

# An Analysis of the Female Characters in *The Great Gatsby* From Feminism Perspective

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Scott Fitzgerald is one of the most important novelists in the literary history of America. His masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, is one of the greatest works of the Jazz Age, and occupies an important position in the American literary world with its profound social significance and artistic techniques. Since its publication, the literary world has been showing a great interest in the novel. At present, the study on the novel at home and abroad is mainly conducted from the perspectives of symbolism, American dream, and other aspects. The study of feminism in this novel is not adequate enough, and the analysis of female characters is still slightly lacking. This paper will study the feminism contained in *The Great Gatsby*, combining with the background of the age and author's life, and on this basis, the paper will analyze the three female characters of Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle from a feminism perspective, so as to show that, the female characters in the novel are distorted and become the victims of patriarchy.

*Keywords:* *The Great Gatsby*, feminism, Jazz Age, patriarchy

## Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's most representative work, *The Great Gatsby*, has established Fitzgerald's position in the history of modern American literature, making him a spokesman for the "Jazz Age" (Zuo, 2006, p. 291).

Once published, this work has attracted wide attention. However, there is little research on the combination of feminism and the analysis of the female characters in the novel.

In foreign countries, the researchers studied this novel from various perspectives, not only limited to the field of literature, but also combined the novel with philosophy, psychology, etc., to produce new insights and conclusions. For example, Grande's *Desire in The Great Gatsby* (2015) combines René Girard's philosophy of desire to analyze Gatsby and Nick.

In China, *The Great Gatsby* is also a heated topic. For the domestic academic community, it has become a typical work for domestic scholars to deeply explore the American Dream: Fu Xiaofan analyzed Gatsby's dream of money and love in *On the American Dream in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby* (2008), revealing the inevitable disillusionment of his dream at that age. In addition, the study of the use of symbolism in the novel also accounts for a large proportion: Wang Zhihao made a comprehensive study of the symbolism in his *The Symbolism in The Great Gatsby* (2016).

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Based on the analysis of feminism contained in *The Great Gatsby*, and in combination with the exploration of the three main female characters in the novel, this paper analyzes the origin, living environment, and fate of the female characters, studies the psychological feelings of them from a deeper level and compares them with the patriarchal thoughts from the perspective of feminism, and explores the impact of patriarchy and money worship on women in the Jazz Age, so as to make a new analysis of the characters' behaviors and make all walks of life have a new and deeper understanding of the image of the three women in the novel.

### **Feminism in *The Great Gatsby***

#### **Overview of Feminism**

Feminism is a collection of political movements, values, and social activities. Feminist Literature refers to the literature that subverts gender discrimination with words, and strives for equality between men and women from a feminist position.

As an advanced idea in which women consciously study how to liberate themselves, feminism has gradually developed into a world-wide movement and made indelible contributions to the women's liberation from all over the world (Ni, 2005, p. 141). Besides, as a combination of theory and practice, feminism has gone throughout the social life in all aspects such as politics, economy, and culture, which affects women's consciousness and social development at different levels, thus promoting the development and progress of human society. With the torrent of feminism sweeping across the globe, millions of women worldwide gradually awoke and came forward to fight for their deserved rights, which has greatly helped women to participate in social life. It has changed women's social status and provided opportunities for women to enter politics, economy, culture, and other fields. Moreover, feminism has enhanced the cultural development of society and the formation of gender equality all over the world, and thus formed more civilized cultural norms, more advanced values and beliefs.

#### **Fitzgerald's Feminist Value**

Living in the patriarchal society since childhood, Fitzgerald, who was born in a traditional American family and received higher education, was deeply influenced by the patriarchal system. It is easy to find his prejudice and discrimination on females in his works.

After World War I, there was an eagerness to embrace the new in America, and Fitzgerald called it the Jazz Age. Under this social background, "new woman" appeared. The female characters in *The Great Gatsby* are all very negative, selfish, superficial, and irresponsible. Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle are different in social class, marriage, appearance, and personality, but they are all "new women", who have a modern sense of independence. Daisy was portrayed as a spoiled, selfish, and shallow woman. When she realized that Gatsby was not from the rich class, she immediately returned to Tom who provided her with the umbrella of money and power, and abandoned Gatsby as garbage. Jordan was portrayed as a liar. She cheated in order to win the golf game. "Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply" (Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 64), which showed Fitzgerald's prejudice against Jordan and all women. Myrtle was portrayed as a woman who was unfaithful to her husband, hypocritical and pushy, and eager to squeeze into the upper class.

We can see that Fitzgerald showed his patriarchal thoughts and strong misogyny in his works.

### **Analysis of the Female Characters in *The Great Gatsby***

#### **Analysis of Daisy**

The heroine, Daisy, was born in the upper class. She hated the vanity, deception, and coldness of the upper class; therefore, she chose the young officer Gatsby among her pursuers because Gatsby was kind and honest from her point of view. But in fact, Gatsby concealed from Daisy his origin of the bottom of the society. When the two people planned to marry, Gatsby was sent abroad by the army. In the meanwhile, Daisy was arranged by her family to marry Tom, the son of a wealthy family in the upper class. Gatsby was unable to fulfill his promise to Daisy. Although Daisy was of noble birth and had all she wanted, she had no right to choose her own happiness at that time. The break-up between Daisy and Gatsby was inevitable, which catered to the female values of the “Jazz Age”, and also declared the end of Daisy’s dream age (Shi & Zhao, 2008, p. 96). She chose Tom, that is to say, she eventually chose to integrate into the life of wealth. At the moment, she was transformed from a naive girl into an apathetic, selfish materialist in the upper-class society.

After she married Tom, Daisy soon found that her husband was unfaithful to their marriage. In order to win Tom back, Daisy even decided to move, but this did not help at all. When Daisy was giving birth to their baby, Tom was gone. Poor Daisy could not help feeling abandoned. Looking at the little baby girl, Daisy sighed she hoped her daughter to be a “beautiful little fool” (Fitzgerald, 2006). This statement showed her sigh for herself and also for all the poor women at that age. In the eyes of married Daisy, it’s unnecessary for women to have an independent personality; on the contrary, they could just be men’s vassal and live a life without worrying about food and clothing. Becoming a fool meant she did not need to think about freedom, love, and independence, but just to spend every ordinary day in her own way, which was the best thing a girl can be to Daisy.

As Daisy has despaired of her marriage and life, Gatsby came back. At this time, Gatsby became a bootlegger and made a lot of money; he began to pursue Daisy again. At this time, Daisy seemed to be really moved by Gatsby’s performance. But when she was invited by Gatsby to his magnificent house and saw Gatsby’s piles of expensive silk shirts, she bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily, because she had never seen such beautiful shirts before, which showed her material desire completely. Gatsby’s sudden reappearance brought Daisy a surprised dream, but Tom was her reality. Though the collision of reality and dream caused her hesitation to escape from the reality and pursue her dream, she finally compromised to Tom, who she really belonged to.

After Gatsby’s dream of Daisy was crushed by the cruel reality, there is a description in the novel: “He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass” (Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 172). Sky, rose, sunlight, and grass are all wonderful things, but these things here, gave us completely different feelings—beautiful but horrible (Shi & Zhao, 2008, p. 95). There is no doubt that Daisy was a symbol for “beautiful but horrible”. As she submitted to wealth and gave up herself, her beauty became worthless. She has enjoyed the true love with Gatsby and also fought for it, but chosen the compromise finally like most people. Although she was still moved by the love and dream years later, her life experience enabled her to have no courage to enjoy it again.

#### **Analysis of Jordan**

Jordan Baker was a famous golf champion. She was Daisy’s good friend, and had a short, fruitless relationship with Nick. This kind of unique female character had her own unique characteristics.

In the eyes of Nick, Jordan Baker was a woman of beauty, loveliness, and mystery when they first met. But at the same time, what impressed Nick was her cool, arrogance, and cynicism, which seemed to be very inconsistent with her age and her career. With the further development of the plot of the novel, the hidden ugly things behind Jordan's "tired and proud face" were uncovered one by one, thus revealing a twisted heart under her charming appearance.

To be just and fair are not only the most basic professional ethics for an athlete, but also the most basic requirements for every ordinary person. While for golf player Jordan, whether in the course of the competition or in the arena of life, these ethics had nothing to do with her. On the contrary, deception was her magic weapon. She used deception to satisfy her strong desire for success and resist the unfavorable situation she may face. At her first big golf tournament, some say that Jordan bent the rules in the semi-final round, but the row died away eventually. Nick supposed that Jordan became dishonest when she was very young and thought that she was "incurably dishonest". In telling Nick about Daisy's past, Jordan had such a comment that showed her life creed: "It's a great advantage not to drink among hard-drinking people" (Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 84). In this way, you could keep clear-headed and give nothing away among a group of drunken men, thus to indulge in petty, mean actions. Obviously, Jordan was very positive about the habit of not drinking, which was her consistent life strategy, because it can put her at an advantage, so as to create an opportunity for her subterfuges. That's what she hid behind her proud face as a golf champion—a crooked, mean, dishonesty soul.

What's more, Jordan's indifference, selfishness, and irresponsibility, were all uncovered in her daily life. She left "a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down" at a party, and then "lied about it" casually; she drove to pass so close to some workmen on the side of the road and just thought it did not matter lightly. For Jordan, who only wanted to get but did not give, self-interest was her only criterion when determining her choice on all issues. She asked Nick to arrange Gatsby's meeting with Daisy. In Jordan's mind, regardless of the loyalty to marriage as a wife and responsibility to family as a mother, Daisy's infidelity was a right choice to deal with Tom's betrayal. In such a society of material desire, spiritual desolation, and moral decay, there undoubtedly had a deeply impact on her (Liu, 2008, p. 59).

Jordan said that she was walking "half on the sidewalks and half on the lawns" when recalling the past, which properly shows her walking state on her own life road. She was indeed walking a wrong road, on which she not only trampled on the lawns, but also trampled on the honesty and goodness that a person should have.

### **Analysis of Myrtle**

Another important female character in the story is Myrtle, who was a degenerate woman.

As a white immigrant woman living in the lower class, Myrtle's dream was to live a luxurious life in the upper class like a noblewoman. She depended on Tom, and regarded him as the inevitable way to improve her social status and realize her dream, but Tom just played with her feelings. Myrtle's wishful thinking eventually ended abruptly with her tragic death.

She was full of curiosity and desire for the upper society, but she could only show her superficial knowledge of the upper society from the movies and tabloids like a stage clown and imitated it clumsily, which is ridiculous but pitiful. In order to be like a lady of the upper class at the platform, "she let four taxi cabs drive away before she selected a new one" (Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 30). She longed to be a noble lady, spending a lot of money in various stores all day. But the shopping list she made was full of dog collars, ashtrays, and other trivial things. In a day, she changed three sets of clothes, from an ordinary spotted dress to an elaborate dress;

she seemed to step from the lower class to the upper class, just like a noble lady. Under the influence of the change of her dress, Myrtle's personality had also changed. Her vitality was converted into superciliousness.

Like Daisy and Jordan, Myrtle was also determined to marry a nobleman to realize her dream. Unfortunately, also like Daisy and Jordan, she could not find an honest and reliable person at that time. At first, she married Wilson, the owner of a garage. But she just thought he was not fit to lick her shoes soon. At the moment met Tom, Myrtle noticed him dressed in rich and decided that he was a nobleman that could save her from misfortune and realize her dream of becoming a noble lady. She got fascinated with Tom and became his mistress, but Tom just toyed with her. Myrtle was very enthusiastic about buying a dog, because the tabloids told her that a noble lady would not walk on the street alone and must be accompanied by a dog. She posed delicately to ask whether the dog was "boy or girl". But Tom did not care about it at all, he just said it was a bitch decisively, and even threw money to Myrtle asking her to buy 10 more dogs with no respect for her at all. She was dressed up, bloated, and forgot her low class and the insurmountable gap between herself and the rich, gave up the cultural foundation of her existence, and abandoned the traditional women's good, loyal qualities (Li, 2015, p. 79). When Myrtle mentioned Daisy's name, Tom broke her nose. In Tom's eyes, she was so humble that she did not even have the right to mention Daisy's name. Her dream, just like the sand castle by the sea, was destroyed in an instant.

The cage of patriarchy was indestructible, and the relationship with Tom finally drove Myrtle to eventual death (Peng, 2011, p. 339). This kind of women like Myrtle could not realize the dream that surpassed their class, but only became the accessory of men, and ultimately became the victims of material society and patriarchal culture.

### Conclusion

*The Great Gatsby* vividly represents the society of the Jazz Age, in which the female characters are the representative of "new women", as well as the representative deeply influenced by the times.

Fitzgerald's description of female images in this novel is pessimistic. Daisy was apathetic, Jordan was dishonest, Myrtle was affected, and they were all symbols for money worship and selfishness. Many readers only have direct impression that the three main female characters in the novel are profligate and degenerate, so they are not recognized by the public.

Through the analysis and the interpretation of the female characters in the novel from the background of the times and in combination with feminism, we can find that their distorted character is due to the Jazz Age and the patriarchal society they lived in, which advocate money and power, and have a new and deeper understanding of them. They were all the products of this era. No matter how they struggle and resist, they will achieve nothing eventually. Considering the pressure of patriarchal cultural ideology and social environment, we can think of them as sacrificial lambs and victims.

In addition, the same can be said of today. Despite the social progress, the past age of times, and the great changes of the living conditions, women need to struggle hard and overcome numerous obstacles, if they want to achieve equality with men.

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