

The Role of Women in the *Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Abstract

At the end of the World War I the role of women as housewives changed dramatically. They were forced to work and to earn their own money which was the first step towards their independence. Especially after the war women came to the conclusion that there had to be more in life than just looking after the children and the house. By earning the right to vote in 1920 women made their biggest step in being accepted as equal members of society. This freedom changed women's attitude totally. They started drinking alcohol, smoking and dancing a new type of dance called "Swing." One perfect example is Daisy from "*Great Gatsby*" by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

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The novel was written and is set in the decade following World War I, which ended in November 1918. The Roaring Twenties, or the Jazz Age, a term coined by Fitzgerald, was a period of enormous social change in America, especially in the area of women's rights. (A Feminist Reading of the *Great Gatsby*, 2013) Before World War I, American women did not enjoy universal suffrage. In 1920, two years after the end of the war, they were finally given the vote. Before the war, standard dress for women included long skirts, tightly laced corsets, high-buttoned shoes, and long hair. A few years after the war, skirts became shorter, laced corsets began to disappear, modern footwear frequently replaced high-buttoned shoes, and "bobbed" hair became the fashion for young women.

Perhaps most alarming for proponents of the old ways, was that women's behavior began to change. Women could now be seen smoking and drinking, often in the company of men and without chaperones, even the new dances of the era, which seemed wild and sexual. In other words, as we often see during times of social change, a "New Woman" emerged in the 1920s. (Bode, 1990) And, again as usual, her appearance on the scene evoked a good deal of negative reaction from conservative members of society, both male and female, who felt, as they generally did at these times, that women's rejection of any aspect of their traditional role inevitably would result in the destruction of the family and the moral decline of society as a whole.

Literary works often reflect the ideological conflicts of their culture, whether or not it is their intention to do so, because, like the rest of us, authors are influenced by the ideological tenor of the times.

One of the greatest writers F. Scott Fitzgerald perfectly explained the new era for females in his novel *The Great Gatsby*. In spite of numerous differences of female characters, Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson, are all versions of the New Woman. Women share much of the focus that the men do in this book; however, they are not always shown in a positive light. In fact, they are often seen as negative things. Fitzgerald presents very contrasting roles for women in *The Great Gatsby*, making distinct challenges to both Flappers and the traditional woman. (Flapper Fashion Look Book, 2013)

For example, Jordan Baker represents the new woman of

the 1920's, who is characterized as an erogenous and therefore oddly desirable for Nick, the narrator. Jordan is a symbol for the principles of the Flappers, as she is arrogant, unemotional, and often irresponsible. Fitzgerald criticizes Jordan in *The Great Gatsby*. However, *Gatsby* also criticizes the traditional roles of women by his characterization of Daisy, a damsel in distress and object of desire in men. Daisy abandons love and *Gatsby* and settles down with Tom, a man who is wealthy and can provide for her financially. Yet Daisy also embodies some Flapper values of irresponsibility and detachment, in her treatment of her daughter, as well as irresponsibility for her actions. To Fitzgerald, Daisy may have embodied the 1920's woman in transition between old and new values.

As we begin the book, Daisy is seen as a sort of pessimist when mentioning her newly born female baby. When she first offhandedly mentions her daughter, she doesn't even specify the gender. This could be taken several ways. One way is that Daisy doesn't care much about her daughter at all. This idea is supported later when Daisy says after Nick has asked about her daughter, "I suppose she talks, and-eats, and everything." (Fitzgerald, n.d.) Another way to look at it, which seems to be more plausible given the context of the book, is that she is disappointed in having a female, rather than a male, child. When Daisy is explaining to Nick her daughter's birth, she explains how she wept and said of her daughter, "... I hope she'll be a fool - that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." (Fitzgerald, n.d.) This not only shows Daisy's cynicism for the world they live in, but also her idea of women in the world. In her eyes, women have no place in this world to be intelligent, only beautiful and stupid. The best thing a woman could be in the world is eye-candy for the hulking brutes. To her, that is the best way for a woman to get ahead in life. While this may seem as recognition of the plight of women in the world from Daisy, her actions later in the book imply that she wants to do nothing to change it. *Gatsby* describes her as having a "voice full of money." The ideal woman *Gatsby* once loved has been corrupted with money and the lifestyle that Tom has provided for her. She has allowed herself to become a snooty, rich American. When Daisy is finally confronted with whom she should choose, Tom or *Gatsby*, she ends up staying with her cheating, hulking, brute of a husband. While this may

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seem the fault of the husband, and cheating most certainly is his fault, going back to him even though she knows he is a cheater makes her look nearly as bad because she is comfortable with her wealthy lifestyle that Tom provides for her.

Before 1920s it was considered that women's main role in their lives was to take care of their husbands and children, but in the novel we can see that later they care more about themselves and about their place in society and they became careless and unfaithful towards their families. Myrtle cheats on Wilson with Tom. "Tom's got some women in New York." Mr. Wilson finds out about the affair and locks Myrtle in her room. In a desperate attempt to escape she runs into the street getting hit by Daisy thinking it's Tom. Daisy also cheats on her husband with Jay Gatsby. "He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God." This affair is different from Tom and Myrtles in that it's based on a previous love that she used to have for Gatsby, which he still has for her. The re-kindled relationship exhibits her unfaithfulness to her husband. Another kind of unfaithfulness could be Jordan Baker. The above quote shows that she was aware of the affair, but did not tell Daisy. Although it's a sticky situation her refrain from telling Daisy the truth was a betrayal to their friendship. All the women in the Great Gatsby to some extent or another are unfaithful, whether it is their husbands, or friends.

From their unfaithfulness stems foolishness. Myrtle and Tom's views of their affair were completely different. Myrtle saw it as a way to receive materialistic gifts and as a way out of poverty. Tom thought of it as a game where Myrtle was just a sex object kept on a leash of luxurious bestowments. Myrtle's foolishness is that she saw what she wanted to see, a man who was providing her lavish gifts because she thought he loved her. She thought Tom would leave Daisy for her sake. In reality Tom was using her, but blinded by her own foolishness she couldn't see it. Daisy is also foolish. Her foolishness is also in roots with her unfaithfulness, Tom and Gatsby fight as Tom knows of their adultery. Staying with Gatsby she decides to drive the car overwhelmed with anger and realizes her fun with Gatsby has ended. Daisy ends up hitting Myrtle with the car killing her. And as a result of Myrtle's death Gatsby gets killed for Daisy's foolish behavior. Daisy is also foolish in the context that if she had waited for Gatsby to come back from the war and married him instead of Tom, she would not have regretted about marrying him. Daisy's dissatisfaction with her marriage is revealed through her attempt to become unfaithful to Tom.

The marriage also has other problems like Tom being rude with Daisy. He bruises Daisy's knuckle. Tom's aggressiveness is also showed when strikes Myrtle. Tom's display of physical power over daisy and Myrtle reflects that in both relationships they are powerless. It was mentioned before that Myrtle was locked in her room by Wilson. This contributes to the idea that men back then had control and power over their wives. Tom doesn't use physical dominance but flaunts that Daisy won't leave him. Later he tells Daisy that she can go to Gatsby, exhibiting power over Gatsby as well.

Conclusion

Women In the 1920's took a step forward by changing their hair-cut, dresses, behavior in society and their attitude towards their families, but the Great Gatsby manifests that women were still in many ways powerless. The author accentuates as well the shortcomings they all had. These shortcomings are often the source of many conflicts in The Great Gatsby. We presume F. Scott Fitzgerald reflected his wife's many problems through his novel's heroines' problems.

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