

# A Feminist Perspective on the Inevitability of the Fate of Tragic Women in The Great Gatsby

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**Abstract:** *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterwork, focuses on the social scene of materialism and hedonism in New York City in the 1920s. The book concentrates on the emotional story of Gatsby, Tom, Daisy, and Myrtle, and condemns prevalence of capitalism, which leads to the manic love of money and the lust for profit of people. From a feminist perspective, this dissertation interprets the inevitability of the fate of the tragic women in the book. By analyzing the background of the post-World War I economic boom in the United States at that time, when people were chasing after wealth and eager for gold and luxurious living. And looking at the specific characters and behaviors of Daisy and Myrtle, two female characters from different classes, we can see that women's tragic character and fate are founded on a patriarchal culture and warped beliefs of "materialism first" at the time. Therefore, their tragic fate was inevitable.

**Keywords:** *feminism; patriarchal society; material supremacy; tragic fate*

## 1. Introduction

From the viewpoint of world integration and development, the Western culture represented by the appreciation of English and American literature has a very different background from the Eastern culture, and it is crucial for today's young scholars to enhance their understanding of Chinese and foreign culture, and develop humanistic qualities and temperament. We can understand Western and Eastern cultures through the portrayal of characters and the environment in Western literature, and we can grasp the values of Chinese and Western societies through an understanding of the characteristics of the characters in their time and social background, which will enrich people's worldviews and enable them to respond to the development of globalization and economic globalization.

Shi Yubai from Tianjin University of Technology analyzed *The Great Gatsby* in terms of the development of Gatsby and Daisy's love tragedy and the causes of the tragedy. Scholars believe that the causes of their love tragedy are mainly the war factor, the materialization of both parties and the confusion behind Gatsby's paranoid character [1]. Yang Guang from Jilin College of Medicine analyzed *The Great Gatsby* from a feminist perspective. Daisy in the feminist perspective, whether it is Tom's belittling her or Gatsby's objectification of her, is a victim of the patriarchal society from the beginning to the end [2]. Tongji University's Li Dongqing scholars conducted an interpretation of the inevitability of the book's tragedy, arguing that the main reason for the tragedy is the pressure from society and the selfishness of human nature that ultimately creates the tragedy of the book's characters [3]. The studies above all focus on a feminist analysis of the characters and the tragedy of love in the book, concluding that the tragedy is primarily due to the tragic character of the characters and the mental mutilation of women in a patriarchal society, but they do not examine the inevitability of the tragic women and the historical context.

In this regard, this paper will examine the tragic women's fate in *The Great Gatsby* from a feminist perspective, focusing on the two aspects, the identities and characters of Daisy and Myrtle, who are from the upper and lower classes, respectively, as well as the nature of the patriarchal and materialistic societies in which they live.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Feminist Theory

Feminism is a theoretical movement launched by women to fight for the same rights as men and to

promote gender equality between men and women, with the main aim of ending sexual discrimination and exploitation, and emphasizing gender equality and identity. The main themes of feminism include discrimination and sexual exploitation.

The setting of the book is a time when patriarchy was prevalent, when men were superior to women, women were only the appendages of men, and women were extremely materialized. At that time, women could only depend on men to obtain money and fame, they were greatly oppressed in society so the concept of parasitism of women was extremely serious.

## ***2.2 Subjects of analysis under feminism***

Under the background of the time when men were strong and women were weak and patriarchy was rampant, women of any class were persecuted to a certain extent. Since the patriarchal standard had been internalized in women's ideology, it was easy for women to develop the parasitic concept of degradation and a series of tragic characteristics such as selfishness, profit-oriented, vain and frivolous.

This paper will analyze characters of Daisy and Myrtle who represent the upper and lower class respectively. Besides, it will combine the analysis of the prevalence of patriarchy and materialistic social climate of the post-World War I in US, then ultimately make a conclusion that their tragic fate has a certain inevitability.

## **3. Findings&Discussion**

### ***3.1 Overview of the Great Gatsby's Story Line and Channels***

"The Great Gatsby" is a well-known American novel set in the 1920s in New York City. It depicts the story of Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, and other characters from different walks of life in an era of money worship, economic prosperity, and the pursuit of the "American Dream" in America after the end of World War I. The love story of Gatsby and Daisy is twisted and romantic, yet ends in a sad tragedy.

The novel begins with a grand banquet, which sets up a certain amount of suspense and then unfolds a series of subsequent descriptions and developments. Gatsby comes from a poor background, as a struggling young man at the bottom of the social ladder, finally is able to make contact with people in the upper class via his hard work. In the military camp, he fell in love with Daisy, the heroine from a prominent family, but when the war ended, Daisy had married Tom who has good fortune. Because of the so-called "obsessive" love for Daisy, Gatsby kept trying to make a lot of money, bought a villa across the river from Daisy's house, and held parties all day long to attract Daisy. And when he learned that Daisy and her husband Tom's marriage was not happy and Tom had an affair with Myrtle, he carried on an affair with Daisy. At the end of the story, Daisy purposefully smashed her car into Myrtle and murders her when she discovered Tom and Myrtle were having an improper affair. However, Gatsby, who was deeply in love with Daisy, eventually took responsibility for the accident, while Daisy had gone away with Tom. Finally, under the prodding and provocation of Tom, Myrtle's husband Wilson mistakenly believed that Myrtle and Gatsby had an unclear relationship and shot Gatsby, resulting in tragedy.

### ***3.2 The inevitable fate of tragic women***

This novel depicts the life of the upper class as well as the lower class in 1920s America. At that time, women had no freedom and they had to remain noble within the confines of the male ideal. Under the reign of a society which a patriarchal culture dominated, women traditionally had to depend on men to gain a better life for themselves, and this standard was internalized in women's ideology, women's minds were firmly imprisoned.

Because of its late entry into World War I, the economy of United State did not suffer. In contrast, capitalism and hedonism blossomed in America at the period. People worshiped money, chased the "American dream," and were obsessed with materialistic desires, all of which skewed and drastically altered their people's material views and views, resulting in the distorted values of "materialism first" of people at the time.

Due to the brutality of patriarchal society and materialistic beliefs, women became worship money and lost their corresponding independence in that period, which eventually brought them to a tragic end.

#### 4. Analysis of the tragedy of the character Daisy

Daisy comes from a wealthy and prominent family, who has a luxurious lifestyle[4]. The extravagant life makes her lose the ability to live independently, her mind is firmly imprisoned and controlled by the material world[5]. She becomes reliant on men and forms the "parasitic" material values. All these factors contribute to her tragic characteristics of materialism, selfishness, and mean-spiritedness.

The material affluence of Daisy contrasted sharply with her spiritual emptiness. Knowing that Gatsby could not get back from the army, Daisy has a fear of her material life. And at the time, the emergence of Tom who is ostentatious is the man that Daisy can rely on. In the end, Tom won her only by a \$ 350,000 pearl necklace, this all shows the money worship and spiritual emptiness of Daisy.

However, Daisy's marriage with Tom was unhappy, Tom treated her with contempt. "Tom's got some woman in New York" "the knuckle was black and blue" "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[6]." These all reflect "hulking" Tom's disrespect for Daisy. Daisy turned a blind eye to his extramarital escapades, but Tom would never allow Daisy to cheat on him, and when he knew the affections between Gatsby and Daisy, he became enraged. Tom's machismo is reflected in everything he does. Their marriage is loveless and Daisy is only used as an ornament for Tom to show off his wealth and status.

Nevertheless, on the eve of Tom's wedding, Daisy wished to return the pearl necklace to Tom, she had the desire to rebel against patriarchal society. But in the end, these rebellions were futile under the patriarchal societal pressures of the family.

Besides, after a long struggle, Gatsby's affection for Daisy was no longer love, but he materialized Daisy and made efforts to regain her as a way to justify his current status.

Daisy's love ending is tragic because of the background of society at the time which oppress the mind and behavior of females. She was under the pressure of reality, and chose to use too rational or even cold ways to treat and repress her affection for Gatsby. After learning the true identity of Gatsby and she chose to abandon him. The times have created Daisy the tragic characters of mean-spirited, selfish, self-serving, and materialistic, making her eventually become a victim of patriarchal society.

#### 5. Analysis of the tragedy of the character Myrtle

Myrtle is a working-class woman from a poor family with little education. She is self-centered, vulgar, and frivolous. In the book, she fails to recognize her situation properly and abandons traditional morals to pursue money and status by attaching to a rich man.

By being Tom's mistress, she strives to become a member of the upper class. From what the book mentioned, "She wet her lips and without turning around spoke to her husband in a soft coarse voice. 'Get some chairs, why don't you, so somebody can sit down.'" "But he wasn't fit to lick my shoe.", we can see that she belittles her husband but they are both in the lower class. "With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment." "It's just a crazy old thing, I just slip it on sometimes when I don't care what I look like.", she pretends to be upper class purposely and doesn't have a clear understanding to herself. However, when she shouts Daisy's name, "Tom Buchanan broke her nose with his open hand. Then there were bloody towels upon the bathroom floor, and women's voices scolding, and high over the confusion a long broken wail of pain." From this we can see that Tom never respects her from the bottom of his heart, so when she touched the authority of men and the dignity of the upper class, Myrtle being hit is not surprising. Besides, in this machismo era, she was also just an accessory in the eyes of her husband Wilson, who is also from a lower social class. When Wilson found out about she was cheating with Tom, he restricted her freedom to protect his dignity. In the end, as Daisy discovered she was Tom's mistress, Daisy drove the car towards Myrtle straightly and killed her, resulting in the "devastating" miserable ending of Myrtle.

Under the patriarchal system, she can only be a plaything of men and a martyr of power. She is not respected by men of any class, and her thought of gaining more money and status by clinging to men is just a fantasy. Her desire to be a member of the upper class and the rebellion against reality are all reduced to bubbles.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper illustrates the characters and the encounters of women from different classes by analyzing the background of the 1920s in the United States, in which the patriarchal society dominated by men and the materialistic values of "materialism first" prevailed. The two female characters in the book are not happy and have a tragic ending ultimately. Daisy has an loveless marriage and only be used as an ornament for Tom to show off his status; in Gatsby's eyes, she is also just a materialized goddess that can be bought with money. Myrtle tries to cross her class status industriously but eventually dies under Daisy's car wheel.

After World War I, wealth became a symbol of success in the United States, money can replace God, resulting in a significant shift in women's values. The materialistic values of make the women at that time eager to pursue money and pleasure, produce degenerate and corrupt ideas and parasitic concept. However, women can only rely on men due to the lack of independence under the patriarchal society. All of these make the women be the victims in that period. Therefore, their tragic ending is primarily due to the materialistic social system and the dominance of patriarchal society.

Through the above analysis, we can learn that the cruelty of society and the selfishness of human nature eventually make the two women from different classes in the book have the same tragic ending, and there is a certain inevitability under this tragic ending.

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