

Women in *The Great Gatsby*:

How does F. Scott Fitzgerald develop thematic elements, male characterization, and symbolism with his portrayal of women in *The Great Gatsby*?



Le Jardin Academy

Candidate Number: 

Spring 2014

Abstract

This extended essay hopes to examine the utilization of female characters by F. Scott Fitzgerald within his novel *The Great Gatsby*, specifically focusing on their use to develop thematic elements, male characterization, and symbolism. These three elements were chosen based on their prominence throughout the novel, the recognition they have historically received, and the influence that the females characters, primarily Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle, have in their formation. The themes discussed include the pastoral, with specific focus on the rejection of female sexuality; the failure of the American dream, with specific focus on Daisy's representation of that dream; and the immorality of the upper class. The three main male characters are also explored: Nick, the narrator; Tom, the antagonist; and Gatsby, the protagonist. Their portrayals are considered with specific regard to how the author uses female characters to reinforce their definitions. Lastly, the use of symbols in the novel is investigated. In this paper, the focus is on Daisy as a symbol, of the upper class, of money, and of dreams and possibilities. These topics are examined within the context of the time period of the novel and with a consideration of the essential elements and themes of *The Great Gatsby*, as well as its role as a "Great American Novel".

Word count: 216

Table of Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| Abstract..... | 2 |
| 1. Introduction..... | 4 |
| 2. Themes..... | 4 |
| 3. Male Characterization..... | 8 |
| 4. Symbols..... | 12 |
| 5. Conclusion..... | 14 |
| Works Cited..... | 16 |

1. Introduction

The Great Gatsby is often considered to be the “Great American Novel”. When we give such cultural weight to any piece of literature, it is important to consider all implications of the work. The treatment of the women seemed problematic to me on my initial reading of the novel and I thought it would be appropriate to analyze the use of women in the context of literary work. By examining the work through a feminist lens, as well as with an awareness of the elements of fiction, an analysis of how the author uses women to create his oeuvre can be formed. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, the female characters (primarily Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle) are used by the author as manipulable devices, existing not as realistic, round characters but rather as tools to aid in the development of the other elements of prose which define *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald’s primary objectives with his female characters are to promote themes that *The Great Gatsby* is meant to evoke, to develop the characters of the men who surround them (specifically Nick, Tom, and Gatsby himself), and lastly to serve as symbols of ideas and concepts greater than an individual.

2. Themes

The first of the themes to be discussed is the concept of pastoral. According to critic Harold Bloom, “In its simplest form pastoral involves a retreat in time and place to an enclosed green world, a retreat expressing man’s dream of a simplified, harmonious existence from which the complexities of social ills and natural process...are eliminated” (68). Evidently, Gatsby has this desire to retreat in time with respect to his relationship with Daisy. He wishes to return to the place and time at which Daisy once loved him, as exemplified by his reaction to Nick’s assertion that the past cannot be repeated: “‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’ ... ‘I’m going to fix

everything just the way it was before,” (Fitzgerald 110). However, despite Nick’s contradiction of Gatsby here, on a larger scale, he shares the same pastoral values. He prefers the Midwest to the new, gaudy East. He reminisces on “a fresh, green breast of the world” (180) before the trees had been cleared to make way for manors. Both on an interpersonal and national level, the arresting of time and return to innocence are extremely important in *The Great Gatsby*. One facet of this desired innocence is the exclusion of sexuality, as sexuality represents a move away from innocent, carefree childhood and the unstoppable passage of time into the corrupt world of adulthood.

Fitzgerald uses his female characters to express this by contrasting Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker with Myrtle Wilson. The initial introduction to Daisy and Jordan has them both wearing white dresses, a color traditionally associated with purity and innocence. The first physical description of Jordan, by her future beau, describes her as “a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet” (11). Though Nick states he enjoys looking at her, the visual imagery used is nonsexual and Nick, in fact, compares her to a man. Compare this to the initial description of Myrtle Wilson, who contrasts the purity of Jordan and Daisy by representing a sexual woman. Myrtle “carried her surplus flesh as sensuously as some women can...there was an immediate perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering” (25). However, it is also stated that her “face...contained no facet or gleam of beauty...” (25). Immediately, from the physical descriptions, it is clear that having a voluptuous figure and a sensual presence is not beautiful, while being small-breasted with an athletic body is. Sexuality, at least in the form of female appearance, is looked upon with disdain while the more childlike and innocent form, that matches most closely the values of the pastoral, is celebrated.

However, the contrast continues past just physical appearances. Jordan and Daisy are

described as being “as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire” (12). In addition, Fitzgerald avoids the possible sexual connotation of the character of Daisy, who is sought after and desired for so much of the novel, through the choice of Nick, her cousin, as narrator. This ensures that she is perceived as a childish sister rather than a lover. On the other hand, Myrtle’s entire role in the novel is one associated with passion, desire, and sexuality: the mistress. By having Myrtle represent sexuality, Fitzgerald associates sexuality with violence and chaos through Myrtle’s association with these forces. Towards the culmination of Nick’s afternoon spent with Tom and Myrtle, “Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand” (37). Myrtle is also the first character to be killed in the novel. In the description of her corpse, the two areas whose injuries are given special authorial attention are her “left breast...swinging loose like a flap” and her “mouth...wide open and ripped at the corners” (137). By highlighting how female sexuality is linked with violence and the grotesque, Fitzgerald is using the women of his novel to indicate a preference for a pastoral America, a place where time stops and childlike innocence is protected.

The Great Gatsby is not solely about reaching for the past; it is also about looking towards and dreaming of the future. Specifically, another of its themes centers on the American dream and, more precisely, the failure of that dream. Gatsby is the character who exemplifies this quest to rise to riches as a self-made man. However, it is not only money and social status for which Gatsby strives, but also Daisy Buchanan, who is often associated with the two. The symbol that most famously represents the American dream and Gatsby’s hopes for the future is the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock. Through Gatsby’s dual quest for Daisy and affluence, the two become further linked. She embodies the goal of this dream. By manipulating our opinion of Daisy, Fitzgerald can also manipulate our opinion of the American dream. As Daisy fails to live up the expectations of both Gatsby and the reader, so does

this ideal. When “Daisy tumbled short of his dreams-not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusions” (95), we see that the same is true of the entire quest. However, as the novel continues, it becomes only more and more obvious that Daisy is not who Gatsby believes. It is her careless driving that strikes the fatal blow against Myrtle and her lack of morality that allows Gatsby to take the blame for the manslaughter. When he has been killed for her crime, she moves away with her husband and does not attend the funeral. Perhaps unfairly, Daisy is often judged extremely harshly by readers and critics alike:

“Marius Bewley, for example, refers to Daisy’s ‘vicious emptiness’ and her ‘monstrous indifference.’ To Robert Ornstein she is ‘criminally amoral,’ and Alfred Kazin judges her ‘vulgar and inhuman.’ Finally, Leslie Fiedler sees Daisy as a ‘Dark Destroyer,’ a purveyor of ‘corruption and death,’ and the ‘first notable anti-virgin of our fiction, the prototype of the blasphemous portraits of the Fair Goddess as bitch in which our twentieth-century fiction abounds’” (Person, 1).

When Daisy is so unlikeable, what she represents becomes tainted as well. Fitzgerald utilizes the character of Daisy to represent the American dream and uses her failure and betrayal to indicate the theme of the failure of the American dream.

This is not the only theme Fitzgerald furthers by manipulating the likeability of Daisy Buchanan. Daisy, with her ties to money and high social standing, represents not only the quest for these things but also those who already have acquired them: the upper class. *The Great Gatsby* is extremely critical of the upper class, judging them as hollow, shallow, and childish. Fitzgerald writes, “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy-they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the

mess they had made...” (179). In addition, the character of Jordan, as an upper class woman, is also given faults to prove the immorality of the upper class as a whole. Nick, who prides himself as an honest man, says of Jordan, “She was incurably dishonest. She wasn’t able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young” (58). Her upbringing in an affluent and advantaged family has left her unable to ever tolerate feeling disadvantaged, leading to her lies, just as Daisy’s upbringing has led to her carelessness. Fitzgerald employs the faults of these women to further the novel’s theme of the hollowness of the upper class. As the entire novel can be read as a critique of the upper class, this theme is extremely important and the roles that Daisy and Jordan are made to play in it are vital.

3. Male Characters

These three themes are not the only literary elements that these women are used to portray. In fact, Fitzgerald’s female characters of the novel are also used as tools to develop the more realistic, complex, and central characters of the men that surround them in the novel. The first of such characters is that of Nick Carraway, our narrator. One of the many interesting devices used by Fitzgerald in the novel is the casting of Nick as our narrator but Gatsby as our protagonist. Nick may be involved in the story, he may tell the story, but Nick does not create the story. He is not confrontational, not the type to perform some of the drastic actions that the other characters of the novel take. He has a strong desire not to complicate things. These traits are all developed through the way he treats unnamed women who are only used to explore his character. For example, Nick states he had a short affair with a girl from Jersey City “but her brother began throwing mean looks in my direction, so when she went on her vacation in July I let it quietly blow away” (56). Instead of continuing a relationship and addressing the

problems that may be associated with this, Nick prefers to “pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes [he] was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove” (56). By establishing Nick’s character through his relationships, or lack thereof, with women, Fitzgerald demonstrates one of the reasons why Nick serves as an adept narrator.

The one romantic relationship of Nick’s that the reader is allowed to see develop, between him and Jordan, serves to define Nick in another way. To Nick, Jordan serves as a symbol for New York City and the lifestyle of its inhabitants; his conflicted feelings regarding her parallel his conflicted feelings regarding the city. On one hand, Nick is attracted to the vivacity of both Jordan and the city, the supposed glamour and excitement that they bring. However, by the end of the novel, Nick has decided to stop seeing Jordan, as he feels he “couldn't have talked to her across a tea-table that day if [he] never talked to her again in this world” (155), and return to the Midwest, as New York has become “haunted for [him]” (176) and like “a night scene by El Greco” (176). Her character, therefore, must be formed in such a way that Nick’s relationship with her can be analogous to his relationship with the city.

Lastly, Daisy is also used to further the exploration of her cousin’s character. Once again, Daisy must be portrayed as an unlikable and immoral epitome of the upper class so that, by Nick’s judgment of her as such, he can retain his own moral purity. His contempt for her in the end of the novel demonstrates his contempt for the upper class and the New York lifestyle in its entirety. Nick “could only remember... that Daisy hadn't sent a message or a flower” (174) after Gatsby's death and he decides that she is a “careless [person]” (179). By depicting Daisy in this way, Fitzgerald is ensuring that the narrator is sympathetic to the themes of the novel. This allows the themes to be conveyed more effectively to the reader, as Nick can speak directly to them in his first person narration.

The character of Tom is similarly structured by how he treats the women around him and his

relationships with them. The readers meet Tom and his wife Daisy in the first chapter. The luxurious possessions that surround him in this scene all demonstrate the extent to which Tom is a man born of wealth, a family name, and social power. Daisy is just another demonstration of the enormity of the effect his position as a member of the upper class has on his character (Donaldson 1). Tom possesses a young and attractive wife from a similarly upper-crust family just as he has “a sunken Italian garden, a half acre of deep, pungent roses, and a snub-nosed motor-boat that bumped the tide offshore” (Fitzgerald 7); he chooses these items to surround himself because that is what a man in his position ought to do, because this is the image of himself he must display to the world. Daisy is also essential to defining Tom as a villainous character because his possession of her stands in direct opposition of the goals of our protagonist. Simply through Tom's relationship with his wife, Fitzgerald is able to define Tom as an antagonist because he is an obstacle to Gatsby; he serves as competition against our protagonist.

The other woman who is used to define Tom besides his wife is, naturally, Myrtle Wilson. The very fact that this mistress exists is used to paint Tom as an unfaithful, disrespectful, and generally immoral man. His treatment of Myrtle, including his the moment when he “broke her nose with his open hand” (37) further convinces the reader that this competition against Gatsby is a brute. This allows us to support the protagonist in his aims, although they too involve adultery. Contrarily, Fitzgerald also relies on women to make Tom more sympathetic in some instances, to ensure that he is not portrayed as one-dimensional and completely villainous. For example, when Gatsby attempts to force Daisy to declare she never loved her husband, Tom reminds Daisy of intimate moments they shared with “a husky tenderness in his tone” (132). After Myrtle's death, he displays a similar sensitivity, as Nick explains, “In a little while I heard a low husky sob, and saw that the tears were overflowing down his

face” (141). Through the women who surround Tom, Fitzgerald is able to develop a round and interesting antagonist and source of social conflict.

Of course, our central character, Jay Gatsby himself, is also defined by his relationship not with *women*, but one *woman* in particular: Daisy Buchanan. This phenomenon is especially notable for this particular character because not only do the reader and the author define Gatsby by his relationship with Daisy, Gatsby defines himself by her as well. “I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes” (91), Nick states. All that Gatsby has amassed has been for her. Of course, Gatsby is a self-made man in more ways than one. Evidently, he accumulated his fortune; however, he also created himself. Gatsby changed his name, his mannerisms, his history, and anything else that one could alter to become this new person whom he believes is worthy of loving Daisy Buchanan. The ideas that we have of Gatsby, as a romantic hero, as a courtly lover of the Jazz Era (Bloom 89), as a man with “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness...never found in another person...” (Fitzgerald 2), these are all identities constructed by both Gatsby and Fitzgerald through Gatsby’s relationship with Daisy. Daisy is not a “real” character to the author and the audience just as she is not a “real” person to Gatsby. She exists to display that Gatsby is a dreamer, an idealist, a man who values “enchanted objects” (93), such as the light at the end of her dock. Her betrayal of Gatsby in the latter half of the book then proves, to our narrator and to ourselves, that “Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” (2).

4. Symbols

However, it is not just the green light or the foul dust that are enchanted objects, or symbols, but Daisy herself. The novel does not only utilize women to further themes and the character development of men, it also uses Daisy prominently as a symbol. As mentioned when discussing the use of women to further themes, Daisy is frequently used to represent the upper class as whole. Daisy is associated with the material objects that surround her, such as her house, her clothes, and her car. For Tom and Gatsby, her love is another symbol of being the wealthiest, the most distinguished, from the highest social standing possible. Nick describes her as, “high in a white palace the king’s daughter, the golden girl...” (120). Daisy more specifically represents the East Egg to Gatsby’s West Egg, the “old money” to his nouveau riche. When Nick describes Gatsby’s meeting of Daisy, he says that “she was the first ‘nice’ girl he had ever known,” (148). Here, however, the quotation marks around the word “nice” indicate that this isn’t a reference to personality, but rather to social status (Bloom 103). Fitzgerald uses her, then, to criticize this class of people. When Daisy tells Nick that she wished her daughter to be a beautiful fool and he reacts with, “I felt the basic insincerity in of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort... as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged,” (Fitzgerald 17), Fitzgerald is employing her disingenuousness and arrogance to characterize the whole of this group, this “secret society”. When Daisy moves away after Gatsby’s death and fails to attend his funeral, she is not just failing to take responsibility for her actions as an individual by allowing the punishment to be doled out to less fortunate others without seeming to show any remorse, she is representing the upper class continually doing the same to the lower class. The valley of ashes, a wasteland created by the excess of the wealthy city which houses the poor, exemplifies this larger scale. Just as Daisy does not look back on the tragedy she has created, the upper class is completely apathetic to the lower class that lives in the

waste products of their exorbitant lifestyle. She is “gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (150).

Daisy, however, represents more than just those who possess affluence. She represents the wealth itself. Gatsby famously says of Daisy, “Her voice is full of money” (121). She is often associated with the colors gold and green, including her description as a “golden girl” (120), her gold pencil, the green light at the end of her dock, and her promise to Nick that she is giving out a green card. These two colors are, of course, typically associated with money in American culture. The symbolism is also evident as both are the end goals of Gatsby’s quest; Daisy and money are two sides of the same ultimate achievement. While it may be Daisy that Gatsby claims he has worked for, both Gatsby’s father and Gatsby acknowledge that he possessed this drive to make a name for himself long before he met Daisy. She simply serves as the embodiment of this desire, a symbol of the affluence that he is willing to work so hard to acquire.

As the goal of Gatsby’s quest, Daisy not only serves as a symbol for money, but also for the larger idea of dreams and possibilities. Gatsby is noted for being a dreamer and his chief dream is exemplified in Daisy. She represents not just wealth, influence, and social standing, but also any dream or desire that one might have. “Daisy embodies the idea of perfection for Gatsby, an almost unapproachable ideal of...self-realization,” (Hays 1). Daisy’s most famous and most noted quality is her voice. Nick describes his cousin’s voice as “a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour” (9). He says of Gatsby, “I think that voice held him most, with its fluctuating, feverish warmth, because it couldn’t be over-dreamed- that voice was a deathless song” (96). Her voice promises adventure, excitement, love, warmth, and even some form of immortality. “Here, in short, Daisy's voice seems full of unrealized possibility,” (Person 5).

In addition to Daisy's voice, Daisy's green light at the end of her dock also famously symbolizes Gatsby's hopes and dreams for the future. Gatsby himself makes the connection, using the light as a stand-in for the woman he loves when he cannot see her. He reaches out towards the light, towards Daisy, and towards possibility. This female figure has been idealized to such an extent that Fitzgerald can manipulate her behaviors to create a tragedy; when his hopes and dreams have abandoned him, Gatsby seems to have nothing left.

5. Conclusion

When examining Fitzgerald's use of women in *The Great Gatsby*, it is important to recall the environment in which the novel was written, particularly the era, and examine Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle as products of American society at this time. According to feminist critics Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn, "In their creation of fictions, writers call upon the same signifying codes that pervade social interactions, re-presenting in fiction the rituals and symbols that make up social practice. Literature itself is a 'discursive practice'...whose conventions encode social conventions and are ideologically complicit" (4). *The Great Gatsby* was published in the midst of a social revolution for women: suffrage had been granted, birth control clinics were opening, women (like Jordan) played sports, skirts were shorter, and the "flapper" had become an ideal of an independent woman. However, this change had "little political foundation for it and almost no economic foundation" (Gross 110). All major political parties continued to ignore women's issues, economic independence was extremely difficult to achieve, and marriage remained the only viable career option for most women (111).

One could argue, and many have, that the essential story Fitzgerald presents in *The Great Gatsby* is one of the failure of the American dream, one of a heroic, but tragic struggle to become a

“self-made man.” At the time, the concept of a “self-made woman” was nearly nonexistent, despite the recent progress. If we view literature as a “discursive practice”, it is only natural that the women of the novel are utilized to reinforce themes, promote male characterization, and exist as symbols. Women, such as Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle, do not fit within the theme of the American dream as Fitzgerald presents it. This problem, a disadvantaged group being excluded from the central narration and denied round, realistic characters, is difficult to avoid in literature. It is necessary then, when critically examining written works, to consider the representation of all groups and consider how the author utilizes them to construct the work.

Word count: 3986

Works Cited

- Bloom, Harold. *Gatsby*. New York: Chelsea House, 1991. Print.
- Donaldson, Scott. "Possessions in The Great Gatsby." *The Southern Review* Spring 2001: 187. *Infotrac*. Web. 20 Feb. 2013.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York, NY: Scribner, 1996. Print.
- Greene, Gayle, and Coppélia Kahn. *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1985. *Questia*. Web. 20 Oct. 2013.
- Gross, Dalton, and Mary Jean Gross. *Understanding The Great Gatsby: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998. Print.
- Hays, Peter L. "Oxymoron In The Great Gatsby." *Papers On Language & Literature* 47.3 (2011): 318-325. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 27 Jan. 2013.
- Person Jr., Leland S. "Herstory" And Daisy Buchanan." *American Literature* 50.2 (1978): 250. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 27 Jan. 2013.