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Female Images in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

This paper tends to analyze female images in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby* from a feminist perspective. It analyzes these three women characters--Daisy Fay, Myrtle Wilson, and Jordan Baker--in three aspects: characteristics of their images, the relationship between them and their intimate men, and their fight against patriarchy society. This paper tends to point out the similarities and differences of these three female images.

Key words: *The Great Gatsby*; F. Scott Fitzgerald; Female image; Feminism

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1. INTRODUCTION OF FITZGERALD AND THE GREAT GATSBY

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was an American writer and screenwriter in the 20th century. As one of the most famous member of “Lost Generation” in 1920s, he is now widely regarded as one of the greatest American writers in the 20th century. In his writing career, he wrote four finished novels (*This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and*

Damned, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tender Is the Night*) and an unfinished novel *The Last Tycoon*. His novel not only vividly reflects the disillusionment of the “American Dream” in the 1920s, but also shows the spiritual aspect of the “wasteland era” of the American upper class during the Great Depression.

The Great Gatsby came out in 1925 and established Fitzgerald’s place in modern American literature. At the end of the 20th century, American academic authorities selected the 100 best novels in a hundred years of English literature. *The Great Gatsby* ranked second, and was adapted to the screen and stage for many times. Today, *The Great Gatsby* is widely considered to be a literary classic and a contender for the title of the “Great American Novel” (Batchelor, p.12).

The Great Gatsby is a novel set in New York City and Long Island in the 1920s, when people always indulged themselves in singing and drinking. By chance, Nick, a poor clerk, broke into the secret world of Gatsby, a wealthy man who held luxurious parties to create opportunities of meeting his beloved Daisy. Daisy, as Nick’s cousin, suffered so much from her husband Tom’s infidelity that she gradually became Gatsby’s lover after they met. At the same time, Nick was aware of Tom’s mistress Myrtle and fell in love with Daisy’s friend Jordan Baker. However, everything changed after a big quarrel among Daisy, Gatsby and Tom. Daisy made a hit-and-run accident which led to Myrtle’s death and the madness of Myrtle’s husband. In the end,

Gatsby was killed by Myrtle’s husband who mistook the former as the murderer, and ironically received no mourning from Daisy. Nick broke up with Jordan and went back to the west.

This novel has been analyzed and researched by many scholars. Most of them analyze it from the perspective of American Dreams. And some focus on these following aspects: character analysis, linguistic and pragmatic features in the novel, psychoanalysis,

and narrative strategies. This paper is to analyze the novel from a feminist perspective, focusing on the three female characters in the novel. It tends to analyze the differences and similarities of three women characters in three aspects, revealing their ways of fighting against the patriarchy society.

There are three typical kinds of female images: women conformists of patriarchy, women accomplices of patriarchy, and women rebels against patriarchy.

Women conformists of patriarchy are those people who obey patriarchal rules and don't fight against men's oppression. In the patriarchal society, men are the masters of society and family, while women depend on men for survival. On one hand, women are always at risk of being abandoned. On the other hand, they are dominated by extremely strict ideas of chastity. As Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*, "men have formulated a set of moral norms which stipulated the methods of domesticating women, so that women consciously and voluntarily become the object of male domination and male oppression" (p.129). Women are excluded from social life, being unable to earn a living by themselves. They completely become men's private property so that they lose their ego and independent personality. In this way, women's activities are confined to the household, but they are still restricted and suppressed in family life. They do not have any rights, so they can only satisfy their basic survival needs by pleasing men.

Women accomplices of patriarchy not also tacitly approve men's oppression on women, but also helped to consolidate men's dominance. Men restrict and deprive of women's right of acquiring knowledge, raising awareness, and developing creativity. Women are in a second place and their roles are always degraded. They are isolated from the fields of social knowledge and cultural achievement. As a result, they gradually lose their independence and even help men to strengthen their oppression on other women. In the patriarchal society, men lay stress on social value, while women pay attention to physical value whose functions are reproduction and meeting aesthetic needs. As Felstiner writes in his essay "Seeing *The Second Sex* through the Second Wave", "being ruled by the patriarchal social discipline for a long time, women unconsciously internalize patriarchal ideas to form their own values" (258). They tend to not only maintain patriarchal social systems and values, but also adhere to the principles of gender role in the patriarchal society.

Women rebels against patriarchy rely on themselves and promote gender equality. They break the traditional norms, pursue equality, demand independence, and seek for individuality. They advocate and encourage women to liberate themselves from marriage and to strive for economic and personal independence. Rebels against patriarchal society all have female subjective

consciousness. According to Butler, female subjective consciousness supports female's conscious awareness of her status, role, and value in the objective world (p.11). Driven by this consciousness, women can instinctively realize and fulfill their historical mission, social responsibility, and life obligation. They know their own characteristics clearly, so that they can affirm and realize their needs and values, thus participating in the transformation of social life in a unique way. Women's subjective consciousness motivates women to pursue independence and to develop initiative and creativity.

2. DAISY FAY: A CONFORMIST OF PATRIARCHY

Daisy was a conformist of patriarchy who succumbed to male power. She was a materialized female character with selfishness and vanity. As two vital men in Daisy's life, Tom and Gatsby cheat Daisy in different ways. To Tom, Daisy was his private property which should be always under his control. As for Gatsby, Daisy was substantially a symbol of fulfilling his dream. They all treated Daisy in an unequal way.

Daisy was an image of materialization and an obedient and innocent beauty with sophisticated personality. Daisy's attractiveness lies in her obedience, innocence and beauty, and her beauty is ubiquitous in this novel. She is popular among men because of the prevalent ideas in that time. As Greer states in her book *The Female Eunuch*, women do not need to work hard to achieve success, nor do they have to have their own personality and moral principles. It is enough for a woman to be cute, and her virtues are passive (51). In light of Daisy's sophistication, she is insincere, selfish and obsessed with status and money. When she killed Myrtle by the car, she had no courage to stop the car and took the responsibility. She was so selfish that she made others consider Gatsby as the real murderer. To protect her wealth and reputation, Daisy did not even send a bunch of flowers to Gatsby's funeral.

Tom regarded Daisy as private property and inferior human. Tom treated Daisy terribly, because he believed that "everything he did was right in his opinion" (Fitzgerald, p.141). Tom materialized Daisy as a personal belonging which could be accused of and neglected as long as her "owner" wanted. He detested those women who did not stay at home and went everywhere. He felt upset about acquaintance of Daisy and Gatsby, and blamed Daisy that "By God, I may be old-fashioned in my ideas, but women run around too much these days to suit me. They meet all kinds of crazy fish" (Fitzgerald, p.110). Tom considered Daisy as his private property so that he was opposed to Daisy's hanging out and making friends. (At that time, Tom did not know that Daisy and

Gatsby had had a love relationship.) Daisy was believed to be an inferior human who had no private life but being a housewife.

Even though he loved Daisy passionately, in essence Gatsby materialized Daisy as a symbol of realizing his dream. Deep in Gatsby's heart, Daisy's love could be measured by money. The way Gatsby won Daisy's heart back was to show off his wealth to attract her attention, rather than to wake up Daisy's pursuit and desire for beautiful love as she was just beginning to fall in love with him. The more Gatsby got Daisy's love, the less he cherished their love relationship. When Daisy visited Gatsby's house and finally showed her love to him, Gatsby felt that "one of his treasures disappeared...and the green light died out" (Fitzgerald, p.74). Just as Beauvoir said in her book *The Second Sex* that "Women have become a symbol of male desire and ideal from pure body...They have not obtained subjectivity and self-transcendence" (p.212). "Treasure" and "green light" stood for Gatsby's inner desire and dream: to get into upper class and to be the rich. When Gatsby gained the symbol gradually, his love for Daisy declined step by step.

Daisy was essentially a conformist in patriarchy society, even though she "fought" against it for several times. She tried to fight against arranged marriage, such as escaping from her wedding. However, she married Tom the next day without trying for the second time. Daisy conformed to the patriarchal rules all the time, putting up with Tom's infidelity and disrespect and having no courage to get rid of the unequal marriage. The patriarchal system sets the stereotyped image of women, so that they are at peace with the status quo. Therefore, Daisy was a typical "angel in the house" who was willing to follow patriarchy and was afraid to break it.

3. MYRTLE WILSON: AN ACCOMPLICE OF PATRIARCHY

Myrtle was an accomplice of patriarchy who helped to maintain patriarchal order. She commercialized herself as a commodity to exchange for material enjoyment. However, her commercialization just led to being treated without respect. Her lover Tom thought her as a plaything that could easily be replaced, while her husband regarded her as a "personal belonging".

Myrtle was a vulgar woman of commercialization. Myrtle sold her flesh to exchange for material comfort and something to boast about. On her way to the secret apartment where she and Tom carry on a clandestine love affair, she picked up the most extravagant taxi and bought things ceaselessly. As soon as she arrived, she changed her clothes to an expensive one and bragged about it to the neighbors. Woolf writes in her book *A Room of One's*

Own that "Men's control over social order and individuals makes women unable to survive. Therefore, women have an urgent need for social identity and material security, and these can only be exchanged after commercializing themselves. Women's personality and values have thus become commoditized and marketed" (p.56). Being fed up with the poverty (scarcity of material) and marriage without love (spiritual isolation), Myrtle sold herself as a commodity in exchange for more expensive goods that she could not afford before.

Tom regarded Myrtle as a plaything. Tom chose Myrtle as his mistress because she conformed his rule that "women should always be under men's control" (Fitzgerald, p.99). When Tom and Myrtle discussed whether Myrtle had any right to mention Daisy's name, the latter shouted out Daisy's name madly and her nose was broken with his open hand. However, Tom showed no concern and regrets to Myrtle. Tom did show some superficial care and love to Myrtle, but indeed he detested her. According to Cornillion, men need women and they have a desire for women. This desire masks the aversion to women, but this aversion is revealed when men are satisfied (p.37). Therefore, once Tom took full advantage of Myrtle's function as satisfying his carnal desire, he would reveal his prejudice against Myrtle.

Wilson seemingly loved Myrtle passionately, but indeed he considered Myrtle as his personal belongings. When he realized Myrtle's infidelity, Wilson locked her in the upper floor of their house and forced her to remove with him in a few days. Wilson contended that "Whether she wants it or not, I will take her out of this place (Fitzgerald 98)". As Moi states, "male chauvinism believe that women are weaker and inferior than men. Women are both protected by men and needed by men, so women are constantly being blamed and always under the control of men" (p.125). Wilson was such a believer of patriarchy ideas that the way he saved his marriage was to confine Myrtle as an animal rather than to find the root of their failed marriage and solve it.

Myrtle was substantially an accomplice. Her marital infidelity was not to procure equal status in marriage but to meet her desire. To squeeze into the upper class, she even helped to consolidate men's influence. Although Myrtle knew clearly that Tom treated women as a commodity, she still involved her sister Catherine in the immoral parties she held. She helped Tom to rationalize his infidelity so that even her sister reputed that Tom was trapped in a miserable marriage because of Daisy's religion. According to Catherine, Daisy was a Catholic who could not get a divorce. Myrtle neglected women's dignity and equal rights as men, being an accomplice who helped to reinforce men's oppression on women.

4. JORDAN BAKER: A REBEL AGAINST PATRIARCHY

Jordan was a rebel against patriarchy. She was self-dependent and had her destiny in her own hands. Unlike Daisy and Myrtle, although Tom and Nick did not regard her as a human in the same status, Jordan made decisions by her own will and thought for herself.

Jordan is a self-reliant woman with a strong desire for controlling her own life. She is the only character who has a successful career. Without families' supervision, she kept practicing golf and was known to men for her sports-talent, rather than for beauty, in the patriarchal world. According to Rauh, the greatest characteristic of women's independence is the pursuit of personality, yearning for freedom, confidence, and courage to innovate. (p.10) Jordan was such a self-independent woman who thought and made decisions with her independent mind. She was never credulous about what others said. For example, even though Gatsby had a photo of Oxford and Nick had already believed it, she still doubted whether Gatsby really graduated from Oxford.

Nick treated Jordan in a relatively equal way, but in essence he regarded her as his self-projection. Arthur Sakamoto said in his essay, "men seemed to realize and believe in women's autonomy and independence, but they were just putting self-projection on them" (p.201). After returning back from the accident, Nick turned down Jordan's invitation of taking a rest inside the house. He felt that "I'd had enough of all of them for one day, and that included Jordan too" (Fitzgerald, p.152). Nick knew that this idea hurt Jordan after she perceived it, but he did nothing to make it up. At that certain time, Nick put his self-projection of detesting immoral Tom and Gatsby on Jordan. Once what Jordan did was out of his expectation, Nick would show no love to her.

Tom treated Jordan in his usual disrespected way. Tom made a comment on Jordan that "she's a nice girl... they oughtn't to let her run around the country this way" (Fitzgerald, p.21). Tom's remark revealed that he disrespected Jordan's efforts and career as a golfer. According to Jerrim, women have talent, and it is even more unfortunate that they want to show open-air talent (p.57). Even though Jordan was more successful on the career than many men, she was still accused of not acting as a traditional stay-at-home woman.

Jordan is a rebel against the patriarchy. She is a self-reliant woman who thinks freely at her will and does not need to depend on men to make a living. Making full use of her career and independent mind, she gained reputation that most man could not get. Once she felt being disrespected and being treated unequally, she could break up with them and keep away from them.

CONCLUSION

The three female characters, namely, Daisy, Myrtle and Jordan, have something in common. Firstly, they are constantly under patriarchal oppression. No matter what their self-definition as a woman was and how much effort they made, they were treated in an unequal way and disrespected by men. Secondly, they got no equal rights as men. Daisy was materialized and Myrtle was commercialized, which means they did not have the right of being treated as human. Even as self-reliant as Jordan, women had no equal rights on the career, let alone other rights.

However, there are some differences among them as well. Firstly, they fought against patriarchy in different degrees. It must be admitted that they all took measures to resist their destiny. Nonetheless, Daisy and Myrtle's fight was momentary and superficial, while Jordan's was lasting and profound. Secondly, they held fundamentally different views on patriarchy. Daisy was a conformist who was obedient to men's power; Myrtle was an accomplice who helped to reinforce men's oppression on women; Jordan was a rebel who pursued equal rights as men.

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