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The Architecture of Desire: Aspirational Self-Fashioning and the Precarity of Belonging in *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Tragedy*

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Abstract: *Self-creation is often a performance of class, desire and belonging in many forms of the 20th century American fiction. F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925) and Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925 are similar examples of aspirational self-fashioning, where identity has become dependent upon receiving some form of social recognition. Rather than looking at these two works through the lens of the traditional interpretation of the American Dream being disenchanted, this paper will explore both Jay Gatsby and Clyde Griffiths as creating socially recognizable versions of themselves for the elite worlds they wish to enter. Using dramaturgy theory developed by sociologist Erving Goffman, this paper views identity as a continuous negotiable process of creating one's aspirational self- based upon their audience, managing impressions, how one appears and receives social validation. Gatsby creates an aesthetically pleasing version of himself that attempts to eliminate the contingencies of his origin; however, Clyde continually adjusts his self-image based upon what he perceives as the desired image from various groups who have socially desirable status. Despite having different paths of self-creation, the two authors reveal a very important paradox regarding social ascension: the more we pursue recognition, the more difficult it is for us to be certain about our sense of belonging. This paper will use comparative close reading method to demonstrate that Fitzgerald and Dreiser reveal social ascension as an architectural structure of desire, whereby the performance of becoming can result in self-hood being ever more unstable and the ability to belong being unattainable.*

keywords: *Aspirational Self-Fashioning; Social Recognition; Performed Self-hood; Class Aspiration; Precarious Belonging; Erving Goffman.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The mythology of self-invention is at once fundamental and profoundly contradictory to American collective consciousness. Inherent to this mythology is the idea that social boundaries are fluid; that one can create a new identity by means of hard work, consumption and entrepreneurial spirit. However, 20th century American literature continually questions the psychological fragility and societal vulnerability hidden behind this vision. Published simultaneously with the beginning of America's consumer culture explosion and the increasing public awareness of social stratification, both F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby (1925) and Theodore Dreiser's An American Tragedy (1925) illustrate that aspiration is far more than simply the attainment of wealth or social standing; it is an ongoing dialectic between self, visibility and acceptance. While extensive scholarly analysis exists concerning Gatsby as an example of the contradictions inherent to the ideals of social mobility, financial achievement and the American Dream, Michael Duffy's examination of Gatsby's elaborate constructed persona as an attempt to emulate the code systems of upper-class society (Duffy) is especially relevant. Likewise, Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths is similarly susceptible to the allure of status and recognition although his propensity for volatility is significantly greater than that of Gatsby.

Additionally, Harold Kaplan illustrates how Clyde's aspirations exist within the complex interplay of class and consumption culture (Kaplan); furthermore, Irene Gammel explains how Clyde's desires for inclusion into a world that excludes him creates an overwhelming sense of tension between social isolation and his yearning for inclusion (Gammel).

Using these previous studies as a foundation for further inquiry, this study will examine the process by which aspiring individuals recreate their identities rather than examining why they fail to achieve their goals. Erving Goffman's theory regarding social interaction as a dramatized act is used as the primary theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, Goffman describes self-presentation as a performance which occurs in relation to an audience and is calibrated prior to its occurrence (Goffman). By comparing the self-creation of Gatsby and Clyde through a comparative close reading of both novels, this study will argue that the self-created architecture of desire that arises from aspiring to become someone else is so dependent on receiving recognition for who you have become, that your own sense of belonging will always be tenuous.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

The relationship between Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths in "An American Tragedy" and F. Scott Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby in "The Great Gatsby," are continually being explored within the context of the ideological tension surrounding American ideals such as upward mobility and the commodification of consumption. A significant number of scholars studying Fitzgerald have highlighted the instability inherent in Gatsby's constructed social identity. Specifically, Michael Duffy has argued that Gatsby performs class through both material and non-material means including the conspicuous display of possessions and the careful cultivation of a particular type of social etiquette (Duffy) all in an effort to create the illusion that he belongs to the elite. However, this attempt at creating an identity through performances, ultimately serves to highlight the fragility of identity when based solely on the possession of external symbols of legitimate membership. Similarly, Clyde Griffiths in Dreiser's novel is also represented as a character who is deeply shaped by his social environment. While many critics view Clyde as an individual who is driven primarily by internal motivations and desires, Michael Spindler argues that such views are overly simplistic and that Clyde's desire for social advancement must be understood as existing within three interlocking systems: youth culture, class structure and consumer culture. In other words, Spindler argues that Clyde can only be seen as representative of himself if we understand him to exist within the set of social relationships that enable or constrain his aspirations (Spindler 63-79). Similarly, Irene Gammel has viewed Clyde as a social outsider who longs to gain entry into a highly exclusive social world, thereby making his sense of self dependent upon becoming the person he imagines he will be once he achieves full inclusion (Gammel). Together, these two sets of criticism demonstrate how Gatsby's deliberate performances of status are analogous to Clyde's more fluid responses to the idealized models of successful behaviour that are socially approved.

Erving Goffman's dramaturgy-based approach to understanding self-presentation offers one particularly useful lens for exploring the connections between Gatsby and Clyde. For example, Goffman describes "performance" as action that occurs in front of others and affects those others in some way and refers to the "front" as the vehicle through which actors establish and maintain public perceptions of themselves (22). Using Goffman's theatrical language for describing performance, audience, setting, appearance, manners and impressions management allows us to describe identity as something that is created during interactions rather than as something fixed or unchangeable. As a result, both Gatsby's carefully managed persona and Clyde's continued self-redefinition in response to social models of success can be described as differing forms of aspirational self-making. Furthermore, because each protagonist seeks acceptance, they illustrate the fundamental paradox of my current research: although the promise of social recognition is often the guarantee of self-coherence and upward mobility, it simultaneously increases reliance on the audience before whom we must continue to perform.

3. GATSBY: ASPIRATIONAL SELF-FASHIONING AND THE PERFORMANCE OF BELONGING:

Jay Gatsby's path in "The Great Gatsby" is nothing less than an ambitious experiment in crafting oneself for the sake of upwardly mobile aspirations. For Gatsby, to achieve social mobility required not merely accumulating wealth, but creating a self whose very existence would suggest its organic affinity with privilege. Thus, James Gatz became Jay Gatsby ,not just a name change. Rather, this was a deliberate rejection of the unpalatable social lineage he had been born into.

Nick Carraway says that Gatsby "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself," encapsulating the radical imaginative freedom inherent in this process (Fitzgerald 98). While Gatsby sought to live in a different world economically, he authored a persona whose every gesture, possession, speech and surroundings were choreographed to make that vision socially understandable.

This manufactured identity relies on the dramatic constructs described by Erving Goffman to describe how we present ourselves to others. Goffman describes the "front" as all of the physical objects we use when we perform a social act, including our setting, appearance and demeanour (Goffman 22-24), thereby enabling us to create the definition of a situation for the benefit of those who are watching us. In this context, Gatsby's West Egg home, car, clothes, extravagant parties and studious diction serve as the front of his manufactured identity. The way he uses phrases like "old sport" is

especially telling: here language itself serves as clothing covering over an uncertain past with the vocabulary of inheritance. As noted by Duffy, Gatsby's public displays of wealth along with his deliberately crafted behaviours represent a performance attempting to mirror the norms of the leisure class (Duffy) , each time one of these parties occurs it functions as much as a spectacle of excess as a stage for exhibiting and socially confirming the aspiring identity that Gatsby has created.

However, rather than performing before a faceless mass attending his parties, Gatsby is presenting to an even more discerning audience , Daisy Buchanan. She represents both erotic desire and the social credibility he is seeking. When she utters words that contain "money," she equates sexual longing with class desire ,thus she and the upper-class world he wants to enter become indistinguishable (Fitzgerald 120). The array of imported shirts he displays before Daisy demonstrate the ways in which material surplus are used as a vocabulary of acknowledgment , goods become means to validate the identity he has created.

Thus, the precariousness of this performance becomes apparent because financial gain will never ensure social acceptance. Gatsby can replicate the outward symbols of success without possessing the historical basis for the credibility of East Egg. His encounter with Tom reveals where the limitations exist for self-fabrication if the authenticity of his origin is called into question before the most important group of people whose approval matters most. Therefore, while Gatsby's tragic demise may be characterized by lost love or thwarted ambition alone; what is more disturbingly revealed by Fitzgerald is that Gatsby achieves great success at seeming to fit in yet remains structurally unable to secure being accepted. His self-fabrication has produced an identity whose very coherence exists based on continued approval, turning what was once an aspirational goal into an elaborate performance for an audience authorized to deny them legitimacy they promise.

4. CLYDE GRIFFITHS: SOCIAL RECOGNITION AND THE PRECARIOUS SELF:

Clyde Griffiths' precarious form of self-fashioning is influenced primarily by imitation, susceptibility and a constant need to be recognized by others. He is constantly evaluating himself through the eyes of different social environments, which he feels are beyond his reach. Therefore, his aspiration is unstable and mutable and will alter based upon the environment in which he is seeking to gain recognition. As demonstrated by Spindler, Clyde's desire should be viewed within the intersecting structural influences of class and consumerism that define how he views success and opportunity (63-79). Thus, Dreiser's novel represents a socially created language that Clyde uses to learn who or what he needs to become.

As stated above, Goffman's dramaturgy illustrates the malleability associated with this process. In presenting oneself for an audience, the individual must create a presentation of themselves that reflects the expectations of the audience. The presented self is therefore dependent on the expectations of the audience and therefore can change rapidly. Clyde's behaviour is reflective of this rapid adaptation. For example, clothing, leisure activities, associating with fashionably oriented individuals, acquiring greater occupational status and having a romantic partner all represent a means by which Clyde attempts to enter more prestigious social realms. Unlike Gatsby, Clyde continually adapts himself based upon the people around him and their influence over his social status. Consequently, Gammel has described Clyde as an outsider who is attempting to achieve entrance into an exclusive society; therefore Clyde's sense of self is dependent upon his imagined self (Gammel).

This dependence is especially significant in Clyde's relationships with Roberta Alden and Sondra Finchley. Roberta represents a part of the social reality that Clyde wants to move away from; whereas Sondra is symbolic of the glamour, exclusivity and recognition that Clyde's aspirations seek. Therefore Clyde's attraction to Sondra extends beyond romantic interest; she represents a future state of recognition. While moving towards Sondra's world, Roberta has become a representation of Clyde's past identity, something he desperately wants to leave behind.

Therefore, Clyde's lack of stability in his self-hood stems from his inability to establish an independent identity outside of the validation provided by others. Since each experience of being closer to a world of privilege presents new horizons for potential recognition, Clyde finds himself in a perpetual state of provisionality with regard to his sense of self. Dreiser also reveals a critical aspect of the transformative nature of aspirational development; Clyde does not exist solely for the purpose of performing for someone else in order to obtain membership; he allows the anticipated gaze of others to determine which version of himself is worthy of being occupied.

5. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: THE ARCHITECTURE OF DESIRE

When compared, The Great Gatsby and An American Tragedy exhibit an architecture of desire where aspiration is not simply the pursuit of economic success but is also used as a means for creating socially intelligible selves. Both Gatsby and Clyde reside in an America purported to be driven by opportunity and mobility however, both experience a social system wherein access to membership or acceptance is governed by birth right, cultural norms and acknowledgment.

Therefore, the desires of Gatsby and Clyde are relationally constructed, they do not seek solely to obtain physical manifestations of success, but to create recognizable identities of men who are entitled to have these possessions. Goffman's dramaturgical framework is particularly useful here, as social identity is created through performances designed for specific audiences whose reactions help validate the self being presented (Goffman, 22-24). As such, aspiration has been given a theatrical structure in both novels, wherein privilege is both spectacle and desired end.

The key difference in the modality of performance exists in how the two protagonists construct their respective performances. Gatsby's construction of himself is primarily curatorial. Jay Gatz intentionally creates "Jay Gatsby" constructing an elaborate social facade using architecture, dress, speech patterns, hospitality and conspicuous consumption. The imagination behind Gatsby's construction of his identity is quite impressive in terms of creative cohesiveness; Gatsby clearly understands what self he wants to portray and he organizes his environment so that he can authenticate that image. However, despite Gatsby's attempts to visually perform the symbols of the leisure class (Duffy), his overall performance is structurally vulnerable due to the fact that his final validation as legitimate depends upon approval from an audience (the most significant being Daisy and the Buchanan) with the authority of inherited status to distinguish ownership from belonging.

Conversely, Clyde's performance is adaptable. Unlike Gatsby, Clyde does not have a clear conceptualization of a self he wants to create; instead, his aspirations evolve as he becomes aware of increasingly elite social settings. Spindler provides evidence demonstrating how much Clyde's desires are formed through social relationships as well as class and consumerism (Spindler, 63-79). Furthermore, Gammel illustrates the irony in an individual who is outside of society trying to gain entry into that same society (Gammel). While Gatsby creates an identity and seeks recognition for that identity, Clyde consistently changes the identity he wishes to achieve depending upon whether he believes he will receive recognition.

Although there exist differences in how Gatsby and Clyde approach their respective performances of identity; there exists a commonalities of unstable sense of belonging. Wealth alone could not transform Gatsby's performance into a hereditary form of legitimacy; nor did Clyde's exposure to forms of privilege increase the distance between his current situation and the desired identity he envisioned for himself. Therefore, desire acts architecturally; it creates visual representations of idealized destinations of selfhood, while at the same time, exposing the exclusions upon which those destinations rely. Ultimately, both Fitzgerald and Dreiser complicate the mythology of independent creation of one's own identity by illustrating that becoming is always partially dependent upon recognition from other individuals. In addition to this; Gatsby and Clyde equally experience their aspirational selves in a manner that is subject to scrutiny from other people and this is the reason why their aspirational identities remain vulnerable: their potential for recognition is contingent upon the social context whose boundaries they cannot independently control.

6. CONCLUSION:

Both Gatsby and Clyde, show how aspiration has evolved into something much larger than just financial achievement, it has developed into a complex method of self-definition by way of which people seek to make sense of themselves to the social worlds they aspire to. Using Goffman's dramaturgy model of self-creation and presentation, we see Gatsby and Clyde as two characters whose identities have been created using economies of visibility, performance and social acknowledgment. While their tragic downfall does not exist solely because of the unattainable nature of wealth, love or social status, rather it exists in the precariousness of creating selves under the scrutiny of others.

It is significant, however, that there is a difference in their methods for developing their respective identities. Gatsby develops his self-concept through careful planning and curation. He builds a persona that will be able to demonstrate aesthetic and material characteristics of affluence. On the other hand, Clyde creates a flexible and shape-shifting form of identity that is constantly being modified based on the attractiveness of each new social environment he enters. Although the distinctiveness of their performances is apparent, ultimately both Gatsby and Clyde come to the realization that neither physical property nor proximity to affluent communities can guarantee them unconditional acknowledgment for their envisioned membership. The society from which they wish to derive membership maintains the ability to validate, question or reject their performed identities.

Thus, the title "the architecture of desire" refers to a structural relationship wherein aspirations simultaneously create and undermine individuality. The term ‘Desire’ in the title provides Gatsby and Clyde with imaginative conceptions of who they may become, yet those conceptions depend upon forms of acknowledgment they are unable to obtain. Therefore, Fitzgerald and Dreiser problematize the mythological concept of self-reliant creation by portraying the fundamentally relational nature of social identity. Thus, their characters do not only pursue success, they pursue selves that must appear legitimate to others. Finally, both novels conclude that when social belonging is made contingent on constant performance, self-formation no longer means freedom alone. Hence the aspirational subject is located between the self presents and the acknowledgement he continually lacks.

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