**Daisy, Jordan, Myrtle**

**Gatsby’s women**

**Ian and Michelle McMechan consider Fitzgerald’s representation of the women characters in The Great Gatsby.**

Besides the timeless ending for which it is so well known, there is much else to admire in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby, first published in 1925. In The Great American Novel, Philip Roth has a fictionalised Ernest Hemingway describe his contemporary as ‘our minor poet Francis Scott Fitzwhat’shisname’ and one of the primary attractions of Gatsby is the lyrical quality of its prose, so well exemplified in the final paragraphs of the story. In recent years, however, a wealth of discussion has focused on ‘politicised’ readings of the text, as opposed to more conventional concerns with its style. Marxists have considered the notion of ownership, for instance; Freudians have pondered the nature of narrator Nick Carraway’s attraction to Gatsby and feminists such as Judith Fetterley have examined the ways in which the narrative might be considered misogynist. The issue of whether or not the book hates women is an interesting one – certainly there is a lot to be made of how Fitzgerald deals with gender as events unfold.

**Starting with names**
The naming of the three main female characters, Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker and Myrtle Wilson, is a good starting point in a discussion of how they are represented. Daisy’s maiden name is Fay, which comes from Middle English faie. Used as a common noun it means fairy. Daisy’s lack of substance (at least from a moral point of view), her flightiness and her beauty are key elements in her depiction. Further, a daisy blossoms between June and August. The name is a compound of the Old English words daeges eage, meaning ‘day’s eye’ (because the petals open at dawn and close at dusk) and a daisy’s colours are obviously yellow and white, two key components in the novel’s chromatic palette. The impressions generated by Daisy Fay’s name are of sunshine, transience and vague unreality.

The name of Daisy’s friend Jordan Baker, although seemingly non-gender specific, is probably a reference to cars made by ‘Jordan’ between 1916 -1932 – models with names like ‘Roadster’ and ‘Playboy’ hinting at sexual freedom and playfulness. This allusion suggests the character’s independent nature and hints at her potential for causing accidents (developing one of the central motifs in the novel: the destructive potency of the car). In one scene, Nick is critical of Jordan’s lack of awareness of other drivers and her egocentrism, to which she replies: ‘they’ll keep out of my way...it takes two to make an accident’. Early on in the narrative, Daisy’s husband Tom (with a typical lack of irony) observes of Jordan’s family that ‘they oughtn’t to let her run around the country this way’ and despite her protestations that she is a ‘good girl’ Jordan is not an angel. Ultimately her apparent lack of care for others might make us grow to distrust her at least.

The third woman, Myrtle Wilson, has a name which like Daisy’s, links to botany – a myrtle is a common, evergreen, bushy shrub. The word is a variant of myrrh, the root meaning of which is ‘bitter’ and it is difficult to distinguish at times whether the sourness with which she is characterised comes from Nick, her lover Tom Buchanan (whose attitude towards her is contemptuous, as demonstrated when he breaks her nose) or Fitzgerald himself.

**Introducing Daisy**
The reader’s introduction to Daisy makes her seem like a Jazz Age fairy tale princess – the sort of fabulous female to whom we imagine the book’s epigram refers. The house to which the Buchanans have ‘drifted’ is
even more elaborate than (Nick) expected...The front...broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy afternoon. Tom leads Nick into:

a bright rosy-colored space...A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling.

On an ‘enormous couch’, two women recline – Daisy and Jordan. Nick wryly observes that they:

were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house.

The breathy laugh with which Daisy greets Nick is as inconsequential as the atmosphere in the Buchanans’ mansion; her words of welcome to her ‘second cousin once removed’ appear insincere: ‘I’m p-paralyzed with happiness.’
Daisy’s ‘low, thrilling voice’ is compelling, however:

It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again...there was an excitement in (it) that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered ‘Listen.’

The hint of sexual appeal is clear enough, though the attraction here is more that of a flirtation – an idea which continues in the following dialogue between the cousins (who are sufficiently distant not to make the suggestion improper). Daisy’s hazy connection with sexuality is confirmed by her ‘irrelevantly’ referring to her three-year-old child, who Nick has never previously seen. When we eventually meet ‘Pammy’ in a key moment in Chapter Seven, it seems that she is just another of Daisy’s innumerable possessions, something for her to ‘show off’ when guests call:

– a freshly laundered nurse leading a little girl came into the room.
‘Bles-sed pre-cious,’ [Daisy] crooned, holding out her arms. ‘Come to your own mother that loves you.’
The child, relinquished by the nurse, rushed across the room and rooted shyly into her mother’s dress.
‘The Bles-sed pre-cious! Did mother get powder on your old yellowy hair? Stand up now, and say—How-de-do...You dream, you. You absolute little dream.’...Daisy sat back upon the couch. The nurse took a step forward and held out her hand.
‘Come, Pammy.’
‘Good-by, sweetheart!’
With a reluctant backward glance the well-disciplined child held on to her nurse’s hand and was pulled out the door.

This trophy daughter, on display for a matter of moments, is the tangible consequence of the Buchanans’ unhappy marriage. Daisy’s attitude towards motherhood, which might at best be termed indifferent, may be a reaction to Tom’s philandering and her lack of love for her husband. Whatever its wellspring, it does not induce great sympathy for her.

**Jordan’s masculine control**
If Daisy embodies one kind of female sensuality Jordan represents an altogether different type of woman – one with more ‘masculine’ qualities. She arrives in the novel as striking, single, self-sufficient, and well-heeled, sharing Daisy’s status as a ‘Silver idol’. Jordan seems untouchable and tantalizing but despite her many advantages, she is ‘discontented’. Her indolence is made patent:

‘we ought to plan something’ yawned Miss Baker...

Nick’s initial description of Jordan reflects an emptiness or sterility – she is ‘cool...white...impersonal’ and betrays an ‘absence of all desire...’

Later when Jordan is ‘summoned’ to speak to Gatsby it is the ‘jauntiness’ in her movements and the way in which she ‘(wears) her evening dress...like sports clothes’ which attracts Nick to her. ‘(M)asculine’ personal qualities such as her self assurance and emotional containment lead the critic Frances Kerr to observe ‘No other woman in the novel has such control’. It is Jordan’s desire both to observe and be at the heart of events without having to commit any substantial emotional resource which might be seen as a fatal flaw in her character – that and the fact that she is ‘incurably dishonest’.

A deep-seated competitive urge has caused her to be ruthless and uncompromising – Nick explains:

She wasn’t able to endure being at a disadvantage.

A feminist reading might, for example, applaud the fact that she has reached the peak of sporting achievement by becoming a golf champion (golf, after all has traditionally been the preserve of the upper-middle-class male) but then recoil when it is revealed that she has a reputation (possibly undeserved) for cheating:

she had moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round...a caddy retracted his statement, and the only other witness admitted he might have been mistaken.

Not exactly a role model for women, then.

**Myrtle’s raw appeal**
Where Daisy is all light and air and Jordan only slightly more grounded, the working class Myrtle Wilson is dust and dirt. The tones in which Fitzgerald draws her are mainly grey and brown and she hails from a ‘valley of ashes’. Myrtle’s appeal, in contrast to Dasiy’s, is raw and earthy: ‘She had changed her dress to a brown figured muslin, which stretched tight over her rather wide hips’ as Nick notes on first meeting her. Her ‘intense vitality’ expands in Tom’s presence until ‘she seem(s) to be revolving on a noisy creaking pivot through the smoky air.’ Myrtle appears as some form of marionette in fact – a grotesque fairground-attraction doll.

Myrtle’s final moment is one of the most memorable scenes in the narrative. Struck by the car carrying Daisy and Gatsby back from their unhappy visit to New York with Nick, Jordan and Tom, her life ‘violently extinguished (she) knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust.’ In death, Myrtle is made to embody the ebbing vigour of the 1920s, her:

left breast was swinging loose like a flap...(her) mouth...wide open and ripped a little at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long.

Sympathy is certainly generated here, but the element of detachment with which events are reported might suggest that it is the consequences of her death rather than any real feeling for her character in which Fitzgerald has the largest stake.

Myrtle is the victim of the ‘apocalypse’ which eventually leads to Gatsby’s murder at the hands of her grieving husband (though Daisy was of course driving the car which killed her). Her negligence at the wheel – for which Gatsby assumes the blame and suffers the consequences – with all the substantial irony that entails – is the distillation of her general carelessness. That she runs away in the aftermath, leaving her lover isolated and desolate, is not likely to make us feel any more positive towards her.

**Owning Daisy**
Much of Fitzgerald’s success in The Great Gatsby derives not from the sentimentality which surrounds his hero, but from the skill with which he depicts Daisy – in a set of largely unpleasant people, her surface qualities distinguish her. Unfortunately, the hollowness of her soul creates a vacuum into which Gatsby is sucked and in which he is finally destroyed. Fetterley argues that in the book ‘ownership of women is invoked as the index of power: he who possesses Daisy Fay is the most powerful boy’, that, in fact, she is no more than the prize over which Tom and Gatsby fight. The critic sees the hero’s fate very much as his own doing – her sweeping assertion is, indeed, that ‘American literature is male’ and that ‘The major works of American fiction constitute a series of designs on the female reader...’ Whether or not we agree with her or her view that ‘the drama of The Great Gatsby involves an attack on Daisy,’ is entirely up to us; what is true is that Fitzgerald’s portrayal of women is by no means straightforward.

**References**
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*This article was first published in emagazine 32.*