

*One of the concluding images of The Great Gatsby is Nick's description of "the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world." (180). This imagery reminds us of the predominance in the novel of fantasies insistently associated with men. What is the place for Daisy, and for the novel's female characters generally, in such fantasies? Are the dreams of the women in the novel consistent with those fantasies, or do we encounter any points of resistance?*

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The Ghostly Heart of The Great Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is heralded as a great tale of America during the "Jazz Age", but it also follows the familiar archetype of a man and his pursuit of an unattainable woman. In this novel, Fitzgerald consistently makes women the subject of idealistic dreams, yet seldom the dreamers. This provides a unique portrayal of male characters possessing the stereotypically-female naivete while female characters don the traditional-male practicality and cynicism. Inevitably, this poses a conflict as the women in the novel quash their potential in order to live the lives chosen for them by men.

Jay Gatsby, as the title character, provides the most obvious example of the novel's overpowering chauvinistic fantasies. Gatsby falls in love with Daisy, a woman far more elite than himself, and comes to idolize her and all he associates with her in a fashion not unlike "the following of a grail" (149). Everything from her hometown to the green light at the end of her dock is enchanted to him. Despite social stratification and Daisy's marriage to Tom while Gatsby is in the war, Gatsby traces Daisy's movements while using questionable means to raise himself up to her social class. Yet the culmination of his dream is bittersweet at best. As Gatsby stands showing Daisy his lavish home, Nick believes "that the colossal significance of that [green] light had now vanished forever...It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock" (93). Already the enchantment surrounding Daisy has begun to fade. Nick observes that Gatsby even doubts his own happiness upon his reunion with Daisy, for she is not (and no woman could ever possibly be) the perfect semblance of the illusion he has spent years building up in his mind. Still, Gatsby holds fast to his dream and tells Nick, "I'm going to fix everything just the way it was before" (110). But he does not succeed. Daisy admits to Gatsby that she loved her husband as well as Gatsby, and it is made clear that she never intended to leave Tom. Gatsby's hopes seem to fade as he gives up begging Daisy to understand him and be with him, but the "dead dream" has grown so powerful that it takes on a life of its own and keeps on "trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undespairingly" toward Daisy (134). Gatsby takes the blame when Daisy hits and kills Myrtle driving home, and he keeps a "sacred" vigil outside her home to make sure Tom does not hurt her, proving just how "incorruptible" his dream is. By the end of the novel, it no longer seems like Gatsby is living for his dream, but that his dream is living for him. He waits for Daisy to call, not truly expecting it, but waiting and hoping just the same. At last reality, quite literally, hits him as Wilson shoots him in his pool. Gatsby could never achieve his impossible dream, but could never give up on it either, so there really was nothing for him to do but to die.

Nick describes Tom Buchanan as a man who "would drift on, forever seeking a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game"(6). This tendency to derive a future from the past is shed by Tom's rival, Gatsby. Tom seeks to re-create his youth with partying and extramarital affairs, and Gatsby seeks to recreate his youth with sophistication

by pursuing Daisy, the first “nice girl” he ever met. Both men envision Daisy more idealistically than she deserves. Tom is completely shocked and outraged when he learns of Daisy's affair with Gatsby, despite the fact that he himself is having an affair. Apparently, men can betray their wives but women cannot betray their husbands. Tom's hypocrisy is another revelation of the predominance of male desires in the novel.

With the men shaping such unattainable ideals for society, it is no wonder the women are less than content. Jordan is chronically dishonest as she cannot “endure being at a disadvantage” (58). Myrtle is having an affair with Tom because she feels trapped in a world where women do not have their own lives. Daisy, despite being a clever woman, conforms to the ideal of the silly, flirtatious, and cheerful 1920s girl rather than face her sadness over her separation from Gatsby. Unlike Gatsby, who relishes the actual dreaming itself, Daisy prefers not to allow her hopes and fantasies to grow. She marries Tom out of a need for a decision about her life--“and the decision [had to] be made by some force--of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality--that was close at hand” (151). Daisy tucks away her affection for Gatsby and distracts herself playing the perfect, charming little wife to Tom. She sees herself as having a distinct role in life that she cannot change or give up, even if she wanted to. Her cynicism over this is apparent as she tells Nick she believes the best thing a girl can be in the world is “a beautiful little fool” (17). It would be much easier for Daisy if she valued partying and wealth as much as the other affluent people of her society, so she wishes foolish tendencies on her daughter in the hopes that it will keep her daughter from suffering for love as she has.

The closing passage of the novel likens the dreams Gatsby had of Daisy to the dreams explorers had of the new world. The women bend to the wishes of men, like America bent to the settlers. Myrtle is the only woman to break from a conventional female role, and no one can say her story ends well. Gatsby's fantasy of his life with Daisy goes beyond all reason and possibility to the point that Daisy could never live up to such idolization. She becomes not an object but a symbol of his dreams. Just as Gatsby could never find the fulfillment of all his dreams, nor could any one man find the fulfillment of all the opportunities America had to offer. Rather, the men strove to make the new world even more beautiful, not realizing it was most beautiful when it brimmed with mystery and hope, free of mankind.