of Roosevelt’s moral strenuousness.”⁴³⁾ Thus, Roosevelt approved of books for children such as *Hopalong Cassidy* so that they could educate themselves, learn values and virtues, and imitate some fictional models,⁴⁴⁾ not to promote material success with illegal methods.⁴⁵⁾

36) Ibid., p.157.

37) Fitzgerald, p.164.

38) Ibid., p.164.

39) Rohrkemper, p.157.

40) Ibid., p.157.

41) Fitzgerald, p.127.

42) Berman, p.180.

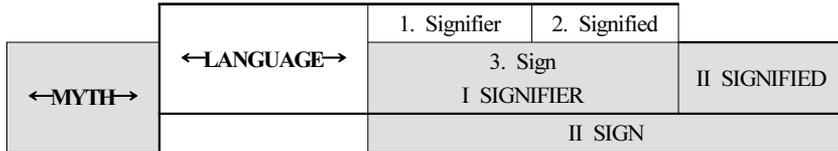
43) Ibid., p.180.

44) Ibid., pp.180~181.

45) From the early twentieth century to the early 1960s, the myth of the American West such as seen in *Hopalong Cassidy* “provided the perfect symbol for Americans … [conveying] self-reliance, independence, and sense of mission… At the same time, the

It seems, then, that even when writing these plans down, the young Gatsby interpreted “self-improvement” and “self-transformation” only in terms of material success, again underscoring how he could commit crimes and nonetheless be depicted as a hero.

In these three examples, then, the processes of reduction and simplification essentially lay the groundwork for the making of myth. According to Barthes, “everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse ... [it] is a type of speech chosen by history ... made of a material which has already been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication.”⁴⁶⁾ In other words, a myth is “a second-order semiological system” in which “a sign [which already exists in language and history] in the first [system] becomes a mere signifier in the second.”⁴⁷⁾ Barthes diagrams the myth as follows:⁴⁸⁾



[Figure 1]

In this process, the signifier of myth is “at the same time meaning and

myth taught that all problems could be solved through cooperation, action, and dedication to the nation’s quest for truth, justice and the American way.” Richard Aquila, “Introduction: The Pop Culture West,” *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 1996, p.10. (cf. Christine Doyle, “Flicka and Friends: Stories of Horses and of Boys Who Loved Them,” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 33:3, Fall 2008, p.281)

46) Barthes, pp.93~95.

47) Ibid., p.99.

48) Ibid., p.100.

form, full on one side and empty on the other.”⁴⁹⁾ Barthes explains that “[a]s a total of linguistic signs, the meaning of the myth [2. Signified] has its own value, it belongs to a history” whereas the signifier of the myth as form (I SIGNIFIER) “empties itself … [and] becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains.”⁵⁰⁾

To return to the three examples, Nick allows these signifiers [1. Signifier]—the Dutch sailors, Benjamin Franklin, and Theodore Roosevelt—to signify the American Dream. They “are credible wholes, they have at their disposal a sufficient rationality”;⁵¹⁾ they have their own values and belong to histories, the content of which function as their signifieds. They [1. Signifier] and their signifieds [2. Signified] become signs [3. Sign] and signifiers [I SIGNIFIER] of the American Dream. At some point, however, these signifiers of the American Dream begin to empty themselves and their signifieds [2. Signified] evaporate, leaving only the superficial to view. At this point, other signifieds can substitute for the ‘original’ signifieds [2. Signified]. Thus, instead of the full meaning of the seventeenth-century Dutch sailors who land in New York, only letters such as “the new world” and “wonder” remain, allowing Gatsby’s new world (Long Island) and his wonder for Daisy to become part of II SIGNIFIED in place of the ‘original’ signifieds of “the new world” and “wonder” of the Dutch sailors. Similarly, Franklin’s and Roosevelt’s morality and virtue are replaced by Gatsby’s materialistic self-improvement program, leading to immoral and illegal behavior, while only the signifiers of Franklin and Roosevelt remain for the American Dream,

49) Ibid., p.102.

50) Ibid., p.103.

51) Ibid., p.103.

emptied of their earlier signifieds.

In terms of temperance, honesty, and probity, then, Gatsby seems to be rather far from the earlier, full ideals of the American Dream. As John Fraser suggests, Gatsby's aspirations seem to be "not 'the' American Dream but a peculiarly twentieth century, urban, sentimentalizing one."⁵²) Emptying positive signifiers of the American Dream, Nick's myth-making colors how he portrays Gatsby's pursuit of his own dream, before he locks onto Daisy. Describing Gatsby's seventeen-year old state of mind, and his "instinct toward his future glory" that propelled him along his path, Nick narrates:

But his heart was in a constant, turbulent riot. The most *grotesque and fantastic conceits* haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of *ineffable gaudiness* spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the washstand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to *the pattern of his fancies* until drowsiness closed down upon *some vivid scene* with an oblivious embrace. For a while *these reveries* provided *an outlet for his imagination*; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing.⁵³)

Since he cannot concretely know what Gatsby's aspirations as a young man were, Nick imagines them to foreshadow his later illicit activity. Thus, what Nick imagines vaguely articulates the magnitude of Gatsby's activities in "grotesque and fantastic conceits," that are furnished with lack of taste in "ineffable gaudiness," and are played out in some

52) John Fraser, "Dust and Dreams and The Great Gatsby," *ELH* 32:4, Dec. 1965, p.563.

53) Fitzgerald, pp.95~96. Emphasis added.

Roaring Twenties-like “vivid scene and reveries.”⁵⁴⁾ Thus, having evoked the American Hero early on in the novel, Nick reveals the scaffolding that can be made to signify anything (scaffolding Nick created after the fact), thereby supporting Nick’s signification, subject to his simulation, of Gatsby as the hero who fulfills the American Dream.⁵⁵⁾

III. Mythmaking, Identity, and Simulation

Signification, for Barthes, “is the myth itself” in which “meaning is distorted by the concept.”⁵⁶⁾ As mentioned earlier, II SIGNIFIED is distorted by I SIGNIFIER in which “history evaporates [and] only the letter[s] [remain].”⁵⁷⁾ However, to consumers of myth, this signification, the myth, is naturalized,⁵⁸⁾ making it seem to be an inductive “system of facts.”⁵⁹⁾ Since Nick links Gatsby with characteristics or signs of American mythic figures such as the Dutch sailors, Benjamin Franklin, and Theodore Roosevelt, the signification seems natural even though, as Barthes describes of myth, “the causality is artificial.”⁶⁰⁾ It is in this manner that Gatsby signifies the American Dream. If “the fundamental character of the mythical concept is to be *appropriated*,”⁶¹⁾ then there is a “motivation which causes the myth to be uttered.”⁶²⁾

54) Ibid., p.95.

55) Barthes argues that, “in general myth prefers to work with poor, incomplete images, where the meaning is already relieved of its fat, and ready for a signification, such as caricatures, pastiches, symbols, etc.” Barthes, p.114.

56) Ibid., pp.107~108.

57) Ibid., p.103.

58) Ibid., p.116.

59) Ibid., p.118.

60) Ibid., p.118.

61) Ibid., p.105.

Barthes' use of "motivation" is instructive here. *The Great Gatsby* is not only narrated by Nick, it becomes Nick's simulation of his own identity, making him too look larger than life. In praising Gatsby's greatness, Nick highlights those traits, signs, that he too shares: both of them pursue financial success, live in West Egg, and move from the Midwest to the East. Moreover, they also share "infinite hope," important to the novel (to Gatsby and to Nick), because it can wipe out scornful things and make Gatsby "all right at the end." Thus, in the beginning of the novel, before he narrates Gatsby's "extraordinary gift for hope" and "romantic readiness," Nick writes about his own tendency to have "infinite hope."⁶³ Likewise, it is Nick, in the end, who continues to hope even after Gatsby has died: "It eluded us then, but that's no matter - tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further ... And one fine morning - So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."⁶⁴

If Gatsby possesses some signs of the American Dream and Nick does as well, Nick can incorporate some aspects of Gatsby's identity. Thus, if Gatsby, who is involved in the bond business,⁶⁵ can be connected to the Dutch sailors, Nick, "a bond man" too,⁶⁶ can be connected to them as well. This sort of association becomes clear at the end of the novel, when Nick revisits Gatsby's mansion after his death and reminds us of signs for the American Dream, signs similar to the ones he displays himself. There, Nick looks around *Gatsby's* house, thinks over the *Dutch*

62) *Ibid.*, p.104.

63) Fitzgerald, pp.7~8. Nick says, "I'm inclined to reserve all judgements.... Reserving judgements is a matter of *infinite hope*." p.7. Emphasis added.

64) *Ibid.*, pp.171~172.

65) *Ibid.*, p.80.

66) *Ibid.*, p.15.

sailor's wonder and *Gatsby's* wonder, and talks about *us*. Then, Nick juxtaposes “Gatsby” and “us” suddenly in one sentence: “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before *us*.”⁶⁷⁾ In this way, Nick further relates Gatsby to the “national collective” by changing suddenly “[from Gatsby, ‘he,’ to the ‘we’] of the novel’s final sentences.”⁶⁸⁾ Nick’s merging his identity with Gatsby’s can be found elsewhere. As Richard Lehan points out, Nick “has so internalized Gatsby’s story, has so identified with Gatsby, that ... Gatsby dead still speaks to Nick.”⁶⁹⁾ Indeed, when it seems that nobody will accept Nick’s invitation to Gatsby’s funeral, Nick hears Gatsby’s voice saying ““Look here, old sport, you’ve got to get somebody for me. You’ve got to try hard. I can’t go through this alone.””⁷⁰⁾ As Nick claims in the beginning of the novel, foreshadowing Gatsby’s American Dream, Nick turns out to be “a pathfinder” and “an original settler”⁷¹⁾ for *us* “against the current ... into the past.”⁷²⁾

Thus, Nick acts as a pioneer exploring Gatsby and his dream. While he admires the American Dream, however, we do not learn that Nick has goals to accomplish. As Lehan suggests, in terms of financial success, even though Nick “[came] East to try his fortune,” it was already “done by those who came before him,” such as the privileged East Eggers.⁷³⁾ Long Island had already been explored by the Dutch

67) *Ibid.*, p.171. Emphasis added.

68) Will, p.126.

69) Richard Lehan, *The Great Gatsby: The Limits of Wonder*, Twayne Publishers, 1995, p.111.

70) Fitzgerald, p.157.

71) *Ibid.*, p.9.

72) *Ibid.*, p.172.

73) Lehan, p.13.

sailors of the early seventeenth century, making the lure of adventure as a promise of the American Dream no longer a possibility. Likewise, Nick cannot achieve the success of landing in a higher class, since he is already from privileged old money. With these venues to the American Dream closed for Nick, he can nonetheless participate by simulating Gatsby, who has “an *extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness* such as [he has] never found in any other person and which it is not likely [he] shall ever find again.”⁷⁴⁾ Nick can be the one who participated in and helped Gatsby’s pursuit of his vision and the one who alone recognized and appreciated Gatsby’s meaning in society. That is, Nick can become a pioneer exploring the territory of Gatsby.⁷⁵⁾

By simulating Gatsby, Nick establishes his identity as belonging to the mythic. Doing so allows him a grand framework that helps him, for example, negotiate his sense of inferiority. Old money as he is, Nick

74) Fitzgerald, p.8. Emphasis added.

75) Interestingly, Nick’s view on Gatsby as an unexplored territory can be related to some American writers’ attempt to “reimagin[e] America as an *interior* frontier.” Brian McHale, *Postmodern Fiction*, Methuen, 1987, p.50. Emphasis in original. According to McHale, “The geographical frontier retreated westward ahead of advancing settlement throughout the nineteenth century. With the closing of the frontier, the effective absorption of the wilderness space by civilization, American writers were forced to reconceptualize and imaginatively restructure their country... [In *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), Frank Baum] locates [the land of Oz] somehow *within* the state of Kansas – an impossibility, since its land-area must surely exceed that of Kansas. In effect, Oz is the frontier zone, but a *displaced* frontier; no longer marking the extreme western limit of civilization, the zone now stands at its very center, the geographical middle of the continental United States. Baum has reacted to the closing of the frontier, and everything it stands for in American ideology, by *reopening* the frontier in Middle America. This strategy of reimagining America as an *interior* frontier clearly struck a responsive chord in the popular imagination.” pp.49~50. Emphasis in original. In a similar way, Nick reimagines Gatsby’s simulational world as an interior frontier for the twentieth-century-version of the American Dream while ironically putting Gatsby in the East, which is no longer a frontier at all.

feels inferior to Tom. When Nick first visits Tom and Daisy's house, for example, Tom asks Nick what he does and with whom he works. Upon answering him, Tom responds, "'Never heard of them,' [which] annoyed [Nick]."⁷⁶⁾ For Tom, his own social relations establish the criteria for judging whether others are worthy and important enough.⁷⁷⁾ Nick's reaction, "You will,"⁷⁸⁾ sounds as if Nick wants to show him that he does something that Tom should know about. On another occasion as well, Nick seems to feel inferior when Tom forces Nick to see his mistress. Nick's thought underscores his sensitivity to Tom's request, "[t]he supercilious assumption was that on Sunday afternoon I had nothing better to do."⁷⁹⁾ Nick can, however, "feel morally superior"⁸⁰⁾ when he simulates Gatsby, not only because he isn't a bootlegger, but also because *The Great Gatsby* reveals Tom's immorality and suggests Nick's superior morality and his virtue—he, after all, has been a faithful friend to Gatsby.

Simulating Gatsby also seems to relieve the shock and guilt Nick feels: Nick's silence may protect Daisy, but it also leads Wilson to kill Gatsby.⁸¹⁾ Rather than facing his own responsibility in Gatsby's death,

76) Fitzgerald, p.15.

77) Don Slater argues that, "there is also no principled constraint on *what* can be consumed: all social relations, activities and objects can in principle be exchanged as commodities." Don Slater, *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998, p.27. Thus, Tom's judgment functions like a commodity to determine if exchanges are warranted. For Tom, Gatsby is not legitimate old money, and so, "[Gatsby] won't know a soul [in the dinner party]" when he is invited by the lady with Mr. Sloan. Fitzgerald, p.100. Conversely, Tom underscores the lack of exchange by stating, "I don't know a soul here" when he is at Gatsby's party. Fitzgerald, p.101.

78) Fitzgerald, p.15.

79) *Ibid.*, p.27. Emphasis added.

80) Lehan, p.99.

81) Boyle, p.22.

Nick can blame Tom and Daisy for the murders through his narrative, which emphasizes their carelessness and immorality. Furthermore, Nick can console himself at having lost Gatsby through an unexpected murder. At the very least, portraying Gatsby as having lived a worthy life is more comforting than a narrative which emphasizes that Gatsby failed in adulterous love, was betrayed by Daisy, and was killed by Wilson although innocent of this crime.

Gatsby has to be “great” for Nick’s own identity.⁸²⁾ In other words, Nick “wants Gatsby to be different from the rest of the world; therefore Gatsby *is* different from the rest of the world,” because, otherwise, “[Nick] is even less the pleasant, anonymous, and highly principled character that he seems to be.”⁸³⁾ Nick emphasizes and simulates “something gorgeous” about Gatsby among “an unbroken series of successful gestures,”⁸⁴⁾ and in doing so, he also consumes Gatsby and his story, which become symbolic goods for establishing his identity.

IV. Simulating Consumption, Romanticism, and Modern-Postmodern Tensions

Nick’s attempt to simulate Gatsby and his story leads to his consumption of a series of signs that enable him to exchange the daily for the mythic. This seems postmodern, but actually postmodern traits

82) Nick needs Gatsby to be “great” also for his familial and national identity. In addition to the shared signs addressed earlier, there are also some analogies between Gatsby and Nick’s grand-uncle who, “started the wholesale hardware business that [his] father carries on.” Fitzgerald, p.8. Both Nick’s great-uncle and Gatsby came to the new world, started a business, and succeeded financially.

83) Scrimgeour, p.75.

84) Fitzgerald, p.8.

present in *The Great Gatsby* are in tension with modernist characteristics. Thus, Nick's simulation may be seen as an ontological act and thus postmodern in Brian McHale's sense. According to McHale, modernist fictions deal with epistemological questions such as "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" ... Who knows it? ... How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? ... What are the limits of the knowable?"⁸⁵⁾ But postmodern fictions raise ontological questions such as "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it' ... What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?"⁸⁶⁾ McHale argues that in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, the dominant changes from "problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being*," that is "from an epistemological dominant to ontological one," by "[a]bandoning the intractable problems of attaining to reliable knowledge of our world ... and [improvising/fictionalizing] a *possible world*."⁸⁷⁾ This description fits Nick as well.

At first, Nick doubts whether Gatsby is faking old money or just "pulling [his] leg."⁸⁸⁾ Later, however, Nick stops questioning problems of knowing (whether his gestures were true or sham) to move to ontological territory. Nick says, "Conduct may be founded on the hard rock or the wet marshes, but after a certain point *I don't care* what it's founded on ... Gatsby turned out all right at the end."⁸⁹⁾ Indeed, at the end of the

85) McHale, p.9. McHale quotes "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" from Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries: Notes towards a Theory of the New Arts*, Printed Editions, 1978, p.101.

86) As quoted by McHale, p.10, in reference to the work of Dick Higgins.

87) McHale, p.10. Emphasis in original.

88) Fitzgerald, p.64.

novel, Nick improvises/fictionalizes a possible world, by relating Gatsby to the Dutch sailors of the early seventeenth century and the American Dream. The dominant of Nick's narration shifts from modern to postmodern as Nick ontologically acknowledges Gatsby's simulational world as an entity.⁹⁰⁾

The modernist and postmodernist traits in the novel are not only found in such sequential order. Thus, since Nick weaves the two seemingly inconsistent stories of James Gatz and Jay Gatsby neatly into one coherent myth, *The Great Gatsby* becomes a kind of metanarrative for both stories, as foreshadowed in what Nick says in the beginning of the novel: "I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever."⁹¹⁾ While Nick's wish and effort to give Gatsby's story *the sort of order* hints at a modernist sensibility, Nick uses a metanarrative to frame the novel, a postmodern phenomenon.⁹²⁾ It is like

89) Fitzgerald, p.8. Emphasis added.

90) Interestingly, as epitomized in Nick's words, "unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing," Gatsby's simulation is materialized from his dream thereby signifying McHale's "interpenetration between the heterogom [unreality] and the real." Fitzgerald, pp.95~96; McHale, p.28. That is, the concept of the American Dream opens the possibility of the coexistence of the two worlds—reality and unreality since even when one's American Dream comes true and becomes a reality, we still call it the American 'Dream.' This tension between modernist and postmodernist sensibilities in Nick's narration can be highlighted to readers who recognize dramatic irony in the novel in that while Nick may seem to believe in Gatsby's greatness, readers can find his narration unreliable. For dramatic irony in relation to postmodernism, see 오세정 · 김기국, 「영화 <셰익스피어 인 러브 Shakespeare in Love>의 스토리텔링과 포스트모던적 특성」, 『인문콘텐츠』23, 인문콘텐츠학회, 2011, pp.224.

91) Fitzgerald, p.8.

92) Linda Hutcheon calls such structural elements "postmodern contradiction." She argues that "Most postmodern theory, however, realizes this paradox or contradiction. Rorty, Baudrillard, Foucault, Lyotard, and others seem to imply that any knowledge cannot escape complicity with some meta-narrative, with the fictions that render possible any claim to 'truth,' however provisional." Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*,

Jean-François Lyotard who cannot help but “smuggl[e] in a coherent metanarrative ... to announce the end of meta-narrative,” while arguing for the end of metanarrativity.⁹³⁾ Between his epistemological doubt and ontological access to Gatsby, and his modern sensibility and sense of postmodern contradiction, Nick is on the way to a postmodern consumer society, or a simulational world, and thereby precursory of a postmodern self.

In presenting and advocating Gatsby’s American Dream, Nick’s use of eclecticism and mixed codes strategically expands further to Romanticism. Partly modernist as he is, with his Romanticist vocabulary and views of self, Nick simulates Gatsby’s story while narrating against Tom’s modernist commitment to “an objective and knowable world,”⁹⁴⁾ as emblemized in his ‘scientific’ investigation of Gatsby.⁹⁵⁾ Participating in Romantic values, Nick narrates Gatsby’s “unseen inner depth”—his passion for and faithfulness to Daisy, his creativity to invent himself, and his “grief-stricken suicide” like death.⁹⁶⁾ Not unlike the tensions

Routledge, 1988, p.13.

93) Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*, Sage, 1991, p.32.

94) Gergen argues that “[c]entral to the modernist view was a robust commitment to an objective and knowable world, and to the promise of truth about this world” and that “Through reason and observation, modernists believed, humans can discover the fundamental essences of the universe—including the essentials of human functioning.” Gergen, p.83, p.227.

95) I use the term “scientific” ironically, but it is interesting to note that when Tom realizes Daisy has an affair with Gatsby and before he reveals that he had “made a small investigation of this fellow,” he says that “You think I’m pretty dumb ... Perhaps I am, but I have a – almost a second sight, sometimes, that tells me what to do. Maybe you don’t believe that, but *science* –.” Fitzgerald, p.116. Emphasis added.

96) On the romanticist view of the self, Gergen argues that it “attributes to each person characteristics of personal depth: passion, soul, creativity, and moral fiber.” Gergen, p.6. Also he also explains other romantic vocabulary such as “loyalty,” “the unseen inner depth” and “grief-stricken suicide.” Gergen, p.19, p.24.

between modernist and postmodern elements, these Romantic values are in tension with what Nick praises; Gatsby's idea of inventing himself represents a modernist view of the self, while Nick's simulation itself is postmodern.⁹⁷⁾ Likewise, Nick celebrates the aesthetic potential (Gatsby's Dream and his Romanticist sensibility) in Gatsby's "amusement park"⁹⁸⁾ or his 'depthless' consumer culture,⁹⁹⁾ the kind of celebration which "has been taken up by commentators who emphasize the transgressive and playful potential of postmodernism."¹⁰⁰⁾ In the process, Nick acts as both a producer/disseminator and consumer/audience while using eclecticism and mixed codes.¹⁰¹⁾

Nick's Romantic discourse seems to be subsumed under his simulation, his postmodern strategy, which suggests an all consuming world where even metanarratives such as Romanticism and the American Dream can be consumed in eclectic manners according to consumers' tastes. Romanticism was "in many respects reactions against industrial, commercial, consumer society from Rousseau in the 1750s through revolutionary and nationalist romanticism up to the mid-nineteenth century."¹⁰²⁾ Thus, in order to disagree with Tom's modernist sensibility,

97) See Featherstone, p. 4 for his observation of a modern view of the self.

98) Fitzgerald, p.43.

99) Featherstone quotes "Jameson's conception of postmodern culture" as "'depthless culture'" from Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 1984, and "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society," *Postmodern Culture*, ed. H. Foster, Pluto Press, 1984. Featherstone, p.15.

100) Featherstone, p.24.

101) Featherstone argues "particular occupational groups specializing in symbolic goods ... [act] as both producers/disseminators and consumers/audiences for cultural goods." Featherstone, p.35. He continues: "a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes" belong to "the central features associated with postmodernism in the arts." Featherstone, p.7.

102) Slater, p.15.

Romantic values and views are useful for Nick. On the other hand, the origins of “some of the sensibilities ... incorporated into and disseminated in postmodernism ... can ... be traced back [to] ... the Romantics.”¹⁰³⁾ Furthermore, “through romanticism ... consumer culture becomes both wildly playful and deadly earnest.”¹⁰⁴⁾ In other words, Nick Carraway, a producer and consumer of high cultural symbolic goods, positions him as a precursor of postmodern sensibilities in the early twentieth century. Moreover, Nick’s simulation of Gatsby anticipates Fredric Jameson’s view on postmodernism in that Nick’s postmodern sensibility does not attempt to change capitalism or consumer culture. Even though Nick criticizes the ‘carelessness’ of Tom and Daisy’s class, his narration does not challenge the rigid class system nor arbitrary signs characterizing consumer culture; rather, ironically, Nick only repeats and contributes to the status quo.

103) Featherstone, p.45.

104) Slater, p.16.

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The American Dream, Identity, Simulation, and Consumption in *The Great Gatsby*

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F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has been previously viewed as a modernist novel. However, this article posits an alternative interpretation: Nick can be viewed as a postmodern consumer. First, this article examines how Gatsby becomes "The Great Gatsby" through Nick's meta-narration. While *The Great Gatsby* has been read as a commentary on the American Dream, with Gatsby embodying the self-made man, the elusiveness in trying to locate the 'true' signifieds of the American Dream throughout history will be addressed, elusiveness that enables Nick to present Gatsby as an American Hero. Then, the article will address how over time, the signifieds of the American Dream had changed, allowing Nick to take advantage of empty signifiers and replace them with altered signifieds to narrate Gatsby's story. While Gatsby 'simulates' old money, to use Jean Baudrillard's term, even though he eventually fails and his identity is revealed, Nick simulates and consumes his story. The article further asserts that Nick maintains an unreliable narrative, which Gatsby represents an American Myth, based on Roland Barthes' theory of mythology arguing that *The Great Gatsby* is Nick's attempt at validating his sense of self. Finally, Nick is viewed as a transitional figure bridging the modern to postmodern sensibilities through his use of romantic ideas.

Keywords : American Dream, American Myth, postmodernism, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, simulation, The Great Gatsby

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