

# Women and Class in Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i  
književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

Lorena Šeda

**Žene i stalež u Fitzgeraldovom romanu “Veliki Gatsby”**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Osijek, 2020.

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Study Programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language  
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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

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## **Abstract:**

Women and social class have been a reoccurring topic for many authors over the centuries, including a renown American novelist Francis Scott Fitzgerald. Born in 1896, Francis Scott Fitzgerald left his mark in literature as one of the most famous American authors of the twentieth century to date. Although he achieved limited success during his lifetime, today he is widely regarded as an exceptional author, who earned his success by writing novels and short stories in the 1920s. In his works he focuses on the idea of the American Dream, social structure, and life in the Jazz Age, while forming his characters as realistic as possible, making them credible for the depiction of reality. One of his many inspirations was his wife Zelda, whom he was devoted to all his life. The Fitzgeralds lived a lavish and extravagant life, which is mirrored in many of Fitzgerald's literary works, including his masterpiece of a novel *The Great Gatsby*. Today, it is considered to be his most successful piece, and being first published in 1925, it is still relevant today. In the novel, Fitzgerald gives an insight in the lives of various people from different social classes in the time of "the Roaring Twenties." Hidden behind a love story, there is a clear image of class stratification, which is most noticeable in the portrayal of female characters, namely Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson. With a diverse set of female characters, Fitzgerald explores the hardships and privileges connected to social class those female characters belong to. This paper will discuss the class-connected differences and similarities between the women in the novel are and how class affects their life, choices, and marriage.

Keywords: Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, women, class, marriage, society

## **Introduction**

Francis Scott Fitzgerald, one of the greatest American writers of the twentieth century, stands out with his extraordinary short stories and novels about the Roaring Twenties. In his novel *The Great Gatsby*, he creates a love story with a tragic ending. Throughout the novel, the reader encounters an array of different types of male and female characters from different social classes. They are created through advantages and disadvantages of their social class, as well as the circumstances of the era they live in.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze principal female characters of the novel and to examine if there are any differences and similarities between them, and if so, what they are and how do they affect the characters. The first chapter gives information on what the idea of a “new woman” is. The second chapter deals with Daisy Buchanan, the long-lost love of the novel’s protagonist Jay Gatsby, and the notorious female representative of the upper-class in the novel. The third chapter discusses Jordan Baker, Daisy’s best friend and a prominent golf player who lives on the verge of the working and upper-class. The fourth chapter deals with Myrtle Wilson, a lower-class woman with a taste for luxury and fortune, a trait that in the end costs her her life. The fifth chapter compares the three women and analyzes the similarities and differences between them, considering their positions in the society. In the concluding chapter of this paper, it is concisely explained in which way all three main female characters represent the modern woman of the 1920s in their own respective ways.

## 1. Women and Class in the 1920s

The 1920s are known as the years of breaking away from traditional societal norms, lavish lifestyles, and modernity, they are commonly known as the Jazz Age or the Roaring Twenties. This decade was a time of transformation in many aspects of life. After World War I, the western society underwent major changes, including the growth of economies and various industries (such as science and technology), cultural development in the areas of art and media, including music and dance, art and architecture, as well as radio and film. In his book *The Roaring Twenties*, Thomas Streissguth states that “movies featured romance and scantily dressed vamps... A new dance music called “jazz” [was created] ... Dancing moved from decorous, well-lit ballrooms to new venues – night-clubs, roadhouses, and private parties...” (44). This points to societal norms of the time becoming more flexible, allowing for young people to create changes in lifestyle and culture.

During World War I, thousands of women were employed as workers in factories, munition plants, and on other positions usually tended to by men, and “as the war progressed, and as the important role of women in the war effort impressed itself on the public, the suffrage movement began to make progress” (Streissguth 40). The 1920s were an era of change in politics and society in general, as women gained the right to vote and shifted their roles in modern society. With that, women acquired greater independence and an opportunity to become more equal to men, thus creating a new image of women.

Today, the type of woman from the 1920s is known as a “Flapper.” The “new woman” was in many ways a separation from the way women were thus far perceived; women swapped their stereotypically feminine rolls of the Victorian era for more masculine ones. Getting married early and starting families at a young age was now replaced by a less conservative way of living, which included being politically, financially, and sexually more independent. Following their new position in society, women’s fashion also changed. According to Kelly Boyer Sagert’s book *Flappers: A Guide to an American Subculture*, the desirable body type was no longer a fuller, curvier body, but a boyish, slender figure, long skirts and dresses were now replaced by short, above the knee skirts, revolutionizing the way women dressed (Sagert 2). They wore their hair in short bobs, smoked cigarettes, listened to jazz, and embraced a lifestyle considered outrageous and immoral at the time. They introduced a new way of living to society of the 1920s and laid foundations for the modern woman of the twentieth and twenty-first century.

## **2. Women and Class in *The Great Gatsby***

There are three main female characters in the novel, each of which is a portrayal of a different social class. Depicting an upper-class woman is Daisy Buchanan, who was Gatsby's first love and his main romantic interest all throughout the novel. Daisy's wealthy upbringing allowed her to live a lavish lifestyle, making her a symbol of "old money" in the novel, that being a symbol of wealth retained in a family for generations. Daisy's best friend is Jordan Baker, another upper-class woman and a golf player who worked her way to the glitz and glamour of living a flapper lifestyle, thus representing "new money," a wealth newly acquired and earned, rather than inherited. Lastly, Myrtle Wilson is a wife of a car mechanic, living a lowly lifestyle but desperately wanting more from what life has offered her, she portrays the "no money" lower class of the 1920s' society.

## 2.1 Daisy Buchanan – The „Golden Girl”

Daisy Buchanan is one of the main female characters in the novel *The Great Gatsby*, she is the woman who is the source of the central conflict in the novel, choosing between her taste for money and her true love. She is unhappily married to Tom Buchanan and a mother of a baby girl named Pammy. She is also the long-lost love of Jay Gatsby, which makes her the most prominent female character of the novel. Both she and her husband Tom are unfaithful to each other. Tom has an affair with a lower-class woman Myrtle Wilson, and Daisy is familiar with that and Tom's previous affairs. Her awareness of Tom's unfaithfulness might be the reason why she does not hesitate much when it came to her having an affair of her own with Jay Gatsby. The climax of the novel is when both of their affairs came to an end, on a hot summer day with a tragic death of Myrtle Wilson, after Daisy accidentally hit her with Gatsby's car on their way home from the city. This event resulted in Myrtle's husband George shooting Gatsby and then himself, after which Tom and Daisy decide to move away. There are many ways to interpret the character of Daisy Buchanan, but the undeniable fact is that she is the prime example of what an upper-class woman's lifestyle in the 1920s was like.

Before she got married and moved to Chicago with her husband, Daisy lived in Louisville, Kentucky where she was born and raised. She was a southern belle, belonging to the upper class, therefore money was never something she had troubles with. Although she could have everything she wanted, her class still restrained her in some aspects of her life, such as living with no regards to the society's expectations of what an upper-class woman should be like. According to Jordan, "her mother had found her packing her bag one winter night to go to New York and say goodbye to a soldier who was going overseas. She was effectually prevented, but she wasn't on speaking terms with her family for several weeks" (Fitzgerald 56), which points to her not being able to act upon her free will.

Daisy is portrayed as a beautiful young woman who was always desired and admired by many. Ever since she was a girl, she was surrounded by glamour and opulence provided by her upbringing in a wealthy family. Jay Gatsby, a soldier at the time, was her first love and the man whom she wanted to marry. However, their love was not enough to overcome the obstacles brought by life. Namely, he went to serve in World War I and she, lead by partly her own will and partly by the norms set by her social class, decided she could not wait for him and married Tom Buchanan.

Her marriage with Tom started out a little bit opportunistic, as Tom came from a wealthy aristocratic family, and he was a great shot for luxury-seeking Daisy. At the time, Tom seemed like a better opportunity and although Daisy loved Jay, Tom had something Jay did not – social status. This does not mean she did not love Tom at all when she married him. After Jay left to serve the army, he and Daisy stayed in touch for a while, but as the time passed, they grew more and more apart. Daisy was getting impatient and wanted her life to be settled: “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” (Fitzgerald 116). She met Tom and fell in love, both of them knew they were great for each other – young, in love, and both prominent members of the upper class.

Unfortunately for Daisy, her marriage with Tom was not what she expected. Tom started seeing other women and their problems had only gotten worse when they had a child. At one point in the novel, Daisy says that even alone she could not say she never loved him (Fitzgerald 102), but despite all his money and their luxurious life, their love faded away. She knew he had mistresses from time to time, but she seemed not to care. She kept quiet and pretended to be happy, until the reappearance of Jay Gatsby in her life. Daisy acted upon her heart’s wishes and sought happiness in the places she could not find it with Tom, “she was fickle in love” (Li, Zheng 53). She cared for Tom and she knew he cared for her too, but there were instances where – upon discovering his rudeness and aggressiveness towards her – she clearly showed her dissatisfaction. This can be seen at the beginning of the novel, after Tom bruises her finger, she says: “You did it, Tom. . . I know you didn’t mean to, but you DID do it. That’s what I get for marrying a brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen of a – “(Fitzgerald 9). She was unhappy with his personality, but could not do anything about it, as she was still his wife,

Although the marriage with Tom failed to bring her happiness in life, she was not miserable. Their relationship resulted in the birth of their only child, a baby girl named Pammy. In a conversation with Nick, the narrator of the novel and Daisy’s cousin, she tells him: “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” (Fitzgerald 13). This is the first instance in the novel in which Daisy shares her world view. In her opinion, being a woman is much harder if she is aware of the problems surrounding her. This is the reason why she wants her daughter to be oblivious to life’s hardships, she wants her to be beautiful and unaware of the difficulties she might face as a woman. In this case, Daisy thinks that ignorance really is a bliss and shows great care for the wellbeing of her daughter. Being a “beautiful little fool” would mean her daughter would have

all her problems taken care of by others, her only task would be to be pretty. Her world view may be criticized but “Daisy is complex, and critics who see her as unintelligent, unsophisticated. . . are not reading her carefully enough” (Protheroe 4.) Daisy’s character has much to offer to the reader and although this approach may seem sexist and degrading - seeing a woman’s worth only in her beauty - it can also be understood as a defense mechanism. Daisy knows life is not all smooth sailing and even though she lives a relatively happy and easy life, her manner implies she had gone through some difficulties in life and hopes her daughter does not have to go through them as well.

Though, it may not seem Daisy’s life was difficult at all, given the fact she was an upper-class woman living in the 1920s, and her young life was filled with luxury: “Her porch was bright with the bought luxury of star-shine. . . . Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (Fitzgerald 115). Even after she became a mother, she had her share of a flapper lifestyle – an icon of the 1920s, the central point of the Roaring Twenties – a woman who was not afraid of the social norms and did what she wanted to do. She attended fabulous parties, listened to jazz, and lived her life the way she wanted to, as Jordan describes her: “Daisy was popular in Chicago, as you know. They moved with a fast crowd, all of them young and rich and wild” (Fitzgerald 57). She was somewhat irresponsible in her actions and displayed detachment to reality, embodying the values of the flapper throughout the novel. One of the flapper’s characteristics Daisy is desperately trying to hold on to is careless youth. In his essay “F. Scott Fitzgerald, age consciousness and the rise of American youth culture,” Kirk Curnutt describes Daisy as an “aging flapper,” who was “although worn cynical by her husband’s constant infidelity, strives at twenty-three to remain the same frivolous teenager who fell in love with Jay Gatsby five years earlier” (Curnutt 41). This statement connects Daisy’s youthful carelessness reminiscent of a flapper with her irresponsible actions and immaturity. Because of her social class, Daisy is in the position to escape (figuratively and literally) from the consequences of her actions – be it ignoring her husband’s infidelity or leaving the scene of a crime, money and status allow her not to care.

After the end of World War I, women in America had been given the right to vote, giving them more freedom in many aspects of life, including social and economic. In the 1920s, it was a usual occurrence to see a woman accompanying her husband to a party, this was one of the novelties of the new decade, as women were typically housewives who stayed at home, taking care of children and the household, no matter what class they belonged to. Daisy uses

this new possibility and through her character, the reader is able to get a perspective of new behaviors of upper-class woman in the 1920s.

Despite Daisy's class and privileges of a "new woman," she is still restrained. Her marriage is what is keeping her down, as she is still very dependent on her husband. Being the part of high society and belonging to the upper class, she did not need to have a job, meaning all the money she had was not hers in reality – either it was inherited, or it was earned by her husband. Nevertheless, money was never a problem for Daisy. Exactly that was one of the reasons why Gatsby was attracted to her – "Her voice is full of money" (Fitzgerald 126). She was the woman who had something Gatsby desired so badly – social status. His attraction to her was materialistic, and the same way Daisy loved Tom, Gatsby loved Daisy for the same reason. They were opportunities to get what they wanted. Even though throughout the novel, Gatsby speaks about his love for Daisy, he is constantly trying to impress her with material things. When showing Daisy and Nick his house, he says: "My house looks well, doesn't it? . . . It took me just three years to earn the money that bought it" (Fitzgerald 68). He is in love with the idea of Daisy and not Daisy herself. His love towards Daisy has grown completely commercial, as she was the girl desired by many, living the dream life of the 1920s. This does not mean their love was not real at one point, but as they grew older, their love grew dimmer and weaker, turning into something that can only be justified by tangible things. In Jay's eyes, Daisy was now a trophy, a product of social desire (Matek, Poljak Rehlicki 551), he was bewitched by her appeal: "It excited him too that many men had already loved Daisy—it increased her value in his eyes" (Fitzgerald 114). He wanted her to stay forever the young Daisy he once knew, and he believed in this illusion he created. Daisy was now something he could afford, because now he had the money and access to the high life he always wanted, as it is analyzed by scholars:

The appearance of eternal youth and beauty centers in a particular social class whose glamour is made possible by social inequality and inequity. Beauty, the presumed object of aesthetic contemplation, is commercialized, love is bought and sold. Money is the means to the violent recovery or specious arrest of an enchanting youth. (Ghasemi, Tiur 124)

Fitzgerald almost allegorizes Daisy's character, equating her to the money she had and the social class she belonged to. It is not unusual that society had a big impact on the characters in the novel. Tom and Daisy are major representatives of the upper class and they were often indirectly portrayed as snobbish and arrogant throughout the novel. Nick describes them as



careless: “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” (Fitzgerald 139). They were careless because they could afford it. Their class allowed them to behave whichever way they wanted and get away with it without any consequences. Daisy did not have to pay the price of killing Myrtle, Jay did. She moved away and continued with her life like nothing happened. This exact carelessness is implied when Nick says Tom and Daisy (or the whole upper class in general) are a “rotten crowd” (Fitzgerald 118).

There are many aspects of Daisy’s character that can be discussed – her being a wife and a motherly figure; a woman who followed her heart after all; or a woman who represents an entire class in the novel – the novel gives the reader many reasons to both pity and judge Daisy. Nevertheless, she is a character that stands out with all her virtues and flaws and greatly contributes to the image of upper-class women in literary works in the 1920s.

## 2.2 Jordan Baker – The “Flapper”

Miss Jordan Baker is another one of the three main female characters of the novel. Being the one of Daisy’s closest childhood friends, as Daisy says so herself: “Our white girlhood was passed together...” (Fitzgerald 15), she is also a member of the upper-class, belonging to the “old money society.” She is the person Gatsby confides in the most, alongside with Nick, when it comes to his secret love for Daisy. Jordan’s character differs from other female characters in the novel in many ways. Despite being in the upper-class, she is one of the few who has a job and provides for herself, which puts her in the working class as well; is not married or in a relationship – except for the casual relationship she has with Nick. She is portrayed to be carefree and self-sufficient, almost masculine in some respects, but she is never fully defined, which does not go unnoticed, as Maggie Gordon Froehlick states in her essay “Jordan Baker, Gender Dissent, and Homosexual Passing in *The Great Gatsby*.” “Jordan’s apparent lack of definition is reflected in literary criticism of the novel, which dismisses her as a flat and static character, Fitzgerald’s representative of a vacuous and superficial New Woman, a kind of stock character of the flapper” (Froehlick 85). However, Jordan plays an important role in the portrayal of women of different social classes. What makes her an extraordinary character worth noticing is her ability to stand out among other characters with her unique sense of self and others around her.

The first appearance of Jordan is just a few pages into the novel, where Nick – upon seeing her lying on a couch at Tom and Daisy’s house – describes 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 grey sun-strained eyes looked back at me with polite reciprocal curiosity out of a wan, charming discontented face” (Fitzgerald 8). This is the first and one of the most striking descriptions of her outer appearance. The author makes her character different from other female characters, showing the duality of the “new woman.” She is not presented as typically feminine. Unlike Daisy, she does not have many ladylike features; her figure could be described as boyish, her posture stiff and her overall appearance as not prototypically ladylike, she “defies a traditional idea of femininity” (Danielle Fischle 11).

Nevertheless, her boyish looks did not make her look any less of woman. In her aforementioned academic work, Froehlich finds it important to emphasize that Jordan is still a female character despite her physique: “Importantly, unlike the established representation of

the -mannish woman-, Jordan does not wear masculine clothing. She is always in extremely feminine attire, in clothing apparently identical to Daisy's" (Froehlich 84). Surely Jordan stands out from other women in the novel with her boyish looks, but she is an excellent example of what women strived for back in the 1920. Being slender and thin, not showing off curves in Victorian style skirts and dresses was all the rage, it was extremely popular among women, especially those living in big cities, having the opportunity to experience the lavish lifestyle of flappers.

Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, women were usually perceived as gentle and delicate, in literature they were often portrayed as man-dependent. This is where Jordan differs from that depiction. She shows a strong sense of self-worth and confidence throughout the novel. In one of Nick's descriptions of Jordan, he gives an insight into her personality:

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. (Fitzgerald 43)

Her character can be interpreted as very opportunistic and fickle, unpredictable in some situations. She made sure the only person she has to rely on is herself and did whatever she needed to in order to get what she wanted, even if it meant lying from time to time. She does not show much care about the consequences of her doings. In his essay "Desire in *The Great Gatsby*," Per Bjørnar Grande says that "Jordan does not actively victimize anyone, as she is wrapped in an impenetrable narcissism" (Grande). The only person she cares about is herself and although she engages into a casual relationship with Nick, she makes it clear that she does not need him. Considering that the position of women in the society was unstable in the 1920s – choosing between being a wife and a mother or a self-reliant New Woman – Jordan has to "practice self-reliance while still appearing to be an attractive prospect for wifely dependency" (Makowsky 29). That is why she opts for a relationship with Nick, making herself a viable girlfriend figure. Nevertheless, she makes it clear she does not anyone to take care of her, one example of that is when she tells Nick: "I don't give a damn about you now" (Fitzgerald 137). She was not tied to a person or a place, "the uncertainty of her own movements between hotels

and clubs and private houses made her hard to find” (Fitzgerald 119). She is unrestricted and nonchalant in her behavior.

Her carelessness plays an important role in the novel. She does not get emotionally involved, so she can be seen “as an alternative narrator to allow the reader to move beyond the limited male viewpoint of Nick” (Danielle Fischle 14) and in several occasions gives another point of view, from the perspective of a female character. This feature makes Jordan differentiate from other female characters, as they are just described, whereas Jordan is given a voice of her own.

Another very important and easily noticeable discrepancy between Jordan and other female characters is that Jordan is one of the few main female characters with a job of her own. Despite her descent, she earns her own money, though she is not as opulent as Daisy. Just like Gatsby, Jordan is chasing the American Dream – making something out of nothing and succeeding in life with only one goal in mind – money. It appears Fitzgerald continued going down the line of creating a boyish woman when creating the character of Jordan Baker, as her profession is one of a professional golf player. Being a female professional athlete, which is a prototypically a male-dominated field, Jordan makes an excellent example of an independent woman of the “Roaring Twenties.” She is a woman who is “literally and metaphorically. . . successfully playing a man’s game” (Froehlich 89). If the reader follows the idea of masculinity being a sign of strength, it can be noticed that with every Jordan’s occurrence, she establishes herself as a strong female character, both physically and mentally. She is smart enough to know she should live in the moment: “. . . Jordan . . . was too wise ever to carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age” (Fitzgerald 104).

Given the fact that Jordan makes her own living, she is able to live her life completely carefree, which she demonstrates by living a lavish lifestyle full of glamorous parties, associating with people of high society and inevitably consuming excessive amounts of alcohol. She is living the American Dream, she belongs to the class of “the pursuing” (Fitzgerald 59) and makes the absolute best out of it. Her existence on the verge of middle and upper class is validated by her hard work (though sometimes fraudulent) and rewarded by the sumptuous lifestyle. Jordan’s character is somewhat a meeting point between upper-class Daisy and low-class Myrtle, but it must be noted that Jordan is far more successful and prosperous than Myrtle.

### 2.3 Myrtle Wilson – The Victim of Chasing the American Dream

Myrtle Wilson, another female character in the novel, is Tom's mistress and the tragic victim of unfortunate circumstances. Although some might consider her character is small in comparison to Daisy, it is undeniably important. Myrtle and her husband George are members of the lower class. George owns a car garage in the "valley of ashes" (Fitzgerald 17) – a run down area between West Egg and East Egg. Myrtle strives for a better life and, wanting to escape her monotonous, gray, and boring reality, she starts an affair with Daisy's husband, Tom Buchanan. The quality of her life is not improved by the affair, but it is an outlet for her pent-up dissatisfaction. Myrtle's character plays an important role in the novel; not only is her tragic death the breaking point in the novel, but she is also a representative character of women of the lower class in the 1920s.

The way Myrtle is portrayed in the novel provides a contrast to the way other women (Daisy and Jordan) are presented. The author focuses more on her appearance and physical features: "She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face . . . 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" (Fitzgerald 19). Her body figure contrasts Daisy and Jordan who are thin and slender, whereas Myrtle's figure is described as "thickish" (Fitzgerald 19) with "rather wide hips" (Fitzgerald 20). She was far from the ideal boyish and slender body shape, which was widely popular among upper-class women – perhaps disparating her body shape from Daisy's and Jordan's is a way of showing the difference between the social classes to which these women belong. Slimness here symbolically shows superiority of the upper class to the lower class. Another small but possibly important sign of the discrepancy between the two classes are the colors the women wear. Daisy and Jordan are often depicted as something light and shiny, often presented wearing white: "Daisy and Jordan lay upon an enormous couch, like silver idols, weighing down their own white dresses. . ." (Fitzgerald 88), whereas Myrtle's clothes are illustrated to be of neutral tones: "She had changed her dress to a brown figured muslin. . ." (Fitzgerald 20), "Mrs Wilson . . . was now attired in an elaborate afternoon dress of cream-coloured chiffon... (Fitzgerald 22). White that Daisy and Jordan wear symbolizes wealth, prosperity, and almost an unreal disconnection from reality, especially in regard to Daisy and her behavior. Myrtle's brown tones symbolize her simplicity and plainspoken life. Reflecting on Fitzgerald's work, in the essay "*The Great Gatsby* and the twenties," Ronald Berman states:

In his correspondence with Max Perkins, his editor at Scribners, Fitzgerald went so far as to state that Myrtle Wilson was a more achieved character than Daisy Fay Buchanan . . . . Myrtle belongs to the everyday world; Fitzgerald's tactic in establishing her is to describe in detail her relationship to that world – and to allow her to reveal her taste and style. (Berman 88)

She is straightforward and clearly shows what she wants, in contrast to Daisy and her vagueness. As above mentioned, Nick highlights the vitality of her character and the way she carries herself. Myrtle establishes herself as a confident and self-assured woman: “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...” (Fitzgerald 22). She is not afraid of expressing her emotions, it is almost expected of her to do so, as women of the lower class did not have to act secretive and unreachable like women of the upper class. She does not have an aura of uncertainty around her, she knows what she wants, and she shows it.

Myrtle is depicted as a woman dissatisfied with her marriage and unhappy with her life. Although her husband loved her dearly, she does not feel the same way. She feels she deserves more in life and believes she must take every opportunity she gets. She shows vigor and willingness to change her life, unlike her husband who is lifeless and, in a way, content with their life as it is. When telling Nick how she met Tom, she expresses her liveliness with words: “You can't live forever; you can't live forever” (Fitzgerald 27). Exactly in those words the reader can recognize her lust for a better life. She wants to escape her dull way of life and experience more her husband has to offer. George has no understanding for her longings and is devastated when he finds out about her affair. His love for her goes as far as to killing another human being in hopes of avenging her, because he cannot imagine his life without her. The discrepancy between the depth of George's love for Myrtle and Myrtle's lack of affection towards George is proven by the fact that she is willing to leave him for Tom. For her, Tom is the opportunity of a better life.

From Myrtle's point of view, Tom is everything she could ever want in life – luxury, financial stability, getting all the things she wants – but what she does not realized is that Tom does not see her the same way. For him, Myrtle is nothing but a distraction from his own unhappy marriage. He considers her an object of his desire and has no intention of leaving Daisy and making their illicit relationship official. Myrtle endures his mistreatment and aggression, desperately wanting all his attention, disregarding the fact that he still cares for Daisy. The

climax of his aggression towards Myrtle is when he breaks her nose. Despite this event, Myrtle continues having an affair with him. This might be considered as a sign of weakness, as she would rather stay with someone who can provide for her, than to stand up for herself. Myrtle wants the taste of life Daisy and Jordan live, and she does not want to give up that opportunity, even if that means she has to endure physical, but also emotional abuse. She wants everything the American dream has to offer; social mobility, prosperity and a stable lifestyle. Myrtle and Tom have different ideas of what their relationship is: “Myrtle saw it as a way to receive materialistic gifts and as a way out of poverty. Tom thought of it as a game where Myrtle was just a sex object kept on a leash of luxurious bestowments” (Samkanashvili 49). She is just as foolish as Daisy, seeing things through rose-colored glasses, and thinking Tom actually loves her. Exactly this delusion and the impression Tom loved her was her downfall, as she ran in front of the car thinking it was Tom behind the wheel, coming to pick her up.

Myrtle’s intense dreams of a better life stem from the misery created by the life in the lower class. She cannot establish herself as a strong character, living in poverty. Still, she shows great strength when dealing with her current situation. Knowing her position on the social scale and being tired of the way she is treated - “These people! You have to keep after them all the time” (Fitzgerald 23), she desperately reaches for any opportunity to change her life, which shows her will power and adaptability in new conditions. Since she is unemployed, and her husband is the one who provides for her, she feels trapped in a destitute situation and takes the opportunity of a “better” life, which comes in the form of Tom, a member of the higher society. There is a clearly noticeable difference between Myrtle and Tom’s positions on the social scale, and, according to Scott Donaldson’s “Possessions and Characters in *The Great Gatsby*,” “Myrtle must cross a vast social divide to reach the territory of the upper class” (Donaldson 123), but despite the discrepancy in their social statuses, she still manages to maintain his focus on her. Considering she cannot reach her aim for extravagance (Donaldson 123) on her own, she shows her dependency on men around her; she cannot provide for herself, therefore she must rely upon George and Tom to support her.

In spite of her financial dependency, “proud Myrtle fancies herself vastly superior to her husband George” (Bufkin 520), she bosses him around and pays little attention to him, walking “through her husband as if he were a ghost” (Fitzgerald 19), and lies to him about meeting her sister, when in reality she meets with Tom instead. This evident dominance over her husband is a sign of strong determination of her character, a feature of the New Woman. Despite her social rank and financial dependency, Myrtle mirrors the image of what it was being a woman

in the 1920s. She wanted stability, freedom, glamour and money – all features almost guaranteed by being a member of the upper class, which to her remained unobtainable.



## 2.4 Comparison of Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle

All of the main female characters in the novel are ordained with a multitude of different, as well as similar characteristics. Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson represent different types of characters in the novel, but inherently have just about similar features of the 1920's' flapper girl.

Starting of with financial stability and obvious advantages of their social classes, Daisy and Jordan contrast Myrtle greatly. Daisy, being "the golden girl" (Fitzgerald 92) is significantly better well off than Myrtle. Daisy is the representative of the upper class in the novel and it is clearly understandable she has no problems when it comes to her financial situation. Myrtle, however, lives on the other end of the spectrum and struggles to live the life she wants to. Daisy, who can have anything she wants, and Myrtle, who barely affords covering her basic needs, both have something in common when it comes to money. They both rely on men to finance them, namely Tom Buchanan. It is expected by the society that Tom should take care of his wife, not regarding the social class she belongs to. Even though she has money, she is unable to be financially independent as long as her husband is by her side. When it comes to Myrtle, her husband does not make enough money that can satisfy her needs for a better life, so she relies on her lover Tom to provide for her. In this respect, Myrtle and Daisy share the same characteristic – they are both financially dependent on men they socialize with.

Considering both Daisy and Myrtle are unemployed, Jordan contradicts them immensely. She, being the only main female character with a job, provides a contrast from the traditional lower-class housewife Myrtle and the upper-class trophy wife Daisy. Jordan is on the verge between the working class and the upper-class, and so considering the fact she worked her way up by herself, she did not have to rely on anyone but herself. Jordan provides a meeting point between Myrtle and Daisy when taking into account their monetary situations. Daisy has too much of what she actually needs, and Myrtle has too little; Jordan is in the middle between the two, not having too much but also not having too little.

Another similarity between Myrtle and Daisy is that they are both unhappily married. Myrtle's husband George does not provide for her in the way she wants him to, whereas Daisy is unhappy with Tom's behavior and infidelity. They both search for a way out in the form of another man; for Myrtle that is Tom and his enormous amounts of money, and for Daisy that is Jay Gatsby and his undying fascination with her. Both women are seemingly in a dead-end

situation in their marriages, so they opt for a solution of a lesser resistance, that being an affair. Jordan is a figure of discrepancy from the other two women once again; she is not married and only engages in a casual relationship with Nick. It seems as though she does not care about relationships as much as Daisy and Myrtle, however she does not have to depend on anyone like they do. Dependency is one great setback in Myrtle's and Daisy's relationships with men. Daisy is dependent on Tom as he is a secure and assured way to stay in the upper-class, whereas her dependency on Jay lies in her "social value". Myrtle needs Tom to provide for her and it appears as her husband is only there to be her "back-up", so she has someone to come home to if things with Tom do not work out. Both of Myrtle's and Daisy's relationships are based on wrong values, be it money, social status or plain desire, they are trapped in a never-ending circle of reliance on men. Despite the differences in their social class, they exhibit the same features of dependency. They are not as free as it may seem, and even though they both portray the empowered New Woman, their characters still show to have less power than men: "The Great Gatsby manifests that women were still in many ways powerless" (Samkanashvili 48). They are unable to act upon their wishes and live the way they want to; the only woman who seems to do it is Jordan, which makes her stand out from Myrtle and Daisy. This is perhaps rooted in the fact that Jordan is not married, whereas both Myrtle and Daisy are, therefore they are not able to freely socialize in the amount in which Jordan does.

The biggest and most noticeable difference between Daisy and Myrtle is their social class. Myrtle belongs to the lower-class and Daisy belongs to the upper-class, Jordan belongs to the working-class but is on the verge of upper-class. Throughout the entire novel, there is an ongoing everyday battle between the classes – people of the lower-class wanting to reach the upper-class, and people of the upper-class rejecting people from the lower-class. Daisy and Jordan, as well as Tom and Nick, live in their own bubble of prestige and imperceptible reputation that essentially evolves into authority. People like Myrtle, her husband George, and – in a way – Gatsby, are socially subordinate to the people of the upper-class and struggle to change their position in the society. The struggle of reaching success and living an expensive lifestyle cost Myrtle and Gatsby their lives, proving they "are victims and. . . socially inferior to Nick, Daisy and Tom Buchanan, and Jordan Baker" (Bufkin 519). Even though Myrtle is far below Gatsby's monetary position, they are both strongly affected by the upper-class and in that way level with each other. The upper-class stays unconditionally unreachable for Myrtle, which shows the gap between the classes to which the women in the novel belong.

## Conclusion

Through the characters of Myrtle, Daisy, and Jordan, Fitzgerald portrayed the New Woman of the 1920s. With all of their differences and similarities, he creates an idea what it was to be a woman in different social classes during the Roaring Twenties.

With her opulence and a lavish lifestyle, Daisy represents the upper-class. She and her husband Tom add to the luxurious tone of the novel, using the benefits of their class. She is portrayed as a strong character, dealing with a cheating husband and taking her fate into her own hands by getting involved with long lost teenage love, Gatsby. At the same time, she shows weakness and the influence of her belonging to the upper-class by running away from reality and living her life as if it was a dream. She is unwilling to accept that life is not necessarily what she imagines it to be.

Jordan could be considered the most uncaring character of them all, she is the most emotionally distant female character and lives her life entirely by her rules. She represents the boyish aspect of the flapper; her independence makes her adaptable for living in a man's world. Jordan takes advantage of her reality, even if it means she has to lie and cheat to get where she wants to go, which makes her an accomplished female character in the novel.

Myrtle, being the female representative of the lower-class, lives outside her reality by engaging in an affair with Tom, trying to escape her dull, poverty-stricken life. She is the victim of her dreams. Her unfortunate situation does not stop her from trying to get what she wants, which proves she is a strong and fearless female character. She establishes herself with vitality and willingness to win a better life. Exactly this vitality is a feature of the flapper that Myrtle exhibits.

All three of the main female characters show certain similarities and differences from one another, but it is undeniably evident that their social classes create immense barriers. Whether they are willing to try to cross them or not, Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle all show astonishing strength in portraying a woman of the 1920's and therefore proving themselves worthy of being called main characters of a novel as great as *The Great Gatsby*.

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