

An Analysis of Popular Culture Novels Can Function as a Site of Memory: A Case Study of The Great Gatsby

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Abstract: Memory scholar and historian Nora clarifies that “memory is a perpetually actual phenomena, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past”. Historical memory and literary creations have a tight relationship. Literary works, as places of memory, can reflect and shape historical memory, while historical and cultural memory serve as a basis for literary work creation. “Memory, then, is not straightforward: it is not just a recalling of the past. It is much more complicated than this; and it involves us in political existence, while also giving us a sense of identity and giving us a sense of difference”. Hirsch pointed out that this type of memory that transmits events they did not experience in the collective memory to the “generation after” through stories, images, and behaviours is called post memory. This essay will analyse how Fitzgerald’s literary work “The Great Gatsby” “shaped the memories of the time.

Keywords: The Great Gatsby; literature; collective memory

1. A journey through the screen to reshape historical memory and national identity

The Great Gatsby is a middle length novel by American author Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald set in New York City and Long Island in the 1920s. It was created in the first decade of the Great Depression in the United States. In 2013, It was adapted from the novel to film which was directed by Baz Luhrmann for the public. “Film has the power to affect the ways in which viewers think and ‘remember’ the past: while film mediates the construction of individual and group memories, in their variety and subtle power, reach different collectives in different ways [1]. Jay Gatsby’s personal memory in the film is a microcosm of American history. His fate is tied to the history, culture and social change of the United States. It describes the story of poor young people Nick Carraway who harboured the “American dream” during this period, using various means to try their best to squeeze into the upper class, but ultimately their dreams were shattered, and they took the road of no return. The film “The Great Gatsby” recreates historical events using background music and narrative style, allowing the audience to relive history in their minds and develop a communal memory of history. This memory can strengthen a sense of “national identity” [2] and solidarity while also influencing people’s comprehension and appraisal of history.

2. Jazz and Collective Memory: Echoes of The Times and the Death of the American Dream in The Great Gatsby

“Music is where the nation was imagined and even lived” [3]. The rendering of this musical atmosphere creates an immersive feeling for the audience and evokes people’s memory of that period of history. The “Jazz Age” was accompanied by the electrical and automobile age and the rise of new art forms such as jazz. The social ballroom parties were popular, and jazz and the fast-spinning Chilterns, as well as the tango, which had been popular since before the war, were sought after by the upper classes. The era became known as the “Mad Twenties”. The soundtrack used in the film is jazz, a form of music that emerged in the United States in the early twentieth century. This form of music was originally a way for black slaves to express their dissatisfaction. It had a strong sense of rhythm and was often used to represent the lifestyle of the white middle class and was the most popular cultural phenomenon from the 1920s to the 1930s, which is why this decade was also called the “Jazz Age” by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Popular culture works are set in a particular historical period, which helps the audience to form a collective memory of a society and to empathize with it emotionally [4]. The film is narrated in the first person and depicts the historical background and age of American culture in the 1920s through the eyes of the main character, Nick Carraway, allowing the spectator to immerse themselves in the ambiance of the time. According to Greenblatt (1980), “Literature has not only a creative but also a transformative effect on society”. Literary texts have a strong connection to real life. To some sense, Gatsby’s American dream was a fading one rather than the genuine one. Following the end of World War I, capitalism society evolved into an imperialist stage, with the hereditary system heavily influencing one’s income and rank. People became addicted to money

and power as society declined, war caused turmoil, and the spiritual realm collapsed. The lingering scent of copper in this setting tarnished the original American dream. Material activities took precedence over spiritual pursuits as the central focus of the dream. No matter how hard Gatsby tried, his birth determined that his dream of entering the upper class would be difficult to realize.

Literature: a key force for preserving memory and promoting multiculturalism

“Literature and (cultural) memory have long been assets of humanity, though their relationship has been only too often either implicit or concealed, if not brushed aside as some weird exercise hardly worth institutionalizing. Fodder for thought, literature and memory traverse cultures all the way back to the burgeoning of Western civilization” (Mihaela Irimia, 2017, p1). Popular culture works convey the values and cultural traditions of the society at the time through the re-imagining of history. These values and cultural traditions can become an important part of people’s identity and heritage, and thus part of their cultural memory. In addition, literary works themselves can also become part of history and a valuable source of information for the study of history by future generations. As a result, literary works serve a vital role in the preservation and transmission of cultural and historical memory.

However, when it comes to historical events and collective memories, we must keep our ability to think and assess independently, rather than mindlessly embracing traditional notions or authoritative viewpoints. By examining and comparing data and information from many sources, we can gain a more in-depth understanding and respect for historical truths. At the same time, we must respect diverse points of view and viewpoints to foster multicultural exchanges and relationships.

3. The Symphony of Literature and Film: Reshaping historical memory and promoting cultural dialogue

3.1 The interaction between literature and film: a deep exploration of historical memory

As two different art forms, literary works and film show unique complementarity in inheriting and reshaping historical memory. After the novel “The Great Gatsby” was adapted into a film, it not only retained the essence of the original, but also made the audience feel the style and emotion of that era more intuitively through the double impact of visual and auditory. Every scene, every piece of clothing and every line in the film is an accurate restoration of the culture of that particular historical period, which not only deepens the audience’s cognition of history, but also stimulates their interest and desire to explore that history.

3.2 Historical interpretation from multiple perspectives

Literary works and films, as cultural products, often carry creators’ unique understanding and interpretation of history. Through the tragic fate of Gatsby, *The Great Gatsby* reveals the illusion and collapse of the American dream, and also reflects the deep-rooted problems such as the solidification of social class and moral decay at that time. This multi-perspective interpretation encourages viewers and readers to look beyond the traditional framework and examine history with a more open and critical eye. In this process, audiences with different cultural backgrounds can have different understandings and feelings about the same historical event based on their own experience, thus promoting the communication and dialogue between cultures.

3.3 Literature and film: Promoting cultural identity and reflection

Literary works and films are not only entertainment tools, but also important carriers of cultural inheritance and reflection. Through its profound themes and rich cultural connotations, *The Great Gatsby* inspires the audience to think deeply about their own identity, social values and historical responsibilities. This kind of thinking not only helps to enhance the sense of national identity, but also promotes the reflection and criticism of individual culture, and then promotes the innovation and development of culture.

3.4 Construction of cultural memory for the future

In the rapidly changing modern society, how to construct and inherit cultural memory has become an important issue. Literary works and films, as important carriers of cultural memory, have the ability to spread across time and space. They not only record the history of the past, but also provide rich materials and inspiration for the construction of cultural memory in the future through continuous adaptation and innovation. Every adaptation of “*The Great Gatsby*” is a re-interpretation and re-creation of the original work, which not only enriches the connotation of cultural memory, but also leaves valuable cultural heritage for future generations.

4. Conclusion

As the carrier of cultural inheritance, the interaction between literary works and films not only excavates the depth of history, but also broadens the breadth of our cognition of history. Under the interpretation of diversified perspectives, the fate of historical events and characters has been endowed with richer connotations, which inspires people to think deeply about the past, present and future. At the same time, this process also reminds us that when facing history and collective memory, we should maintain critical thinking, dare to question traditional concepts, and form a more comprehensive and profound understanding through the comparison and analysis of diverse information. Only in this way can we better respect history, cherish culture, promote exchanges and understanding between different cultures, and jointly build a more harmonious and inclusive world. Therefore, *The Great Gatsby* is not only a work of literature or a film, but also a bridge between the past and the future, a power to stimulate thought and dialogue, which allows us to look back at the past and look forward to a better future.

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