



## Representation of Women as the ‘Second Sex’ in *The Great Gatsby*

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**Abstract:** This article is an interpretation of The Great Gatsby novel through a Feminist perspective. F. Scott Fitzgerald sets his famous novel The Great Gatsby in 1922 in America. The society which is described by the author is a patriarchal society which positions men as superiors to women. The author privileges men in his novel and constructs the female characters as what the feminist critic Simone De Beauvoir terms the “second sex”. In Fitzgerald’s novel the world is a masculine world. The author, the narrator, and the title of the novel are males, and in agreement with what Simone De Beauvoir argues about men’s superiority toward women, in the novel men are the citizens and the natives of the world but women are the “others”; this means that the world is drawn in such a way that being a man does not cause any peculiarity, but women are strangers, so women’s subjective selves always are under the critical gaze of a male. This essay will argue that in The Great Gatsby, whatever situations the main three female characters – Daisy, Myrtle, and Jordan – have in the society and also during their own lives, they are represented as inferiors to men. Women’s situations like being as a single girl, a wife, a mistress, and a beloved, which are defined in relation to men, will be discussed in this essay.

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### Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald sets his famous novel The Great Gatsby in 1922 in America. The society which is described by the author is a patriarchal society which positions men as superiors to women. The author privileges men in his novel and constructs the female characters as what the feminist critic Simone De Beauvoir terms the “second sex”.

Simone De Beauvoir in her book The Second Sex argues and questions the superiority and condescendence of men toward women. She introduces the concept of the “second sex” to refer to women who are regarded as nothing but the secondary sex in the world controlled by men. In this case she claims that women are under critique because they are women. Since the world is a men’s world they are unquestionable entities but the women are the “others”. She says: “In the midst of an abstract discussion it is vexing to hear a man say: ‘you think thus and so because you are a woman’. It would be out of the question to reply: ‘And you think the contrary because you are a man’, for it is

understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong” (15). She claims that women are defined not in their selves but as relatives to men. She argues: “Woman is not regarded as an autonomous being. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man; she is inessential, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the absolute – she is the other” (16). In this way she proves that women, unlike men, do not have independent individualities. De Beauvoir’s opinion about women’s “character” is that women’s characters, which are their values, their morality, their tastes, and their wisdom, and their behavior, are to be explained by their situations. This essay will argue that in The Great Gatsby, whatever situations the main three female characters – Daisy, Myrtle, and Jordan – have in the society and also during their own lives, they are represented as inferiors to men. Women’s situations like being as a single girl, a wife, a mistress, and a beloved, which are defined in relation to men, will be discussed in this essay.

## Literature and Results

Moreover, Linda McDowell and Rosemary Pringle in *Defining Women* write: “Women are constantly defined in relation to men, and women’s identity and status derive from their relation to the categories of mothers, daughters, and wives. Women are thus defined not only in relation to men, but as dependent on men and subordinate to them. Men, on the other hand, are not defined in relation to women, or in purely familiar terms” (3).

In Fitzgerald’s novel the world is a masculine world. The author, the narrator, and the title of the novel are male, and in agreement with what Simone De Beauvoir argues about men’s superiority toward women, in the novel men are the citizens and the natives of the world but women are the “others”; this means that the world is drawn in such a way that being a man does not cause any peculiarity, but women are strangers, so women’s subjective selves always are under the critical gaze of a male.

Accordingly, Nick Carraway as the narrator and one of the characters of the novel never criticizes men as a whole, but several times he criticizes women. When he is talking about Jordan, he regards all women as fraudulent entities, and says: “Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” (65). He describes Myrtle who is imprisoned by her husband at the upstairs of the garage, when her husband becomes suspicious of existence of another man in her life, and again he criticizes women in these words:

In one of the windows over the garage curtains have been moved aside a little, and Myrtle Wilson was peering down at the car. So engrossed was she that she had no consciousness of being observed, and one emotion after another crept in to her face like objects into a slowly developing picture. Her expression was curiously familiar – it was an expression I had often seen on women’s faces, but on Myrtle Wilson’s face it seemed purposeless and inexplicable until I realized that her eyes, wide with jealous terror, were fixed not on Tom, but on Jordan Backer, whom she took to be his wife. (131)

He criticizes women as the dishonest and jealous entities. Nick’s duty in the novel is not only to narrate the story but also is to critic women in the world of the novel. Tony Tanner in his introductory notes about *The Great Gatsby* avers that Nick constantly introduces his own interpretations in his account, and Nick’s constantly use of words and phrases like: “I suppose”, “I suspect”, “I think”, “she seemed to say”, “there must have been”, “I always had the impression”, are noticeable evidences of Tanner’s claim.

Such dependent women in their situations as men’s wives do not feel happy. Simone De Beauvoir describes the married women as unhappy women, who understand their passiveness toward the dominance of men. They suffer from awareness of their submission to men. She states that: “Her anxiety is the expression of her distrust of the world as given; if it seems threatening this is because she is unhappy in it. She knows very well that she suffers as she does against her will: she is a woman without having been consulted in the matter. She dares not revolt; she submits unwillingly; her attitude is one of constant reproach” (617). And this statement suits Daisy’s situation in the novel. Daisy Buchanan is the main female character of the novel. She is the wife of Tom Buchanan – a wealthy, pride, cruel, drinker, and a womanizer. He represents the authority of masculinity in the world of the novel. Daisy and Tom have a daughter and they live in the fashionable side of Long Island in a magnificent mansion. When Nick visits Daisy for the first time in her house, describes her in these words: “Her face was sad and lovely” (15). She is unhappy. She reveals her oppression and sadness to Nick when she is alone with him (17). Daisy finds herself under the power of a brutal man. Tom’s moods splendidly depicted by Graham Handley’s describing words about Tom; Handley states: “the transition from libertine to prig is so complete” (15). Daisy should tolerate and accept him because he is a man and he sets himself up as the essential subject opposed to her – the inessential object. She is “shut up” in her world.

Besides, Shirley Ardener in *Defining Females* refers to the theory of “muted groups”, which first proposed by Edwin Ardener in *Perceiving Women*. Ardener discusses the theory which its gist is that the dominant entities in any society generate the dominant expressions, and in any situation, only the dominant expression of dominant group will be “heard” or “listened to”. She avers: “Women are the muted group when sexual polarity is pertinent” (7), and argues that “indirect speech” is a mode used by the muted women, and this is the evidence of their suppression of speech, since they are not able to express their thoughts and emotions adequately in the proper “forms” and “forums” (9). Likewise, under Tom’s control, when Daisy wants to express her unhappiness, she speaks indirectly. She states poignantly: “I’m p-paralyzed with happiness” with a stammering and sad tone (15).

Since women depend on men as the masters in the world of the novel, they should gain value in men’s eyes. Daisy is aware of this fact, and when she gives birth to her child as a girl, she says: “I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool – that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little

fool” (24). Daisy with these words reflects her own and the other women’s foolishness in her environment. She knows that in her world, which is the men’s world, every girl should gain value in men’s eyes because the female is dependant to the male. To be considered valuable in the men’s eyes she must take a passive role, she must be a fool, and only getting the role of passivity can women please the authoritative men. According to Simone De Beauvoir, she notices that: “Men do not like garçons manques, or blue stockings, or brainy women; too much daring culture, or intelligence, too much character, will frighten them” (359). Thus, to live in this world in which men are the masters, women must be the beautiful fools, beautiful dolls for men’s pleasure. Consequently, women’s independent personalities, and abilities do not please men.

The novel also suggests that at that time in the States, marriage was not the same in girl’s life and men’s life. Simone De Beauvoir’s notion of the difference between the importance of marriage in girl’s life in contrast with its situation in man’s life proves the idea of superiority of men toward women as a constant reality in every circumstances during their lives. De Beauvoir claims that: “A single woman in America, still more than France, is a socially incomplete being; if she is to attain the whole dignity of a person, she must wear a wedding ring” and again she states: “When girls are asked about their plans for the future, reply as formerly: ‘I want to get married’. But no young man considers marriage as his fundamental project. Economic success is what will bring him adult standing” (451). The girl always looks to man for fulfillment; to complete her existence she depends on a man. She has always been convinced of male superiority and this superiority has economic and social foundations, but a man is an independent and complete individual. Everything tells the young girl that the best thing for her is to become the man’s subordinate. Since marriage is forced much more oppressively upon the young girl than upon the young man, Daisy decides to get married to Tom although she had been in love with Jay Gatsby for two years. Daisy and Jay wanted to get married but Jay went to war and after the war he went to Oxford. Although he knew that Daisy was waiting for him, he delayed his return and did not make haste to go back. In this situation, and under the forces which she indirectly reveals in her letter to Jay, she gets married to Tom.

Simone De Beauvoir in her book depicts that wealth has a great role in marriage. She reports that: “Money plays a leading part in 30 to 70 per cent of marriages, according to various answers” (452). Likewise, Daisy is fascinated by Tom’s wealth and gets married to him, because she has never seen

wealth equal to his. After her wedding she tries to seek happiness in her love for her husband. During the early years after their marriage, she tries to admire him devotedly. Then her emotions become obvious. She is not happy in the passive role that marriage has relegated her to. Her frustration and unhappiness are organized by what Simone De Beauvoir interprets as the oppression of women as the result of women’s awareness of their own passivity and men’s dominance. And this conforms De Beauvoir’s statement about woman, she claims that: “Shut up in her flesh, her home, she sees herself as passive before these gods with human faces who set goals and establish values” (609). Daisy feels herself as a stranger to her unsentimental, cruel husband. She finds that her marriage enslaves her under the man’s authority. She recognizes that the world is masculine on the whole; men are those who fashioned this world, ruled it, and dominate it. She understands that she is inferior and dependent to him. Yet she keeps silent toward her husband even when he reproaches her in front of Nick and Jordan. While Tom and Gatsby are quarreling with each other she is still silent. Her silence during the argument between Tom and Gatsby is described by the narrator as the “lost voice” (141); because –as also Simone De Beauvoir believes - living in marital life teaches women to be silent and passive toward men (617).

Daisy suffers from being a plaything – a “beautiful fool” – in the hands of two men, Jay Gatsby and Tom. On the one side there is the former lover, and her life once was affected by his hesitation. After five years he comes back and asks her to represent the past, to break her silence, and to stand against her husband’s authority: “He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: I never loved you” (116). On the other side there is the heartless husband who controls her. De Beauvoir’s notion of imperialism referring to man’s despotism in their marriage life, matches Tom’s authority toward Daisy. De Beauvoir states: “Marriage incites man to a capricious imperialism: the temptation to dominate is the most truly universal, the most irresistible one there is; to surrender the wife to her husband, is to promote tyranny in the world” (483). In this respect Tom wants to keep Daisy for himself; she is like his property, and since everyone should guard his properties, he controls her to confirm his power and authority. The only answer to the question of why Tom sends Daisy with Gatsby to Long Island is his excessive pride and sense of control. Tom orders Daisy: “Go on. I think he realizes that his presumptuous little flirtation is over” (141). He wants to show everyone, even Daisy, that he has his wife under his control.

Another aspect of a patriarchal system is in the fact that no matter how much is he an ineffectual man, he can control the woman, because he is regarded as the superior entity and she is subordinated to him. Simone de Beauvoir refers to this point in her book, and she claims that: "One of the benefits that oppression confers upon the oppressors is that the most humble among them is made to feel superior. The most mediocre of males feels himself a demigod as compared with women" (24). For this case, Myrtle Wilson, who is another female character of the novel, is a good example. She is the woman of the low social class who lives in the second floor of a garage in the valley of ashes with her husband, George Wilson. George is a "blond, spiritless man, anemic and faintly handsome" who sells and buys cars to survive. One of their neighbors describes him in these words: "Generally he was one of these worn out men: when he wasn't working, he sat on a chair in the doorway and stared at the people and the cars that passed along the road, when anyone spoke to him he invariably laughed in an agreeable, colorless way. He was his wife's man and not his own" (143). This description of Wilson by his neighbor reveals Wilson's weakness for the other men but not for his wife. When Tom goes to Wilson's garage to talk to him about a car, but actually to see Myrtle, he talks to Wilson in a very proud and contemptuous manner, and Wilson acts submissively and humbly. Myrtle is submitted to such a lifeless, weak man – weak toward other men but authoritative toward his wife. The man who has nothing to say against other men is the manifestation of control for Myrtle, because he is a man and she is a woman. Myrtle is imprisoned by George at the upstairs of the garage, when he finds the dog lead which Tom bought her. He becomes suspicious of the existence of another man in her life. Despite the fact that George is powerless against other men, he is authoritative toward his wife. He is the first one and the woman is the second one toward him.

Like Daisy, Myrtle as Tom's mistress, is suffering in the hands of two men, George and Tom. Graham Handley in his book *Brodie's Notes* claims that: "Women have their places in Tom's world, but one strictly circumscribed by his own ideas and desires" (37). Tom, who is a lascivious man, wants Myrtle because of her powerful sexuality. Tom's masculinity allows him to make violence not only toward his wife but also toward his mistress. He breaks Myrtle's nose when she argues with him. He deceives her saying that Daisy is Catholic and they cannot get divorced. Besides, Handley refers to Tom's violence, and avers that: "he has an indolent, reflex capacity for causing pain which can be translated into positive physical violence, as we see

from the sudden and explosive force with which he breaks Myrtle's nose" (36). Handley also refers to Tom's insincerity, regarding his lie that Daisy is Catholic, and believes that this reveals Tom's "unscrupulousness and hypocrisy" (36). The relation does not give Myrtle real liberty, but violence and abuse and it eventually causes her death.

Although Daisy and Myrtle are from different social classes, which cause the difference in their behavior, they are similar in their feminine lives. They share their inferiority toward the males. Both are controlled by men. With their extramarital affairs the two women have been involved in a double game play. On the one hand they want to resist against their men's domination. Having relationships with other men, they try to sustain their independence of their husbands. But on the other hand they do not want to lose their husbands. Both of them want to keep their husbands, because they are dependent on their men. If their husbands leave them, they cannot count on help from their own inner resources, because - as De Beauvoir believes- in that environment, the women are not able to enterprise, to produce, to invent. They are condemned to obedience (486).

Simone De Beauvoir argues that "When a woman says ecstatically: 'He is a man!' she evokes at once the sexual vigor and the social effectiveness of the man she admires. In both he displays the same creative superiority" (628). Accordingly Tom as a sensual and extremely wealthy man has enough attraction to subjugate women who are inferiors regarding both aspects of sex, and social activities. Tom was a man who possessed so much money that Daisy has never seen wealth equal to him, so he becomes her master. He bought a fashionable apartment in New York for Myrtle. He was a passionate, and a wealthy man. He could buy for her whatever she wanted. In this situation no one could be better than Tom for Myrtle. Daisy and Myrtle were dazzled by Tom and subordinate themselves to him. Gatsby also uses his wealth to attract Daisy's love. He asks Nick to invite her to his house, because his house is next to the Gatsby's mansion. Nick says that: "Gatsby wants her to see his house" (85). In this way he wants to show his wealth to Daisy, and to enter her heart again by money. It seems that he is aware of the women's moods, namely, that they are easily subordinated to the men who possess more wealth.

As the master of this world the man gives the right to himself to have the extramarital affair, but does not allow his wife to have such a relationship. He is the authority of this world who establishes the values, so everything would be to his advantage. Tom himself has an extramarital affair with Myrtle, but he



gets extremely angry when he becomes suspicious of the relation between Gatsby and Daisy. Simone De Beauvoir claims that in the world in which men are rulers, men – the descended beings as workers and citizens – can enjoy contingent pleasure before marriage and extramaritally. But the erotic pleasure is suppressed for the women (454).

Although Jordan Becker, who is another female character of the novel, is a successful champion, she is still as inferior to men. Simone De Beauvoir believes that the athlete females who are positively interested in their own game, feel themselves least handicapped in comparison with the male (357). Jordan is a more liberated woman according to her free travels through America and her participation in the social activities as a champion. She seems to be an independent woman. However, she is belittled by Nick and she is still represented as the “second sex” toward male.

Due to the fact that girls are more eager for marriage to fulfill their dependence, men – who seem to be aware of this fact – resist marriage when they feel that girls want to “hook” them. Men’s evasive manner toward girls is depicted by De Beauvoir as: “‘Nothing is more disagreeable to a man than to feel himself pursued, to realize that a woman is trying to hook him’. And men endeavor to avoid such efforts to ensnare them” (453). Correspondingly, in her relationship with Nick, Jordan is suffering from Nick’s unkindness. Despite of their romantic relation, Nick does not show a serious love for her and annoys her with his indifferent behavior. During her last visit with Nick she complains because of his unkind behavior: “You threw me over on the phone. 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” (183). She finds that Nick does not want to make their relation more serious and he never plans to marry her, so she decides to become engaged to another man. This makes Nick angry according to his own narration: “Angry, and half in love with her, I turned away” (185). He expects that only himself can make any decision about their relation. To see his obedient and powerless partner, who was voraciously seeking his love and attention, escape from oppression makes him angry. Jordan’s social activities offer her power. This power gives her the ability to change. She is not as mute and passive as Daisy and Myrtle, but this does not make any difference in her position as “the second sex” toward men: she is a woman and is submitted to a man for a while and when the man disappoints her, she seeks for another man’s territory to subjugate herself to him.

## Conclusion

To sum up, the novel represents women in different situations: as single girls who are waiting for men, as the wives of men from distinctive social classes, as the beloveds and mistresses, and as a champion. Simone De Beauvoir implies in her book that woman’s “character”, which is her values, her morality, her tastes, her wisdom, and her behavior, is to be explained by her situation, and her situation is also defined in relation to a man. Whoever she is, she is only a relative, and she is the second phenomenon. She should depend on a man to give meaning to her individuality: he is essential and she is inessential. In the world which is constructed by the novel men are the subjects and women are the objects in men’s hands. Women are like men’s properties. They are controlled, ruled, and imprisoned by men. Women’s subordination to men is one of the main themes of the novel. Daisy is presented as a single girl and as a married woman during the novel. In both situations she is a passive and dependent entity, and she is under the authority of men. She cannot make Gatsby to go back, and she is also controlled by Tom. Daisy will not exist if her roles as a wife and a beloved are taken away from her, and Myrtle has the same story. She is abused by Tom, and in the other hand, she lives with spiritless and poor George. Myrtle’s existence in the novel is justifiable only as Wilson’s wife and Tom’s mistress. Regarding Jordan, even her active and successful participation in the society does not make essential improvement in her position as an inferior to men. In the masculine world of the novel all main three female characters are presented as inferiors to men and their characters are organized by what Simone De Beauvoir introduces as “the second sex”.

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