

A Feminist Approach to *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract: *The Great Gatsby* is Fitzgerald's finest work, and it has been widely reviewed by critics. This paper focus on one of the female protagonists, Daisy Buchanan, to illustrate female modernity in the novel. This will be done by analyzing Daisy's attitude toward marriage and family. It comes to the conclusion that the novel depicts female modernity and shows great concern about women. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* is also a women's book.

Keywords: *feminism, modernity, identity*

1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald is an American novelist and is considered to be one of the pre-eminent authors in the history of American literature. He is famous for his depictions of the Jazz Age, known as the Golden Twenties or the Roaring Twenties, which refers to the American 1920s, a decade of major cultural conflicts. His third book, *The Great Gatsby*, which is also his most brilliant novel, has become required reading for many high school students in America because of its beautiful lyricism, pitch-perfect portrayal of the Jazz Age. When it was published, it was well-received. *The Dial* claimed it to be "one of the finest of contemporary novels" and the *Saturday Review* argued that it had "high occasions of felicitous, almost magic craftsmanship" (Piper 1970: 127). T.S. Eliot had read the novel for three times and wrote in his letter Fitzgerald: "In fact it seems to me to be the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James" (Donaldson, 1984:268) Undoubtedly, literary critics have investigated this book from many perspectives. It can be divided into several periods. During Fitzgerald's life time, the story and features of the book are the main concerns of literary reviewers. After his death in 1940, critics began to focus on his life and novels from various aspects. Psychoanalysis, structuralism criticism and feminist criticism are among the most popular angles. Since 1960s, the focus change to the study of the themes on American dream and its disillusion as well as the use of symbols the novel adopts, such as the green light, the valley of ashes, the name of Daisy and Jordan Baker. Other critical study focused on the author's social-historical criticism of post-war America. There are some researches on characters analysis, however, most of them focus on the male protagonists, female characters are neglected to some extent. As a book written in the 1920s, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is usually considered as a man's book and full of misogyny (Fitzgerald, 1963: 173). My argument is that it is a women's book because of distinct modernity of the female characters. It's not difficult for the readers to notice that women in the novel are very different from traditional women both in behavior and thoughts. As it is the modern thoughts inside women's mind constitutes the essential meaning of modernity, this paper mainly focuses on female characters', especially the main character Daisy Buchanan's, attitude towards marriage and family.

2. Historical Background and Feminism

Feminism usually means "movements for recognition of the claims of women for rights in legal, political, familial, fields, etc. equal to those possessed by men." (Ardis 35) In a broad sense, feminism has experienced three waves, with the first wave started from late 1700s to early 1900s. It was influenced by French Revolution and Enlightenment Movement. In 1790, Gerry published *The Declaration of Women Rights*, which became the document of the movements. Later in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, arguing that women should have equal treatment in education, politics and employment. The climax is the publication of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which is considered to a classical feminist writing. The second wave started from 1960s to late 1970s with Simone de Beauvoir's best-known work *The Second Sex* as the foundation of the feminist

theories. In her book, she wrote: “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (265) The third wave began in 1990s as Susan Bolading’s article *The Voice of a Generation in Post-feminism* was published.

The traditional notion of gender is somewhat similar to that of sex. However, sex is largely different from gender. Sex is fixed and it is determined by the biological and physical appearance while gender is unstable because it refers to one’s behavior and thoughts which could shift and change in the process of the formation of one’s identity. To be specific, male gender refers to the cultural constitution of masculinity and similarly, female gender refers to the cultural constitution of femininity. Both of them concern “what is ‘appropriate’ to either gender, or the ways in which these serve ideologically to maintain gendered identities” (Wolfreys 74). According to David Glover and Cora Kaplan, “gender is a much-contested concept, as slippery as it is indispensable, but a site of unease rather than agreement” (ix). As gender is situational, it is unstable and changes according to the change of social norms.

At the same time, *The Great Gatsby* is a work of the 1920s, a period when the upheavals of every aspect are taking place. Therefore, relating the gender roles reflected in this novel is of importance. By the influence of the First World War, social norms are reshaped and people began to redefine women’s role and status in society and also their duties and responsibilities to society. What’s more, women’s movement at that time fought for women’s right to vote and finally succeeded. This raised their demands and they began to seek for more. Women gained the same rights as men possess to some extent, therefore they began to imitate men and behaved like men. Thus, the distinction between men and women is blurring and the opposition is dismantled. The previously established assumptions about this novel are then replaced by the idea that by a careful and close reading of *The Great Gatsby*, the reader could infer the distinctive features of the women characters. Actually, they are full of modernity. This paper mainly focuses on the main female character Daisy Buchanan.

3. General concept and attitude

First of all, Daisy’s concept of being a woman is totally different from that of the previous generation. For a traditional norm, women had no other role other than those of the wife and the mother. And in particular, motherhood is considered as women’s God-given purpose and its importance is universally accepted. Thus, motherhood becomes the central part of the familial role. Some critics note that marriage is a source of inequality because it is always the case that the husband is gratified and the wife sacrificed. According to them, childbearing and childrearing are the basic cause of oppression because responsibility for children has confined women to the home in all or almost all societies. Thus, marriage makes man master, woman slave (Hess and Sussman 10). However, by the 1920s, women’s roles had changed greatly. They were brought out of the home and into the public eyes. The world outside the home was as available to them as it was to men. They were no longer closeted in the home. They rejected Victorian concepts of domesticity and instead threw themselves into a broad range of public activities previously deemed incompatible with proper womanhood.

Women’s attitude towards marriage and family changed as well. Contrasting with older generations of women, they demanded more out of marriage. Only security, protection and social respectability were not enough. “They were not going to be hierarchical relationships. As the first generations in history, they were going to create loving, respectful, egalitarian relationships between spouses.” (Søland 115). The novel portrays Daisy like this:

‘She’s a nice girl,’ said Tom after a moment. ‘They oughtn’t to let her run around the country this way.’

‘Who oughtn’t to?’ inquired Daisy coldly.

‘Her family.’

‘Her family is one aunt about a thousand years old. Besides, Nick’s going to look after her, aren’t you, Nick? She’s going to spend lots of week-ends out here this summer. I think the home influence will be very good for her.’

Daisy and Tom looked at each other for a moment in silence. (34)

From this conversation the reader could easily infer that Tom is a very traditional man. There are indications previously in the novel. For example, Tom once says: “By God, I may be old-fashioned in my ideas, but women run around too much these days to suit me” (100). To him, women are very different from, even subject to, men. Women are weaker, they are not capable of working and earning money. Thus, they should be protected and depend on men. So, what a woman could do is to stay at home and

look after the family. It is not good for her to go around and be in touch with the society. That's what a traditional man thinks and a traditional woman takes it for granted as well. But Daisy does not. She thinks it is very good for a woman to go out and know the outside world as a man does. She does so and she thinks all women should behave like this. So once Tom remarks that Jordan shouldn't go outside, Daisy objects immediately. She kind of detests the concept in Tom's mind. They almost have an argument on this: she inquires coldly about his remark and they end up in silence at last.

4. Compared with traditional men

Moreover, as Daisy is a modern woman, her attitude towards marriage is quite different from Tom who is a traditional man. Thus, there is disagreement between her and Tom. As for her own marriage, Daisy feels rather hurt and depressed. She reveals her true emotion to Nick in the novel:

It'll show you how I've gotten to feel about — things. Well, she was less than an hour old and Tom was God knows where. I woke up out of the ether with an utterly abandoned feeling, and asked the nurse right away if it was a boy or a girl. She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. "All right," I said, "I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool — that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." (32)

As readers, we can infer that Daisy is not happy with her marriage, and we could even say that it is a tragedy. Her daughter, the first and the only child she has with Tom, of course is considered to be the fruit of their marriage. But Tom was absent, probably was having fun somewhere, at the time when the baby was born. This means that Tom does not care about her and their marriage or the family. In the deep mind of Tom, the woman is still a tool. However, Daisy does not think so. She wants her marriage and family to be the one it used to be. What she really wants is not the happiness from economic satisfaction but the love and care from her husband. That is the emotional happiness and spiritual pursuit of her. But she is depressed and has "an utterly abandoned feeling". We can see she suffers a lot to be a new woman pursuing true happiness. Thus, she comes to the conclusion that in this world, the best thing a girl can do is to be a fool. This does not mean that she really wants her daughter to be a fool initially. What is truly in her mind is that she wants to prevent her daughter from suffering and she would rather prefer her daughter to be a fool and have no idea about anything and have no feeling. Only by so doing, her daughter could avoid suffering from the pains to be a new woman in this not fully equal society.

5. Compared with traditional women

Daisy's attitude toward marriage is also different from that of traditional women. Women's attitude towards marriage is reshaped by the social norms of their time. According to Simone de Beauvoir, marriages at that time are like this:

Marriages, then, are not generally founded upon love. As Freud put it: 'The husband is, so to speak, never more than a substitute for the beloved man, not that man himself.' And this dissociation is in no way accidental. It is implied in the very nature of the institution, the aim of which is to make the economic and sexual union of man and woman serve the interest of society, not assure their personal happiness (453).

Daisy's marriage to Tom is surely not founded upon love. It is obvious that she married him because he is rich and of high social status and he married her because she is pretty and attractive. Thus, their marriage could not assure their personal happiness and Daisy does feel that. Because Daisy is "a product of the 1920s" (Gross 109), a new generation, which Gross describes:

Women were now demanding more than they were before. A few years before, upper-class and middle-class women were expected to be obedient to husbands and to devote most of their energy to being mothers. Many of them had accepted the double standard and looked the other way when husbands were unfaithful. But the new generation of women wanted much more from marriage and from life. They wanted to be partners with their husband. They wanted romance and good sex lives. They wanted independence. The result of these desires was a social revolution (110).

Therefore, we find reasons for Daisy's reunion with Gatsby. She marries Tom for the purpose of seeking personal happiness though their marriage is not based on true love. She thought Tom could offer her not only economical wealth but also emotional care. That is what makes her different from traditional women. She demands more. One possible explanation for this may be the women's movement at early 1920s. By that time, women had won the right to vote and thus raised hopes in lots of women. They

began to expect a new life and future and they searched for equal rights in every respect including marriage and sexuality. While Tom does not care about her and has an affair with another woman, she turns to others in order to seek emotional happiness and equality. Simone de Beauvoir also suggests: "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (445). However, according to Daisy, her destiny is not decided by her marriage but by herself. This could be inferred by her reaction to Tom's affair and her affair with Gatsby. When Tom does not disguise his interest in another woman, she reacts like this: "'Go ahead,' answered Daisy genially, 'and if you want to take down any addresses here's my little gold pencil'" (102). Of course, she does care about her marriage and while Tom has an affair, she feels sad and depressed. However, she does not act desperately like other women who are dumped by their husband. Contrary, she seeks happiness from another man and thus develops her affair with Gatsby. What is more, she even does not hide this:

As he left the room again she got up and went over to Gatsby, and pulled his face down, kissing him on the mouth.

'You know I love you,' she murmured.

'You forget there's a lady present,' said Jordan.

Daisy looked around doubtfully.

'You kiss Nick too.'

'What a low, vulgar girl!'

'I don't care!' cried Daisy, and began to clog on the brick fireplace (110).

What is more, she flirts with Gatsby in Tom's presence sometimes:

'Who wants to go town?' demanded Daisy insistently. Gatsby's eyes floated towards her. 'Ah,' she cried, 'you look so cool.'

Their eyes met, and they stared together at each other, alone in space. With an effort she glanced down at the table.

'You always look so cool,' she repeated (112).

And when Tom suggests that she and Gatsby go by the same car, she does not refuse to do so although she knows Tom's suggestion is not a good idea and Daisy's behavior is rather a sign of challenge. She takes the challenge and she even defies Tom: "She walked close to Gatsby, touching his coat with her hand" (114). Her flirting with another man even in her husband's presence strongly indicates her rejecting and dissatisfaction of her husband and their marriage. As a modern woman, she bravely asserts her needs and makes her feelings known. Therefore, Daisy's modernity is reflected both by her modern thoughts and performance.

6. Conclusion

Although female characters in *The Great Gatsby* seemed subjected to men, and they are not able to master their lives like the traditional women, they changed a lot not only in behavior. The main character Daisy's attitude towards marriage and family are largely different from traditional men's and women's, which implies Fitzgerald's concern about women. In *The Great Gatsby*, the author depicts the difference between traditional women and the female characters, particularly Daisy, which indicates their modernity. Therefore, *The Great Gatsby* can be considered as a women's book that reflecting women's changes and showing their modernity.

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