

## Clothing and Body Narrative Strategies in *The Great Gatsby*

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### Abstract

Body became the generative center and presentation of narrative meaning in modern fiction; it is not only the physiological existence, but also the collection of ideas and the signifier of meaning. In modern novels, the signifying meaning of characters will be revealed by the presentation of private body. Description of clothing is significant in body narrative, while paradoxically, clothing is, in one way the medium of meaning construction and expression of body, and in another way the cognitive obstacle covering the body and delaying the revealing of truth. Fitzgerald, taking full advantage of this paradox, adopted different strategies to depict the clothing of the two groups of main characters in *The Great Gatsby*, constructing a contrast between the visible body and the invisible body, thus to disclose the different body representations of American Dream and their respective failure.

**Key words:** Body narrative; Clothing; Paradox; *The Great Gatsby*

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### INTRODUCTION

In modern narrative theory of fiction, the body is positioned as “a component of fictional world” and has “relevance to narratology in general” (Punday, 2003, p.18).

The creation of characters cannot be separated from the description of the body, so cannot the interpretation of characters be separated from the explanation of the body: the body of character becomes “an object to be dissected and interpreted”, rather than just some physiological existence or thematic symbol. And according to Danial Panday, “those bodies must always be shaped into meaningful textual objects by specific choices made by the text” (Punday, 2003, pp.53-57). The “specific choices”, or the purposeful, detailed and selected portraits of the bodies are not only shaped by the cultural context of the novel writing, but also depend on the narrative strategy of the writer to construct the body, endowing the body in specific text with different narrative meanings.

The way writers describe bodies used to be called “portraiture”, including descriptions of faces and clothes. Portrait was “the indispensable and core description object, which is not only related to the physical manifestation of the literary character, but also related to the character’s personality, fate and environment” and thus “was the central image of the narrative” (Xu, 2003, p.176). But after the 20th century, with the continuous development of narrative forms, face description is often suppressed, or even dispelled, from the narrative center to the edge. However, clothing remains an important strategy of body narration, which constructs the first and foremost impression of characters for readers. Because the body rarely has the opportunity to be naked, and clothing, closely connected with the body, becomes an extension of body. So, when the body is watched, the focus is usually clothing. *The Great Gatsby*, written in the 1920s, is a classic and well-known American novel, in which much attention was paid to the clothing styles of the main characters. Some studies believe that the clothing description of *The Great Gatsby* “reflects the zeitgeist and social style of the American society during the transition from tradition to modernity” (Chen, 2019, p.147). However, the clothing in the novel not only reflects the

social and cultural context, but also is used as a body narrative strategy to reveal the essence of the body as a combination of social concepts and all power relations. Through the display or concealment of the body, clothing can help to locate the body image, to reveal the symbolic meaning of visible body, and to point to the conceptual nature and social significance of that body; yet, it can also cover the body. Detailed and fragmented descriptions of clothing can break the clear and complete image of the character, pointing to an invisible body.

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## 1. THE PARADOX OF CLOTHING: THE PRESENTATION AND CONCEALMENT OF THE BODY

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Body, especially narrative body, plays an important role in modern novels, because in most cases, the body is an inseparable medium of narration. Moreover, the body in narration is no longer merely physical, but also becomes a signifier of some cultural meaning. Body becomes the core of visual attention in the narrative of novels, not because of voyeuristic impulse, but because of the cognitive impulse brought by the body as “the existence of a ‘comprehensive body’ in the phenomenological sense of a collection of social concepts” (Tian, 2021, p.106). The body itself has become the code of meaning, the field of social relations and power relations, and the manifestation of gender, class and all identities. The question here is, what is the relationship between clothing and the body in the process of cognition? Is clothing a barrier to body recognition?

Generally speaking, in the narrative of novels, the physical features of characters are expressed and the body image of characters is constructed through the details of clothing, or in another word, clothing is the physical existence of the body. Beyond that, clothing can show the identity status, personality characteristics and even psychological status of characters, or in another word, clothing is the social existence of the body. The importance of clothing often lies in the latter. In most fictional writings, clothing is not merely an external object of the body, but a “carrier of personal self-expression” (Yang, 2003, p.72), which becomes the self-construction and molding of the body of a character in a certain social concept. Clothing becomes voiceless discourse of the silent body and the mute medium of body expression, highlighting the existence of the body in the level of concept and consciousness, and pointing to the social existence of characters as a collection of concept and power relations. Details of clothing can become the channel of truth for readers to grasp the nature of a character as a social existence, such as the cuff buttons made of “human molars” wore by Mr. Wolfsheim in *The Great Gatsby*: parts of a human body can be the ornaments of another human being. The cuff buttons

become a declaration of power, revealing a violent inter-personal relationship.

Paradoxically, as it is sometimes the medium of body construction and expression, clothing is indeed sometimes an obstacle that covers the body and delays the revelation of truth. “Any dress code not only shows some kind of body relation, but also covers people’s body experience in the provisions of the code” (Zhang, 2017, p236). Clothing can disguise the physical characteristics and dim the form of body, and, as a cultural symbol, clothing can conceal the real existence of the body in concept and relationship. As a “self-construction”, clothing may become the carrier of self-negation, self-objectification and alienation, thus concealing, violating, or even dispelling the nature of characters.

It is because of the possible concealing function of clothes that modern novels often take the revealing moment of the naked body as a symbol of the exploration of human nature and the truth of life. In *The Rise of The Novel*, Ian Watt argues that interest in private life arises and develops along with middle-class notions of privacy (Watt, 1957, pp.177-178). The more secretive is the body, the greater is the desire to learn about it. According to Peter Brooks, intrusion and disclosure of privacy (especially of the body) have become the themes of modern novels, turning the body in the private sphere into the object of public cognition. The author “gives the body an importance in the generation and inscription of meaning...The body is made semiotic: it becomes a sign, or the place for the inscription of multiple signs.... In turn the body thus semiotized becomes a key element in narrative meanings; it carries the burden of significance of a story. Once again, semiotization of the body is accompanied by the somatization of the story” (Brooks, 1993, p.38). Special parts, private parts or the marked area of a body can be seen as an announcement of certain cognitive turning point, such as when Milady shows her lily on the shoulder in *The Three Musketeers*, and when Dimmesdale exposes the scarlet A on his chest in *The Scarlet Letter*. When the secret is revealed, the body is completely symbolized: it is an important moment for the final coming of meaning. Naked bodies and the way they are presented —such as Zola’s naturalist depiction of Nana’s nakedness, D. H. Lawrence’s explicit depiction of sexualized body and James Joyce’s detailed and private body— reveal the nature of human beings in cultural cognition shaped by specific social context and the essence of inter-personal relations. Brooks emphasizes that the true meaning of the body lies not in fetishistic details, but in the process of stripping away the camouflage and seeing the real body symbolized.

Fitzgerald made full use of the above paradoxical relationship between clothing and body—the clothing is both a physical/social medium of the presentation of body and a cognitive barrier concealing the body—thus

he constructed the contrast of the visible body and the invisible body, revealing the different body representations of the “American dream”, and the disillusionment of that dream in the disappearance of the bodies. In *The Great Gatsby*, there are two couples of extramarital love, namely the revival of the love between the protagonists, Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan, and the adultery of Daisy’s husband Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson, the wife of the owner of an auto repair garage. In these two groups, Gatsby and Myrtle are respectively the dreamers of “American dream”, while Daisy and Tom are the symbols and methods of the realization “American dream”. Nick Carraway, the first-person retrospective narrator, has the opportunity to observe two sets of extramarital relationships because of his special status. However, Nick is both present and absent in the meetings of both sides. He rejects the direct narration of adultery out of an anti-voyeuristic narrative method, and thus rejects the body narration of desire and impulse at first. Fitzgerald took advantage of the paradox of clothing to adopt different body narrative strategies for two couples of extramarital lovers. For Tom and Myrtle, Fitzgerald discovered the embodied characteristics of their bodies through the tight wrapping and gap of clothing, thus extracted the symbolic meaning of the body, revealing the nature of the social relationship between the two, and criticized the trade of body for money in the “American dream”. For Gatsby and Daisy, Fitzgerald made clothing cover the body totally to resist the symbolization of the body, and he even negated the existence of Gatsby’s body, by keeping his body permanently invisible—always disguised and scattered in fragmented descriptions of clothing, thereby gaining the possibility of multiple meanings and interpretations of his protagonist, and expressing an ambivalent attitude towards the trade of money for love in Gatsby’s version of American dream.

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## 2. VISIBLE BODY AND SYMBOLIC MEANING

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Fitzgerald took the character Nick as the narrator in *The Great Gatsby*, whose identity, status and personality determine the extremely limited body perspective of the novel. Nick mainly presents the most obvious physical characteristics, economic status, living environment, education and psychological state of other characters through his body narration, focusing on clothes and accessories. But there is a contrast between Nick’s account of both affairs, although generally he avoids direct personal commentary, his attitude is implicit in the body narrative, and his physical description of Tom and Myrtle certainly makes their adultery clearer and more sensual. Nick gives his description of Tom’s “great pack of muscle—a cruel body” and Myrtle’s “thickish figure... which carried her flesh sensuously”, showing their visible

bodies respectively to readers. Therefore, Fitzgerald offered “violence” and “sexuality” as the symbols of their bodies and set them in a pair, and established the corresponding “somatization of the story”.

When describing the bodies of Tom and Myrtle, the narrative perspective focuses on the curves of the bodies wrapped by the clothes, or the bodies exposed in the gap of the clothes, which presents the symbolic meaning of the bodies. Tom has “a body capable of enormous leverage”, filling his “glistening boots until he strained the top lacing”, and the “effeminate swank of his riding clothes” can hardly hide his “great pack of muscles shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat” (Fitzgerald, 2001, pp.6-7). Tom’s body seems to be covered under the elegant and “effeminate” clothes, but the muscle lines wrapped tightly by the clothes clearly show the violent nature of his body. In addition, the physical details of two female characters who are directly related to Tom in the novel—Daisy and Myrtle—demonstrate Tom’s violence and rudeness. Daisy, whose “knuckle was black and blue”, has been hurt and thus accused Tom of being “a brutal man, a great, big, hulking physical specimen” (p.10). Tom broke Myrtle’s nose “with his open hand”, leaving her bleeding and scolding, giving a “long broken wail of pain” (p.25). The pseudo- “effeminate swank of his riding clothes” is an irony of Tom’s brutal body and male violence.

The novel adopts a similar narrative strategy for Myrtle’s body. When Nick first met Myrtle at her husband’s garage, she was “faintly stout”, with a “spotted dress of dark blue crepe-de-chine” wrapped around her “sensuous flesh”, and “the nerves of her body were continuously smoldering” (Fitzgerald, 2001, pp.17-18). For a tryst with Tom in town, Myrtle changed her dress into a “brown figured muslin, which stretched tight over her rather wide hips” (p.18). When she arrived at Tom’s rented apartment in town, she changed “her costume” into “an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-colored chiffon, which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room”, with her intense vitality “converted into impressive hauteur” (p.21). During this meeting, Myrtle changes her clothes three times, meantime changing her identity from “the owner of a garage” to “Tom’s girl” and then to “the mistress of a stately home”. She trades her sensuous body with Tom for “more dress”, for shopping recklessly whatever she likes all the way to the apartment, for showing off to her guests, and even to her sister, that her elaborate dress is only “a crazy old thing”: “I just slip it on sometimes when I don’t care what I look like.” ... “I’m going to give you this dress as soon as I’m through with it. I’ve got to get another one tomorrow. I’m going to make a list of all the things I’ve got to get...I got to write down a list so I won’t forget all the things I got to do” (pp.21-25). But Myrtle’s body can’t exchange for her an equal social status, she has the fantasy of being Tom’s “hostess”, however, in the eyes of Tom, she has even no right to call

the name of Daisy. When Myrtle shouted Daisy's name, Tom "broke her nose with his open hand", and Myrtle, lying on the couch, "bleeding fluently", and "trying to spread a copy of *Town Tattle* over the tapestry scenes of Versailles" (p.25). In this ironic scene, Tom's violent body and Myrtle's sensuous body show a cooperative picture of money, desire and violence, revealing the materialistic society and interpersonal relationship in the United States in the early 20th century. With money as the link, the bodies become the subject and object of violence, and also the subject and object of desire. The money relationship leads to the union of "Beauty and the Beast" (p.26), which not only reveals the nature of the extramarital relationship between Tom and Myrtle, but also implies the nature of the marital relationship between Tom and Daisy: Tom can "buy" Myrtle's body due to their unequal social status; and because of the equal status of money, Daisy would rather choose the "beast" -the brutal Tom than Gatsby.

In chapter seven of the novel, Gatsby's identity as a bootlegger was revealed, and Daisy drove Gatsby's limousine in a frenzy, accidentally killed Myrtle on the way. Gatsby's golden limousine becomes a symbol of the conspiracy of "money and violence", which ultimately kills Myrtle. The rescuers tore open Myrtle's shirt-skirt and saw "her left breast was swinging loose like a flap" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.88). Myrtle's sensuous body had lost its vitality and material desire with her death. With the aid of clothing, Myrtle's body is always presented as "visible" and predest the trade between body and money. As a representative figure of the women who worship money and wish to exchange her body to satisfy her desire for fame and wealth, Myrtle cannot hide the essence of her body as the object of desire and violence, no matter how many times she changes her dresses. Myrtle's body partly naked and displayed after her death is the highest point of body exposure in the novel. The moment when the sexuality symbol of the female body is revealed is also the moment when it disappears, revealing the collapse of Myrtle's "American dream" of entering into the upper society by her body.

### 3. THE CLOTHING CONCEALMENT AND THE INVISIBLE BODY

The clothing of Tom and Myrtle is used as a medium to present their bodies, but the clothing narrative strategy of Daisy and Gatsby is a different case. Fitzgerald took the clothing as a concealment of body and the metonymy of body, to an extent that clothing became the body itself. Fragmentation and trivial details in description of clothing conceal the existence of the body, deny the wholeness the body, and thus reject the symbolization of the body. Clothing becomes the only visible medium of the body and the only socially acceptable component of the "self", and the real body is left in the "invisible" state.

This clothing narrative strategy sets up obstacles for the insight and interpretation of the truth of the characters, and also implies the materialization of "American dream" by the dreamers, which lead to an extinction of a real "dream".

The body of Daisy is hardly directly described. The narrative of her body parts — face, eyes, lips, hair, fingers —uses only inauthentic adjectives: "bright," "beautiful," "melancholy," leaving the reader with little certainty about her appearance and physical details. What made up Daisy's body impression were the details of her clothes, the white dress she often wore, the triangular purple hat, the small metal cloth hat, the fuzzy grey fur collar she wore at parties, and the rows of copper buttons on her dress. Different from Myrtle's symbolic body, Daisy's sexiness does not exist as a body symbol. Researchers suggest that Daisy's sexiness is expressed more through her voice, which is described many times in the novel and alludes to Daisy's frivolity (Hochman, 1994). When Daisy first appeared in the novel, her body was completely hidden in her white dress fluttering in the wind. On the hot summer night of the final confrontation, Daisy once again wore a white dress, and her body always maintained in a hazy state. Her white dress makes her "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggle of the poor" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.95), and the reader needs to find out the nature of the body beneath her innocent yet ambiguous white dress.

The concealing effect of Daisy's white dress is also shown in Gatsby's multicolored shirts. Nick's narration helps readers learn about Gatsby's general experience, but there is no direct and concrete portrait of his accurate body image. Readers can only rely on features of clothing to construct an impression of Gatsby's body: The navy blue and white canvas trousers of his young age, the military uniform of his youth, the "pink suit" ridiculed by Tom when he made himself "Gatsby" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.77), the "white flannel suit" he matched with "silver shirt and gold-colored tie" when he dated Daisy (p.54), and most importantly the colorful shirts of his wardrobe:

"He [Gatsby] took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian bile. Suddenly with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily." (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.59)

This is the moment for Gatsby and his estranged ex-girlfriend Daisy meeting for the first time in five years. He is showing Daisy and her cousin Nick around the mansion to present the wealth he has accumulated in recent years. When Gatsby led them around in his bedroom, he opened

his wardrobe and showed off his splendid shirts. Daisy's response to the gaudy, colorful shirts is unusual. Her "strained sound" and crying under the "soft rich heap" of Gatsby's shirts are suspicious, but she quickly explains: "They're such beautiful shirts, It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.59). Some critics argue that Daisy's "genuine appreciation" of Gatsby's "beautiful shirts" is a distraction from the reunion (Cousineau, 2001, p.21). However, Harold Bloom spoke highly of this scene and considered Daisy's cry to be "high art" (Bloom, 2010, p.3). Bloom's interpretation of Daisy crying as an erotic description is a perceptive insight: it's at this particularly moment that Daisy obscurely rediscovers her passion for the returned Gatsby because of a pile of gorgeous men's shirts. Faced with these fine clothes, Daisy realizes that Gatsby now has what she is looking for in a perfect marriage: "life... of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.96). Daisy's unspeakable desire is expressed with her strained sound and questionable crying, and this is also the closest moment for Gatsby to realize his dream: Because Daisy always values people by clothes, "for Daisy, a man *is* the shirt he wears", thus this moment means "that the doomed romance of Daisy and Gatsby is largely founded on her love for shirts and his capacity to remind her of the advertising image...a passion founded on appearances and the consumerist itself" (Reynolds, 2001, xiii). In order to gain Daisy's favor, Gatsby negated his real body and alienated it into a pile of gorgeous shirts.

The relationship between Gatsby and Daisy is closely related to their cognition of clothes. In their previous short love of young age, Daisy thought Gatsby suitable with her, did not see his hidden status under his neat uniform, while Gatsby was fascinated by Daisy's beauty and her expensive clothing, "overwhelmingly aware of youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.95). Gatsby deeply understood how "clothes make the man" and understood the equation between clothes, money and love. It is not so much the clothes that keep one bright as the clothes that dissolve the physical nature of the body and replace it with the eternal charm of money. This may be the secret of Gatsby's mysterious and sometimes funny choice of clothes with "gleaming" colors: gorgeous clothes make people stay young forever, as if time can stop and old dreams can be revisited.

Based on his limited experience, Gatsby constructed his aesthetic cognition of the body and clothing of the upper class, believing that the clothes favored by a noble girl like Daisy should be luxurious and colorful. He compensated the girl whose gown had been torn at his ball with an expensive new "gas blue" evening gown adorned

with "lavender beads" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p.29). In Gatsby's fantastic and intrusive vision of Daisy's life when he was in military, Daisy "was young and her artificial world was redolent of **orchids** and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras...a hundred pairs of **golden and silver** slippers shuffled the **shining dust**...fresh faces drifted here and there like **rose petals** blown by the sad horns around the floor" (Fitzgerald, 2001, p 96, my emphasis). Gatsby relied on his imagination of the upper class to choose the colors of his clothes. He specially "got a man in England" to buy him clothes "at the beginning of each season, spring and fall", and dressed up carefully to build his own body image (p.59). He tried to catch up to the aesthetic taste of Daisy with these "gleaming" colors, and expected to get through the barriers of class, immersed himself in the materialized illusion of American dream. Gatsby struggled to "make himself new", to construct his new identity, with multi-colored shirts and other beautiful clothes, mistakenly assuming that as long as he has the possession of wealth and dresses in finery, he can revive the love of Daisy, therefore, he chose to materialized his own body and his true self into those elaborate costumes.

But in fact, the aesthetic of men's wear of the American upper class in the jazz age was quite different from Gatsby's perception. Tom knew Gatsby would never graduate from Oxford from his "pink suit". Gatsby's colorful shirts obviously did not conform to the dressing code of the upper-class men who came from traditional and prestigious families and learned from Oxford and Cambridge. Gatsby, who was born in a poor family and started from nothing, could not understand the tradition and aesthetic preference hidden in the riding clothes, sportswear and casual wear of the upper class. Clothing code has become a symbol of the deep-rooted and hard-to-break class barriers. The saying "Clothes maketh men" not only reveals the class conflict manifested by clothing differences in the American society at that time, but also reveals the desire of class transition hidden behind clothing anxiety, as well as the self-alienation of people in the capitalist system. The most ambitious personal narrative in the age of Capitalism is to "build a new self", proposed and demonstrate from Benjamin Franklin to Ralph Waldo Emerson, defining the essence of American dream. In the time of Fitzgerald, construction of the spiritual self was further cancelled, and material side of the American Dream was further strengthened, and the Dream was deformed into a narrative fiction for "construction of a new objectification of self". Gatsby's gorgeous clothes are his new identity constructed by alienation of his true self, a symbol of the realization of his version of "American dream" —Daisy's recognition and love; Sadly, his "self-objectification" violates the aesthetic rules laid down by the real power holders of the upper class, dooming the inevitability of failure from the outset.

Gatsby is different from his mirror character, Myrtle, a similar failed “Dreamer”, because his body never shows itself in the package or gap of clothing, and always rejects symbolic presentation. At the moment of Gatsby’s death, it seems that he finally can get rid of the cover of all clothes and return to his real body. However, Fitzgerald refuses to allow Nick to describe Gatsby’s body in a positive way — although this is the moment we are closest to Gatsby’s real body — which is completely different from body narrative strategy of Myrtle. Gatsby’s body image finally lost its embodiment and was broken into a pile of colorful and exquisite men’s clothes. The clothes were present, but the body was missing and invisible, escaping from the readers’ gaze forever. Perhaps this is precisely because Gatsby took self-objectification as the path to pursue his dream, and eventually lost his integrity in the process. His body, as a spiritual representation, was inevitably dispelled, representing a story of the pursuit and loss of the American dream.

## CONCLUSION

Modern novels are keen to expose the essence of human existence, with the body as a medium to show social relations and conflicts. Fitzgerald chose different body narrative strategies when describing the two groups of corresponding characters in the American dream: clothing either serves as a medium to present the body, or serves as a concealment of the body, a cognitive obstacle to truth. The clothes of Tom and Myrtle seemingly wrap up their body but present the curves, showing the symbolic nature of their bodies, exposing the network of violence, money and desire. By the contrast, the bodies of Gatsby and Daisy are completely transformed into clothing, and the relationship between people is alienated into the relationship of things. The real body is covered, the existence is dissolved by narration, and the body disappears as a presence of spirit, leaving only the extension of clothes.

Fitzgerald could calmly face the trade between Tom and Myrtle, but sympathized with the trade between Gatsby and Daisy. On the one hand, he revealed the failure of the American dream, but on the other hand, he deeply pitied the pathetic and persistent loser Gatsby and refused to show his naked body as he did with Myrtle.

Gatsby’s colorful shirts became the representation of his “American dream”, and his body covered by clothes was deconstructed into emptiness — perhaps, this was the truth of the American dream that Fitzgerald designed to explain.

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