

Narrative Distance and Time Distance -- On the Application of Aesthetic Distance in The Great Gatsby

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Abstract: Narrative distance and time distance are significant embodiment of the concept of aesthetic distance. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald skillfully employs this concept to illustrate the space among the author, the reader, the narrator and characters. Underpinned on the concept, this paper explores the specific approach of Fitzgerald to manipulating the narrative distance and time distance in this novel. It illuminates that through the application of aesthetic distance, the author is enabled to build the tension and suspense in the work, render the readers to be exposed to the fascinating aesthetic experience, and enrich the profound connotation of the work.

Keywords: Aesthetic distance; Narrative distance; Time Distance; *The Great Gatsby*

Introduction

1. A Brief Introduction to Authors and Works

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (1896-1940) is an American writer in the 20th century, who was drafted into the Army in 1917. (Yang Renjing 274) In his most popular novel, *The Great Gatsby*, the first-person narrator Nick Carraway describes the story of Jay Gatsby, the mystery millionaire, and his preoccupation with getting back together with his ex-lover Daisy Buchanan.

2. A Brief Introduction to Aesthetic Distance Theory

Wayne Clayton Booth introduces the concept of aesthetic distance in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which is the milestone of the aesthetics of novels in the 20th century. (Britannica 1) He emphasizes that authors should use specific rhetorical techniques to create gaps and spaces between the author, the reader, the narrator, and characters in the works, to create distinctive literary effects and provide readers with the opportunity to experience an excellent aesthetic feeling.

3. Literature Review

In the past few decades, multiple scholars at home and abroad have studied *The Great Gatsby* and the aesthetic distance theory respectively. Firstly, the study of *The Great Gatsby* indicates four research trends, which are the micro perspective of character's identity (Sari Dina 130), macro perspective of American dream's delusion (Zhang 102), the trend of interdisciplinary study (M. Amir. P 102) and the trend of writing techniques such as narrative strategy (Tian 23). Secondly, different theories are mingled with the aesthetic distance theory in some literature, but this study itself and its application on *The Great Gatsby* are scarcely focused. (Xu Suyi 486; Andringa, Els 431) Therefore, it is of significance to probe into the manifestation of aesthetic distance in *The Great Gatsby* and analyses its function and effects.

Chapter 1 Narrative Distance shown in The Great Gatsby

1.1 Narrative Distance among Main Characters

1.1.1 Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby

For Gatsby, narrator Nick first stays away from him, then gets close to him, and takes his side in the end. Even before Nick meets Gatsby, he has heard some scandals that Gatsby has "killed a man once", and was "a German spy in the War". (Fitzgerald 29) So, he keeps his distance from this affluent stranger, which is quite renowned since is portrayed as the

stereotype of a wealthy man. Nick, the narrator, and Gatsby, the book's protagonist, are poles apart from one another. (Newman Andrew 209) However, it turns out that they share a lot of similarities. They've both fought in the same war and belong to the same division. Later, as the plot develops, Gatsby's honesty touches Nick, rendering him to penetrate through Gatsby's naive demeanor to his moral principles, which ultimately makes his distance with Gatsby closer.

1.1.2 Nick Carraway and Daisy Buchanan

Nick is first close to Tom and Daisy, gradually estranges from them, and becomes hostile to them in the end. Daisy, his cousin, as well as Tom, his college classmate, both enjoys the more intimate relationship with him. Nevertheless, Nick does not agree with their values, even with a little disdain. In his perspective, Daisy is apathetic and hypocritical despite having a lovely appearance and voice. However, Gatsby's request forces him to keep contact with them, wrestling with their love triangle. Having witnessed that how Gatsby is ultimately killed in revenge for Daisy's crime, (Martínez, Micaela 7) he ultimately regards Daisy as a fundamental slave who is driven by lust and money, which eventually lengths their distance.

1.2 Narrative Distance Between the Characters and the Author

As the characters, Nick and Gatsby appear to be the mere fictional creations of the author. Nonetheless, their images are actually drawn by the personal life of the author, Fitzgerald, who is the prototype of them.

The experiences of Gatsby corresponds with the author. Fitzgerald was raised by a family of business people, whose early exposure to the world's cyclical nature and the value of riches. Having joined the army, he met and fell in love with Zelda. But their nuptials had to wait until the author became popular on account of Zelda's yearning for wealth. They spent lavishly after getting married, so he was compelled to sell books to appease her.

Through the image of Nick, Fitzgerald actually reveals his ideas. On the one hand, Nick participates in some upper class social engagements and considers this novel way of life as a rejection of conventional morals. On the other hand, he examines and assesses these phenomena collectedly. He resists following the herd, adheres to certain conventional moral principles, which adequately conveys the author's voice.

Chapter 2 Time Distance shown in The Great Gatsby

2.1 Narrative Time and the Character

The time is not only refers to a single event time in novels, but rather encompasses a variety of features due to the presence of authors, narrators, characters, and readers. There are two overlaps of time that affect narrators and characters, which are event time and narrative time. From the point of view of novel narration, this novel does not directly narrate Gatsby's life in chronological order like writing character biography. Instead, it employs the perspective of an outsider to slowly tell the audience what he knows indirectly. Consequently, it appears to fragment the story's chronological line. At the beginning, Nick's relationship with Gatsby is told by the narrator. Later, readers learn about the romance between Gatsby and Daisy from Nick. Then, it depicts the souring life of Gatsby and his romance from his own narration. And finally, the memories of Old Gatsby and Gatsby's youth are narrated by Gatsby himself, which actually indicates the non-chronological narrative order.

2.2 Narrative Time and Reading time

In the book, the author sometimes lengthens the narrative time. For instance, Gatsby and Daisy's reunion in Chapter 5 is particularly obvious. The tea party is set at four o'clock in the afternoon, but the author commences the narration at eleven when Gatsby sends his manservant to mow Nick's garden lawn. At two, he sends a gram of greenhouse flowers with numerous arrangements. At three, the pale-looking Gatsby hurriedly enters. At four, Gatsby believes Daisy wouldn't arrive. Then Daisy's arrival eventually occurs.

The host of the tea party appeared to catch Gatsby's anxiety. (Rai, Bidur 18) The author purposefully extends the narrative time in this circumstance, prolonging characters' actual experiences considerably than the original time length of the story or the time it takes to read it, which shrinks the psychological gap between readers and characters and let the reader experience the same level of immersion as the narrator so that they can more fully comprehend Gatsby's state of tension.

Chapter 3 Analysis of Aesthetic Distance Theory in The Great Gatsby

3.1 Conflicts: Limited Degree of Use

The author creates a gap and difference in value, morality, reason, and other aspects between the author, the narrator, the characters and the readers in the work, through his flexible employment of narrative and time distance. By maintaining

these distances, he is capable of generating various literary effects and providing the reader with a striking aesthetic experience while reading. However, the separation must be neither too close nor too distant, since “if it is too far, the work would look impossible, unnatural or meaningless, and we will not respond to it. If it gets too personal, the piece loses its ability to be recognized as art.” (Wayne C. Booth 136) Nick, a trustworthy narrator, stands in for the book’s implicit author. He has the same moral, intellectual, and cognitive norms as the assumed author, and shares the same sentiment with the reader. Through his narration, it indicates the emphasis on both Gatsby’s flaws and his instinct value.

3.2 Harmony: Optimal Reading Effect

Aesthetics is a dynamic process that involves the subject and the object. Hinging on the depth of the subject’s cognition, the object will present the subject with beauty of various levels and meanings. The deeper the subject’s understanding of the object, the more apparent opposite trends there will be in the distance between the subject and the object. (Heagarty 44) It is widely acknowledged that Fitzgerald manages to achieve the extraordinary effect of the aesthetic distance. Firstly, he is particularly adept at employing time distance to show the complicated and challenging process of characters, expressing their psychological characteristics through his finely tuned and careful observation of time. Secondly, he precisely controls the distance between the narrator and Gatsby, the narrator and Daisy, in addition to the distance between the narrator and other characters in the novel, offering readers the optimal reading experience.

Chapter 4 Conclusion

The “aesthetic distance” hypothesis offers readers a new way to get the finest aesthetic test when reading novels. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald flexibly employs the narrative distance and time distance to describe the proximity and separation between the numerous individuals.

Firstly, by utilizing a variety of narrative approaches and rhetorical devices, the author illuminates how each character is entwined with each other more explicitly, and stimulates the profounder connotation of the novel’s theme. Secondly, through the description of the time distance, it makes the narration more dramatic and leaves certain suspense. In addition, it also promotes readers to better appreciate the implication of the plot. Moreover, it fits in with what the readers are expecting, showcasing the visual impact and creative attractiveness of his story to the fullest extent.

In sum, the best reading effect means impelling the reader to arrive at the same conclusion even though the author, the narrator, the characters, and reader frequently have radically different beliefs and norms. *The Great Gatsby* achieves the optimal literary reading effect through the appropriate application of the concept of aesthetic distance, making it a fantastic work in the history of American fiction.

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