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# Puppies, Pearls, and Corpses on the Road: F. Scott Fitzgerald's Treatment of Women in *The Great Gatsby*

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Eleanor Cory

LE II

Wells

“Puppies, Pearls, and Corpses on the Road: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Treatment of Women in  
The Great Gatsby”

“...That’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (21). These are the words of Daisy Buchanan, a woman around whom the entire novel seems to revolve. Her story is one of a woman who loses her first love and instead marries a man who proved unfaithful and angry. Knowing that the story was written as a critique of society at the time, one might expect Daisy to eventually empower herself to leave this situation and escape the stereotype of the weak woman. The actual story could not be more different. In his attempts to critique American materialism in his novel The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald uses women, particularly Daisy and Myrtle, to represent many of the flaws of the upper class and, as a result, portrays them as generally shallow, dependent, and incapable of redemption.

Daisy Buchanan’s character personifies most of the things Fitzgerald appears to hate about the upper class culture, as she is shallow and materialistic. She has the tendency to link romance to money and tends to choose wealth and status over love. When she first falls in love with Gatsby, she thinks that he has money and he has to lie about his finances to gain her affection. Nick comments that Gatsby “knew he was in her house by colossal accident. However glorious might be his future as Jay Gatsby, he was at present a penniless man without a past, and at any moment the invisible cloak of his uniform might slip from his shoulders” (156). Gatsby’s lack of wealth and status would assumedly cause Daisy to reject him because he does not truly deserve her. Once Gatsby has left, however, she does not wait for him. Although they write to

each other and she knows that he still loves her, Jordan states, “By the next Autumn, she was gay again, gay as ever. She had a debut after the Armistice, and in February she was presumably engaged to a man from New Orleans. In June she married Tom Buchanan of Chicago” (80). The fact that she moves on so quickly shows that she felt a sort of urgency to get married, as Nick notices when he says, “She wanted her life shaped now, immediately—and the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand” (159). The longer she waits to get married after coming of age, the lower her social standing will be. Thus, she abandons the man she loved because she wants people to like her. Tom buys her nice things, including an extravagant string of pearls, which she throws away when she briefly changes her mind, but puts back on immediately after. The pearls tie her to Tom and she relies on him for everything thereafter. When he cheats, she is forced to tolerate it because she has no other option.

Daisy is completely dependent on men and relies on them to do everything for her, never daring to voice opinions of her own. In the ultimate confrontation between Tom and Gatsby, she is a mere object as they argue over her feelings and what she will do, both completely certain without actually consulting her. At one point, Gatsby tells Tom, “Daisy’s leaving you” (140). He has made this his decision rather than hers and she does not argue. She simply allows two men to determine her life, both manipulating her to serve their own purposes. Gatsby convinces Daisy to say that she has never loved Tom, but Nick notes that it is with “perceptible reluctance” (139). She says things not because she means them, but because they will please the men she cares about. Ultimately, Tom wins the argument and Daisy’s decision is made for her.

Myrtle Wilson demonstrates many of the same flaws, proving herself shallow enough to put money before her physical or emotional well-being by allowing herself to be dependent on

Tom. She also connects marital happiness with wealth, as despising her husband for being poor and commenting, "I knew right away I made a mistake. He borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in" (39). She has an affair with Tom because he can buy her things and allow her to live the rich lifestyle that she craves. When she is with him, she takes full advantage of this, as Nick noted, saying, "At the news stand she bought a copy of 'Town Tattle' and a moving picture magazine and, in the station drug store, some cold ice cream and a small flask of perfume. Upstairs in the solemn echoing drive she let four taxi cabs drive away before she selected a new one, lavender-colored with grey upholstery" (31). She then stopped to buy a dog for the apartment. Myrtle seems to love buying things that she does not need but that make her feel like a rich young woman rather than the wife of a garage-owner. Thus, she is completely invested in Tom, but he seems to see her as simply a plaything, since he lies about why he cannot marry her and later becomes angry at her for saying his wife's name. When she persists, as Nick describes, "Making a short deft movement Tom Buchanan broke her nose with an open hand" (41). Myrtle takes the abuse and allows Tom to disrespect her because wealth is that important to her. Thus, she is a victim, but at the fault of her own weakness.

Although some characters in the novel eventually redeem themselves by becoming less materialistic, the women are not allowed to do this. Nick starts the story making the decision to move east so that he can make money, and he envies Daisy and Tom for their status, noting how small his house is compared to theirs. After discussing Tom's extravagant use of money, he comments, "It was hard to realize that a man of my own generation was wealthy enough to do that" (10). By the end of the book, however, he has learned that money is not everything and that those who possess more than him are not necessarily better, as he comments on the people he once admired: "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” (187-8). Similarly, Gatsby starts out believing that the only way to win love is to have a lot of money and to use it in impressive ways. He seems to see Daisy as an item to win rather than a person and expects her to abandon her husband and her life for him. Nearing his death, though, his morals change and he begins to value Daisy’s well-being above all else, deciding that he will take the blame for the car accident and most likely go to jail so that Daisy can be safe, even if she will be with Tom. The female characters, however, never find redemption and this is the root of the issue. After Gatsby’s death, Nick attempts to contact Daisy and is told that “she and Tom had gone away early that afternoon, and taken baggage with them.” This came after Daisy had killed a woman and Gatsby had taken the blame. Daisy chose to stay with her wealthy, cheating husband and let the man she loved go to jail. Even after she presumably hears of his death, the reader never hears from her again and it appears that she has chosen to stay on course with her socially acceptable and wealthy life rather than pursue moral change or independence from her controlling and cheating husband. Myrtle never finds redemption either, as she is killed before she could have the chance, although the fact that her last act is running toward what she thinks is the car of the wealthy and abusive Tom Buchanan would indicate that she would not attain it anyway. As a whole, the book seems to offer the idea that women will always have major flaws and can never grow as people the way men can.

Women in The Great Gatsby often serve to represent the problems that Fitzgerald sees as being held by the wealthy class. They tend to be materialistic, shallow, and dependent on men for everything. Although male characters have some similar issues, they generally find redemption by the end of the novel, while the women do not, giving the idea that women will always have problems and, unlike men, cannot grow to become better people.