

# An analysis of female characters in *The Great Gatsby* from the perspective of feminist

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**Abstract:** *The Great Gatsby* is a novel written by Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald in 1925, set in New York City and Long Island in the 1920s, in which the author successfully portrays three full-figured women, Daisy from the upper class, Jordan born in the middle class and Myrtle from the lower class. They come from different classes and have different personalities, but all have regrettable fates. This paper will analyze the characteristics of these three women from a feminist perspective. Through this analysis, it can be concluded that the reasons for these unconventional female images are inseparable from the money-oriented and patriarchal society of the time, and their unfortunate fate is not only attributed to themselves, but also the result of the oppression of women by the patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** *feminism, The Great Gatsby, patriarchal society*

## 1. Introduction

Born on September 24, 1896, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota in the atmosphere that had been characterized as shabby-genteel. During Fitzgerald's childhood, the family had to move around several times because of the failure of his father's career. As a result, the Fitzgerald family was virtually dependent on the wealth his mother inherited from his mother's family, and even had to stay with his grandfather for a considerable period after his father's first business failure, an experience that made Fitzgerald a sensitive child from an early age. At the same time, the traditional atmosphere of the family allowed Fitzgerald to be exposed to various literature and art. Fitzgerald's father, a dashing romantic gentleman, always told him about the old traditions and stories of the South, which gave Fitzgerald an affinity for the customs of Southern culture in the United States from an early age, and a preference for Southern culture was evident in his early short stories. Fitzgerald's mother doted on him and often took him to the upper society of St. Paul, which had a great influence on the direction of his artistic creation and the development of his taste.

Many of these events from Fitzgerald's early life appear in his most famous novel *The Great Gatsby* written in 1925. Set in the Midwest and New York, the story was narrated by Nick Carraway. The protagonist James Gatz was a poor farmer's child in North Dakota. Since childhood, he dreamt to be a big shot. After much effort, he finally rose through the ranks and changed his name to Jay Gatsby. While serving as a lieutenant in a military training camp, he fell in love with a southern girl, Daisy Fee. But when he returned from overseas at the end of the war, decorated with military honors, Daisy had married Tom Buchanan, a well-built, rich, but gruff playboy from Chicago. Gatsby, intoxicated by the dream of love, worked hard to become a millionaire from a poor officer. He bought a luxury villa on the west end of the Long Island, across the bay from the Buchanons, who lived on the east end. His hall was brightly lit every night, and crowds of guests drank and enjoyed themselves. When Gatsby and Daisy met again, Gatsby thought he could go back in time and relive his old dream, but as time went by, he found Daisy was far from the person he had dreamed of. Later, Daisy ran over her husband's mistress, Myrtle Wilson, with a car. Tom managed to convince George, Myrtle's husband that Gatsby had killed Myrtle, and Gatsby was finally shot to death by George. Daisy didn't even come to his funeral. Nick, the narrator, saw through the cruelty and evil intentions of the rich in the upper class and left New York to return to his hometown in the Midwest.

*The Great Gatsby* is universally regarded as the masterpiece of Fitzgerald, which marks the peak of the writer's career achievement. As an excellent chronicler, and mouthpiece of the jazz age, Fitzgerald not only related a love story but also records the times characteristics.

## 2. Feminism and *The Great Gatsby*

The feminist movement began in 1791 when Olympe de Gouges, a woman leader of the French Revolution, issued *the Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen*. Throughout history, women have been more or less unequal to men in all areas: political, cultural, cognitive, and ethical. Feminism believes that society is built on a male-centered patriarchal system, and that the gender order of male superiority over female is not naturally formed, but artificially constructed by society and culture. Feminism wants women to gain political, power, and other equality with men, and its themes are affirmative action, anti-oppression, and self-emancipation for women. French feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted that one is not born a woman, but becomes a woman.<sup>[1]</sup> She argued that femininity is not innate, nor is it determined by female hormones or the mind, but rather by the existing social environment. In her book *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir was also doing justice to women. She was committed to eliminating social prejudice against women, hoping that through her books, women could be liberated from having their individuality suppressed and losing themselves by a patriarchal society. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's three main female characters are portrayed and their fates are essentially shaped by their social environment.

Feminist literary criticism emerged in the 1960s from the Feminist literary criticism emerged in the 1960s as a theory of literary criticism developed from the women's liberation movements in Europe and the United States. Feminist literary criticism believes that literary works should be interpreted from a female perspective, and that the distortion of women's images in male-centered Western civilization and male literature should be addressed. The first phase of feminist literary criticism, from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, focused on exposing the distortion of the image of women by male culture and criticizing the misogyny in literature. Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* at a time when patriarchal ideology was still predominant in the United States, and when women were suppressed by a patriarchal society. Their behavior and moral qualities were corrupted. The main female character in the novel is not the traditional virtuous woman, but a group of degenerate women. The reasons for such a female image are what feminist literary criticism focuses on.

## 3. A feminist perspective of the three heroines in *The Great Gatsby*

### 3.1 Daisy-an objectified object

Daisy came from high society and also has an enviable beauty. But she was cold and selfish, irresponsible, and even went so far as to use others to achieve her own ends, and such a female figure was clearly unpleasant. But she was not born that way. In her childhood, the First World War viciously destroyed the dreams of people's hearts and made them feel lost. War and death would take everything away, so they believed that the only meaning of struggle was to hold on to wealth firmly in their hands. In such a social environment, as well as living a life of luxury since childhood, Daisy was used to using material needs to meet the spiritual emptiness, and even her love with Gatsby was far less than Tom Buchanan's \$350,000 pearl necklace, so she left Gatsby and married Tom Buchanan to live a rich life. The concept of materialism made her believe that happiness cannot be obtained by herself, and that only wealth, status and fame were the stepping stones to happiness. But Daisy's married life was not a happy one, as Tom often fooled around but did not allow Daisy to have intimate relationships with other men. Under this macho rule, Daisy felt lonely and empty inside, and her material wealth contrasted with her spiritual emptiness. She hoped to find spiritual solace in Tom again, but she found that she could no longer escape the whirlwind of money, status and fame. Tom's contemptuous attitude toward Daisy and his exuberant desire to control, even Gatsby's pursuit of Daisy, was really just a way to prove himself by realizing his own American dream. Gatsby regards Daisy as the symbol and means of realizing his dream. He never gave Daisy the respect she deserved as an equal. Gatsby's love for her was full of deception. This can reflect that in that time, under the prevailing patriarchal system, women were objectified objects. Women could only survive by relying on men, and they were regarded as subordinates who had to tolerate everything from their husbands, and could lose their independent minds as long as they were given money. Moreover, women in the upper-class society have been educated for such a long time that their minds are also confined. This has created selfishness. This has created their selfish and materialistic character. The novel is undoubtedly a reflection of the parasitic status of women in the upper-class society at that time. It is also a mockery of women.

### 3.2 *Jordan-a semi-awakened character*

Baker was a very individual female character in the novel. On the one hand, as a middle-class woman, she admired Daisy's status and money and wanted to be a woman in the upper class; on the other hand, she was a professional golfer with masculine characteristics. She was trying to find ways to achieve her financial independence as well as compete with men on the course. When she was with Nick, she was not as submissive to men as Daisy and Mrs. Wilson, but showed her high and aloof side. In Baker, there are already shades of new age women. She was not timid in front of men and tried to achieve economic and emotional independence, which is already rare at that time. But the materialistic social system also distorted Baker's values. Selfish and self-interested, she even took unsavory means to win the game on the court; she did whatever she could to settle the trouble by bribery, without the slightest remorse in the end. The Jazz Age saw major changes in women's rights in the United States, such as the acquisition of women's suffrage, but the creation of such an idea that challenged the patriarchy was bound to be met with much resistance. Therefore, women at that time still had to choose to be dependent on men for better survival in order to gain their approval. Moreover, the whole society at that time still held a contemptuous attitude toward women in the new era, considering that they were not honorable and could not be equal to the status of men.

The author sensed the emergence of feminism and its impact on the patriarchal society. But in the society of the time, women still had a long way to go to achieve true equality and emancipation.

### 3.3 *Myrtle-a plaything of upper class*

Myrtle came from a humble background, and because of vanity, she became Tom's mistress and tried to join the upper class. In the author's writing, her frivolous and vulgar appearance is clearly visible. She was not happy with her low status and thought she could replace Daisy's position in Tom's family, not knowing that Tom would never abandon Daisy, who came from the upper class, and marry her. She thought that by attaching herself to a man she could change her social status, and after being attacked by Tom, she also fought with him and eventually died a horrible death under the wheel. Myrtle did have the idea of changing the status of women, but she did not recognize her own position and was still delusional about being dependent on men, a typical representative of the lower class who deceived herself and others. Men under the patriarchal system treated women as mere playthings, and it was almost impossible for women to change their social status through their own efforts. The women at the bottom were not well educated and were not willing to get rid of men, so it was difficult for them to truly liberate themselves. The novel's depiction of Myrtle is a reflection of the life of women of the lower class at that time, reflecting the low status of women but also their inability to change.

## 4. Analysis of the reasons of the three women's destiny in feminist perspective

### 4.1 *Patriarchal society*

Patriarchal society in which men are superior to women. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that women are not born, they are made. It is traditional customs and the needs of a patriarchal society to create women. Women's social status is dependent on men, and their meaning and value in life are determined by men. A materialistic society has a huge impact on the minds of the people. After World War I, the U.S. political and economic progress and prosperity were extremely rapid. The shadow of war gradually receded and was replaced by the pursuit of wealth. Under the surface of material prosperity was a psychological emptiness and indifference, people were plunged into a decadent life of wealth and status. The traditional moral standards gradually declined, and social order was disrupted. Although women's inner worlds also changed, the limitations and shackles of society made it difficult for them to realize their own self-worth through their own efforts. They have no choice but to depend on men. They can only depend on men and rely on their external advantages to enchant them. The daughters would follow mothers' steps in thought and behavior. Women always obey the males around them without deny. In the law, some inequality rules are listed to limit women's rights. For instances, the father must be the guardian of the unmarried girl; after marriage, the husband should be the protector of the married woman; once the father dies, his daughter can only get half as much property as his son; after getting married, a wife's dowry will belong to his husband; if a woman divorces, she can get nothing, including custody of the children. The women have lived in oppressive environment so long term that they are accustomed to the inferior position.<sup>[2]</sup> Thus, it can be seen that women's self-degradation. The social context of patriarchy has a lot to do with this.

#### 4.2 Fitzgerald's misogyny

Fitzgerald was deeply influenced by male chauvinism and was full of disdain and prejudice against women, believing that if women broke free from men and fought against them, they would eventually pay a painful price, which is also a manifestation of misogyny.

In addition, in his life, Fitzgerald was forced to write to support the whole family because of his wife. When he was deeply involved in his creative work, his wife Zelda had an affair with a French naval pilot because she was not accompanied for a long time. When Fitzgerald found out and confronted Zelda, Zelda calmly filed for divorce. This cast a great shadow on Fitzgerald and largely reinforced his misogyny. We can easily find the influence of Zelda on his work in the words of Daisy when she gave birth to her baby in *The Great Gatsby*. She said that she was glad it was a girl. And she hopes she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.<sup>[3]</sup> After World War I, the United States made remarkable achievements in politics and economy, women went out to work and their status gradually improved. They changed the stereotypical image of traditional housewives and were eager to go into society and realize their self-worth through struggle. This change in women's role was deeply criticized by social conservatism.

This change in women's role was criticized by social conservatism, which believed that once a woman had an idea, it was difficult to control it and would lead to the destruction of the family and moral collapse. The emergence of the new woman stimulated men's sensitivities and overturned the values of the public.

Fitzgerald, who was deeply influenced by the patriarchal culture, also expressed his fear of the "new woman" by vilifying women in his works, while the context of his time and his life experience also showed his fear of the new woman. and his life experiences also made it difficult for him to accept a progressive the influence of Fitzgerald's work on women also reflects his fear of the new woman.

#### 4.3 The lack of self-awareness

After the war, women became more self-reliant and independent, but in spirit, they still relied on men. Daisy, among the three women in *The Great Gatsby*, is the most typical case. She was protected by her parents since her childhood, living a luxurious life. After she met with Gatsby, she fell in love with him. However, when Gatsby had to leave for war, Daisy married Tom casually. After marriage, she found that Tom was a playboy but she chose to stay with him and did not want to be parted with Tom a single minute.

Jordan's tragedy lies in her reliance on the traditional model of marriage. Although Jordan was financially independent and had a successful career, she had no shortage of suitors. She still yearned for a stable marriage. She wanted a better man. A comfortable life and a decent status. She would rather find a trustworthy and attentive husband who can elevate her status. Nick is a man of integrity. He is of high status in that his parents were western aristocrats. From her teenage years, she admired Daisy's noble status as did most women in a patriarchal society, and she aspired to a lucrative marriage. Therefore, in order to climb higher on the social ladder, she chose candidates based on their husbands' family conditions and social status. In this feeling, she is similar to Myrtle, who also relies on traditional marriage.

This proves that whether a woman is financially independent or not, she still does not get escape from the traditional rule of patriarchy. Due to the lack of feeling and acting independently, all three heroines are unable to get rid of them, women themselves bear some responsibility for their tragedy.

### 5. Conclusion

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author recreates the life of women from the bottom to the top of the social ladder in a time of prevalent patriarchy. Although they were able to smoke and drink in public and had the freedom to pursue a nightlife, women still lived under the patriarchal system, bound by the male gaze and social shackles. The moneyed society, patriarchal society, patriarchal oppression, and the disdain for new age women have deprived them. From a feminist perspective, a male-centered society is deformed. If women are to be truly liberated in society, society must change its prejudices against women and throw away the shackles.

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