



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

Redefining gender in the Jazz Age: the women of “The Great Gatsby”

Relatore
Prof. Anna Scacchi

Laureando
Mery Marcazzan
n° matr. 1197195 / TLLM

Anno Accademico 2021 / 2022

Abstract

In Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the three main female characters embody different versions of the so-called New Woman, a subversive female icon who was born during the post-war era, as a result of the 1920s revolution in manners and morals. The New Woman contributed to blurring the boundaries between the male and female genders by displaying an androgynous figure and living a carefree, materialistic lifestyle, which perfectly reflected the consumeristic mass culture of the 1920s Jazz Age. Despite the fact that women started to claim their independence and gain a certain degree of power in the male-dominated field, they were still relegated to a subordinate sphere, victims of a patriarchal mindset. In addition to the gender conflicts, within the novel the author mirrors the socio-economic rigid scale the American society was based on, an inflexible hierarchy that spared no one. As a matter of fact, in spite of the modernization of society, the nation remained deeply unequal since the female gender, treated as "other", racial minorities and the working lower classes still suffered injustices and disparities.

Table of contents

Introduction	pa.	1
1. The 1920's New woman and F. Scott Fitzgerald	»	5
1. Gender revolution: from the Victorian angel to the New Woman		5
2. The Flapper	»	10
3. American Modernism	»	15
4. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda, and the Jazz age	»	18
2. Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker: the higher-class flappers	»	23
1. Nick Carraway, an unreliable narrator	»	23
2. Daisy Buchanan, the Golden Girl	»	26
3. Jordan Baker, the androgynous flapper	»	32
3. Myrtle Wilson: the lower-class mistress	»	39
1. Overturning gender roles	»	39
2. 1920s class stratification	»	42
3. The tragic fate of the overreachers	»	44
Conclusion	»	47
Bibliography	»	51

Introduction

This work explores the effects of the revolution that transformed American society in the entire period from the end of World War I to the 1929 crisis. Particularly, through a focus on gender conflicts and the female characters of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), it analyzes how the moral and social upheaval affected both gender roles and traditional moral codes. It was an era of economic prosperity, technological wonder and industrial revolution also called The Roaring Twenties.

First, the concept of the New Woman in 1920s America is discussed, as well as the emblematic figure of the Flapper. While the Victorian woman found self-fulfillment in marriage and motherhood, exercising her power only within the domestic sphere, in the post-war period the new economic autonomy gained by working women guaranteed a relative degree of individual and personal independence and they managed to enter the public business arena, competing with men, finally exercising their will power and agency. This research aims to show how the traditional notions of femininity and masculinity, which were previously separated and clearly defined, were now threatened by the new women, as they were competing with men within the public sphere. In fact, women invading traditionally male-dominated workplaces and public arenas posed a serious threat to rigid gender distinctions and traditional masculinity. With the expansion of female self-awareness and individualism, modern women felt for the first time in charge of their destinies, and they demanded gender equality by revolting against the misogynist oppression.

Then, the first chapter introduces how the passage from the foregoing Victorianism to modernity was not straightforward, but the decade was pervaded by profound contradictions. In fact, as the period of innovations and progress advanced, strong counter tendencies grew from the most conservative and traditionalist part of the population, longing for a return to the past, expressing a general dissatisfaction and unrest for the present condition of America. In addition, behind the innovations and excesses brought about by urbanization and industrialization, 1920s America experienced deep injustices and inequalities, especially toward the class, gender, and racial minorities.

The chapter concludes with a deeper analysis of the author's journey as the spokesman of the Jazz Age, his anxieties and criticisms typical of the spirit of his time, which he illustrates within the novel.

In the second chapter, the two upper-class new women of the novel, Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker, are analyzed. Moreover, the reliability of the narrator, Nick Carraway, is discussed. In particular, the chapter addresses the gap between the moral point of view of the narrator and the objective circumstances in which those characters act. In addition, the chapter focuses on the double standard women have to endure since they are divided between the old Victorian conventions and the modern opportunities granted by the revolution in manners and morals. In fact, the old patriarchal property relations persisted for a long time after women achieved political and economic rights. During the modern revolution, women achieved great successes and a higher degree of power and agency; however, gender categories were internalized and inherited from the previous generations, which proved it difficult for women to authentically claim their independence from men and to achieve equality between the sexes.

However, in very different ways, both Daisy and Jordan challenge the conventions and expectations associated with their gender, thus obtaining some degree of agency and power within the patriarchal hierarchy. First, the figure of Daisy as the unreachable golden girl, the epitome of modern decadence and corruption, is dismantled through the complex motivations behind her self-centered actions. Then, the struggles faced by Jordan as she rejects the domestic role associated with her gender are pointed out.

In addition, the small opportunities they enjoy are due to the social class they belong to. In fact, in addition to the power struggle between the female and male genders, this B.A. thesis focuses on the importance of the economic and social background, as the 1920s American patriarchal society was based on financial availability.

Finally, the third and last chapter focuses on the character of Myrtle Wilson. Particularly, her lower-class background is discussed, as well as the unsympathetic and harsh description of her by the narrator. Therefore, my work analyzes the economic and social context she is trapped in and the ways with which she desperately tries to live a more comfortable life. In fact, her overt sexuality and greedy attitude are not a symbol of moral depravation, but they are used as a means to gain emancipation and abandon the squalor of the Valley of the Ashes. What is more, Myrtle's attempts to overcome her

misery and gender inequities are compared to Gatsby's journey towards success and wealth. These two ambitious dreams turn out to be doomed illusions as they contrast the strict gender and class stratification 1920s American society was based on.

1. The 1920's New woman and F. Scott Fitzgerald

1.1 Gender revolution: from the Victorian angel to the New Woman

1.1.1 The Victorian separate spheres

The 1920s represented a revolutionary turning point for American society, as the nation broke with the rooted Victorian conventions of the past and drifted towards the modern era. The 19th-century American society was shaped upon the ideology of the separate spheres, a hierarchical construction based upon the public male and private female dichotomies. This notion concerned the complex power relations between the genders within the society. In general, according to the puritan belief, the world was divided in polar categories: based on biological sexual differences, the male and female genders were divided into separate spaces and each gender was pressured to acquire a specific role imposed by society. In particular, women were deemed the weaker sex: their confinement within the domestic sphere and the exclusion from the public and economic realms were based upon their presumed physical and psychological vulnerability.

Moreover, the spheres did not only outline a figurative hierarchy within the American society but also marked physical spaces women were relegated to, as a symbol of their social subordination. Linda Kerber argues that the separation of roles was believed to be at the very basis of American industrialization and society: the increasing male labor demand polarized gender lifestyles and attitudes, creating a dichotomy between the public and the private. Men financially provided for the family and dominated the public business sphere, while women were in charge of the household. "Separate spheres were due neither to cultural accident nor to biological determinism. They were social constructions, camouflaging social and economic service, a service whose benefits were unequally shared" (Kerber 1988:14).

Furthermore, the female exclusion from production and politics was justified with the cult of True Womanhood: the female gender was associated with a wide range of values women had to cultivate in order to attain their nurturing, reproductive and maternal functions. According to this patriarchal ideology, true women had to be patient, obedient, self-sacrificing and pure, in exchange for moral superiority. These feminine virtues were perpetrated and internalized by young girls through education and various institutions, which depicted the American woman as the angel at the centre of the family, where men

could find protection and decency from outside corruption. In other terms, the Victorian separate spheres functioned as a sedative force that relegated women at home, depriving them of power and freedom.

1.1.2 The 1920's New Woman

The New Woman's origin is traced back to the 19th century feminist movements when thousands of activists of all social classes¹ had reunited to demand major political reforms and equal rights. Between 1880 and 1920 women progressively claimed their autonomy and gender equality, as they refused the Victorian beliefs and opposed to societal pressures. Previously, many women throughout the 19th century had exploited their moral authority for self-empowerment, in order to extend their influence outside of the home. Moreover, many American women were unable to embody the ideal of true womanhood; due to the increasing industrialization and urbanization they were forced to find an occupation in order to survive. Furthermore, historical circumstances such as the 19th Amendment, which granted national suffrage in 1920, and the wartime mobilization of women into the work sphere, allowed women to become self-confident, empowered and determined to achieve emancipation.

Consequently, some countercultures of the Victorian angel of the household started to emerge, new versions of modern womanhood. The term "New Woman" was coined at the end of the 19th century by the English feminist Sarah Grand to highlight the revolutionary changes in women's attitudes and the discard of old gender canons. The New Woman soon became a slogan circulating through the press and literature. She denied the social imposition that required women to be self-sacrificing and assertive by claiming female freedom and the expansion of agency. In addition, the New Woman did not only function as an emancipating icon for female awakening, but she was the centre of the cultural metamorphosis and encouraged the blurring of gender boundaries as well (Stansell 2000: 225). Moreover, the modern demand for gender equality had radical consequences within the traditional institution of marriage too. Before 1920 marriage was a patriarchal institution based on proprietorship relations, which reduced women to commodities and objectified them for their reproductive function. Conversely, as

¹ While the suffrage campaigns had unified women, it was a white-dominated movement only: black women were indeed completely ignored, and they were denied basic rights.

Tebbetts convincingly argues, modern women demanded marriage to become a democratic companionship that reflected their autonomy, rejecting the old male-dominated arrangements. Women refused to attain their conventional roles of mothers and wives, as well as their traditional status as possession, and aimed to revolutionize marriage on the basis of a more egalitarian treatment (Tebbetts 2003: 24-60).

Furthermore, the widespread psychiatric theories of Sigmund Freud were fundamental for the modernization of the nation since they reformed the conception of sex. Freud asserted the need to freely express one's own unconscious and irrational desires, rejecting cultural behavioural impositions. From the 19th century, and after the World War I revolution especially, women achieved gradually a certain degree of control and agency within the domestic sphere and began to claim their sexual autonomy. Therefore, sexuality assumed a central role in modern lifestyles, complemented by the spread of contraception techniques and the decline of birth-rate.

The new woman wanted the same freedom of movement that men had and the same economic and political rights. By the end of the 1920's she had come a long way. In the business and political worlds, women competed with men; in marriage, they moved toward a contractual role. Sexual independence was merely the most sensational aspect of the generally altered status of women (Leuchtenburg 1958: 159).

In addition to the New Woman's turmoil, the whole modern American generation was shaken by a profound "revolution in manners and morals" (Allen 1931: 95), as a direct consequence of the World War experience. John F Carter wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1920:

We have in our unregenerate youth learned the practicality and the cynicism that is safe only in unregenerate old age. We have been forced to become realists overnight, instead of idealists, as was our birth right. We have seen man at his lowest, woman at her lightest, in the terrible moral chaos of Europe. We have been forced to question, and in many cases to discard, the religion of our fathers. We have been forced to live in an atmosphere of "tomorrow we die," and so naturally, we drank and were merry. (Carter 1920: *Collected Commentary on Modern Youth.*)

This represents the modern manifesto of the pleasure-seeking, rebellious and hedonistic atmosphere of that era: the new youth felt incredibly detached from the previous generations and their values, demanding greater freedom and independence. In fact, this prosperous decade, called the Roaring Twenties, was characterized by a celebration of the youth culture, embracing modernity, entertainment, leisure time. The previous puritan gender distinctions were softening, and patriarchal authority was undermined, due to women's new degree of independence and agency.

1.1.3 Gender competition

The New Woman was broadly praised for her active participation in American life: the modern youth was faithful about the consequential societal awakening and the destruction of the obsolete conventions proper of the past generations.

Nonetheless, the 1920s were a period of great contradictions for women: they were placed between modernity and old traditions and their societal role was constantly questioned. Indeed, the decade was characterized by profound cultural disorientation and ambiguity towards the modern subordination of traditional habits since the Victorian values and moral codes were not completely swiped away. Specifically, women had to face great aversion throughout their journey towards emancipation as the unrestrained New Womanhood created scandal among the elders and threatened the canonical social boundaries and old balances.

In order to understand men's hostile reaction towards women's agency and freedom throughout the 1920s, the advent of the New Woman must be examined under a gender consideration: by entering the public realm, women were competing with men for power and control over society. This drastically affected their male counterpart, as they perceived their authority and public domain violated. In other terms, since the New Woman was shaking the foundations of the male-dominated western world, progressively breaking free from the pre-established functions, she was criticized and pushed back towards her domestic role. Therefore, the modern American woman was accused both of ridiculing male authority and discarding the traditional feminine qualities. Modern women were accused of failing to provide the necessary moral support for the nation and weakening the family and marriage institutions: they were blamed for the modern decadence since society was left unrestrained, free to indulge in the deepest impulses and destructive desires of the human soul since the civilizing influence of the woman within the household had ceased.

In addition, many scholars indeed have stated that, despite the moral revolution and greater freedom, women remained oppressed victims in the 1920s (Freedman 1974: 374). Although the New Woman was striving to break with traditional gender differences, she was still living within a hierarchical and male-dominated social structure. Freedman proves that, after gaining major improvements in political and economic fields, feminist movements lost their forceful activism towards gender equality and legal rights. As a

consequence, despite the evident changes in women's societal role, critics negatively viewed the New Woman as the feebler version of the 19th-century suffragists, guilty of moral decadence and hollowness.

Moreover, the expansion of female work opportunities did not change the public attitudes towards working women: they were mostly exploited for a low salary as well as confined in domestic-oriented careers associated with their loving and nurturing disposition. Indeed, Allen demonstrates that work opportunities only gave an impression of economic independence: as a matter of fact, despite the modernist tendency to emphasize the minor successes achieved by women in 1920s, such as sexual freedom, modest work opportunities and female participation in society, the New Woman remained a victim of inequities and gender discriminations and was still far away from emancipation (Allen 1931: 95-96).

1.1.4 Women as “other”

Within the patriarchal hierarchy, the New Woman's free spirit and unrestrained desires were usually associated with non-white or non-American people: these urges were therefore deemed connected towards the savage or “other”²:

The most serious deficiency of a model based upon two opposed spheres, appears in its alliance with the dualisms of the past, dichotomies which teach that women must be understood not in terms of relationship -with other women and with men -but of difference and apartness (Rosaldo 1980: 409).

Although they escaped their domestic sphere, women remained “another” gender, treated with superiority and authority. In other terms, the public business realm was still considered male; while working women were regarded as “other”, a subordinate group temporarily entering the male sphere. Therefore, the moral revolution and female emancipation were deemed in negative terms: they were treated as a minority group, discriminated by society and denied full equality on the basis of presumed biological sex differences, remaining victims of stereotypes by the dominant male group.

² During the 1920 decade, a widespread fear of the *other* emerged in America: it involved women, immigrants, Jews, blacks, Catholics and communists. As a result, acts of violence and discrimination increased, as well as dangerous ultranationalist organization like the Ku Klux Klan.

1.2 The Flapper

1.2.1 Origins

One version of the New Woman, perhaps the most memorable and straightforward symbol of the Roaring Twenties, is the Flapper³, with her iconic bobbed hair, short dresses, athletic physique and excessive behaviour. The flapper is the female representative of the 1920s, embodying the modern revolutionary values of America, as well as the profound ambivalence and disorders that shaped the Jazz Age.

The most emblematic images of the flapper can be found in John Held's illustrations, adopted by F. Scott Fitzgerald himself for the cover of his *Flappers and Philosophers*: Held portrayed slender, sleek and gracious young women, wearing short, elegant dresses, that leave their arms and legs bare. Most importantly, his female characters are often floating in mid-air, perfectly capturing the frivolous and vivacious spirit of the Jazz Era folklore, as well as their wide mobility.



³ The etymology of the term “Flapper” is disputed. Some sources trace its origins back to the 18th century, to describe “a young bird, or wild duck, that’s flapping its wings as it’s learning to fly”. Other sources argue that the term comes from the English slang either for “young, wild girl” or for “prostitute”.

⁴ Figure 1: John Held, *The Girl Who Went for a Ride in a Balloon*, Life Magazine, January 14, 1926

Figure 2: John Held, Life Magazine, 1927. John Held’s satirical illustrations published in the “Life” magazine captured the flapper’s unconcerned and revolutionary attitude compared to her forebears.

The flapper's audacious figure, highly recognizable and emulated, helped to blur the boundaries between genders and classes. In fact, in order to gain social acceptance and access to the public arena, the flapper adopted boyish looks, male aggressive and uninhibited behaviour such as smoking, drinking alcohol and dancing at jazz clubs. She claimed her self-fulfilment and individuality, defying Victorian etiquette and proclaiming herself sexually, economically and socially free.

Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald is debatably considered the first American flapper: in *Eulogy of the Flapper* (1922) she perfectly captured the archetype of the new American values, arguing that:

The Flapper awoke from her lethargy of sub-deb-ism, bobbed her hair, put on her choicest pair of earrings and a great deal of audacity and rouge, and went into battle. She flirted because it was fun to flirt and wore a one-piece bathing suit because she had a good figure; she covered her face with powder and paint because she didn't need it and she refused to be bored chiefly because she wasn't boring. She was conscious that the things she did were the things she had always wanted to do. Mothers disapproved of their sons taking the Flapper to dances, to teas, to swim, and most of all to heart. She had mostly masculine friends, but youth does not need friends – it needs only crowds, and the more masculine the crows the more crowded for the Flapper. Of these things the Flapper was well aware! (Sayre, 1922)

The flapper was at the same time the product and the harbinger of the modern mass culture. The 1920s were a prosperous decade for business: great technological and industrial advances deeply affected the country's society and landscape, as well as Americans' lifestyles. Since the average salary increase and the increment of work opportunities, people were able to save extra incomes and were encouraged to spend it on public amusements and material pleasures. Moreover, despite the conclusion of the first feminist wave in 1920, during the Roaring Twenties a profound break from the past did take place. The entrance of women into the workforce, caused by mass industrialization and lack of employees during World War I, gave women the strength to claim their social, economic and political equality. As a matter of fact, after their wartime service for the country, young women refused to go back to their domestic roles and slowly entered the male arena. Furthermore, the expansion of mobility, provided above all by the automobile, guaranteed the flappers unprecedented freedom and access to newer opportunities. In addition, the process of urbanization led thousands of rural women to move into the city, far away from their parents' respectability and morals, in pursuit of enjoying the pleasures and innovations modern culture was offering them.

Thus, Flapperdom divided the public eye, lacking the ideological and political commitment of the previous generation of feminists, as well as the moral and spiritual refinement of the former Victorian woman.

Nevertheless, this 1920s generation of feminists wasn't trading political and ethical concerns for pleasures and frivolities, but they were exerting publicly the figure of a non-condescending and non-apologetic modern woman, defying the consolidated, internalized female expectations that linked femininity with morality, submission and dependency. They were consciously contrasting gender differences by living the amoral, selfish, sinful life traditionally associated with masculinity. Trying to emerge as individuals rather than products of society, the flappers lived a life out of the ordinary, seeking wildness and recklessness, to repudiate the canonical Victorian beliefs and the Prohibition rules, indulging in alcohol consumption and free sexual activities. As a result, many women rejected the idea of motherhood and marriage as they refused to sacrifice their newly acquired freedom. "Historians in the 1930s and 1940s viewed the "moral revolution" in more negative terms-as a threat to the family-than it had been seen in the late 1920s, when the short skirt and bobbed hair were likely to be used as symbols of emancipation" (Freedman 1974: 382).

Therefore, flapperdom was not a single and spontaneous phenomenon: to some extent, the flapper was a trope, a fictional role women in the 1920s played in order to redefine the societal female position and to guarantee themselves a subtle agency.

1.2.2 The flapper's fashion

The social and moral revolution required a revolution in women's attire. The flappers did not focus on fashion for mere frivolity or superficiality, but their style and external appearance were a trademark that conveyed their emancipation and power. In this respect, Madge Garland asserted that "the whole position of women in western civilization, her struggle for equality and success is reflected in the garments she has worn" (Zeit 2006: 161). As a matter of fact, the feminine pre-war clothing was itself a symbol of control, a social tool that reinforced the female standards of beauty and conformed women to the male ideal of femininity as delicate, submissive and fragile.

By painfully disciplining women's bodies, clothing helped impose the political and social subordination of America's daughters and wives and enforced the rigid separation between the masculine public sphere and the feminine domestic sphere (Zeit 2006: 137).

Progressively, the flapper's fashion replaced the Victorian tight corsets, petticoats and dark ankle-length dresses that covered their bodies. They adopted freer and flexible garments, as a reflection of their modern active lifestyle and expanded agency. In order for women to embrace a more mobile and urban life, shorter and simpler dresses, tank tops, comfortable shoes to move around the city were dominating women's fashion. Furthermore, young women were for the first time encouraged to be athletic and practice physical activity along with men, therefore they needed clothing that could suit workplaces, leisure time and sports.

Along with the urban fashion revolution, the 1920s were a decade of deep change in female beauty standards: the flapper was confident and displayed a slender, elegant, androgynous body, a straight silhouette, opposed to the Victorian women who showed off their typically feminine traits and curves. The flapper's linear and tall figure was an attempt to blur gender differences by absorbing masculine traits and concealing lines and curves of the female body. Young women flattened their chest, were driven to be skinnier and slender, wore dresses that hid their hips, bobbed their hair, wore waistless and sleek silhouettes.

In addition, fashion, which used to be a privilege of a small higher-class elite, during the 20th century underwent a process of democratization: women of all classes could claim their independence and self-worth through their clothing and style, with the advent of cheaper fabrics and quickened mass production. Although the fashionable image of the original flapper was born in the upper-class, her behaviour was quickly imitated by women of all classes.

1.2.3 The flapper's contradictions and the feminine paranoia

The flapper was a complex and ambiguous figure, a product of the drastic upheavals between the two world wars. Since women were aware of their precarious social position and the gender gap, their lifestyle was a matter of choice, a declaration of independence to blur conventional gender roles and enter into the male-defined social sphere. Through their public image, the flappers self-consciously fought against standard gender expectations, asserting their power and liberty in a patriarchal society. Therefore, their external display served for both social and economic reasons, a vehicle for their emancipation and to escape male dependence.

However, as a product of mass culture, this new image of womanhood was soon objectified by advertisements campaigns, magazines and newspapers that aimed at attracting consumers' desires and influencing them towards mass consumption (Felski 2005: 63). In particular, female sexuality was used as a commodity in the marketplace promoting a luxurious and consumeristic life in order to persuade Americans to enjoy all the pleasures life offered. In fact, her concrete realization was deeply influenced by media advertisements, movie stars and novel characters. Progressively, the flapper became a feminine ideal used by advertisements to perpetuate certain ideas of body images and fashion choices that would appeal to women's and men's attention.

What is more, there existed a huge gap between the figure the flapper wanted to emulate and her real position within the patriarchal society. In particular, women were subjected to a double standard since predominant Victorian beliefs were still widespread among the nation. Christine Stanwell used the term "patriarchal modernization" to refer to the gender paradoxes of modernity: while women felt empowered and claimed their freedom from the repressive obligations of wifhood, motherhood and daughterhood, the decade was also characterized by a consolidation of masculine privileges (Stansell 2000).

More specifically, men were profoundly ambiguous towards the figure of this New Woman: they were inevitably attracted by her confidence and sexual freedom, while at the same time a sense of nostalgia for the past had developed. Men were concerned that women would compete with them for public space and social power, since the flappers not only looked like and dressed like men, but they behaved like one, denying the predominant figure of the self-sacrificing woman.

In addition,

The spectre of homosexuality was also raised; that is, women were now dressing and behaving more like men, blurring the traditionally obvious superficial distinctions and increasing the chances of a mistake, making sexual advances toward or arousing desire in a person of the same sex (Yellis 1969: 48).

As a response, the traditional and conservative part of the nation judged the flapper as the epitome of decadence and demoralization of society. Her ground-breaking behaviours appeared superficial and materialistic, lacking the moral values the previous generations were endowed with.

1.3 American Modernism

1.3.1 Definition

The origins of Modernism⁵, the predominant culture of 20th century America, are placed around the end of the previous century when “a profound shift in sensibility led to an explosion of creativity in the arts, transformed moral values, and in time reshaped the conduct of life throughout Western” (Singal 1987: 7).

The concept of Modernism denotes a set of behaviour, values and beliefs that emerged as a result of World War I, of the rapid processes of urbanization and industrialization, and of technological progress. White male-dominated society responded to these changes with deep ambivalence: on the one hand, a sense of disruption towards the Victorian biases and traditional conventions increased, while, on the other, an unconscious melancholy towards the loss of traditional values emerged, as well as aggression and hostility against the gender, race and class minorities who were trying to gain their space within the American society. Consequently, the movement was characterized by a profound ambiguity and disorders following the revolutionary modernization of the nation.

Moreover, modernist culture was born as a reaction to the progressive loss of authenticity and individualism, threatened by the alienating capitalist culture, and perfectly reflected the male-dominated and patriarchal culture of the time.

1.3.2 Modernist ambivalence

The movement was born as a rebellion against the predominant Victorian culture, which was based on the puritan beliefs of morality, respectability and modesty. Above all, the foregoing society relied upon the dichotomy between human civilization and savage animality: hence civilized western men were expected to repress their natural impulses and use reason as a tool to suppress their instincts. In contrast, modernists

⁵As Singal notices, Modernism and Modernization are different concepts: the notion of Modernism denotes a culture, born at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, a set of ideas, values, beliefs that profoundly revolutionized the American lifestyles and society. Modernization on the other hand is a process, involving the social, economic and industrial advancements from the 17th century up to the present day. The two terms are closely related as Modernism was born as a response to the rapid modernization but mustn't be confused.

refused these rational restraints and pursued excitements through sexual experiences as well as material consumption. To some extent, the modernist quest for sensorial and material pleasures as well as for emotional authenticity and individualism contributed to softening the divisions of gender, class and ethnicity.

Daniel Singal claims that:

The modernist narratives chronicled the disintegration of society and culture, focusing on the celebration of the animal component of human nature, the quest for spontaneity and authenticity, the desire to raze all dualisms and distinctions, the breaking down of social and cultural barriers, the quest for "wholeness," and the effort to expand consciousness and discover new modes of experience (Singal 1987: 20-21).

Nevertheless, modernists showed a great degree of contradictions and inner conflicts: while embodying the modern avant-garde spirit, they criticized the superficiality, as well as the uncertainty and anxious chaos that characterized the Jazz age. As a result, a sense of nostalgia can be perceived towards the stability and certainties of the past, showing the modernist failure to effectively break free from the ethics and customs of Victorian times.

1.3.3 Modernist literature and gender division

Regarding the modernist artistic production, the movement was defined by a high self-consciousness, text fragmentation, personal detachment, whose aim was the aesthetic experience of everyday life, as opposed to the bourgeois mass culture.

Gender division was still predominant in 1920's modernist culture; art, literature, sentimentality were automatically associated with the feminine, while the masculine was identified with force, progress, power. Male modernist artists experienced this gender gap and defined themselves as the carrier of lost feminine values. Modernists' fictitious femininity is illustrated in one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's letters, where he stated "I don't know why I can write stories. I don't know what it is in me or that comes to me when I start to write. I am half feminine – at least my mind is" (Turnbull 1968). This confession suggests that modernist artists believed themselves to be partly androgynous with a fluid conception of the sexes. Consequently, "true" women were excluded from the artistic and creative field, a privilege of men, perpetuating the patriarchal ideology. Since they were considered a product of mass culture, intrinsically associated with the banalities of

everyday life, women were deemed incapable of producing authentic culture (Huysen 1968).

In fact, while men appropriated the feminine sensitivity and sentimentalisms, women were downgraded to an inferior level since the belief of modern women's hopeless corruption and loss of traditional values (Huysen 1968).

Therefore, modernism associated mass culture with the female gender and criticized from above the banality, corruption and decline of the modern society; meanwhile their subjects concerned the issues and anxieties of the popular masses.

Martha Patterson argues convincingly that the ambivalence of these writers towards the New Woman can be interpreted as discomfort towards the controversial nature of her image (Patterson 2005).

In other terms, the modernist degrading vision of women as the primal cause of the modern decline was a projection of the threat posed by the "feminization" of culture: the entrance of women into the public sphere and their progressive expansion of agency generated fears and anxieties regarding the loss of gender control. By relegating women into the inferior and unauthentic mass culture, men were trying to reinforce gender boundaries.

Moreover, Greg Forter describes the feeling of disempowerment of the male gender as "unmanning": men felt they were losing their economic and social superiority, as well as their sexual property, and felt obligated to accentuate the borders between gender identities. Therefore, according to this male unease, the boyish modern woman represented a danger to social cohesion. In order to maintain their privileged role, men had to preserve their manhood and virility by denouncing typically feminine traits. Consequently, women were dismissed as "other". This 20th-century gender anxiety was the core of the modernist ambivalence: typically feminine traits such as compassion, sensitivity, intimacy and sentimentality were denigrated in order to reinforce masculinity, but at the same time modernists yearned for these qualities as they perished from the downfall of modern reality.

The conflict between a residual attachment to the feminine in men and an internalized hatred of that femininity resulted in these texts' unleashing of melancholic aggression toward the socially vulnerable: women, effeminate men, and racial minorities (Forter 2011: 5).

1.4 F. Scott Fitzgerald, Zelda, and the Jazz age

1.4.1 Fitzgerald's Jazz age

Francis Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald were the most famous and influential couple of the so-called Jazz Age, a term coined by Fitzgerald himself that refers to the decade between 1918 and 1928, which was characterized by a hedonist and pleasure-seeking spirit. The gender, sexual and social revolution which came along the Jazz age was not an outburst, but it was a product of decades of changes, starting from the turn of the century. In particular, following the end of World War I, a deep sense of national prosperity, success and wealth spread throughout America. This era was also deeply ambivalent, as it struggled with the contrasting coexistence of old traditions and new improvements.

Contrary to popular belief, it was not Fitzgerald who himself invented the flapper, but he was the main author capable of representing the New Woman's psychology and the complex evolution of gender. In the light of the major success of his first novel *This side of paradise* (1920), Fitzgerald rapidly became popular as the representative of the 1920s vibrant youth culture. Meanwhile, Fitzgerald managed to analyze the changes of society and new trends, ultimately publishing a collection of short stories entitled *Flappers and Philosophers*, centered on the modern American girls, irrevocably linking his name with the image of the flapper. In addition, he met Zelda Sayre, who soon became Fitzgerald's artistic muse, from whom he drew inspiration for his reckless, courageous heroines: "Indeed, I married the heroine of my stories. I would not be interested in any other woman" (Fitzgerald, 1921).

Moreover, throughout the decade, Fitzgerald observed how deeply the image of the flapper herself was evolving within the public perception: she started as a sexual revolutionary, bright and careless figure who embraced all the freedoms granted by modernity, but soon developed into a generational tendency, a performance played in order to gain social approval and male validation. Similarly, in *Zelda's Eulogy on the Flapper* (1922), she proclaimed that the flapper was bygone: "Flapperdom has become a game; it is no longer a philosophy", realizing how their carefree spirit had turned into an imposition, a social construction (Sanderson 2002: 147).

In addition, his own painful and faltering marriage with Zelda had a large impact on his depiction of the modern youth. Around the time *The Great Gatsby* was written, in 1925, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald had lived years of spectacular and expensive lifestyles, exclusive and lavish parties, nightclubs, material and economic excesses, which led quickly to economic decadence and financial needs. They had a daughter, Scottie, and moved to France in order to live a less expensive but still disruptive life.

1.4.2 Fitzgerald's ambiguity and gender conflicts in *The Great Gatsby*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, as the spokesman of the Jazz Age, chronicled the social revolution taking place all around him, the contradictions and anxieties of the post-war period generated by the gender fractures within the illusion of the American dream.

In particular, his novels focus on the change of women's role in the period between the two wars, as well as on the complex gender relations of his era, following the progressive feminization of society and the consequent spread of the cult of masculinity. The term "Cult of masculinity" refers to the crude machismo that spread at the turn of the century as a result of the feminization of society and the threat posed to male superiority within the patriarchal hierarchy. It involves a strong and exaggerated manliness in order to exude power and strength, and it implies features such as arrogance, pride, courage, dominance, as well as hypermasculine sports and a husky, muscular figure. Women were progressively gaining self-consciousness and freedom of movement within the urban landscape, which challenged male egotism and authoritarianism. Nonetheless, modern American society still remained profoundly androcentric, a feature found in Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* as well, as the events and all the female characters are portrayed from a male point of view, never objectively.

As Rena Sanderson states, his conflicting and disruptive female characters mirror Fitzgerald's ambiguity and uncertainty about his own production: the flapper could be the embodiment of modern independence and rebellion, while simultaneously symbolizing the loss of moral values.

Increasingly he used her as a symbol not only of a new order, but also of social disorder and conflict. He recognized the modern young woman as a product of the social flux and of the particular pressures on women during that "turbulent epoch." The truth is that Fitzgerald was ambivalent, both fascinated and disturbed by women and by the changing distribution of power between the sexes. (Sanderson 2002: 143).

Moreover, as a member of American Modernism, Fitzgerald revealed the widespread sense of anxiety about the abandonment of traditional values, as well as a cultural nostalgia for the past and a profound sense of lostness.

Specifically within *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway's ambiguity and contradictions reflect the modern anxiety towards the dichotomy of public masculinity and repressed femininity and the struggle with gender biases.

In the novel, it is Tom Buchanan who embodies the masculine aggressive response to the gender and class peril of his time, by exerting his male authority and class dominance over minorities. Indeed, he is described with traits traditionally associated with rough manhood, such as strength, physical violence and competitiveness. The pressure of the crude machismo is illustrated by Nick's lingering on the brutality of Tom's masculinity, since he involuntarily compares his vulnerability to Tom's harshness:

Now he was a sturdy straw-haired man of thirty with a rather hard mouth and a supercilious manner. Two shining arrogant eyes had established dominance over his face and gave him the appearance of always leaning aggressively forward. Not even the effeminate swank of his riding clothes could hide the enormous power of that body — he seemed to fill those glistening boots until he strained the top lacing, and you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage — a cruel body. His speaking voice, a gruff husky tenor, added to the impression of fractiousness he conveyed. There was a touch of paternal contempt in it, even toward people he liked — and there were men at New Haven who had hated his guts. (8)⁶

Fitzgerald criticizes this exaggerated masculinity, Tom's use of physical strength and psychological violence, as well as financial power, in order to ensure women's inferiority (Kerr 1996: 416). In fact, Tom's authority is placed not only above lower-class characters, like Gatsby or Wilson, but above the "inferior" gender as well, through his exploitation of both Daisy and Myrtle.

Furthermore, Nick's brief narration of his past involves his admiration for his father, of whom he values the self-discipline and authorial role within the family. Nick's father represents the ideal image of strong manhood, which he tries to emulate, but fails to achieve because he indulges in more feminine impulses.

There emerged a new form of manhood that sought to root out the femininity that had once served to counter male aggression. Manliness was now to be unambiguously hard, aggressive, physically dominative, potent — and this version of manhood was then projected back into the past, imagined as a primal essence eclipsed by a feminizing modernity that it was now the business of men to combat (Forster, 2011: 26).

⁶ All quotation are from Fitzgerald F. Scott – Ruth Prigozy, *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Page number are given in parenthesis after the quoted text.

Conversely, the threatening lack of sentimental control is embodied by George Wilson, whose emotional weakness leads to the loss of power within his own marriage and to financial poverty. Wilson's poverty is deemed his fault, a consequence of his physical and psychological weakness, as well as his lack of masculinity.

On the other hand, both Gatsby and Nick, as well as Fitzgerald himself, suffer from the societal pressures of gender norms, that require men to commit themselves to strong discipline and self-control, while repressing their inner sentimentality and emotional excesses. Nick's private and repulsed desires when he states: "I am full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires" (47) are the fears of all men, who try to distance themselves from the most vulnerable and sensitive part of themselves, traditionally associated with the female gender. In other terms, the narrator's harsh criticism and concern towards female corruption reflect the modernist yearning for the traditional gender roles and past social order.

Men's competition in the new upper class is governed by a crucial social binary: the secret and the public. A powerful man maintains his social position by denying his own emotional interior while penetrating the emotional secrets of other men. To lose control of one's woman or one's inner emotions in the presence of others is to risk losing one's masculinity (Kerr 1996: 420).

Nonetheless, the failure to adhere to the crude machismo is captured through Nick's sexual attractions: firstly towards the boyish and androgynous Jordan Baker, secondly towards the effeminate men, McKee and Gatsby.

In addition, Gatsby's melancholia and his obsession with repeating the past reveal the modernist ambivalence towards the feminine, following the gender subversion and the feminization of modern society. On the one hand, the creative femininity embodied by Gatsby is enhanced by the narrator, who mourns for the loss of typically feminine moral values: the qualities of sensitivity and compassion only belong to Gatsby, who finds himself surrounded by a "rotten crowd" (118), which represents the dominant mass culture. On the other, Nick criticizes the feminine qualities of Gatsby, labelling them as excessive, fictional and inauthentic. Once again, the notions of inauthenticity and fiction are related to the feminine. (Forster 2001: 32).

Indeed, at the end of the novel, Gatsby's illegal affairs and emotional interiority are exposed, and he shows all his vulnerability as he fails to compete with Tom's intact masculinity and class position. Through Nick's perception, Gatsby is denuded in all his authentic weaknesses, while Tom preserves his public figure of crude and powerful

manhood: as a result, Gatsby is elevated to a mystical romantic hero, embodying the fallen American dream. However, Gatsby is doomed to fail, unable to succeed for his gender ambiguity and vulgar femininity that clashed with the spirit of the time.

2. Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker: the higher-class flappers

2.1 Nick Carraway, an unreliable narrator

2.1.1 Gender polarization in *The Great Gatsby* and economic alliances

In *The Great Gatsby* (1925), F. Scott Fitzgerald depicts the gender revolution of the Jazz Age, which originated as a consequence of women's refusal to meet male expectations and the threat posed to male superiority. Despite the significant differences in class, appearance and occupation, all the three subversive female characters, Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker and Myrtle Wilson, embody a version of the New Woman, since they violate the patriarchal order by attempting to reaffirm their independence. Firstly, Daisy self-consciously exploits her external beauty and sexual attractiveness in order to acquire the social and financial security she needs; meanwhile, Jordan Baker's androgynous appearance, her insensitive behaviour and typically male profession defy the traditional idea of femininity. Likewise, Myrtle's excessive sexuality and lower-class vulgarity challenge Victorian respectability as she strives to achieve independence and rise through the social scale.

Therefore, as products of Modernist literature, the women of *The Great Gatsby* to some extent benefit from the expansion of agency and self-consciousness; however, they remain commodities within the 1920s androcentric hierarchy. In this respect, all the female characters are represented in terms of their relationships with men. As Rena Sanderson explains:

demonstrating that in the modern world personal identity resides in the perception of others, the book suggests that a woman has no identity except in the eyes of her beholder, presenting the female characters through a central male consciousness. (Sanderson 2002: 154)

While presenting the flappers' attractive free-spirit, charming beauty and light-hearted personality, Nick gives an overall negative image of modern women's purposelessness and amorality. In particular, he condemns the vile opportunism of young women who exploit their sexual power and naïve public figure to get access to higher social and economic positions, since women remain powerless victims of a masculine economy and have to sustain the expectations associated with their gender.

Despite certain accomplishments in regard to personal autonomy, which allowed 1920s women to smoke, drink and live their sexuality freely, women of Fitzgerald's

generation remained economically dependent on men (Fryer 1988). In this respect, Gordon Froehlich highlights how the novel's power relations and gender exploitation mirror "a patriarchal economy in which wealth and power are transmitted between men" (Froehlich 2011: 213). For instance, James Gats becomes Jay Gatsby only once he establishes ambiguous alliances with Dan Cody, described as "a token of forgotten violence" (165) and Meyer Wolfsheim. Froehlich argues that economics plays a central role in romantic relationships and gender balances: in other terms, money is a clear instrument of power and control. Therefore, all the relationships in the novel involve economic and social alliances: whether they are heterosexual marriages or male connections, they are based on patriarchal capitalism, on gender and sexual exchanges. For example, both Myrtle and Daisy consider their affair with upper-class gentleman Tom Buchanan in terms of financial rewards and public status.

The New Woman obtained sexual liberation but remained marginalized from the financial and political point of view. As a result, marriage prevailed as the easiest and most convenient business to gain stability and support, although it often implied submission to the husband.

2.1.2 Nick's unreliable representation of women

The narrator, Nick Carraway, plays the role of moral representative within the novel, condemning the modern decline and moral disintegration. In particular, he highlights the corruption of the opposite sex as well as female opportunism as they try to gain equal social status and he expresses nostalgia for the feminine values of the past. For instance, the irreparable destruction of the restorative feminine role of "the angel of the household" is portrayed by Daisy's corruption and irresponsibility throughout the novel, since she undergoes a degrading path from the sacred idol in Gatsby's illusion to the careless murderer she proves to be at the end.

Moreover, women appear to Nick as incredibly dishonest, as though they constantly play a role and hide their authentic selves behind a public façade. In fact, most of Fitzgerald's female "heroines" are spoiled women from wealthy upbringings, who claim moral freedom and gender emancipation while remaining economically dependent on men. Consequently, men's value is based upon their financial availability. Within the novel, the narrator highlights how the flappers' irresponsibility and frivolity were allowed

owing to their reliance on male figures: “Girls were putting their heads on men’s shoulders in a puppyish, convivial way, girls were swooning backward playfully into men’s arms, even into groups, knowing that someone would arrest their falls” (40).

In this perspective, women’s recklessness does not derive from an authentic need for rebellion against domestic confinement but arises from modern decadence and moral desolation. Moreover, female moral decay invalidates the male counterpart as well, since men find themselves deprived of the Victorian separation of gender roles, which leads to the threat of emasculation, as well as the peril of feminization.

However, despite Nick’s ruthless criticism of the female gender, while former scholars such as Matthew Bruccoli accepted Nick’s reliability as a narrator and his objective recounting of the story, modern scholars have questioned the accuracy of his interpretation of the facts and highlighted Nick’s failure to be objective in his portrayal of gender opposition. (Fischle 2016: 9)

In addition, Nick’s point of view inevitably plays a remarkable influence on the reader’s perspective. He appears tolerant and neutral as he himself confesses his fairness at the beginning of the novel, highlighting his “reservation of all judgements” (4) and that he’s “one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (47). In reality, Nick’s version of the facts is hopelessly ambiguous and deeply contrasts the initial confession of transparency since he adopts an obsolete morality to judge women’s dishonesty and infamy. In this respect, his hypocrisy is evident since he reiterates his strong morality “I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever” (4), but remains silent about Myrtle’s murder and somehow becomes an accomplice for its tragic consequences. In order to prove Nick Carraway’s unreliability, Thomas Boyle introduces the concept of distance “between the author's perception and the perception of the narrator; or, to put it another way, the *distance* between the narrator's perception and the reader's perception” (Boyle 1969: 21). In other terms, the reader must acknowledge the judgemental and hypocritical narrator of the novel and must take a certain distance from his non-objective point of view.

In particular, as a response to the modern gender chaos and the deconstruction of the Victorian gender separation, Nick perceives women as symbols, as he abstracts them into objects of selfish wish-fulfilment (Person 1978: 252). In his viewpoint, all women appear highly deceptive and secretive, as though they are plotting something underneath

their external facade. He homologates the entire female gender into the emblem of modern dishonesty and ethical emptiness. For example, a few times he blends the figures of Daisy and Jordan, implying they are different versions of the same mould:

Sometimes she and Miss Baker talked at once, unobtrusively and with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire. They were here, and they accepted Tom and me, making only a polite pleasant effort to entertain or to be entertained. (12)

Rather than recognizing that women are submitted to a double standard, torn between modern aspirations and canonical gender expectations, the female characters are perceived as unreachable “others” from Nick’s male perspective.

Nonetheless, Nick’s conflicting attitude towards women is clear when he is allured by their magnetism and glamour. However, due to his scepticism towards the female gender, Nick prefers to enjoy the idealized and abstract women he makes up in his head:

I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness. (45)

In other terms, Nick’s narrative , as well as Fitzgerald’s characterization, are altered by modernist gender anxieties (Felski 2005: 21). As a result, the writer presents an image of the 1920s rebellious woman, who enjoyed broader agency and freedom and lived a scandalous life that would have ruined her reputation only a decade before.

2.2 Daisy, the Golden Girl

2.2.1 Daisy’s corruption: emblem of American failure

Daisy Buchanan, the novel’s “Golden girl” and main female character, is a member of the upper class and the love interest of both Jay Gatsby and Tom Buchanan. She is depicted as a free-spirit, magnetic and fun-loving girl, escaping from any obligation and inhibition. She emanates a fascinating and glamorous aura, associated with the spirit of her time. At the same time, she embodies the moral emptiness and carelessness that Nick assigns to the entire female gender. As a matter of fact, the narrative of Gatsby and Daisy

projects the gender anxieties proper of the Jazz Age and the modern discomfort towards the New Woman's manners.

From the very beginning, through Nick's perception, Daisy's behaviour and words appear hopelessly suspicious and dubious, and her enchanting attractiveness seems to hide a spiteful inauthenticity, described through images of witchcraft and incantation.

She laughed again, as if she said something very witty, and held my hand for a moment, looking up into my face, promising that there was no one in the world she so much wanted to see. (10)

The instant her voice broke off, ceasing to compel my attention, my belief, I felt the basic insincerity of what she had said. It made me uneasy, as though the whole evening had been a trick of some sort....she looked at me with an absolute smirk on her lovely face, as if she had asserted her membership in a rather distinguished secret society to which she and Tom belonged. (16)

While Daisy's physical appearance is not closely described, her suggestive voice is particularly highlighted with ethereal tones, hinting at her unreachability. First, the character of Daisy is turned into the emblem of American hopes and fantasies, the dream of a utopian future; but in the course of the novel she ends up symbolizing the irreversible disintegration of this illusion. In other terms, Gatsby's failure to obtain Daisy reflects the nation's impossibility to achieve the American dream. Finally, Daisy's voice, once compared to a "deathless song" (74), will turn "full of money", signifying America's decline. "Her voice was full of money — that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it... high in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl." (92)

At first sight, Daisy's betrayal of Gatsby's delusional worship of her appears like the conclusive episode of modern rottenness and accentuates the elusive values of the past the author, as well as the narrator, were yearning for. Daisy's murder and her refusal to take responsibility for her actions dismantle her enchanting aura as she is recognized as the symbol of modernity: she represents the loss of the past authenticity as well as the advance of modern corruption. (Forster 2001: 38)

Furthermore, according to the novel's rigid hierarchy, Tom and Daisy's old aristocracy appears inaccessible and destructive towards anyone who dares to reach the apex of society. In this respect, as soon as Gatsby, who exemplifies the new wealth, and Myrtle, who belongs to the lower working class, attempt to improve their status, they are annihilated, due to their modest upbringings.

It was all very careless and confused. They were careless people, Tom and Daisy — they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. (137)

2.2.2 Female objectification

Nonetheless, throughout the novel it is clear that Daisy's characterization lacks a deep and complete definition: she is portrayed by the narrator as an abstract concept, an unattainable beauty that dooms the final destruction of the romantic protagonist. Hence, Nick's prejudiced perception of Daisy doesn't allow him to penetrate into her artificiality and inquire about her deeper motivations, as he states that he "had no sight into Daisy's heart" (8). Regardless of her upper-class position and women's expansion of autonomy, Daisy is constantly subjected to societal expectations and gender norms. In fact, she's a victim of Tom's violent masculinity and gender dominance, as well as Gatsby's objectification. "She becomes the unwitting "grail" in Gatsby's adolescent quest to remain ever-faithful to his seventeen-year-old conception of self." (Person 1978: 250)

There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams — not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. He had thrown himself into it with a creative passion, adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted his way. No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart. (74)

When she fails to measure up to Gatsby's youthful dream, she appears helplessly corrupted, condemned as her real identity does not correspond to his romantic ideal.

Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one. (72)

In addition, Tom and Gatsby's rivalry to win Daisy's heart appears like a gender and class competition, the old money and the crude machismo, versus the new money and feminine manhood. In fact, the two contenders for Daisy's love represent not only different wealth but also two contrasting images of masculinity: while Tom embodies the traditional physical strength and psychological inflexibility, who perfectly mirrors the old Victorian male ideal, Gatsby's unconventional romanticism and emotional fragility resemble typical feminine traits. As a result, Gatsby's obsession with his past love hides his urgency to win the ultimate "medal" for his financial and social success.

She was the first “nice” girl he had ever known. He knew that Daisy was extraordinary, but he didn’t realize just how extraordinary a “nice” girl could be... It excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy — it increased her value in his eyes. (114-115)

Moreover, Gatsby’s infatuation for Daisy masks his real obsession to be part of the privileged position she and Tom belong to, the exclusive “rotten crowd” at the apex of modern society. The unreachability of the higher class is clear from the description of the Buchanans, who appear to conspire together, watching the world from the top of their elite: “Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (115). “They weren’t happy...and yet they weren’t unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together” (111).

This power contest concerns the notions of proprietorship and commodity: the male proprietor displays his authority over the female possession. (Tebbetts 2003: 52)

2.2.3 The higher-class “beautiful little fool”

Consequently, part of her cold-hearted, ruthless choices are associated with the role Daisy must adhere to in order to survive as a woman in a patriarchal society. Daisy’s detachment from real life, her materialism, and superficiality serve to mask her dissatisfaction over an aggressive husband and an unsuccessful marriage. For instance, she only displays indifference towards Tom’s extramarital affairs, while she’s deeply affected by it: “Daisy took her face in her hands as if feeling its lovely shape, and her eyes moved gradually out into the velvet dusk. I saw that turbulent emotions possessed her.” (15)

Through her ambiguous behaviour it becomes clear that, like most women, Daisy hides her true identity behind her public image, using her magnetic charm to achieve her purposes and enjoy a subtle agency. While Tom exerts his physical and psychological violence to highlight his dominance within the relationship, the only chance for Daisy to survive in a patriarchal environment that exploits women is by using her sexuality and charisma to escape from her passive condition. Rather than fighting the gender code, Daisy intentionally exploits it to her advantage, despite her relegation to an inferior sphere. Therefore, Daisy is not a naïve and superficial woman, nor an unscrupulous gold-digger: she is deeply aware of her desires and needs for a higher economic and social position and exerts her domain skilfully to achieve her goals.

The New Woman's freedom is therefore only an illusion: men are still powerful and dominant in society, while women have to wear a mask in order to prevail and gain some autonomy, at the expense of their authenticity. To describe women's inner conflicts in the 1920s, Sarah Fryer argues convincingly that:

They are recipients of mixed messages about their roles and rights in life. They behave selfishly, impulsively, and inconsistently as a direct result of their fundamental uncertainty about their purpose in life, or indeed whether they have any real purpose at all. (Fryer 1988: 10)

Her life experience as a woman, the harsh judgment of public opinion and societal pressures have rendered her deeply pragmatic and self-conscious of her position. "Well, I've had a very bad time, Nick, and I'm pretty cynical about everything." (16)

Her youthful immaturity and naivety are exemplified by the events that preceded her marriage: she was prevented by her family to meet Gatsby overseas when he was enrolled.

She was feeling the pressure of the world outside, and she wanted to see him and feel his presence beside her and be reassured that she was doing the right thing after all. For Daisy was young and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras which set the rhythm of the year, summing up the sadness and suggestiveness of life in new tunes. (116)

Moreover, she got drunk and was about to call the wedding off as soon as she received Gatsby's letter. From her adolescent experience, she has learned to switch off her inner sentimentality for the sake of a rational cynicism that defends her from the outside uncertainty. Jordan herself highlights Daisy's public composure by stating that:

She came out with an absolutely perfect reputation. Perhaps because she doesn't drink. It's a great advantage not to drink among hard-drinking people. You can hold your tongue, and, moreover, you can time any little irregularity of your own so that everybody else is so blind that they don't see or care. (60)

Her cynicism about life is clear when she states, showing for the first time her truer self, that she cried at the news she had a daughter and wished she would be a "beautiful little fool, the best thing a girl can be in this world." (16)

It is interesting to note how Daisy's cynicism and pragmatism are perceived unsympathetically in contrast to Gatsby's romantic idealism, rather than viewing them as the helpless response to female marginalization and submission.

The reappearance of Gatsby awakens Daisy's dreams and hopes of her youthful age, giving her a glimpse of an alternate life full of love and happiness. She is clearly coping with conflicting feelings, torn between the idyllic romantic love Gatsby would grant her and the economic and social insurance provided by Tom. However, when

Gatsby's identity as a common gambler is revealed, she understands that this reality is an illusion and ends up choosing social and financial security granted by Tom.

He had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe that he was a person from much the same stratum as herself — that he was fully able to take care of her. As a matter of fact, he had no such facilities — he had no comfortable family standing behind him, and he was liable at the whim of an impersonal government to be blown anywhere about the world. (115)

Following Gatsby's exposure, she is not entirely giving up love for money, as she clearly states that she loves them both, but she understands the privileges and advantages that Tom's wealth and social status provide for her precarious condition as a woman.

Like many other 1920s women, this free-spirited and liberated girl sticks to the romantic convention of marriage out of economic interests. By choosing her domestic life and emotional and economic dependence, Daisy is not renouncing her personal realization, but she is embracing the comforts of her husband's financial security and family integrity, rather than the instability of autonomous women's position in 1920s society.

Furthermore, Daisy's eagerness to settle down depicts how love in the modern mass culture becomes another materialistic good exchanged in commerce in order to obtain a certain social or financial status.

And all the time something within her was crying for a decision. She wanted her life shaped now, immediately — and the decision must be made by some force — of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality — that was close at hand. That force took shape in the middle of spring with the arrival of Tom Buchanan. There was a wholesome bulkiness about his person and his position, and Daisy was flattered. Doubtless there was a certain struggle and a certain relief (116).

To conclude, through Daisy's complex figure Fitzgerald depicts the power struggles in 1920's America and focuses on women's newer sexual liberation as their economic and social independence were still inaccessible and were constrained by societal pressures. In addition, women are deeply objectified by male characters, another trophy for their successes. Therefore, Daisy's role as a mother and wife is not a sign of her renunciation of self-determinism but it appears to be the most convenient way to obtain security. She has pragmatically examined her precarious condition and accepted that she can't achieve freedom on her own.

2.3 Jordan Baker, the androgynous flapper

2.3.1 Defying gender division

Jordan Baker is Daisy's friend and Nick's romantic entanglement within the novel; moreover, she is presented as the primary embodiment of the 1920s flapper. Specifically, the narrator often lingers on her physical description that perfectly homologates to the conventional flapper outline: she is sleek, gracious and lean, capturing the vibrant urban style of the modern attire.

I looked at Miss Baker...I enjoyed looking at her. She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet. Her gray sun-strained eyes looked back at me with polite reciprocal curiosity out of a wan, charming, discontented face. (17)

By comparing Jordan to a “young cadet”, Nick underlines her masculine features. Typical of the New Woman, Jordan's mysterious and fascinating aura is counterbalanced by a bitter carelessness and moral hollowness. To illustrate, Nick's first encounter with both Jordan and Daisy highlights their magnetic charm, as well as their detachment from real life and self-absorption. Nick's first impression of Daisy and Jordan is highly emblematic and symbolic: the two girls appear almost indistinguishable from one another, “fluttering” like balloons in white dresses. This description highlights the women's detachment from real life, their frivolity and self-confidence typical of the New Woman's freedom.



Figure 3: Fordham, F. Fitzgerald. F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby: the graphic novel*. Place: New York Scribner, 2020.

Through Jordan's character, Fitzgerald's conflicting feelings towards the New Woman become evident: he cherishes Jordan's strong personality and her androgynous traits; meanwhile, by describing her as unreliable and deceptive, he is mourning the Victorian decorum and traditional gender integrity. In fact, Jordan's successful entrance into the male arena permits her autonomy and self-sufficiency, accentuating her empowerment in contrast to 1920s androcentrism.

First, through Nick's perception, Jordan's androgynous features are highly emphasized: not only her slender figure but also her nonchalant attitude and her name resemble typical masculine traits. Secondly, Jordan is the only one out of the female characters to have employment: she enjoys the privileges granted by the white upper-middle-class she belongs to, but needs to have a job of her own in order to embrace the glamorous and fashionable flapper lifestyle. Moreover, her career as a professional golfer, a typically male-dominated field, mirrors her disruption of conventional female expectations as well as gender polarization. Finally, unlike Daisy's and Myrtle's reliance on men's provision, she does not seek a romantic partnership with men to maintain mobility and financial security but lives her relationships casually. Her refusal to meet societal expectations is clear as she doesn't aspire to marriage because her individuality would be threatened by male authoritarianism. In fact, she provides for herself and in return enjoys a higher degree of independence and autonomy, that allows her to live an unapologetic, wild life.

From the very beginning, Nick is captured by Jordan's charm and tenacity; meanwhile, he appears almost intimidated by her independence and unconventional public image: "Again a sort of apology arose to my lips. Almost any exhibition of complete self-sufficiency draws a stunned tribute from me." (10)

Demonstrating his ambiguous sexuality, Nick finds himself helplessly attracted by Jordan's androgynous traits and boyish qualities, repeatedly emphasizing her masculine "hard, jaunty body" (46), as well as her irreverence, self-control and cold-heartedness, all qualities typically associated with manhood. In other terms, "what Nick is drawn to in Jordan is masculinity in a woman" (Kerr 1996: 419).

I put my arm around Jordan's golden shoulder and drew her toward me and asked her to dinner. Suddenly I wasn't thinking of Daisy and Gatsby any more, but of this clean, hard, limited person, who dealt in universal scepticism, and who leaned back jauntily just within the circle of my arm (62).

This gender transgression is both fascinating and suspicious for the narrator, who criticizes Jordan's hollowness and unpredictability. Her strong personality and defiance of female conventions deprive her of any empathy and comprehension from her male counterparts.

Interestingly, the strongest female character is also the one who shows typically masculine traits, both physically and in her attitude. In fact, strength, power and wealth were assessed as male qualities; meanwhile, femininity was associated with fragility, vulnerability and deficiency. (Kerr 1996: 406).

Nonetheless, her characterization appears flat and monotonous, and her attitude within society seems passive. Analysing Nick's description of her, Froelich highlights how he "obscures the women's presence, relegating them to the position of accessory objects...women's physical presence seems again to be merely atmospheric, their bodies part of the décor." (Froehlich 2010: 88). As with Daisy's idealization, Jordan as well becomes a symbol, objectified by the narrator for what she represents rather than being a true individual with a unique identity.

Furthermore, Nick's concerns appear like the response to his incapability to read Jordan's personality and the unconscious reaction to the gender peril Jordan represents. In fact, Jordan threatens the male sphere, as she competes with men in the work field and does not meet the expected feminine role, destabilizing societal hierarchies and gender balance. This highly emulated and fascinating new type of woman seems in command of her own adventurous life among the male-dominated social sphere, no longer bound by the old-fashioned female expectations. She shows no concern for the traditional decorum and etiquette, the core of the Victorian age. Nick displays a clear discomfort towards Jordan's unconventionality, as he fails to discern her identity since she doesn't homologate to a definite gender category but has attributes from both sides. This gender concern mirrors Fitzgerald's struggles towards both gender relations and public identity, since he was experiencing anxiety as a man and unsuccess as a writer.

2.3.2 Jordan's "incurable dishonesty"

Throughout the novel, Nick reiterates his assumption that Jordan is hiding her true self behind her public image: consequently, she's often depicted in rigid, unnatural positions, as though she is posing, conforming to a calculated public front. "The bored,

haughty face that she turned to the world concealed something – most affectations conceal something eventually.” (46)

Nick’s criticism about Jordan’s insincerity, as well as his distrust towards the entire female gender, are made explicit when he states:

Jordan Baker instinctively avoided clever, shrewd men, and now I saw that this was because she felt safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible. She was incurably dishonest. She wasn’t able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard, jaunty body. It made no difference to me. Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply — I was casually sorry, and then I forgot. (46)

Nick’s final acceptance of Jordan’s deception is linked to his assumption of gender biases: he stereotypically attributes to the whole female gender the forlorn fault of being deceitful. Therefore, Jordan constructs an appealing public façade through her aloof and unconcerned appearance.

The peak of Jordan’s carelessness and moral emptiness is reached during the conversation about bad driving: Jordan defends herself since “it takes two to make an accident” when Nick reproaches that she is “a rotten driver” (46-47).⁷ Moreover, her ambiguity and contradictions are evident when she affirms that she hates careless people, while she herself is described as deeply self-centred and irresponsible.

Furthermore, Nick immediately links Jordan with a past scandal, involving an alleged cheating during a golf tournament, and other smaller lies.

It occurred to me now that I had seen her, or a picture of her, somewhere before...I knew now why her face was familiar — its pleasing contemptuous expression had looked out at me from many rotogravure pictures of the sporting life at Asheville and Hot Springs and Palm Beach. I had heard some story of her too, a critical, unpleasant story, but what it was I had forgotten long ago. (11-17).

In this respect, it is interesting to note how the rumours surrounding Gatsby’s mysterious past do not affect Nick, while Jordan’s rumoured scandal negatively influences his opinion of her.

Finally, Nick ceases to comprehend Jordan and places her within the upper-class hierarchy of Tom and Daisy, the “rotten crowd” where she appears hopelessly corrupted

⁷ However, in Jordan and Nick’s last conversation, Jordan subtly denounces Nick’s hypocritical and judgmental identity, by stating that “Well, I met another bad driver, didn’t I? I mean it was careless of me to make such a wrong guess. I thought you were rather an honest, straightforward person. I thought it was your secret pride” (136).

and unreachable. “I’d had enough of all of them for one day, and suddenly that included Jordan too.” (109)

Nonetheless, moving away from Nick’s perception, it is clear how Jordan displays public composure and inscrutability in order to enjoy independence and personal freedom. Her self-sufficiency and success are due to her composed and studied behaviours, a part she plays by ripping off personalities from mass media and popular culture.

She lay perfectly still, listening, in a big chair. She was dressed to play golf, and I remember thinking she looked like a good illustration, her chin raised a little jauntily, her hair the colour of an autumn leaf, her face the same brown tint as the fingerless glove on her knee. (135)

In addition, her arrogance and insolence can be perceived as a tool to exert her agency and gain an individual voice, rather than snobbishness from her wealthy upbringing. Concurrently with Nick’s distrust towards the female gender, Jordan exhibits a similar scepticism towards the male counterpart. However, she shows tenderness for Nick, manifesting signs of affection but she never seeks male approval, remaining deeply self-confident and reserved.

I saw Jordan Baker and talked over and around what had happened to us together, and what had happened afterward to me. For just a minute I wondered if I wasn’t making a mistake, then I thought it all over again quickly and got up to say good-bye. “Nevertheless you did throw me over,” said Jordan suddenly. “You threw me over on the telephone. I don’t give a damn about you now, but it was a new experience for me, and I felt a little dizzy for a while. (135)

Moreover, Jordan’s appropriation of male traits can be identified as a tool to mask her gender transgression, her entering into the male arena (Yellis 1969, 48). In this respect, Nick’s descriptions of Jordan’s rigid and unnatural poses mirror her contrived personality and the duality of her condition since she is a successful sportswoman but can’t avoid the perils of her gender belonging.

She was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless, and with her chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on it which was quite likely to fall. If she saw me out of the corner of her eyes she gave no hint of it — indeed, I was almost surprised into murmuring an apology for having disturbed her by coming in. (9)

In this regard, Christine Stansell examines the real condition of working women in the 1920s: despite the undeniable growth of women in professions, which increased from 8% in 1900 to 12% in 1920, working women experienced a profound inequality within the public realm. They were either relegated to inferior spheres within the professional

hierarchy or gained a lower salary. Due to the illusory prospect of female independence, “they failed to see they lacked the real economic and institutional power with which to wrest hegemony from men and so enforce their vision of a gender-free world” (Stansell 2000: 248).

Namely, women could dare to live independently but had to face the financial and social perils as they tried to adapt themselves to the patriarchal world. Makowsky asserts that:

Unfortunately, autonomy was not really a viable choice for an upper-class young woman of the 1920s, so Jordan performs a constant "balancing" act (Gatsby 13, 141) which requires a degree of mendacity to succeed: she must practice self-reliance while still appearing to be an attractive prospect for wifely dependency. (Makowsky 2011: 29).

Therefore, Jordan must acquire an unscrupulous and callous temper due to the harsh surroundings she finds herself in. The only way to achieve success in a patriarchal environment is to behave and look like men. In fact, Jordan’s focus on her career and her complete economic independence result in an apparent loss of “authentic” femininity and moral integrity.

3. Myrtle Wilson: the lower-class mistress

3.1 Overturning gender roles

Through the three different narratives centering on female characters, Fitzgerald perfectly portrays the 1920s conflicting attitudes towards the revolution of gender roles. The rise of the flapper had only apparently eradicated the conservative social and moral conventions of the past, while Victorian habits remained deeply anchored within the American mindset. This prejudiced mentality is evident in the narrator's unsympathetic description of Myrtle Wilson, as she is portrayed as an amoral and disruptive figure who threatens the traditional gender hierarchy.

She is a lower-class woman, married to George Wilson, who owns a garage in the squalor of the Valley of the Ashes, and the mistress of Tom Buchanan. Her controversial image shakes the foundations of American social balance and class hierarchy, due to her extramarital affair with Tom Buchanan and her distance from traditional wifehood and womanhood. Indeed, Myrtle diverges from any other female character within the novel: she lacks beauty and youth, as well as elegance and refinement, generally expected from the female gender. Unlike Daisy, who is given a symbolic and abstract image, almost angelical, the narrator focuses on Myrtle's physical traits and highlights her carnal magnetism. Her modest upbringing has rendered her straightforward and pragmatic, far away from Jordan's and Daisy's elusive and unreachable aura.

Then I heard footsteps on the stairs and in a moment the thickish figure of a woman blocked out the light from the office door. She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face, above a spotted dress of dark blue crepe-dechine, contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering. She smiled slowly and, walking through her husband as if he were a ghost, shook hands with Tom, looking him flush in the eye. Then she wet her lips, and without turning around spoke to her husband in a soft, coarse voice. (22)

Nevertheless, Nick fails to filter Myrtle's true identity, as she is reduced to a mere sexual object and the reader is provided with a description that evolves almost entirely upon her body. What is more, Nick reiterates her eager vitality and course vigour, which highlight her eccentricity.

In addition, her materialistic needs, as well as her exuberant lifestyle provided by Tom's wealth, mirror the mass consumer culture that characterized post-war America. In

other terms, she is the embodiment of American decadence and modern excess. She is the opposite of the composed and constrained Victorian woman, since her sexual boldness and amoral behaviour conflict with the customary expectations associated with the female gender.

Moreover, by describing Myrtle with denigrating tones and focusing on her coarse physical traits, Nick conceives her as a caricature of the working-class woman, who fails to adopt the dignity and refinement typical of the higher classes, such as Daisy's sophistication and Jordan's composure. For instance, the overall chaos and restlessness that characterize the second chapter, the "inexhaustible variety of life, which simultaneously enchanted and repelled" Nick (29), clearly contrasts the sophisticated composure of the previous chapter, set in the Buchanan's' mansion in East Egg. Despite her humble background, she desperately wants to transpire as wealthy and sophisticated but comes off as a parody of the refined higher-class woman she tries to emulate: shameless, vulgar, loud and obnoxious. Therefore, her prosperous "vitality", which challenges the notion of femininity, is described unsympathetically, an expression of her forthright audacity and vanity.

Mrs. Wilson had changed her costume some time before and was now attired in an elaborate afternoon dress of cream colored chiffon, which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room. With the influence of the dress her personality had also undergone a change. The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive hauteur. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air (26).

Her being inappropriate and unsuitable for the lavish and wealthy lifestyle the novel focuses on, is clear from the very first time Myrtle is mentioned, when she constantly interrupts the Buchanan's' dinner by calling Tom in the first chapter. This interference symbolizes the intrusion Myrtle represents within the higher-class elite she attempts to reach, as well as within the traditional family order by initiating an extramarital affair with Tom and believing he will ultimately leave Daisy for her.

Even after the car accident, the narrator describes Myrtle's corpse by highlighting once again her feminine lavishness, as though to imply that her exuberant vigour led to this tragic end: "They saw that her left breast was swinging loose like a flap, and there was no need to listen for the heart beneath. The mouth was wide open and ripped at the

corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long.” (106)

Furthermore, according to Nick’s unflattering perception, Myrtle’s vulgarity parodically subverts gender norms and exemplifies the collapse of moral authenticity and feminine grace. Indeed, Myrtle acquires typical male traits due to her unapologetic coarseness and vigour, far away from her female counterparts. Likewise, due to the overturning of gender roles within their marriage, George is associated with traditionally feminine traits such as fragility, sensitivity and insecurity. In fact, Myrtle is the one who wears the trousers within the relationship and her authority weakens George’s masculinity, as well as his dignity. “He was his wife’s man and not his own” (105). His economic unsuccess is reflected in his marital failure too: he is cheated by his wife, and he is not aware of it.

According to the American belief in the “dream”, that is that by hard work, determination and moral fortitude financial success will eventually be granted to everyone, Wilson’s unsuccess from both an economic and personal point of view is unsympathetically perceived as an unforgivable failure. Both by Nick’s and Tom’s description of him, he is given a pathetic and powerless image, which inevitably contrasts with Tom’s harshness and economic prosperity. “He was a blond, spiritless man, anaemic, and faintly handsome” (21) “Wilson? He thinks she goes to see her sister in New York. He’s so dumb he doesn’t know he’s alive” (22)

In other terms, Wilson’s fragility undermines his masculinity since he lacks the determination, strength and vigour typically associated with “true” manhood, as well as economic achievements. An even harsher judgment of Wilson is given by Myrtle, who despises her husband due to his financial and personal weakness. In her New York apartment, while talking about her husband Myrtle gives a “violent and obscene” answer (28). She bitterly states that marrying “a man way below her” was a mistake: “I married him because I thought he was a gentleman,” she says finally. “I thought he knew something about breeding, but he wasn’t fit to lick my shoe” (29). Right before her murder, the metaphorical prison she feels trapped in becomes a concrete imprisonment since Myrtle is locked up above the garage after George has found out about her infidelity. Even in this context, Wilson is brutally emasculated by his wife: “Beat me! Throw me down and beat me, you dirty little coward!” (105).

The emphasis put on class belonging and social stratification is clear when Myrtle despises and mocks her husband's mediocre life, which does not satisfy her anymore, and feels somehow superior, as though her affair with Tom has automatically elevated her social status. In this materialistic reality, based on socioeconomic availability, the most offensive thing her husband did was to "borrow somebody's best suit to get married in" (29).

Therefore, as Ms. Wilson undermines stereotypical femininity by displaying overt sexuality and undisguised coarseness, conversely Mr. Wilson's weakness and naivete subvert conventional manhood and virility.

3.2 1920s class stratification

Through his description of the socio-economic reality of 1920s society, Fitzgerald dismantles the illusion of the so-called Golden Age, revealing the hardships and injustices faced by the working classes, under the apparent splendour of post-war America. As a matter of fact, the superficial luxuriance and wealth that characterized the whole decade hide a deep social discrepancy. Throughout the post-war years, young American women were struggling to achieve gender equality and destroy the patriarchal hierarchy; meanwhile, the class division remained unscathed, and the newer possibilities brought by modernization were merely reinforcing the disparities between social classes. Gilkison Taylor states that all of Fitzgerald's works "resemble the extremes that the Roaring Twenties introduced to America", which means both the splendors and prosperities which characterized the decade, as well as the complete desolation and decadence of modernity. (Galkison 2017:10).

Both these two oppositions are clear in the novel through the various settings of each chapter: while the first chapter narrates the wealth and fascinating luxury of Tom's and Daisy's upper class, the second chapter is completely reversed as it chronicles the misery and collapse in the Valley of the Ashes, where lower-class George and Myrtle live, as well as Myrtle's tacky and pretentious lifestyle in her New York apartment rented by Tom. Therefore, Fitzgerald not only describes the separation of spheres between genders, but also the divergences of lifestyles and opportunities among social classes.

In particular, Myrtle's actions and her tragic destiny mirror the struggles and adversities faced by the lower classes during the Roaring Twenties, as well as the social disparities and inequalities still rooted within 1920s America. As a matter of fact, removing the non-neutral judgment of Nick, the reader can notice how Myrtle is hopelessly corrupted by the environment she finds herself trapped in.

Rather than being a greedy social climber, she lacks the privileged opportunities provided to the aristocratical classes Jordan and Daisy belong to. Her "intense vitality" (25), as well as her outrageous sexuality, are her attempt to make her voice heard, which appears grotesque and bizarre due to her corrupted surroundings.

In addition, from an objective point of view, her determination to achieve a better life is admirable: she does not passively settle in her mediocre life and unsatisfying marriage, but actively attempts to escape from her tedious reality and debilitating social position. In this perspective, despite Tom Buchanan's physical and psychological abuse, their different socioeconomic backgrounds induce Myrtle to initiate an affair with him. "Myrtle satisfies her need for material desires and hedonist pleasures with her extramarital affair with Tom Buchanan." (Li, Bao-Feng 2015: 877). Indeed, rather than true love, both Tom and Myrtle engage in an extramarital affair for opportunism: Tom is attracted by Myrtle's erotic disinhibition and exploits her as a sexual object, an escape from his own unsuccessful marriage; meanwhile, Myrtle sees in Tom the only vehicle to achieve economic and social liberation.

Her stolen days with Tom in New York City offer temporary elevation from dirt and poverty into wealth and ease. Their relationship provides Myrtle with access, however limited, to Buchanan money, which procures goods and services she otherwise could not afford, and she clearly revels in this opportunity. (Saunders 2018: 142).

Therefore, Myrtle firmly believes in the economic and social profits assured by Tom: her clothing, her luxurious lifestyle in New York and her extravagant behaviours emulate the expensive habits and manners typical of the higher-class elite she is aiming for. However, despite the material gifts she receives, the divergent power relationships given by their backgrounds are evident: for instance, Myrtle is not allowed to mention Daisy's name out loud and gets her nose broken for disrespecting Tom's authority.

Furthermore, through Tom and Myrtle's affair, it is noticeable also how different extramarital affairs are perceived according to social and gender belonging. Tom's infidelity is never a secret, and he makes little effort to keep his mistress hidden from

Daisy. On the other hand, both Daisy and Myrtle engage in extramarital affairs, but they appear much more intended not to display them publicly. That is, to engage in illicit affairs for men is a sign of their undeniable masculinity and strong virility, while for women it is still considered amoral and indecorous.

Therefore, the character of Myrtle is only apparently an unrefined, coarse version of the New Woman within the novel. From a deeper perspective, Myrtle's carnality and liberated sexuality, which she exploits in her quest to achieve economic freedom and social consideration, can be viewed as an instance of what Kathy Peiss calls "Charity Girls": "The choice made by some women to engage in a relaxed sexual style needs to be understood in terms of the larger relations of class and gender that structured their sexual culture." (Peiss 2004: 15). Specifically, the author talks about the sexual interactions practiced by lower-class working women, who exchanged sexual pleasures in exchange for material benefits. This type of trading was well popular in the city during that period, since women struggled to enjoy the freedom and opportunity granted by the moral revolution of post-war America. They discarded the moral respectability typical of their mothers' generation and took advantage of their sexuality and leisure time in order to achieve benefits and raise their economic and social position.

In conclusion, Myrtle is deeply self-aware of her social position and the consequent inequality she has to endure. Her determination to achieve the apex of society contrasts her husband's passivity towards their infamous conditions since she uses her sensuality to achieve social worth, threatening Victorian gender roles.

3.3 The tragic fate of the overreachers

Despite being a rather marginal character, Myrtle's story and the symbol she represents are pivotal within the novel to illustrate the brutal class and gender hierarchy of 1920s America. From the perspective of an upper-class narrator, who judges with disinterest and insensitivity the squalor of the lower classes condition, it is clear how both Myrtle and Wilson will end up devoured by the indifference of the upper classes and the harshness of modern society.

In this respect, Myrtle's flashy actions and lack of ethical concern are nothing but the consequence of the ruthless reality she is trapped in, the brutality of the Valley of the Ashes which spares no one. In fact, her opportunities are not only limited by her gender, but also by her class belonging. In other terms, Myrtle is confined within destructive sexual codes due to her lower social and economic status, while both Daisy and Jordan remain untouched since their class provides them the power to escape the consequences of the situations they find themselves in. While Daisy and Jordan embody the exciting and appealing wealth and freedom associated with the enthusiastic spirit of the age, Myrtle's tragic death and her miserable circumstances remark the inaccessibility of the American dream for the working class and the struggles they have to endure.

Myrtle herself is not valued for her personality, as an energetic and ambitious woman, but she is regarded as a mere object of sexual desire, as well as a threat to the social order. She embodies one version of the New Woman as she opportunistically uses her sexual appeal in order to attempt an escape from that squalor but her violation of prescribed codes, as well as her threat to the patriarchal hierarchy, will lead to her inevitable downfall and to an undignified death. Her desperate run towards Gatsby's yellow car, which in her opinion symbolized freedom and the endless possibilities offered by Tom, will end up killing her: this is a powerful metaphor of the impossibility of class upheaval.

The disastrous consequences of her attempt to achieve a social status equal to the one of her lover, Tom Buchanan, prove the dark side of the so-called American dream. In this respect, E. C. Bufkin compares Myrtle and Jay as doubles, tied together by the same effort to achieve an impossible dream: "The forces of society and money as well as the force of character predetermine the failure of the two unrealistic quests" (Bufkin 1970: 520). In the same way as Gatsby, who does not automatically receive social prestige after his economic success, Tom's materialistic gifts do not grant Myrtle access to the higher class. As a matter of fact, the lower-class incapability to achieve the same privileges enjoyed by the upper classes is evident through the miserable destinies of both Gatsby, Myrtle and Wilson, who are doomed to failure after their attempts to overreach their modest upbringings.

To conclude, through Myrtle's tragic description, Fitzgerald harshly denounces 1920's America's ruthlessness and inhumanity. By trying to disrupt the traditional gender

and class hierarchy, she is doomed to failure and death. Indeed, the novel closes with the inevitable restoration of class order and social balance. As always, in the end, the higher-class triumphs and the lower-class perishes, a symbol of the injustices the poor must endure because of their class position. (Bechtel 2017:119).

Conclusion

To conclude, this work has examined the gender conflict within the 1920s American society and, particularly, the conditions of modern women within the androcentric hierarchy, as reflected in the female characters of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Indeed, within the novel Fitzgerald, as the spokesman of the 1920s Jazz age and the protagonist himself of this wild generation, explores the disorienting revolution of the gender conventions and focuses on the restraints upon women's agency and their marginalization within the society.

Firstly, my work has highlighted the circumstances in which the figure of the New Woman was born, as well as the discrimination women had to endure in the post-war era. The New Woman refers to a revolutionary female icon who opposed to the standard role of the Victorian woman and the Puritan moral values, rejecting the conventional social construction of gender roles, as well as the separation of society between the public and the private spheres. Thus, she threatened the authority and privileges enjoyed by men within the patriarchal structure and the traditional marriage institution. The phenomenon of the New Woman is perfectly embodied by one of the most subversive and emblematic icons of the decade, the Flapper, the symbol of the modern juvenile revolution and the gender turmoil. The Flapper redefined beauty standards, wore flashy clothes, and displayed an unbothered and unapologetic attitude, contributing to blurring the lines between masculinity and femininity. However, this figure soon became an object of media and advertisement campaigns, in order to promote mass consumption, which quickly led to its decline. Nonetheless, Flapperdom was not a mere fashionable cultural trend, but it was a statement of personal freedom, a way for women to assert their emancipation.

Despite this flashy façade used as a means of power and self-expression, women were still extremely marginalized and the sexual and social revolution was not enough to achieve equality. In fact, as many scholars have shown, women in the 1920s were still deeply discriminated, limited and labelled as the weaker sex, as "other" than the white male elite who headed the society.

All in all, the female path towards the acquisition of agency and their entering into the public sphere were neither quick nor simple: the foregoing Victorian values were

deeply internalized, thereby the moral revolution was deemed negatively by the large part of the population who judged the new generation as amoral and indecent. As a result, the new opportunities obtained by modern women were constantly questioned and they faced the aversion of the male part of the nation. In fact, the feminization of society resulted in the weakening of gender differences, whereby men suffered over the female threat and mourned the old dichotomy of the genders and the Victorian female submission. In addition, great importance was given to the strong manhood that men felt pressured to maintain in order not to lose their predominance in the business and public fields.

Then, I have explored the contradictions of the modernist movement, which Fitzgerald was part of. The movement emerged both as a spirit of rupture with the dogmas of the past, but also mourned the lost values and past certainties cancelled by the modern revolution.

Within *The Great Gatsby*, male egotism is embodied by the narrator, Nick Carraway, through whom the characters and events are described. His version of the events is unreliable, however, as he negatively criticizes female characters, he does not grasp their efforts to acquire emancipation within the institution of marriage or patriarchal society, and judges them as the epitome of the loss of moral values and certainties of the American past. Whereas Nick's hypocrisy reflects Fitzgerald's anxiety about the gender revolution and the public figure he felt pressured to conform to, it is clear that Fitzgerald also criticizes Nick as extremely judgemental, reflecting the male-dominated American society, in which power relations are exchanged through men.

I have then discussed how Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker and Myrtle Wilson portray different versions of the New Woman since they all violate the norms of patriarchal society in different ways. It is essential to separate the realistic and objective identities of the three female characters from the male perspective through which they are perceived, since the latter is deeply influenced by Nick's patriarchal biases and his rigid morality. Therefore, the narrator describes unsympathetically the attempts of the three women to obtain a subtle degree of agency within their marriage or within the society, and refuses to acknowledge how women are still victims of old patriarchal inequities. In fact, Nick can be described as a first-person unreliable narrator, who presents the three women as stereotypes and manipulates the perception of the events. Indeed, by yearning for the past, Nick is reflecting the anxieties and concerns of his time, such as the female

emptiness and moral dishonesty, the fear of emasculation, as well as the ruthless manhood the narrator, and the author himself, felt pressured to conform to.

First, Daisy Buchanan is the novel's golden girl, the delightful upper-class woman whose enchanting and light-hearted aura resembles the amusing spirit of the Jazz Age. However, because of her aristocratic upbringing and her belonging to old money, she feels the pressure of society to acquire a certain social status and marry well. Instead of being a submissive victim, Daisy's determinism and agency are reflected in her decision to stick with Tom Buchanan for the economic and social benefits Tom ensures. It is evident that she plays the role of the "beautiful little fool" in order to survive within the patriarchal society and enjoy the privileges granted by her social class. Nick negatively judges Daisy's corruption since she fails to keep up with the idealized version of Gatsby's dream. Instead, the angelic aura Gatsby places upon Daisy is the mere result of the aristocratic elite she is part of, which Gatsby tries to reach. Therefore, Daisy is reduced to a commodity to possess in order to exhibit his success as part of the new money. The Jay-Daisy-Tom triangle demonstrates the importance of one's economic background, as well as the impossibility to change one's social status, and the socio-economic values upon which the American society is constructed. Daisy is deeply aware of women's limitations and their subordination within the male-dominated society, therefore cynically decides to depend on her husband's financial availability rather than facing the uncertainties and inequities women have to endure. Indeed, her social and economic security allows her to avoid the consequences of her murder at the end of the novel.

Second, Jordan Baker is the only female character who is able to move within society without any romantic alliance and resist the conventional norm that requires women to get married. Moreover, with her androgynous silhouette and unbothered attitude, she opposes the traditional image of the submissive and fragile woman. Her threat towards the conventional gender roles, especially towards the white male elite, is evident since she is a champion in a male-dominated field. In fact, Nick seems to be always at disadvantage in Jordan's presence, quite intimidated by her self-confidence and self-determination. Consequently, this discomfort leads Nick to judge Jordan as dishonest and deceptive.

However, it has been argued that Jordan's reserved and secretive personality, which resembles the emotional passivity typically associated with the male gender, is a shield

she displays in order to enjoy the privileges and opportunities granted to men. In addition, she comes from a wealthy upbringing: her independence is, of course, a privilege. Her privileged position allows her to be careless and shallow about the consequences of her actions. What is perceived by Nick as opportunism, appears more like self-reliance and self-determinism, qualities that only a white upper-class woman could afford in the 1920s.

Finally, through the character of Myrtle Wilson, Fitzgerald portrays the suffocating conditions endured by the lower working classes. Indeed, Myrtle, as well as going through the inequities of her gender, is also constrained by her class position. She opposes the conventional female role as delicate and pure with her sexual vitality and coarse attitude. She shows no concern for the traditional decorum and etiquette, the core of the Victorian age. In addition, she does not conform to the traditional beauty standards and plays the dominant role within her marriage. She is determined to escape from the miserable living conditions of the Valley of the Ashes and exploits her sexuality in order to achieve better opportunities. Her opportunism is harshly criticized by Nick, who fails to perceive her behaviour as a desperate attempt to live a better life. As a matter of fact, Myrtle's excessive and flamboyant, sometimes even scandalous, attitude is a cry of empowerment and freedom, an attempt to gain a voice in a society that stacks women as invisible, anonymous among the crowd. Nonetheless, at the end of the novel, she is doomed due to her threatening the patriarchal society, as well as the class hierarchy. All in all, the tragic deaths of Myrtle, Wilson and Gatsby reflect the inviolability of the patriarchal structure and the social ladder.

Bibliography

- Allen L. Frederick, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties*. New York: Harper, 1931.
- Bechtel D., “Jay Gatsby, Failed Intellectual: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Trope for Social Stratification.”, *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, 15:1 (2017), pp. 117–29.
- Boyle T., “Unreliable Narration in ‘The Great Gatsby.’”, *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, 23:1 (1969), pp. 21–26.
- Bradbury Malcolm, *The Modern American Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Brucoli Matthew J., *New Essays on The Great Gatsby*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Bufkin E. C., “A pattern of parallel and double: the function of Myrtle in ‘The Great Gatsby.’”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, 15:4 (1969), pp. 517–24.
- S.n, *Collected Commentary on Modern Youth*. In *Becoming Modern: America in the 1920s*, National Humanities Center, 1920-1931.
- Dumenil L., “The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920s.”, *OAH Magazine of History*, 21:3 (2007), pp. 22–26.
- Felski Rita, *The Gender of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- Fischle D. Gretchen, *Female power in the Great Gatsby*. Master’s Thesis. Fresno University, 2016.
- Fitzgerald F. Scott – Ruth Prigozy, *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Fordham Fred – Fitzgerald F. Scott, *The Great Gatsby: the graphic novel*. New York: Scribner, 2020.
- Forter Greg, *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Fraser K., “Another Reading of The Great Gatsby”, *ESC English Studies in Canada*, 5:3 (1979), pp. 330-343.
- Freedman E., “The New Woman: Changing Views of Women in the 1920s.”, *The Journal of American History*, 61:2 (1974), pp. 372–93.
- Froehlich G., “Jordan Baker, Gender Dissent, and Homosexual Passing in The Great Gatsby.”, *The Space Between: Literature and Culture, 1914-1945*, 6:1 (2010), pp. 81-103.
- Froehlich G., “Gatsby’s Mentors: Queer Relations Between Love and Money in The Great Gatsby.”, *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, 19:3 (2011), pp. 209-266.

- Fryer Sarah B., *Fitzgerald's New Women: Harbingers of Change*. Umi Research Press, 1988.
- Gilkison Taylor, *The Transformation of Gender and Sexuality in 1920s America: A Literary Interpretation*. Western Kentucky University, 2017.
- Huyssen Andreas, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. New York: Macmillan Press, 1988.
- Kalaidjian Walter, *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Kerber L., "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History", *The Journal of American History*, 75:1 (1988), pp. 9–39.
- Kerr F., "Feeling 'Half Feminine': Modernism and the Politics of Emotion in The Great Gatsby.", *American Literature*, 68:2 (1996), pp. 405–31.
- Lee A. Robert, *Scott Fitzgerald: the Promises of Life*. London: Vision Press, 1989.
- Leuchtenberg W., "The Perils of Prosperity 1914-32", *Journal of American History*, 45:3 (1958), pp. 158-177.
- Li Bao-Feng – Xue-Ying J., "On the Confrontation Between Masculinism and Feminism in The Great Gatsby.", *Sino-US English Teaching*, 12:11 (2015), pp. 874-880.
- Makowsky V., "Bad Driving: Jordan's Tantalizing Story in 'The Great Gatsby.'", *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, 9 (2011), pp. 28–40.
- Patterson Martha H., *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005.
- Peiss K., "Charity Girls and City Pleasures.", *OAH Magazine of History*, 18:4 (2004), pp. 14–16.
- Person L., "'Herstory' and Daisy Buchanan.", *American Literature*, 50:2 (1978), pp. 250–57.
- Pike D., "Masquerading as Herself: The Flapper and the Modern Girl in the Journalism and Short Fiction of Zelda Fitzgerald.", *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, 15:1 (2017), pp. 30–48.
- Prigozy Ruth, *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Rado Lisa, *Modernism, Gender and Culture: A Cultural Studies Approach*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Reinsch O., "Flapper girls - Feminism and Consumer Society in the 1920s.", *Gender Forum*, 42:1 (2013), pp. 1-6.
- Rosaldo M. Z., "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-cultural Understanding.", *Signs*, 5:3 (1980), pp. 389-417.
- Sanderson Rena, *Women in Fitzgerald's Fiction*. In: *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, edited by Ruth Prigozy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001, pp. 143-63.

- Saunders Judith, *The Great Gatsby: An Unusual Case of Mate Poaching*. In: *American Classics: Evolutionary Perspectives*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2018, pp. 138–74.
- Sayre Fitzgerald Zelda, *Eulogy on the Flapper*. In: Brucoli, M. J., *Zelda Fitzgerald: The Collected Writings*. New York: Collier Books, 1992, pp. 391-393.
- Singal D. J., “Towards a Definition of American Modernism.” *American Quarterly*, 39:1 (1987), pp. 7–26.
- Stansell Christine, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century*. New York Metropolitan Books, 2000.
- Tebbetts T., “Sanctuary’, Marriage, and the Status of Women in 1920s America.” *Faulkner Journal*, 19:1 (2003), pp. 47–60.
- Turnbull Andrew – Fitzgerald F. Scott, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963.
- Yellis K., “Prosperity’s Child: Some Thoughts on the Flapper.” *American Quarterly*, 21:1 (1969), pp. 44–64.
- Zeitz Joshua, *Flapper: a Madcap Story of Sex, Style, Celebrity, and the Women Who Made America Modern*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006.

Summary in Italian

Negli USA il decennio dal primo dopoguerra al 1929 rappresentò un punto di rottura rivoluzionario con le convenzioni del passato. I cosiddetti ruggenti anni '20 furono caratterizzati da una profonda rivoluzione tecnologica e industriale, da una rapida modernizzazione e urbanizzazione della società e dall'arrivo della cultura consumeristica che trasformarono radicalmente lo stile di vita dei cittadini americani. In questo spirito rivoluzionario, opponendosi all'ideologia Vittoriana della separazione dei generi, secondo cui le donne erano rilette alla sfera domestica perché inadatte al mondo pubblico e degli affari maschili, nacque la figura della Nuova Donna. In passato, infatti, a seconda della propria identità di genere il paese era diviso in categorie polari, a cui veniva associato uno specifico ruolo imposto dalla società. Nonostante queste distinzioni fossero basate su presunte differenze biologiche, si trattava invece di costrutti sociali, grazie a cui gli uomini godevano di privilegi e opportunità a discapito della subordinazione femminile.

L'icona della Nuova Donna nacque dai precedenti movimenti femministi che richiedevano pari opportunità ed eguali diritti. Inoltre, la Prima guerra mondiale e l'entrata delle donne nella sfera lavorativa contribuirono ad attivare la mobilitazione femminile verso l'emancipazione. La Nuova Donna adottava uno stile di vita e un atteggiamento ritenuti impudenti per i canoni rigidi dell'epoca. Ad esempio, venne rivoluzionata la concezione di sessualità, non più vista come un tabù ma vissuta in libertà, così come l'istituzione del matrimonio che pian piano passò da un accordo patriarcale, che riduceva la donna ad un possesso, ad un'unione più egualitaria. Oltre a minacciare la tradizionale divisione di genere, questa nuova figura emancipatrice rifletteva le ansie e le aspirazioni della nuova generazione, che dopo aver vissuto il trauma della guerra richiedeva uno spirito più leggero e dava priorità allo svago e al divertimento.

Tuttavia, le donne moderne non riuscirono rapidamente ad eliminare le tradizioni passate, ma dovettero convivere con un doppio standard: le convenzioni vittoriane erano infatti internalizzate dalla società e le sue rigide imposizioni rimasero per lungo tempo. Inoltre, venne accusata di incarnare la moderna corruzione e la caduta dei valori morali, e dovette affrontare l'ostilità della parte maschile della società. Per questo, nonostante qualche vittoria dal punto di vista dei diritti, le donne rimasero vittime della società patriarcale. In particolare, il genere femminile era considerato come "altro", rispetto alla

maggioranza maschile e bianca che stava all'apice della società, rimanendo vittime di stereotipi e discriminazioni.

Simbolo dell'età del Jazz e della rivoluzione morale dell'epoca fu l'emblematica Flapper, i cui tratti androgini confondevano la tipica separazione tra maschile e femminile. Infatti, le flapper esibivano una figura slanciata, senza le tipiche curve femminili, adottavano uno stile mascolino e godevano della vita spregiudicata fatta di danze, alcool e fumo tipicamente associata agli uomini. La moglie di Fitzgerald stesso e principale musa delle sue opere, Zelda Sayre, era una precorritrice di questa tendenza, che si trova in larga parte anche nelle audaci figure femminili de *Il Grande Gatsby*.

La flapper fu vittima di un paradosso: mentre cercava di emanciparsi dai rigidi ruoli di genere tradizionali, adottando un'immagine pubblica scandalosa per la mentalità dell'epoca, venne utilizzata dalle pubblicità e dai mass media come figura simbolo dell'era moderna con il fine di promuovere il consumo di massa. Presto, quindi, questa condotta rivoluzionaria adottata per liberarsi dall'arcaica figura della donna come angelo della casa e per ottenere un certo grado di emancipazione, venne considerata come l'epitome del materialismo e della superficialità tipica della società moderna. Inoltre, nonostante attirasse l'attenzione delle masse, l'adottare comportamenti e stili tipicamente maschili non bastava per permettere alle donne di entrare a pieno nel mondo pubblico del business e ottenere la completa indipendenza.

Questo atteggiamento ambivalente nei confronti dei conflitti di genere fu caratteristico del movimento Modernista, nato alla fine della guerra come risposta ai cambiamenti repentini che stavano radicalmente trasformando la società. Nonostante il movimento glorificasse le moderne innovazioni, così come il progresso e la velocità, nacque anche un senso di melanconia per le certezze e le stabilità del passato, in contrasto con il caos e il superficiale materialismo moderno.

La preoccupazione per la perdita dei vecchi valori morali era in parte anche conferita alla "femminilizzazione della società" cioè alla progressiva entrata delle donne nella sfera pubblica. Questa trasformazione preoccupava gli uomini e nacque quel che si può chiamare una competizione tra generi, secondo cui il genere maschile si sentiva inconsciamente minacciato e lamentava la progressiva perdita del proprio dominio. Perciò, secondo il pensiero comune dell'epoca, la nuova donna diventò il capro espiatorio a cui venne affibbiata la colpa della decadenza moderna. Al tempo stesso, la "paranoia

femminile" generò un progressivo rafforzamento del culto della mascolinità: gli uomini sentivano una inconscia pressione a mantenere la propria virilità e a non mostrare alcuna debolezza, dimostrando una forza e una fermezza sia fisica che morale, necessarie per mantenere la propria superiorità.

All'interno del romanzo *Il Grande Gatsby*, la società androcentrica e l'ansia derivata dalla rivoluzione di genere è rappresentata dal narratore, Nick Carraway, che in prima persona racconta le vicende e descrive i personaggi. È stato accurato che Nick è un narratore inaffidabile: il suo punto di vista è soggettivo e inevitabilmente influenza anche la percezione del lettore. Tuttavia, il pensiero di Nick e quello dell'autore non coincidono: Fitzgerald denuncia l'ipocrisia e l'obsoleta moralità del narratore, specificatamente la sua critica ai personaggi femminili.

Anche i personaggi maschili riflettono brutalmente le contraddizioni della propria epoca: Tom Buchanan raffigura il culto della mascolinità, esibendo forza fisica, risolutezza morale, successo economico. Il suo potere è confermato dalla superiorità che esercita sia nei confronti delle donne, che nei confronti delle classi più umili. Al contrario, George Wilson è l'incarnazione della debolezza non solo dal punto di vista spirituale e fisico, ma anche dal punto di vista finanziario. La povertà di Wilson è considerata una colpa, una conseguenza della sua fragilità e della sua mancanza di mascolinità. Jay Gatsby invece soffre delle pressioni sociali che lo inducono a reprimere la sua sensibilità, ma dimostrando la sua vulnerabilità finirà schiacciato e inevitabilmente sconfitto dall'inflessibilità delle imposizioni di genere e dalla rigida gerarchia sociale che cerca di aggirare.

Fitzgerald riesce brillantemente a creare figure femminili tra loro molto eterogenee ed estremamente complesse, riflettendo le contraddizioni e ambivalenze del suo tempo e i moderni conflitti di genere. Attraverso i tre personaggi femminili si nota infatti come la figura rivoluzionaria della Nuova Donna era molto differenziata a seconda della posizione sociale, e come fosse una maschera, un ruolo che le donne strategicamente adottavano per guadagnare un certo grado di indipendenza e potere all'interno di una società androcentrica che ancora le riduceva ad un ruolo inferiore.

Daisy Buchanan, nonostante appartenga alle classi sociali più alte e goda dei privilegi garantiti dal suo status, viola le norme tradizionali e astutamente cerca di ottenere un certo grado di sicurezza, sia sociale che economica, sfruttando la sua bellezza

estriore e il suo fascino ipnotico. Mentre la sua scelta di rimanere con Tom è frutto di una contrastata decisione di anteporre la propria sicurezza davanti ad un amore incerto e precario, Nick lo condanna come il simbolo del fallimento americano e della decadenza morale dell'intera società. Invece, è evidente come Daisy venga costantemente oggettificata e idealizzata, sia dal narratore che da Gatsby stesso, il quale più che provare un autentico amore verso Daisy la sublima a trofeo del suo successo, l'ultima rivale su una società spietata. Alla fine di quello che appare come una competizione di classe tra Tom e Gatsby per conquistare il cuore di Daisy, la vecchia aristocrazia e la inflessibile mascolinità di Tom predominano sulla fragilità sia personale che finanziaria di Gatsby, in quanto appartiene alla nuova aristocrazia, che non nasce ricca ma si fa dà sé tentando di innalzarsi nella scala sociale. Il fatto che Daisy non sia un'ingenua e che abbia sofferto delle aspettative e pressioni sociali addossate al genere femminile, mascherando la sua vulnerabilità con cinismo e pragmatismo, è chiaro quando dichiara che spera che la figlia sia una sciocca, il modo migliore per tollerare una società ostile alle donne. Inoltre, strategicamente sfrutta la sua posizione sociale per sfuggire alle responsabilità delle proprie azioni e concepisce il matrimonio come un'alleanza utilitarista per beneficiare di una garanzia sociale e finanziaria.

Jordan Baker è il perfetto modello di Flapper: androgina, non conformista, impassibile e determinata, è l'unica dei tre personaggi a non dipendere economicamente da un uomo; anzi, sfida il predominio androcentrico con la sua professione di golfista professionista in un ambito prettamente maschile. Nick critica la superficialità, vanità e incoerenza di Jordan, che diviene simbolo della disonestà delle donne moderne. La trasgressione di genere di Jordan attrae Nick, ma allo stesso tempo lo preoccupa in quanto contrasta con la figura obbediente e subordinata della donna nell'età vittoriana. Infatti, Nick prova un senso di nostalgia per la perdita dei vecchi principi e delle passate consuetudini, in quanto le donne erano considerate portatrici di questi valori morali. Ciononostante, è chiaro che la personalità disinteressata e imperturbabile di Jordan non è altro che una maschera che lei assume col fine di guadagnarsi indipendenza e libertà senza l'appoggio di una figura maschile. Questa apparente indifferenza è un modo per entrare con successo nell'arena pubblica dominata dagli uomini.

Myrtle Wilson differisce dai primi due esempi in quanto appartiene alle classi sociali inferiori: non solo subisce i pregiudizi e le discriminazioni del genere femminile,

ma anche le difficoltà e disparità che le porta la sua condizione sociale. Myrtle è giudicata da Nick come una fredda calcolatrice che sfrutta la sua relazione extraconiugale con Tom per ottenere dei favori materiali. Inoltre, con il suo stile di vita eccentrico e il suo vigore sessuale, Myrtle si oppone drasticamente all'immagine della donna raffinata e sofisticata. Nick la giudica come grezza e grottesca, una parodia della donna di alta classe che Myrtle cerca disperatamente di imitare e di raggiungere. In realtà questo opportunismo non è simbolo di una decadenza morale e di un superficiale edonismo, tipico dell'epoca moderna, ma è il suo disperato tentativo di riscattarsi, di vivere una vita migliore e scappare dalla desolazione e dalla miseria della Valle delle Ceneri. Infine, cercando di elevare il suo status sociale e contrastare le aspettative associate al suo genere, Myrtle va incontro ad un tragico epilogo. Il suo omicidio, così come quello di Gatsby, sottolinea la brutalità e l'intransigenza della società americana, basata su valori socioeconomici, e nega il sogno americano secondo cui con il duro lavoro e la giusta determinazione era possibile raggiungere benessere economico ed una buona condizione sociale.

Per concludere, il giudizio spietato e moralista del narratore verso i personaggi femminili, il suo essere cieco nei confronti delle reali difficoltà affrontate dal genere femminile all'interno della società patriarcale, riflette l'astio che le Nuove Donne hanno affrontato. In particolare, Nick oggettivizza le donne, le riduce a simboli di degrado morale e vile opportunismo, e non comprende le diverse strategie che esse adottano per contrastare le rigide convenzioni Vittoriane e ottenere qualche grado di indipendenza all'interno di una società androcentrica.