

English B Extended Essay

Research Question: To what extent does Fitzgerald's portrayal of female characters challenge or reinforce 1920s gender roles?

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Introduction:

The Great Gatsby, written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, is typically understood to be an exploration of the ideas of money, illusion, and the failure of the American Dream (Curnutt 12). From the perspective of gender, however, the novel can also be understood to be an exploration of the act of observing women in space and the impact of culture on choice. The 1920s were an era of manifest change in the lives of women in America, with women winning the vote, the rise of the flapper as an icon of women's newfound freedom, and the rise of consumer culture offering new space for self-definition (Zeitzy 45). However, beneath this manifest level of change, there were also very deep-seated structures of economic subordination, class divisions, and cultural norms that defined women in terms of men (Cott 89). The paper that follows will seek to address the following research question: "To what extent does Fitzgerald's depiction of female characters in his novel challenge or reinforce the gender roles of the 1920s?" In terms of action and style, Fitzgerald's female characters, such as Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson, embody the freedom of movement that was offered to women in the 1920s. On the level of narrative value, consequence, and social structure, however, they are largely restricted to roles that define women in terms of their beauty, their marriage, and their relationships with men. The novel thus documents the period of change but ultimately illustrates how patriarchal society circumscribes the possibility of female autonomy (Showalter 181).

Methodology:

To address the issue of Fitzgerald's portrayal of gender, the essay will combine different approaches, such as close reading, feminist theory, Marxism, and psychoanalytical theory, as discussed by Eagleton, Freud, and Lacan, respectively, at 34, 22, and 98. The essay will begin with close readings of the characters, such as Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson, including discussions of word choice, character development, and narrative techniques. The analysis will then expand to include the period's journalistic and theoretical literature to contextualize the characters' behaviors within the changing rules of gender during the period, as discussed by Churchwell, 67. Feminist theory will be employed to examine how the novel reflects and challenges the restrictions placed on women during the period, while Marxist theory will be employed to examine the intersections between class, economics, and gender. Psychoanalytical theory will be employed to examine the psychological aspects of the female characters. The essay will also examine the reliability of Nick Carraway as a narrator and the ethical implications of his portrayal of women, using narrative theory to examine how narrative point of view shapes the audience's perception of gender.

Historical and Cultural Context for Gender in the 1920s:

In order to understand Fitzgerald's choices, it is important to place the novel in the social context of the time. While the Nineteenth Amendment granted American women the legal right to vote in 1920, urbanization and industrialization provided women with more opportunities for work and leisure. In addition, the flapper, with her short hair, short skirts, cigarettes, and jazz club-hopping, became a visible embodiment of the new type of woman (Zeit 102). While American women gained the legal right to vote, however, they still remained economically dependent. In fact, marriage remained the main route to security for many women, and the route to social respectability still depended in large part upon how a woman looked and acted (Cott 112). American journalism of the time celebrated the flapper as a symbol of the new woman, but it also expressed concern about the moral and social implications of women's public visibility (Banner 56). Fitzgerald's novel reflects the ambivalence of the cultural moment in which it was written. While the novel reflects the glamour of the era, it also reveals the limitations that still restrict women's lives. Thus, Fitzgerald's female characters may appear both liberated and trapped, both in attitude and in fact.

Daisy Buchanan:

Daisy Buchanan is the brightest, yet the most complex, female figure that the novel presents. She is the central figure of Gatsby's idealization, the central figure that the plot revolves around.

Daisy's beauty is her voice, her clothes, and her social skills. This, therefore, is a commentary on the new status of women during the Jazz Age. However, the author often portrays Daisy's value as being dependent on her looks and her status as a wife and mother.

The famous line that is often quoted to show Daisy's outlook on life is "'I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world—a beautiful little fool'" (Fitzgerald, Chapter 1).

This is not the comment of a mother who is trying to be kind to her daughter, but rather a commentary on the social status of women during the Jazz Age. It is a commentary on the social status that women are expected to be beautiful, carefree, and not bothered by the problems of the world. She is advising her daughter to be ignorant, because ignorance is the best way to be free from the problems that the world presents. This is the central irony that the novel presents, that the very qualities that make Daisy desirable, such as beauty, charm, and carefreeness, are the qualities that are used to keep women under control.

Daisy's actions also complicate a straightforward interpretation of Daisy as a passive figure. She flirts, she laughs, she performs at the spectacle that are the parties; she can be strong-willed at times when intimacy calls for decision. Her words to Gatsby, "You always look so cool," can be read as a form of flirting and a recognition of the performative nature that each character embodies (ch. 5). She can also be read as passive and passive-aggressive at times. She does not want to be seen with Gatsby, she allows Tom to tell his side of the story after Myrtle's death, and she chooses to stay with Tom and maintain her social status. Her choice to stay with Tom can be

read as a performative act that is also informed by the comfort and security that Tom's wealth and status provide. Daisy's modernity can be read as performative at times.

Fitzgerald does not stereotype Daisy. Instead, he presents her with psychological depth, tenderness, indecisiveness, and self-preservation. However, the way in which the novel is structured causes readers to repeatedly slot her back into a world where she is defined by her beauty and marital status. Daisy is a microcosm of the way in which the novel presents a dichotomy of possibilities, both glamorous and empty, in a world where male power is still dominant.

Jordan Baker:

Jordan Baker is the most modern of the women in the novel. She is a golfer, which means that she has a public space in which to act, a space that in the 1920s was still relatively rare for women. She smokes, she drives a car, and she moves in the world of men with a confidence that sets her apart from the more traditional role of the female in the novel, as represented in the character of Daisy. Jordan Baker's presence in the novel challenges the traditional roles of women in that it presents a world in which women can act in the public sphere, in which women can have a public role and a sense of self outside of marriage.

Fitzgerald presents Jordan Baker as a figure of independence in several ways. Jordan "was incurably dishonest," Nick says of her, "but there was a touch of pathos in her smile, a certain wan, charming, discontented face" (ch. 3). Jordan Baker's dishonesty, the rumors of her cheating in a golf tournament and her flippant attitude towards telling the truth, puts the value of her independence in question. Jordan Baker's independence is represented as a bad thing in the novel, a thing that raises moral questions about the place of women in the public sphere.

Jordan Baker's relationship with Nick Carraway further domesticates the figure of the independent woman in the novel. Jordan Baker may be the most modern of the women in the novel, but even Jordan Baker becomes a part of a romantic subplot in the novel that reinscribes the traditional roles of women in a very traditional way. Jordan Baker may be a figure of independence, but even Jordan Baker becomes a part of a romantic subplot in the novel that reinscribes the traditional roles of women in a very traditional way. Fitzgerald's portrayal of Jordan Baker as a figure of independence in the novel reveals a cultural ambivalence towards the role of women in the public sphere in the 1920s.

Myrtle Wilson:

The story of Myrtle Wilson serves as a dramatic example of the interplay between gender and class. While Daisy and Jordan are from the leisure class, Myrtle is not, and she is married to George Wilson, who owns a garage in the valley of ashes. The affair between Myrtle and Tom Buchanan was her attempt to transcend her station in life.

The portrayal of Myrtle by Fitzgerald can also be considered harsh and serves a specific social purpose. The death of Myrtle, though dramatic, was anonymous and served the specific purpose of the novel's tragic ending. The attempt by Myrtle to transcend her class by using her desires and her attempts at consumption was a failure, and she was reduced to a body on the road, mistaken for another and not claimed by the social group she was attempting to penetrate.

However, the novel also presents a more sympathetic portrayal of the situation and the character of Myrtle Wilson. The actions of the character are not necessarily moral failings, but rather a response to her economic and emotional circumstances. The desire by the character to transcend

her circumstances was a rational response to a world where there was no legitimate means for women of her class to transcend her station.

The portrayal of the character by Fitzgerald also serves to show the harshness of the world and the cruelty of the circumstances that led to the desperate attempts by the character to transcend her station, and the ultimate failure and death of the character as a means of highlighting the harshness of the world and the cruelty of the circumstances that led to her desperate attempts at transcendence. The novel, therefore, uses the story of the character to show the interplay between gender and class and the consequences of the transgression of the boundaries set by the world on women who attempt to transcend their station.

Overall Reflection:

Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle, as characters, therefore, demonstrate the intricacies of gender roles during the 1920s, as presented in the novel. Daisy's limited agency, Jordan's conditional freedom, and Myrtle's aspirational tragedy together show the possibilities and limitations of women's roles during the 1920s. Each of the characters represents a different aspect of the new woman of the 1920s. Daisy represents the ornamental woman, Jordan represents the woman who is free to be independent, and Myrtle represents the woman who is willing to transgress.

All the women, to some degree, subvert the traditional role of the woman, albeit through different means. Daisy does this through her wit, Jordan does this through her independence, and Myrtle does this through her desire. However, the subversion is not enough to change the fact that the novel presents a commentary on the role of women during the 1920s. The women are, therefore, reduced to the same roles that they are expected to play, albeit at the hands of the societal norms that govern them.

Fitzgerald's portrayal of the women, therefore, presents the reader with the opportunity to think about the cost of the social roles that women play during the 1920s. It is not a portrayal that is either celebratory or condemning of the women's roles during the 1920s, but rather presents the reader with the social nuances that are at play during the novel. It is, therefore, a commentary on the women's roles during the 1920s, albeit not directly. By making the women the focal point of the social commentary, Fitzgerald presents the reader with the opportunity to think about the role that gender roles play on the social order.

By presenting the reader with the women's roles during the 1920s, Fitzgerald presents the reader with the social nuances that are at play during the novel, making the novel a commentary on the women's roles during the 1920s, albeit not directly. The women are the focal point of the social commentary, making the novel a commentary on the women's roles during the 1920s, albeit not directly.

Feminist, Marxist, and Psychoanalytic Readings:

In order to further examine Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, it would be pertinent to incorporate different critical perspectives. The three most important perspectives are feminism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. These perspectives provide different insights into how Fitzgerald's novel portrays women and how these portrayals compare to those in the 1920s.

These three theories of criticism were used because they complement each other in presenting a comprehensive analysis of Fitzgerald's novel "The Great Gatsby." Feminist criticism centers its attention on the structural inequalities and patriarchal limitations in the portrayal of women in the novel (Showalter 182). Marxist criticism, on the other hand, examines these inequalities in the context of the social and class structures in the 1920s (Eagleton 41). Finally, psychoanalytic

criticism reveals the ways in which the unconscious desires and perceptions of the male characters, particularly Gatsby's perception of Daisy, reduce women to mere objects of male desire (Freud 29; Lacan 101).

Feminist literary criticism emerged in the mid-20th century as a reaction to the marginalization of women in literature and society. Feminist literary criticism centers its attention on the portrayal of women in literature, the significance of the female characters in the novel, and the patriarchal influences in the novel's conclusion (Showalter 182). In the essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" written by Elaine Showalter in 1981, the significance of analyzing the portrayal of women in literature and society, and the society in which these women are portrayed, was emphasized.

A feminist approach to "The Great Gatsby" reveals the evaluation of women based on their physical appearance and their contribution to a relationship. For example, "She hoped she'd be a beautiful little fool" (Chapter 1), says Daisy in reference to her own daughter. This is a bleak truth because women are rewarded for their physical appearance rather than their intelligence and independence. Moreover, the independence and individuality of Jordan Baker are overshadowed with a sense of guilt, while the attempt of Myrtle Wilson to transcend the barriers of class and gender ends in a violent retribution, which is a truth revealed through a feminist approach to "The Great Gatsby." However, a feminist approach to "The Great Gatsby" alone might not reveal a complete analysis of the complexity of the novel because Fitzgerald reveals a patriarchal society, but in doing so, he reveals its emotional toll as well. Fitzgerald reveals a patriarchal society in "The Great Gatsby." However, in reference to the research question, a feminist approach reveals Fitzgerald as a writer who reveals women as modern and visible characters in society but also reveals a patriarchal society through the evaluation of women based

on their physical appearance and their contribution to a relationship. A Marxist approach to *The Great Gatsby* would analyze the role of money and class in the novel. Marxist literary criticism is rooted in the theories of Karl Marx, and it analyzes the role of economics and class in a novel and the happenings in the novel. According to Terry Eagleton in *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), literature reflects and comments upon the economic world in which it exists and thrives. A Marxist approach to *The Great Gatsby* would show that it is a patriarchal society where women are not given freedom and independence. Women's freedom and independence are rooted in their relationship with men and their class. Daisy's freedom and independence are rooted in her relationship with Tom and her class with Tom. Myrtle, in her bid to move beyond her class and her role as a woman, through her relationship with Tom, suffers a tragic end in the novel. Gatsby suffers a tragic end due to the society in which he lives, a society where the wealthy are safeguarded and the poor are trampled upon.

Gender and class are interconnected in that women's agency is not only oppressed by gender but also by the distribution of wealth. The oppression of Daisy, the liberation of Jordan that comes with a condition, and the desire of Myrtle that leads to peril all illustrate the function of the economy in the oppression of gender. Fitzgerald's depiction of women is not only the result of a class system that seeks to repress the liberation of women but also a critique of it, which illustrates that economic inequality and gender inequality are interrelated.

The psychoanalytic approach, which derives from Freud and then Lacan, is concerned with the way in which repressed desires, fantasies, and projections inform one's reading of the text. The psychoanalytic approach is concerned with characters depicted as struggling with internal conflicts and how the text reflects the culture's deepest desires and fears, or the cultural unconscious. The concepts of repression, projection, and the human unconscious developed by

Freud, and the concepts of human desire developed by Lacan, are particularly relevant to the analysis of literature.

When it's applied to "The Great Gatsby", psychoanalytic criticism emphasizes themes of desire, fantasy, and projection. Gatsby's obsession with Daisy, therefore, is not really about Daisy but about his fantasy of perfection and his desire to go back to the good old days. Daisy, in other words, becomes the screen upon which his fantasy of perfection is projected, replacing her individuality with his longing for something unattainable.

According to this analysis, the female characters in the book are portrayed as objects of male fantasy: "Daisy's voice was full of money—that was inevitable, delicate, exotic—that was money." This line from chapter 7 of the book already shows how Daisy's voice, along with her beauty, becomes the object of male fantasy. Jordan's coolness, Myrtle's sensuality, are all portrayed from the point of view of male desire, defined more in relation to how men perceive them rather than who they are.

In relation to the research question, therefore, psychoanalytic criticism shows that, despite its apparent subversion of gender norms, Fitzgerald's portrayal of women in the book remains superficial, since at the end of the day, all female characters are portrayed as objects of male fantasy.

Each of these angles only adds depth to the query. Feminism highlights the built-in inequality between the sexes, demonstrating how patriarchy seeks to constrain female independence.

Marxism points to the class power structures that affect gender roles. It shows how the interdependence of women is economically maintained in a subordinate role. Psychoanalysis examines the emotional factors that turn women into objects of projection. Desire is used as a

tool of domination. All of these approaches to understanding Fitzgerald's work demonstrate that his portrayal of women cannot be reduced to a singular ideology. It is a multi-faceted representation, one that is a product of social currents. When asked, "To what extent does Fitzgerald's portrayal of female characters challenge or reinforce 1920s gender roles?" a variety of approaches to understanding Fitzgerald's work suggest that, ultimately, while Fitzgerald brings women to the fore, allowing them a degree of independence, he ultimately reinforces those social currents that constrain their independence.

Synthesis:

When Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle appear together in a scene, a trend begins to emerge. Each woman represents a different reaction to the 1920s. Daisy wants a safe haven, Jordan fights for independence through her work, and Myrtle craves a glimpse of forbidden love. The results of each character's actions, where Daisy ends up contentedly married, Jordan remains suspended in a moral grey area, and Myrtle dies a tragic death, can be seen as a product of a patriarchal society. The women who conform to these old patriarchal notions of femininity seem to prosper—happy, successful. The women who rebel against these notions face backlash, persecution, punishment. But Fitzgerald isn't just some reactionary author. He's also presenting a social commentary on the emotional toll these definitions take on each woman, and ultimately on society as a whole. The true brilliance of Fitzgerald's work lies in the fact that it challenged the notion that a patriarchal society was fair and just. He's not necessarily supporting the modern feminist movement; he's also not necessarily condemning it. What he does do is present—clearly and unflinchingly—what society was really like. The feminist movement of the 1920s was a product of a society that had yet to become egalitarian. Fitzgerald's work challenges us to look deeper and to examine the true nature of a patriarchal society. This is what makes it so successful, and it is what makes it so relevant to modern readers. Fitzgerald's work is a product of a patriarchal society, and it is a product of a patriarchal society in the 1920s. This is what makes it so successful, and it is what makes it so relevant to modern readers. Fitzgerald's work is a product of a patriarchal society, and it is a product of a patriarchal society in the 1920s. Fitzgerald's work is a product of a patriarchal society, and it is a product of a patriarchal society in the 1920s.

Conclusion:

However, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* ultimately presents us with a verdict that's both messy and twofold. The women in *The Great Gatsby* are ultimately presented as women of modernity, but they are also pulled back into cages through the moral setting and the world-building that takes place throughout the novel. While Daisy is beautiful and alluring, she's also shown to be weak. While Jordan is successful, she's also shown to be suspicious. While Myrtle makes a brave attempt to rise above both class and gender, it ultimately ends in ruin for her. In short, while looking and desiring can be empowering for women, it can also be limiting for them. While *The Great Gatsby* is written from a man's perspective and takes place in a society where money ultimately defines one's level of morality, it's not necessarily an attack on patriarchal society. It's a nuanced look at patriarchal society and how it affects women. As such, it's difficult to determine exactly how much Fitzgerald challenged or reinforced 1920s gender roles in *The Great Gatsby*. The women in *The Great Gatsby* are modern and present in 1920s society, but they are also limited by patriarchal society. The real strength of *The Great Gatsby* lies in its ability to be both ambiguous and emotionally impactful through limited choices. *The Great Gatsby* also challenges patriarchal society in that it presents women in 1920s America in a way that forces one to think about gender roles in a new and interesting way. As such, *The Great Gatsby* is ultimately a potent tool for talking about gender and how one might rethink what they see within Fitzgerald's world and within our own.

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