

The Lasting Imprint of Family Background: Class Habitus and Character Formation in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract—This article reconsiders character formation in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* through a combined family-of-origin and class-habitus perspective. Existing criticism has extensively examined the novel in relation to the American Dream, self-making, class performance, and social exclusion, but the characters' contrasting family backgrounds have received less attention. Drawing on Bowen's family-systems perspective and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, this study conducts a qualitative analysis of main characters in *The Great Gatsby*. It argues that family background should not be treated as a deterministic cause of personality. Rather, it provides durable relational expectations, class-coded dispositions, and unequal stocks of economic, cultural, and social capital that shape how the characters pursue intimacy, status, and security. Gatsby attempts a radical break from his impoverished origins, yet his self-invention reveals the limits of converting economic success into inherited social legitimacy. Nick's relatively secure upbringing enables moral distance and social mobility, while Tom and Daisy rely on inherited privilege as a shelter from accountability. Daisy further shows that class privilege is mediated by gender. This reading reframes the novel's tragedy as a conflict between aspiration and intergenerationally reproduced social boundaries.

Keywords—*The Great Gatsby*; family of origin; class habitus; character formation

I. INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is frequently read as a critique of the American Dream, a narrative of failed self-making, and an anatomy of class division in the United States of the 1920s. Pearson interprets Gatsby as embodying both the promise and corruption of self-made success [1], while Decker situates his self-invention within the ethnic and class anxieties of the period, showing that economic achievement cannot easily overcome established social boundaries [2]. Goldsmith similarly emphasizes identity performance and passing, presenting Gatsby's self-fashioning as an attempt to gain recognition within a social order structured by inherited legitimacy [3]. Other studies extend this discussion beyond Gatsby's individual aspirations. Goldblatt connects the novel's enduring appeal with the tension between utopian

aspiration and disappointment in the American Dream [4]. Will examines how Gatsby is narratively reconstructed through Nick's acts of memory and interpretation [5]. Cain highlights the economic inequalities underlying the novel's moral world [6]. Beuka further demonstrates the importance of class, space, consumer culture, and national mythology in the novel's critical reception [7].

These studies show why Gatsby's wealth cannot secure the social legitimacy associated with East Egg. However, they leave another question open: why do the novel's central characters respond so differently to wealth, intimacy, uncertainty, and moral responsibility even when they occupy the same social world?

The characters' family backgrounds provide one useful way to address that question. Fitzgerald gives uneven but meaningful information about the families from which Gatsby, Nick, Tom, and Daisy emerge. Gatsby is born into poverty and attempts to erase that origin through a new name, a fabricated history, disciplined self-improvement, and spectacular consumption. Nick comes from a financially secure Midwestern family that has been socially established for generations and begins the novel by remembering his father's moral advice. Tom and Daisy are embedded in inherited wealth and in social environments where status is treated less as an achievement than as an unquestioned condition of life. These differences matter not because family background produces personality, but because it shapes the resources, expectations, and habitual responses through which each character interprets the world.

This study therefore examines family background not as a deterministic cause of personality, but as a source of unequal resources, expectations, and habitual dispositions. Drawing on family-of-origin theory and Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital, it compares Gatsby, Nick, Tom, and Daisy to explore how inherited and acquired forms of privilege shape their orientations toward status, intimacy, and security. The central argument is that Gatsby's tragedy lies partly in his attempt to acquire a form of belonging that is socially inherited, while Nick's relative security and the Buchanans' inherited privilege give them forms of social confidence and protection unavailable to Gatsby.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Theoretical Framework

1) Family of Origin as a Relational Perspective

This study draws first on a family-of-origin perspective to examine how early familial and social environments may continue to shape expectations concerning security, attachment, obligation, and belonging. In family-systems theory, the family is understood not simply as a collection of individuals but as a relational system whose patterns may persist across time. Bowen emphasizes differentiation, emotional interdependence, and the intergenerational transmission of relationship patterns [8].

In the present study, these concepts are used as heuristic rather than clinical categories. Fictional characters cannot be psychologically diagnosed, and *The Great Gatsby* does not provide sufficient evidence to reconstruct complete family systems. The concept of family of origin is therefore used primarily to identify possible continuities between early relational environments and later strategies of belonging.

Accordingly, family background is defined broadly to include not only immediate family relationships but also social position, material resources, cultural expectations, and inherited reputation. This broader definition is particularly appropriate for *The Great Gatsby*, since Fitzgerald provides relatively limited information about the childhood family dynamics of Tom and Daisy while repeatedly emphasizing inherited class position. The analysis therefore avoids attributing particular adult behaviors directly to parental influence and instead focuses on the relationship between family background and later social orientation.

2) Habitus, Capital, and Class Reproduction

Bourdieu's theory of practice offers a complementary perspective. Habitus refers to durable dispositions through which social conditions become embodied as apparently natural ways of perceiving and acting [9]. These dispositions are neither fixed rules nor entirely conscious choices; rather, they make certain behaviors appear natural and familiar while rendering others less accessible.

Bourdieu's distinction among economic, cultural, and social capital further explains why wealth alone does not eliminate class differences [10]. Economic capital concerns material resources; cultural capital includes socially valued knowledge, taste, speech, and manners; and social capital derives from networks, relationships, and recognized membership. Families play an important role in transmitting these resources and the dispositions associated with them.

This distinction is particularly relevant to the four central characters. Gatsby accumulates economic capital but struggles to convert it into the cultural and social legitimacy associated with old money. Tom and Daisy inherit not only wealth but also the confidence and recognition attached to established privilege. Nick

occupies a more intermediate position: his family background provides social and financial security without insulating him to the same extent as the Buchanans. The novel thus dramatizes differences between possessing wealth and possessing the socially recognized right to wealth.

B. Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative close-reading method combined with comparative analysis. The primary text is the 1995 Scribner edition of *The Great Gatsby* [11]. The analysis focuses on passages that directly indicate family background, inherited status, economic resources, self-presentation, intimate expectations, or responses to social exclusion and moral consequence.

Particular attention is given to Gatsby's descriptions of his past and his father's appearance after his death, Nick's account of his father, the Plaza Hotel confrontation, and scenes revealing Tom and Daisy's reliance on inherited wealth. Four dimensions guide the comparison: (1) material inheritance or deprivation; (2) relational security and expectations of belonging; (3) class-coded dispositions, including speech, taste, confidence, and attitudes toward status; and (4) responses to social threat or moral consequence.

III. ANALYSIS

A. *Gatsby: Self-Invention and the Incomplete Conversion of Capital*

Gatsby's relationship to family begins with rejection. James Gatz is born into an impoverished farming family in North Dakota, but he refuses to accept that origin as an adequate definition of himself. The change from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby is therefore not merely a new name; it is an effort to interrupt social inheritance. In Bourdieu's terms, Gatsby attempts to replace the dispositions associated with his early class position by deliberately acquiring the manners, possessions, and narratives that he associates with a higher social field. His later life is organized around the belief that identity can be designed.

The schedule shown by Gatsby's father near the end of the novel complicates the idea that Gatsby's ambition is simply a corruption produced by adult greed. The youthful program of exercise, study, work, and self-improvement demonstrates that the project of self-transformation began long before Daisy and before his spectacular wealth [11, pp. 171–174]. The schedule is important because it reveals continuity beneath Gatsby's apparent rupture with his family. His adult extravagance is not the opposite of his early discipline; both are expressions of a deeply rooted refusal to remain within the limits assigned to him.

At the same time, Gatsby's distance from his family leaves his new identity without inherited social recognition. His father's arrival after the funeral makes the gap visible. The father is proud of Gatsby and impressed by the mansion, yet his presence also reconnects Jay Gatsby to James Gatz at precisely the

moment when Gatsby's invented world collapses. The scene does not prove that Gatsby lacked parental love. On the contrary, his father's grief and pride make such a conclusion too simple. What it does show is that Gatsby's desired identity depends on keeping his family origin socially out of view.

This need for concealment helps explain Gatsby's elaborate self-presentation. When he tells Nick that he comes from wealthy Midwestern parents and was educated at Oxford as part of a family tradition, the story is less a casual lie than a bid for legibility [11, p. 66]. Gatsby understands that wealth without pedigree remains suspect. His mansion, parties, clothes, car, carefully rehearsed phrase "old sport," and stories about Oxford all work as visible signs of a class identity that he wants others to ratify. Goldsmith's account of Gatsby as a performer is relevant here: identity in the novel is not only possessed but staged before an audience [3].

Yet the performance exposes the very insecurity it is designed to hide. Tom does not need to narrate a pedigree because his position is already recognized. Gatsby repeatedly narrates one because recognition remains uncertain. The distinction becomes decisive during the confrontation over Daisy. Gatsby imagines that the past can be reorganized by declaration: Daisy must say that she never loved Tom, so that her marriage becomes an error and Gatsby's desired history becomes retrospectively true. When Tom reveals Gatsby's criminal connections and challenges his social legitimacy, Gatsby's composure breaks down. The scene shows the limit of economic conversion. Gatsby can purchase symbols of elite life, but he cannot compel old-money society to treat his biography as equivalent to Tom's inherited position.

Daisy is central to this conversion project. Gatsby clearly loves her, but the novel also associates her with the world from which he was excluded. She represents beauty, intimacy, memory, and class legitimacy at the same time. For this reason, the desire to recover Daisy cannot be separated from the desire to make his self-invention complete. Possessing her would seem to prove that James Gatz has successfully become Jay Gatsby. The tragedy is that Gatsby treats emotional reciprocity and social recognition as if both could be secured by sufficient effort. His family background does not determine this mistake, but the distance between his origin and his desired position makes the fantasy of total transformation especially powerful.

B. Nick: Inherited Security and Social Detachment

Nick's family background provides a revealing contrast. The novel opens with his recollection of his father's advice not to judge people too quickly because others may not have enjoyed the same "advantages" [11, p. 1]. This statement immediately establishes family as a moral and class framework. Nick's later account of a prominent, well-to-do Midwestern family with several generations of social standing reinforces

that framework [11, p. 2]. Unlike Gatsby, Nick does not need to invent an ancestry, and unlike Tom, he has been taught to connect privilege with restraint rather than with open domination.

Nick's relative security helps produce the social mobility required by his narrative role. He can enter Tom and Daisy's home, attend Gatsby's parties, interact with Jordan, and observe working-class spaces without experiencing each encounter as a test of his right to exist there. His family even finances his move East for a year. This material detail matters because it gives Nick a safety net. His experiment in the bond business is risky in a limited sense, but failure would not carry the existential stakes that status carries for Gatsby.

The same security shapes Nick's moral style. He presents himself as tolerant and reluctant to judge, yet his narration is full of evaluations. The tension between tolerance and judgment is not a simple contradiction; it reflects an inherited ethic of self-command. Nick watches before acting, distances himself before condemning, and converts emotional experience into narrative reflection. His admiration for Gatsby arises not from approval of Gatsby's illegal activities but from his perception that Gatsby possesses a capacity for hope absent from the more socially secure people around him.

Nick's relationship with Jordan further reveals this pattern. He is attracted to her but remains alert to what he perceives as dishonesty. Instead of making the relationship the center of his identity, he can withdraw from it. The ability to leave is itself socially unevenly distributed. Gatsby clings to Daisy because she has become the symbolic completion of his life project. Nick can leave Jordan, leave New York, and return to the Midwest. His family background functions as a place of material and symbolic return.

This does not make Nick morally superior in a simple sense. His class location also protects him from the consequences of observation. He can move through other people's crises and then retreat. Will's emphasis on Nick's role in shaping Gatsby's meaning reminds us that the narrator's apparent modesty conceals considerable interpretive power [5]. A family-background reading therefore complicates any moralizing interpretation in which a "good family" simply produces a good person. More precisely, inherited security gives Nick forms of confidence, restraint, and mobility that become both ethical resources and privileges.

C. Tom Buchanan: Inherited Legitimacy and Class Exclusion

The novel supplies few details about Tom's parents, so it would be speculative to attribute his adult behavior to specific parenting practices. What it does establish is inherited wealth. Tom's money predates the events of the novel and is large enough to make expenditure appear effortless. His identity is therefore built on a form of capital whose legitimacy is presumed

rather than demonstrated. He has attended Yale, moves through elite institutions with ease, and treats property as a normal extension of status.

Tom's habitus appears most clearly in his sense of entitlement. He assumes authority over Daisy, Myrtle, Wilson, and Gatsby; his physical aggression is matched by a social certainty that others can be ranked and managed. His racist discussion of civilization in the opening chapters is also a form of boundary anxiety [11, p. 13]. He imagines established hierarchies as natural and threatened by outsiders. Decker's analysis of the 1920s as a period in which the self-made ideal is constrained by ethnic and social gatekeeping helps illuminate this aspect of Tom's hostility toward Gatsby [2].

The confrontation with Gatsby is therefore more than a rivalry between two men for Daisy. Tom acts as an enforcer of social classification. Once Gatsby's background and business connections are exposed, Tom can reframe him as an illegitimate intruder rather than an equal competitor. The effectiveness of this strategy depends on a shared social code: Gatsby's money is real, but his claim to old-money identity is not recognized by those who possess it by inheritance.

Tom's confidence also explains why he can violate the norms he expects others to obey. His affair with Myrtle does not lead him to question his marriage as an institution because he assumes that Daisy remains part of his social order. Fidelity is optional for him; possession is not. This asymmetry is an expression of both gendered power and inherited class privilege. His family background matters here not as a hidden psychological wound but as the social foundation of impunity.

D. Daisy Buchanan: Gendered Privilege and the Search for Security

Daisy also comes from wealth, but her position cannot simply be merged with Tom's. As a young woman in an elite social world, she benefits from class privilege while being constrained by gendered expectations about marriage, respectability, and dependence. Her earlier relationship with Gatsby occurs before she fully understands the extent to which his social position differs from hers. During his absence, however, the expectations of her milieu and the attraction of Tom's wealth converge. Her marriage places her inside a structure of security that is emotional, social, and economic at once.

Daisy's remark that she hopes her daughter will be a "beautiful little fool" is often read as evidence of disillusionment [11, p. 17]. Within the present framework, the remark also shows her awareness that elite femininity rewards a strategic form of unseeing. Daisy recognizes more than she openly confronts. She knows of Tom's infidelity, senses the emptiness of her social world, and is responsive to Gatsby's romantic promise. Yet recognition does not automatically produce the ability or desire to abandon the structure that protects her.

Daisy is often interpreted either as an innocent victim of her environment or as a fundamentally selfish figure. A more productive interpretation holds agency and constraint together. Daisy is harmed by a patriarchal marriage, but she also benefits from and ultimately chooses class security. At the Plaza Hotel she cannot perform the absolute renunciation Gatsby demands. Her past with Tom cannot simply be erased, and the social world represented by Tom remains materially real. Her return to Tom after Myrtle's death is therefore not only a romantic decision; it is a retreat into a familiar structure of protection.

The novel's moral force intensifies because that protection works. Daisy's privilege does not prevent fear, loneliness, or pain, but it gives her a route away from consequences that Myrtle and Gatsby do not possess. In this respect, her family background is not merely personal history. It is an inherited infrastructure of escape. Gender limits her power within the marriage, while class expands her power relative to those outside it.

We can easily see Daisy's sadness and helplessness from her words. As a daughter of an upper-class family, her mother must have told her to be meek and the importance of her husband. She also must have seen a lot of the husbands' love affairs. She understands the miserable destiny of a girl in an upper-class family. Therefore, she hopes her daughter to be a beautiful little fool and does not divorce from Tom even though she knows Tom's love affair with other women. Daisy is afraid of losing the rich and comfortable life she has. Actually, Daisy is a little lonely and helpless. Her family and her husband do not care about her sincerely. At the same time, Daisy is selfish and indifferent like other upper-class people. After she runs over and kills Myrtle, Gatsby wraps for her. Daisy promises to call Gatsby and run away with him, however, she just abandons Gatsby and runs away with Tom. Daisy should be responsible for Gatsby's death to a large extent.

E. Comparative Analysis

Viewed together, the four characters illustrate different relations to inheritance. Gatsby rejects his origin and attempts to replace it. Nick accepts his origin while selectively distancing himself from the moral failures of his class. Tom reproduces his inherited position aggressively, treating social hierarchy as natural. Daisy reproduces it ambivalently, perceiving some of its costs but ultimately relying on its security. These differences are more analytically precise than a simple opposition between "good" and "bad" families.

The comparison also clarifies why Gatsby's financial success is insufficient. Economic capital is the most visible resource in the novel, but it is not the only one. Gatsby lacks the long social memory, recognized networks, and embodied ease that make Tom's status appear self-evident. Nick has enough of these resources to enter elite spaces without anxiety, while Daisy's social value within that world is inseparable

from the family and class system that produced her. The novel thus exposes a central contradiction in the ideology of self-making: mobility is celebrated as an individual achievement while legitimacy remains intergenerational.

IV. DISCUSSION

The combined family-of-origin and habitus framework offers three main insights. First, it replaces psychological determinism with mediated influence. Family background does not explain every action, and the novel gives no basis for claims that Gatsby is kind because his parents were simple, that Tom is cruel because his family was rich, or that Daisy's decisions are merely the result of parental instruction. What family background does provide is a structured starting point: access to resources, expectations of belonging, and practical senses of what is possible or appropriate.

Second, the framework reveals that the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* is intergenerational as well as individual. Gatsby believes in the convertibility of achievement: if he becomes rich enough, disciplined enough, and visible enough, he should be able to enter any social position. Tom's world operates by a different logic. It treats certain forms of legitimacy as inherited. Gatsby's failure therefore does not simply prove that money cannot buy happiness. More specifically, it demonstrates that newly acquired economic capital cannot instantly reproduce the cultural and social capital accumulated through family history. This is why class is expressed in the novel through houses, accents, manners, schools, relationships, and memory as well as through bank accounts.

Third, family inheritance interacts with gender. Tom and Daisy share class privilege but experience it differently. Tom's position enables direct domination; Daisy's position combines protection with dependence. Her choice of security cannot be understood by class alone, yet neither can it be understood by gender alone. The family into which she is born and the marriage she enters form a continuous elite network that both limits and shelters her. Gatsby's romantic ideal fails partly because he imagines Daisy as detachable from that network.

This interpretation also complicates Nick's celebrated moral position. Because he is neither an anxious aspirant nor a fully insulated aristocrat, Nick can perceive the failures of both. But his position of observer is itself enabled by privilege. He can afford to be disappointed and to go home. Gatsby cannot return to an origin he has spent his life repudiating, and Myrtle cannot escape the material vulnerability that structures her marriage. The novel's ethics are therefore connected to unequal capacities for withdrawal.

The contribution of a family-background perspective is consequently not to reduce *The Great Gatsby* to a lesson about parenting. It is to show how the intimate and the social are joined. Families transmit affection and conflict, but they also transmit

money, reputation, cultural knowledge, expectations, and networks. Fitzgerald's characters carry these inheritances into romance and rivalry. Their choices remain choices, yet the social costs of those choices are profoundly unequal.

V. CONCLUSION

This study has reworked the idea of the "everlasting mark" of family origin into a less deterministic and more socially grounded account of character formation in *The Great Gatsby*. Through a comparative analysis of Gatsby, Nick, Tom, and Daisy, it has argued that family background operates as a durable configuration of relational expectations and class resources. Gatsby tries to break from poverty and construct a new self, but his spectacular economic success does not provide the inherited legitimacy he seeks. Nick's established background gives him confidence, mobility, and a place to which he can return. Tom's inherited position supports entitlement and boundary policing, while Daisy's privilege is inseparable from gendered dependence and from the security offered by the old-money world.

The analysis therefore reframes Fitzgerald's critique of the American Dream. The novel does not merely oppose poverty and wealth or sincerity and corruption. It distinguishes between acquired and inherited forms of belonging. The tragedy emerges when a culture promises that identity can be remade through individual effort while continuing to recognize family history as a source of social legitimacy. Gatsby can change his name, accumulate money, and transform his surroundings, but he cannot make the past disappear on command.

The study is limited by the uneven representation of family life in the novel. Gatsby and Nick receive more explicit family background than Tom and Daisy, so claims about the Buchanans must remain focused on inherited class position rather than specific parenting practices. Future research could extend this framework to Fitzgerald's other fiction or compare family inheritance across novels of social mobility. Even within these limits, the family-background lens adds a useful dimension to existing scholarship by connecting intimate identity formation with the reproduction of class.

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