The Great Gatsby Example: Definitional Resolution in Tier 4

A Worked Example for the Hierarchy of Relational Claims

A supplementary document to the Hierarchy of Relational Claims. The framework was conceived and developed by Jim Grusendorf; this document was drafted with AI assistance under the author's direction. See the white paper preface for a full account of the collaborative process.

Setup

Consider two physical copies of The Great Gatsby — same novel, same edition, same text. One has a coffee stain on the cover. The other doesn't. A reader opens both to page 43 and finds identical text on both pages.

Are these two books the same thing?

The answer depends entirely on what definition you are using, and whether that definition is the right one for the claim being made.

The Resolution Problem

At high definitional resolution — the level of individual physical object — the two books are not identical. They differ in location, ownership, history, and the presence or absence of a coffee stain. At this resolution, Tier 4 does not hold. They are two distinct objects.

At lower resolution — the level of edition and textual content — the two books are identical. Same publisher, same text, same pagination, same cover design (minus the stain, which is not part of the cover design). At this resolution, Tier 4 holds. They instantiate the same specification.

Lower still — the level of novel — they are again identical, and so is every other printing of The Great Gatsby in any language, including editions with different pagination. At this resolution, "page 43 has the same content" is no longer guaranteed, but "this is the same work of literature" is.

Three different definitions. Three different verdicts on whether Tier 4 holds. All three are internally coherent.

The Constraint: Analogy-Relative Resolution

The Hierarchy's Tier 4 does not simply ask whether two things share a type. It asks whether they share the type the analogy requires. The operative definition is the one that captures what the correspondence was actually claiming to share — no finer, no coarser.

This means definitional resolution is not a free parameter. It is constrained by the analogy under examination.

If the overarching analogy concerns textual content — if the claim is that two readers encountering these books will encounter the same story, the same sentences, the same argument — then the relevant definition is at the level of edition and text. The coffee stain is irrelevant. The different ownership histories are irrelevant. The fact that one copy is slightly more worn than the other is irrelevant. These differences exist at a resolution finer than what the analogy requires, and invoking them to resist the Tier 4 finding is not a refutation — it is a change of subject.

If the overarching analogy concerns physical object identity — if the claim is that two people own the same object, or that the same object occupies two locations — then the coffee stain is not irrelevant. It is evidence of non-identity at the operative resolution. In this case, Tier 4 does not hold, and correctly does not hold.

The example works precisely because it makes visible what is usually implicit: that every Tier 4 claim carries an embedded definitional choice, and that choice can be evaluated for whether it is calibrated to the analogy.

The Partial Recant

Suppose a claimant is confronted with a Tier 4 finding — told that two copies of the same edition of The Great Gatsby are, at the relevant resolution, the same thing. The claimant responds: "Okay, they're the same thing. But they're still different — one has a coffee stain."

This is the partial recant. It concedes type identity while invoking a finer distinction to reintroduce separateness.

The Hierarchy's response is a diagnostic question: is the distinction between a stained and an unstained copy relevant to the analogy being made? In almost any analogy about literature, language, narrative, or textual meaning, the answer is no. The coffee stain does not affect what is on page 43. The recant is a deflection — it gestures toward real physical difference while failing to show that the difference matters for the claim at hand.

The recant would land only if the analogy were about the physical objects themselves — their condition, their market value, their provenance — rather than their textual content. In that case, the appropriate response is not to dismiss the recant but to acknowledge that the analogy was operating at a finer resolution than initially specified, and to re-examine it there.

Note that re-examination at a finer resolution is not a defeat. It is a clarification of what the analogy was actually claiming, and it may strengthen or weaken the original argument once the operative definition is correctly identified.

The Edition Boundary: When Resolution Legitimately Tightens

The example also illustrates when a finer definition is legitimately required.

Two copies of The Great Gatsby from different printings may not have the same content on page 43. Pagination varies across editions. A first edition, a mass-market paperback, and a scholarly critical edition may all carry the same novel while distributing its text across pages differently. If the analogy depends on specific page references — if the claim is that "page 43 of your copy and page 43 of my copy contain the same passage" — then the relevant definition must include edition and printing. A definition that identifies both books merely as "copies of The Great Gatsby" is too coarse for this analogy. It loses a distinction the analogy depends on.

This is what it means for a definition to be unjustifiably loose: it operates at a resolution where differences the analogy requires are invisible.

The two failure modes are therefore symmetric:

- Definition too fine: Invoking the coffee stain to resist a Tier 4 finding about textual content. The distinction is real but irrelevant to the analogy.

- Definition too coarse: Treating all printings as equivalent when the analogy depends on consistent pagination. The definition loses a distinction the analogy requires.

The correct definition sits at exactly the resolution where the analogy's operative distinctions are preserved and nothing finer is introduced without justification.

The Recursive Structure

Identifying the correct definition is itself a correspondence claim. One can ask: at what tier does the proposed definition match the analogy?

A definition that merely feels appropriate is a Tier 1 match — an intuitive sense of fit without specified dimensions. A definition that can be shown to structurally capture the dimensions the analogy is tracking is a Tier 2 match. A definition the analogy's own structure forces — where any coarser definition loses a required distinction and any finer one introduces distinctions the analogy does not depend on — is a Tier 3 match.

In the Gatsby example, the argument that the edition-and-text definition is the right one for a literary analogy is at least Tier 2: there is a specifiable structural reason why textual identity, not physical object identity, is the operative dimension for claims about what a reader will encounter in a book. Whether it reaches Tier 3 — whether the analogy's constraint space forces exactly this definition and no other — is a further question, but it is a tractable one.

This recursion is in principle unbounded: the claim about the definition can be evaluated, and so can the claim about that evaluation. In practice, the regress terminates when the match between definition and analogy is established to the degree the argument requires. The availability of the regress is a feature, not a bug — it means that definitional choices in Tier 4 are not arbitrary, and that challenges to those choices can be engaged rigorously rather than deflected.

Summary

The Great Gatsby example illustrates four properties of Tier 4 simultaneously:

1 Resolution-indexing: Whether Tier 4 holds depends on the definition applied, and multiple definitions at different resolutions are all internally coherent.

2 Analogy-relative constraint: The operative definition is not freely chosen — it is the one the analogy requires. Finer and coarser alternatives are unjustified unless the analogy depends on the distinctions they introduce or elide.

3 The partial recant: Conceding type identity while invoking a finer distinction (the coffee stain) to reintroduce separateness is a deflection unless the finer distinction is relevant to the analogy's claim.

4 Recursive evaluability: The choice of definition is itself a correspondence claim subject to evaluation by the Hierarchy, grounding definitional choices in the same logical structure as the tier claims they support.

Together, these properties make Tier 4 the most logically complex of the five tiers — not because identity of definition is philosophically obscure, but because its correct application requires a precise account of what the analogy was actually claiming, at what resolution, and why.