

# *Color Symbolism and American Dream in Luhrmann's The Great Gatsby*

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**Keywords:** gatsby, daisy, color symbolism, green light, commercial success

**Abstract:** Luhrmann's movie version of *The Great Gatsby* has caused many discussions and debates in the area of literary analysis. This paper would argue that Luhrmann manages to gain commercial success in the film. While the director recreates the scenes that demonstrated color symbolism, the color symbolism suggests different meanings from the book; and that is because the director changes certain important plot in the book, which exaggerates Gatsby's pure love to Daisy at the expense of undermining the complexity of Gatsby's character and his American Dream that based on materialism. With the help of secondary sources, this paper will expand on analyzing how color symbolism, which includes the green light and the main characters' clothes, illustrate different themes between the book and the movie.

## 1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has been adapted into a film directed by Baz Luhrmann. The visually appealing film successfully recreates the materialistic environment during the 1920s; however, since its release, the film has received controversial comments. For instance, David Danby asserts that "Luhrmann's vulgarity is designed to win over the young audience, and it suggests that he's less a filmmaker than a music-video director with endless resources and a stunning absence of taste" [1]; Carol Vernallis, however, praises that "*The Great Gatsby's* (2013) 'arcadian' party sequence counts as one of the most opulent, densely articulated, and extravagant in film history" [2]. I agree with Vernallis' remark on the film's visual effects, but would also point out that, to "win over the young audience" and to become a commercial success, Luhrmann to some extent makes the film a "vulgar" oversimplification of the original novel by slightly altering the symbolic meanings of some colors and deliberately changing two major plots. Admittedly, the film's visual effects vividly reflect the rampant materialism of the 1920s American society, and the symbolic meanings of the colors – in particular, that of the green light and the main characters' clothes – are made clearer. Nonetheless, by changing some important plots, such as deleting one comment on Daisy made by Gatsby and changing the ending, Luhrmann overemphasizes Gatsby's love for Daisy, thereby undermining both the complexity of Gatsby's character and Fitzgerald's social criticism.

The significance of colors in *The Great Gatsby* was anticipated by Fitzgerald in a self-interview composed for Scribner's three years before his first draft of the novel. As Fitzgerald admitted, he was

“a professed literary thief, hot after the best methods of every writer in my generation”; although he was talking about style, Fitzgerald suggested that, “By style, I mean color. . . . I want to do the wide sultry heavens of [Joseph] Conrad, the rolled-gold sundowns and crazy-quilt skies of [Robert Smythe] Hichens and [Rudyard]Kipling” [3]. This paper, by examining how some colors – in particular, the green light, Daisy’s white clothing, Gatsby’s yellow car, and fireworks – are presented in Luhrmann’s adapted movie, and how their visual effects either correspond to or differ from Fitzgerald’s novel, intends to argue that Luhrmann’s *The Great Gatsby*, although being a commercial success, oversimplifies Fitzgerald’s masterpiece.

## 2. The Green Light

Being a literary descent of Kipling, Fitzgerald brought the symbolic red light in Kipling’s *Maisie* to produce his famous green light in *The Great Gatsby*<sup>1</sup>. The green light, being a perfect symbol for the dream Gatsby has of his unattainable woman and his as unattainable American Dream in the original novel, shines brighter in Luhrmann’s film, with its symbolic meanings slightly altered and simplified. At the very beginning of the movie, the director already makes the audience comprehend the power of the green light to Gatsby: the movie directly shows the green light shining at the end of Daisy’s dock with a hand reaching out for it. In reading Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the power of the green light is only imagined from Nick the narrator’s perspective; in watching the movie, however, the audience is able to directly see the green light shining in a vastness darkness – the green light hence is strong and powerful, while distant and inaccessible. The movie’s visual effect helps the audience identify the sharp difference between the lightness and the darkness – a difference between the harsh social reality and Gatsby’s illusory dream. However, Gatsby’s isolation is reinforced in Fitzgerald’s novel by his almost unconscious alienation from Daisy, especially when he is psychically closest to her. As Plath notices, In Chapter 5, “Gatsby seems more ‘absorbed in what he had just said’ than the woman with whom he had just reconnected, and who had just slipped her arm through his” [4]. The fulfillment of Gatsby’s illusion is hence accompanied by a greater sense of disillusionment and, Gatsby’s characteristics, as well as the relationship between him and Daisy, are complicated. Gatsby is more than a tragic lover, and Fitzgerald’s story is more than a sad tale of romance. As Plath analyzes, “If, in fact, Fitzgerald was inspired by Kipling’s use of color to suggest an idealized view of woman who is beyond a man’s reach, the younger author certainly did more with it, using the green light to suggest that distance is an almost necessary condition to sustain any notion of the ideal” [4]. Similarly, the movie ends with the shining green light, just as in the beginning, which symbolizes the climax and the final destruction of Gatsby’s American Dream to improve his social status. The novel ends with the readers learning from Nick’s perspective that “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...” [3]. The green light becomes weaker and weaker by the end, and eventually vanishes, leaving behind a vast darkness, which implies the final breakdown of the American Dream.

However, different from Fitzgerald’s narration, the movie reaches an end by recreating the scene in which Gatsby stretches his arm in the darkness, attempting to get closer to Daisy’s green light, echoing the beginning of the movie and slightly altering its symbolism. In the novel, the green light means way more than Gatsby’s passion for Daisy; its inaccessibility is reinforced by the unbridgeable gap between the past and the present, and between Gatsby’s ambition and Daisy’s indifference. Fitzgerald’s Daisy acknowledges that “I feel far away from her...It’s hard to make her

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the Kipling’s *Maisie* and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* – in particular, the relationship between the red light in the former and the green light in the latter – is thoroughly discussed in James Plath’s “In an Odd Light: Kipling’s *Maisie* and Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*”.

understand...And she doesn't understand...she used to be able to understand...Can't repeat the past? Why of course you can!" [3]. The movie, however, tells a more sentimental story about Daisy and Gatsby's romance, miraculously bridging the irremediable gap between the two and undermining the novel's emphasis on Gatsby's grand, idealistic American Dream of changing his fate permanently. Nick the narrator speculates that "Gatsby himself didn't believe it [the phone] would come and perhaps he no longer cared" [3], but Luhrmann's Gatsby confidently believes that "I supposed that Daisy will call too". The film emphasizes Daisy's hesitance about whether or not to make a phone call; finally, the golden girl picks up the phone, and the butler answers, "I know Mr. Gatsby will be very happy that you've called". Gatsby hears the phone call, and he smiles triumphantly, murmuring Daisy's name with hope even at the moment when he is shot. Drowning in a sea of greenness, Gatsby's dream, however, is partially fulfilled and the novel's harsh social criticism and its tragic tone is somewhat undermined. This scene newly created by the movie accomplishes the commercial purpose of impressing the audience with the dramatic effect, but it essentially violates the key nature of Gatsby's American Dream. Fitzgerald makes clear that Gatsby's American Dream is finally crushed; the social critique in the novel is severe. But in this movie, it appears as if Gatsby still maintains hope for his relationship with Daisy and thus dies fantasizing that Daisy finally decides to call him. In "exposing the idealism underlying sentimental desire", Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" more gravely exposes the sentimentalism underlying idealistic desire" [5]. However, romantic love, rather than ambitious puritanical American Dream and social criticism, becomes the central message in Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*; this also weakens the depth and complexity in Gatsby's characteristics, reducing him from a wise, idealistic, assiduous adventurer to an overly passionate lover.

### 3. Daisy: A Combination of White and Yellow

Due to the help of the visual effect, Luhrmann's movie in this way does well in helping the audience better comprehend the symbolism of colors and the materialistic environment. Similarly, the colors of the main characters' clothes and the fanciful parties are also emphasized reflectively in the movie. For example, Daisy's white dress implies both about her external and internal characters. At the beginning of the movie, Nick sees Daisy wear a white dress – which reminds the audience of the color of silverness – and fancy jewels. The golden girl impresses those who do not know her internal nature with a gorgeous appearance, which indicates her social status. According to A. E. Elmore, Fitzgerald intentionally uses white as the color that appears the most in the book in order to portray Daisy's character as a woman who looks innocent but has a materialistic nature. "White, even after one excludes near-synonyms such as silver, makes more appearances in the novel than any other single color, and something like three of every four are applied to East Egg or characters from East Egg, especially to Daisy" [6]. Elmore continues to argue that the whiteness that exists on Daisy's clothes is essentially connected to the word "bright" – as described in the novel, Daisy "was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth" [6]. Such associations make the color of white, and the light and the brightness work together. Elmore's analysis indicates that Fitzgerald implicitly connects the word brightness with the whiteness that dominates Daisy's clothing. In the movie, the audience could easily see that Daisy's white dress is made of fancy materials which clearly reinforce Daisy's upper-class status. In this way, Luhrmann's movie version successfully recreates the book's description of characters' clothing and in turn makes the audience understand their social status and personal impressions more directly. Daisy firstly appears wearing such a fabulous white dress, which demonstrates her superficial impression on characters like Nick and Gatsby.

Daisy's deceptive innocence and her deep-rooted materialism is also made obvious in her name, which means a flower with white petals around a yellow centre, which symbolizes Daisy's character as being ostensibly pure and innocent but essentially materialistic and corruptive. However,

Luhrmann noticeably deletes in his film one most important line in Fitzgerald's original novel, namely, Gatsby's comment of Daisy: "Her voice is full of money." [3]. Gatsby's comment on Daisy reveals that he clearly knows Daisy's materialistic nature; his longing for Daisy, in this sense, is more for his American Dream – an ambitious dream which, like Daisy, is both idealistic and materialistic – than for Daisy *per se*. However, in Lurhmann's movie, this line is deleted, which makes the visual effect of his movie somewhat less effective. Further, in the movie, one would see Gatsby's giant yellow car standing in front of the characters – including Daisy who wears a white dress with white earrings the whole time – dwarfing them, which again strengthens Gatsby's materialistic success. Had the line not been deleted, it would have achieved its best purpose of corroborating with the color symbolism used here. Daniel Schneider remarks, that "white traditionally symbolizes purity, and there is no doubt that Fitzgerald wants to underscore the ironic disparity between the ostensible purity of Daisy...and [her] actual corruption" [7]. Schneider also contends that yellow becomes the "symbol of money, the crass materialism that corrupts the dream and ultimately destroys it" [7]. Admittedly, it is Gatsby's dream of winning Daisy's love and respect that is corrupted by his obsession with possessing wealth and material objects, a wealth which Gatsby believes will ensure Daisy's unwavering love [7]. Had Gatsby's comment on Daisy been kept in the movie, the word "money" would have well resonated with the image of Gatsby's gorgeous yellow car – the best symbol of both his materialistic power and his vulnerable American Dream. By deleting this line, Luhrmann weakens Fitzgerald's social criticism, makes Daisy a less objectified woman – namely, an equivalent of money or the materialistic yellow car – and makes Gatsby a more tender, sentimental figure than he is supposed to be in the original novel.

#### 4. Fireworks

As Tom Morgan rightly points out, Luhrmann's film is "one of the most sentimental versions of The Great Gatsby ever made" [8]; stylistically, the film "accentuates sentimental visual metaphors throughout" [8]. Such "sentimental visual metaphors" include not only the green light and white clothing as mentioned above, but are "foreshadowed with the fireworks that herald Gatsby's first appearance and illuminate the sky in the first party scene" [2] – a materialist and restless environment. According to Carol Vernallis, Luhrmann's movie is classic in its portrayals of materialistic party scenes: "The Great Gatsby's 'arcadian' party sequence counts as one of the most opulent, densely articulated, and extravagant in film history" [2]. In this film, "Fairytale tableaux of hired performers merge with party guests who mimic these tableaux. Ornaments, from paper birds to balloons, are thrown up as complicating scrimms. A scene of musicality is care-fully established" [2]. Vernallis gives a technical analysis of how Luhrmann set up the party scene to display the atmosphere that is dominated by materialism during the 1920s. In the movie everything seems to move so fast that it is hard for one to catch a break, which again strengthens the theme of the domination of economic success at the sacrifice of moral values. Be-sides, Vernallis also indicates that the party scene implies the story's plot: "But even within the spectacle, the story both recedes and advances: the crowds' engagement builds to a moment of class solidarity, but moneyed patriarchy (Gatsby) is offered as a substitute" [2]. Gatsby's position at the center of the party scene reveals his highly noticed position by reaching the climax of his materialistic richness. But such centrality on the other hand implies the vulnerability of materialistic gain. When the audience first sees Gatsby's face in the movie, Gatsby appears un-der the scene of firework bursting, which is a new scene that does not appear in Fitzgerald's book. Such scene could be regarded as using the firework to symbolize Gatsby's fate: that he has reached the pinnacle of materialistic gains and shown his wealth by all means, just as the splendid fire-works that reach to the climax of the dark sky; but on the other hand, just as the fireworks which would finally become the ashes on the ground, Gatsby's fate, along with his vulnerable, firework-like American Dream, is doomed to failure. The fireworks, like the green light,

shine strongly to visually impress the audience, but simultaneously add a note of sentimental fatality to the film.

## 5. Conclusion

In general, this paper mainly analyses how different colours in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* are visually represented in Luhrmann's film adaptation of this novel and how, the director actually alters the symbolic meanings of some colors by changing or deleting important plots. It could be argued that Luhrmann manages to achieve a commercial success mainly by his use of sensuous colors and his faithful reproduction of the materialistic society as described in the novel; however, the film diverts from the original understanding of Gatsby's American Dream since it overemphasizes Gatsby's passionate but futile love for Daisy. The symbolic meanings of the green light, the white and yellow colors on Daisy and Gatsby's clothes, and the yellow car all work together to fully demonstrate the essence of Gatsby's American Dream and the characteristics of the protagonists. The movie's representations of these colors essentially divert from Fitzgerald's novel; it simplifies the original story but that makes it a Hollywood success catering to the modern audience.

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