

# *An Interpretation of the Great Gatsby from the Perspective of Feminism*

Xiaowen Yu

Qufu Normal University, Lucheng Street, Qufu, China  
2977738104@qq.com

**Keywords:** Fitzgerald, Feminism, Patriarchal Ideology, Misogyny

**Abstract:** F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940), the renowned American novelist of the 1920s, is often hailed as the spokesman and laureate of the “Jazz Age.” His masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* is considered a classic of American literature, widely discussed for its theme of the disillusionment of the American Dream. However, feminist interpretations of the novel remain relatively scarce. This thesis attempts a feminist re-reading of *The Great Gatsby*, exploring the depiction of female characters and their societal implications. Although Fitzgerald creates a “romance of money” in *The Great Gatsby*, the women in the novel are generally portrayed as secondary to the men, with negative characterizations, especially Daisy, who is often seen as the embodiment of emotional passivity. This paper applies feminist literary criticism and close reading to analyze the patriarchal consciousness of the narrator, Nick, and his misogynistic views toward female characters. By reinterpreting Daisy, the study deconstructs Nick’s patriarchal narrative, arguing that Daisy is not a perpetrator, but rather a victim of Gatsby’s American Dream. Furthermore, the negative portrayals of women in the novel reflect both the societal gender norms of the time and Fitzgerald’s own views on women.

## 1. Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald, a prominent American novelist of the early 20th century, is widely recognized for his vivid portrayal of the “Jazz Age” in his works, which captures the spirit and excesses of the 1920s. Known as the spokesman of the era, Fitzgerald, along with William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway, is regarded as one of the foremost writers in modern American literature. While Hemingway focused on the resilience of tough men and Faulkner created the myth of the South, Fitzgerald’s writing delved into the world of the wealthy, which offers a critical examination of their lives and values<sup>[1]</sup>. His most famous work, *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, has remained a classic of American literature. It dissects themes of the American Dream, love, and social class. Despite its widespread acclaim, much of the scholarly analysis and interpretation have primarily focused on the novel’s portrayal of disillusionment and its narrative techniques. However, few essays have discussed the novel from the feminist perspective.

The novel’s central character, Daisy Buchanan, has long been regarded as a symbol of beauty and privilege, yet her characterization has been criticized for its emotional passivity<sup>[2]</sup>. Fitzgerald himself admitted that the novel was “a man’s book” and that the women in it were emotionally

passive figures. However, this perception has been increasingly challenged by feminist literary criticism, which seeks to examine how women are portrayed in male-dominated narratives. In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy is depicted primarily in relation to the male characters, particularly Gatsby and Tom Buchanan. While critics have often viewed Daisy as a mere object of Gatsby's obsession, a re-reading from the perspective of feminism suggests that she is a victim of both her circumstances and the patriarchal structures that confine her.

This thesis aims to offer a feminist interpretation of *The Great Gatsby*, focusing on the novel's treatment of its female characters, particularly Daisy. By applying feminist literary criticism, the thesis will explore the underlying patriarchal ideology present in the novel and challenge traditional readings that reduce Daisy's role to that of a passive, unworthy object of desire. Through a detailed analysis of Daisy's character, this paper will argue that she is not merely a passive figure, but rather a victim of a masculine world that objectifies her. In doing so, the thesis seeks to offer a fresh perspective on the novel and contribute to the broader discourse surrounding gender, power, and representation in Fitzgerald's work.

## 2. Literature review

*The Great Gatsby* is F. Scott Fitzgerald's most famous work. It was first published in 1925. The novel has been translated into more than 40 languages and continues to be reprinted regularly. *The Great Gatsby* made a profound impact on the literary world. Many domestic and foreign scholars and critics have conducted research on it.

### 2.1 Studies on the Great Gatsby Abroad

The study of F. Scott Fitzgerald's work, particularly *The Great Gatsby*, has grown significantly since his death in 1940. Some early works offered key insights into Fitzgerald's life and his unique style. For instance, Arthur Mizener's biography *This Side of Paradise* set the foundation for future research by making readers aware of the historical contexts and personal experiences that shaped his writing<sup>[3]</sup>. Later, Matthew Brucoli's *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur* cemented Fitzgerald's legacy by offering a thorough look at his life, career, and artistic contributions to American literature<sup>[4]</sup>.

In the 1960s, new literary theories such as psychoanalysis, feminism, and structuralism began to influence how scholars approached *The Great Gatsby*. Critics started to analyze the novel from these different perspectives, exploring deeper into the themes of identity, desire, and social change. By the 1990s, interest in Fitzgerald's works greatly surged, especially with the 100th anniversary of his birth in 1996. During this time, books like Jackson R. Bryer's *F. Scott Fitzgerald in the Twentieth Century* celebrated Fitzgerald's contributions to both short stories and novels. Critics like Nicolas Tredell also examined *The Great Gatsby* through the lenses of race, class, and gender, highlighting the novel's relevance to contemporary social issues. Ronald Berman's *The Great Gatsby and Fitzgerald's World of Ideas* took this further by exploring the link between capitalism and the novel's portrayal of American society.

Alongside these comprehensive studies, various essays have introduced new interpretations. For example, Roger Lewis's paper, "Money, Love, and Aspiration in *The Great Gatsby*", focused on the complex relationships between wealth and personal ambition that drive the novel's plot. These contributions make *The Great Gatsby* a central text in literary studies, with its themes and artistic elements continuing to spark debate among scholars.

### 2.2 Studies on the Great Gatsby at Home

In China, Fitzgerald's works began to attract scholars' attention in the 1980s. Dong Hengxun

played a significant role in early research. His *A Survey of American Literature* provided a comprehensive overview of Fitzgerald's career and his impact on modern American literature. This work helped introduce *The Great Gatsby* to Chinese readers, especially after Wu Ningkun's translation of the novel. Wu's translation was pivotal in making the novel more accessible to Chinese audience.

As interest in Fitzgerald's works grew, Chinese scholars continued to explore his life and writings. Wu Jianguo's *Fitzgerald Studies* gave an in-depth analysis of Fitzgerald's literary contributions, helping readers better understand his artistic vision. Additionally, Sun Chenggui's research revealed the substantial impact *The Great Gatsby* had in China, noting that seventy-six essays about the novel had been published in major literary journals, which indicates the novel's lasting popularity and the broad range of critical perspectives it inspired.

Overall, both Western and Chinese scholars have contributed to an ever-growing body of research on *The Great Gatsby*<sup>[5]</sup>. The novel's exploration of themes like class, social ambition, and the American Dream continues to resonate with readers and critics worldwide, making it a timeless subject of study.

### 3. Theoretical framework

This thesis takes feminist literary criticism as the theoretical basis for research. Therefore, we need to make clear the definitions and characteristics of feminism. This chapter also introduces the feasibility of analyzing *The Great Gatsby* from a feminist perspective.

#### 3.1 Feminism and Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminism is a movement that advocates for the recognition and rights of women, seeking equality in legal, political, familial, and social spheres. Historically, feminist movements have evolved from advocating basic rights like suffrage to challenging ingrained gender inequalities in social structures.

Feminist literary criticism began in the 1960s and focuses on how literature reflects, reinforces, or challenges women's roles in society. It aims to reveal the patriarchal ideologies in literary works and re-interpret them to bring attention to the voices of women who have been ignored or oppressed. Feminist critics look at how women are represented in literature, how power is shared between genders, and how women's experiences are portrayed. They also emphasize the need to reclaim women's voices and identities that have often been silenced in traditional stories.

#### 3.2 Feasibility of Analyzing *the Great Gatsby* from a Feminist Perspective

Analyzing *The Great Gatsby* from a feminist perspective is both feasible and meaningful, even though the novel mainly focuses on male characters and is narrated by Nick Carraway. Feminist criticism helps us look at the gender dynamics in the novel, especially how women are marginalized. Female characters like Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker are mostly seen through the eyes of male desire and social expectations, making them objects rather than active subjects. However, feminist criticism encourages us to question these portrayals and explore the implications of how these women are depicted in relation to the male characters and social structures. By reading against Nick's patriarchal viewpoint, feminist criticism helps bring out the voices of the female characters and rethink their roles in the novel. In this way, *The Great Gatsby* can be examined for its subtle critiques of gender roles and the limitations imposed on women in the 1920s.

## 4. A Feminist Perspective of the Great Gatsby

From a feminist perspective, this section will explore how the patriarchal ideology is reflected in *The Great Gatsby* through Nick Carraway's perspective, and how Fitzgerald's life experiences lead to his contradictory attitudes toward women.

### 4.1 Patriarchal Ideology in Nick's Narrative Discourse

Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*, represents the patriarchal ideology of his time. His dismissive and critical attitude toward women shows the deep-rooted sexism that shapes his views. Nick's narrative not only highlights the toxic masculinity in the world of the novel but also critiques how society limits women, reducing them to mere objects in the male gaze<sup>[6]</sup>. This section explores how Nick's narrative reflects his patriarchal worldview, especially through his views on characters like Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson.

#### 4.1.1 Prejudice against Women in Patriarchal Society

In the patriarchal society of *The Great Gatsby*, women are victims of oppression. However, this system also shapes women's characters, pushing them to internalize societal beliefs of inferior status. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, women often become complicit in their own subjugation, adopting the patriarchal views that devalue them. In this context, women may accept their roles as defined by men rather than challenge them.

The idea that women are inherently inferior to men goes back to thinkers like Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas, who saw women as "imperfect men" or defective beings. This belief has been passed down through history, reinforcing women's place as the "Other" or as secondary to men. In Nick's narrative, women are often reduced to stereotypes: the submissive wife, the pure virgin, or the dangerous seductress. These stereotypical portrayals show how patriarchal ideology limits women to narrow roles<sup>[7]</sup>.

#### 4.1.2 Nick as a Misogynist

Nick Carraway's treatment of women reveals his deep-rooted misogyny. Although he presents himself as an unbiased observer, his personal biases and prejudices often come through in his descriptions of the female characters. His attitudes toward Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle expose a hostile and dismissive approach to women. Nick's tendency to belittle women is clear from the beginning. He often portrays them with irony or contempt, blaming them for their negative qualities based on their gender.

For example, his relationship with Jordan Baker is marked by his dismissive attitude toward her dishonesty. For example, when considering her lies, he pompously proclaims that "Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply", showing his belief that women are naturally dishonest and less morally accountable for their actions. This statement reveals Nick's sexist attitude towards women's intrinsic dishonesty.

Nick also reduces women to objects of desire. There is little emotional depth in his relationships with women. His brief encounters with women are more about satisfying his own desires than forming meaningful connections. This lack of emotional bond indicates that, for Nick, women are primarily sexual objects, and their individuality does not matter as much as their ability to fulfill his needs.

### 4.1.3 Nick's Ideological Reading of Daisy

Nick's portrayal of Daisy Buchanan represents his patriarchal mindset. He reduces her to a symbol of beauty and wealth, representing an idealized object for men's desires. Daisy becomes the object of Gatsby's dreams, yet Nick sees her as shallow and materialistic. From Nick's perspective, Daisy is more of a symbol than a fully realized person, embodying the American Dream in a hollow and unattainable way.

For example, Nick frequently describes Daisy in terms of her physical beauty and social status, calling her "the golden girl." Her voice is even described as "full of money," tying her value to wealth. This portrayal focuses solely on her external qualities and ignores any deeper aspects of her character. For Nick, Daisy's worth is tied to her status as a symbol of wealth, beauty, and privilege<sup>[8]</sup>.

Despite his admiration for her, Nick ultimately critiques Daisy for her lack of substance. Her choice to return to Tom and abandon Gatsby after his death is seen as an act of cowardice and irresponsibility. Daisy is portrayed as a symbol of the moral emptiness of the upper class, and her behavior reflects the destructive power of wealth. Through Nick's eyes, Daisy is not a fully developed person but a shallow, careless figure whose actions are driven by materialism and fear.

### 4.1.4 Daisy as a Symbol of Patriarchal Idealization

Through Nick's narrative, Daisy serves as a symbol of idealized women in a patriarchal society. Her beauty captivates the men around her, and she becomes a symbol of the American Dream for Gatsby. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Daisy's beauty is not just a surface-level trait—it also leads to harm and destruction. She entices Gatsby with the promise of a perfect life, but ultimately she is part of the reason for his downfall.

Daisy's allure is also tied to her connection to wealth. Her voice, "full of money," is a metaphor for the corrupting influence of materialism and the emptiness of the American Dream<sup>[9]</sup>. To Gatsby, Daisy represents an unattainable ideal, but she is revealed as nothing more than a reflection of the moral decay in society by the end of the novel.

Daisy's destruction goes beyond Gatsby's death. Her actions throughout the novel—her refusal to take responsibility and her emotional coldness—demonstrate the cruel side of the patriarchal system. Although Daisy is a victim of this system, she is also complicit in the system. She represents the way women can be both oppressed by patriarchy and also perpetuate its values.

## 4.2 Scott Fitzgerald's Feminist Value

Fitzgerald's works are often seen as reflections of his personal experiences, particularly his tumultuous relationship with his wife, Zelda Sayre. He described her as the "golden girl", which is central to understanding Fitzgerald's feminist values, as it reveals both his admiration for and frustrations with women, wealth, and love. In his life and work, Fitzgerald grapples with the tension between his idealization of women and his critique of the societal structures that confine them. This double vision manifests in his depiction of female characters, particularly in *The Great Gatsby*, where women are both objects of desire and symbols of moral emptiness.

### 4.2.1 The Golden Girl and the Price of Success

Fitzgerald's life was deeply intertwined with his pursuit of success, particularly through his marriage to Zelda, a woman who embodied the glamour and privilege of the Jazz Age. In many ways, Zelda became the prototype for Fitzgerald's "golden girl" characters<sup>[10]</sup>, especially Daisy Buchanan. Like Zelda, Daisy is portrayed as captivatingly beautiful and desirable, yet also shallow



and parasitic. They are dependent on men for validation and material wealth. This paradox is reflected in Fitzgerald's own experiences, where his literary success was not only a means of securing his place in society but also a necessary condition for winning Zelda's affection.

Fitzgerald's work reveals his belief that love and loyalty could only be attained through material success, which is also an idea that permeates *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby's obsessive pursuit of Daisy, driven by the belief that wealth could win her love, mirrors Fitzgerald's own life. Fitzgerald wanted to use his achievements and social standing to define his worth in Zelda's eyes. From this perspective, the novel reflects both the allure and the emptiness of a world in which love is often measured by material gain, highlighting the fragility of romantic ideals in a consumer-driven society.

#### 4.2.2 Fitzgerald's Contradictory Attitudes toward Women

Fitzgerald's views on women were shaped by his own experiences and the cultural context of the 1920s. On one hand, he idealized women, seeing them as symbols of beauty, grace, and elegance. On the other hand, his frustration with the materialism of the Jazz Age led to a cynical view of women.

For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy who initially represents Gatsby's ideal of beauty and wealth ultimately reveals herself to be morally hollow. She betrays Gatsby and returns to her wealthy husband Tom. This disillusionment shows Fitzgerald's own struggles with Zelda, whose desire for wealth and luxury contributed to the disintegration of their relationship.

In his portrayal of women, Fitzgerald acknowledges the pressures placed on women to conform to societal expectations of beauty and material success. However, his depictions are often laced with criticism, as seen in his portrayal of Daisy's superficiality and Jordan's dishonesty. These characters are not fully realized women but rather symbols of the external forces—wealth, class, and the expectations of men. Fitzgerald's contradictory views on women reflect his personal struggles with love, success, and societal norms, making his work a poignant commentary on the gender dynamics of the time<sup>[11]</sup>.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Great Gatsby* remains a timeless masterpiece of American literature, renowned for its vivid portrayal of the Jazz Age and its nuanced exploration of themes such as wealth, dreams, and identity. From a feminist perspective, this thesis has revealed the deeply ingrained patriarchal ideologies in the novel, particularly through Nick Carraway's limited and misogynistic perspective. The treatment of women challenges readers to reconsider the conventional judgments imposed upon female characters. Fitzgerald's contradictory views on women reflect the broader social tensions of the 1920s, marked by the clash between traditional roles and the emerging new woman. By focusing on these feminist dimensions, this thesis sheds new light on the novel's portrayal of gender and power, offering a deeper understanding of its enduring relevance in literary and social contexts. Ultimately, *The Great Gatsby* continues to provoke thought and discussion, inviting readers to reflect on the intricate relationships between gender, identity, and societal norms.

### References

- [1] Yixin Zhang. (2022). *The Lost Generation of American Literature in the 20th century—Take The Great Gatsby and The Sun Also Rises as examples*. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences* (9. 0).
- [2] Junshuang Wang. (2024). *An analysis of female characters in The Great Gatsby from the perspective of feminist*. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*(10).

- [3] Fitzgerald, F. S. (1996). *This side of paradise*. Everyman's Library; Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group; Random House, Inc.
- [4] Bruccoli, M. J. (2002). *Some sort of epic grandeur: The life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. University of South Carolina Press.
- [5] Bryer Jackson R., Prigozy Ruth, Stern Milton R., Stern Milton R., Balkun Mary McAleer & Inge M. T. (2012). *F. Scott Fitzgerald in the Twenty-First Century*. The University of Alabama Press.
- [6] Wenyi Qian. (2024). *The Advantage of the Narrator in the Great Gatsby*. *Lecture Notes on Language and Literature* (8).
- [7] Yuqing Lu. (2022). *A Feminist Perspective on the Inevitability of the Fate of Tragic Women in The Great Gatsby*. *Frontiers in Art Research* (10. 0).
- [8] Maggie Gordon Froehlich. (2011). *Gatsby's Mentors: Queer Relations between Love and Money in the Great Gatsby*. *The Journal of Men's Studies*(3), 209-226.
- [9] Sanabil A. Suleiman & Kamal H. Hussein. (2024). *Multimodal Representations of the American Dream Theme: A Comparative Analysis of The Great Gatsby in Film and Novel*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*(11), 3424-3430.
- [10] Gabriela Tucan. (2024). *Zelda Fitzgerald in Love and Madness: Her Letters to F. Scott*. *Romanian Journal of English Studies* (1), 69-78.
- [11] Yu Yaoye. (2021). *The Great Gatsby: Feminism in the Jazz Age*. *Journal of Sociology and Ethnology*(1).