**http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2453**

**Feminist interpretations of *The Great Gatsby***

[Female rolesIndependent womenDependent womenDegraded femininityPatriarchal attitudesFeminist analysis of narrative](http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2453)

**Female roles**

A feminist approach to the *The Great Gatsby* might focus not only on the female characters such as Daisy, Jordan and Myrtle, but other minor female characters and a selection of female party guests.

**Independent women**

Many of the female characters are seen enjoying the freedoms of the ‘flappers’ in the Jazz Age. **Jordan** in particular resists social pressure to conform to feminine norms. She plays golf, seems androgynous in her appearance, doesn’t have a ‘home influence’ or a chaperone, drives, drinks alcohol and attends Gatsby’s parties. **Catherine**, Myrtle’s sister, claims to live a similarly independent life, visiting other countries and sharing her accommodation with a ‘girlfriend’ rather than a husband or family.

**Dependent women**

Daisy and Myrtle are more conventional in that they are married, although they are both prepared to have affairs. **Daisy** is presented as being extremely seductive in Nick’s description, with special emphasis given to her voice. However, she is finally revealed as false, ultimately corrupt in her carelessness and concern for money. Her bitterness and cynicism is signalled early in the novel as she expresses a devastating critique of women’s position in society with reference to her daughter:

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.

**Myrtle**’s characterisation is more focussed on her physicality, and she is more quickly undermined as artificial, corrupt and even grotesque. Her death is undignified and stresses the destruction of specifically feminine aspects of her: her left breast is ‘swinging loose’ and her mouth is ‘ripped’. It is possible to argue that Myrtle is punished severely for her sexuality, while Daisy, less overt about her illicit relationship with Gatsby, and a less sensual character altogether, is able to resume her life with Tom once she has abandoned Gatsby.

**Degraded femininity**

The representation of the other female party guests can be interpreted as more critical, and degrading: some are named, but others are merely ‘Beluga’s girls’ or

four girls… never quite the same ones in physical person but they were so identical one with another that it inevitably seemed that they had been there before.

Some women suffer indignity at the hands of men:

* you got her dress all wet when you stuck her head in the pool
* the dispute ended in a short struggle, and both wives were lifted, kicking, into the night.

None of them are abused as much as Myrtle, whose nose is broken by Tom and who is locked up by George when he discovers her infidelity.

Other images of women in the novel might include the dreamlike drunken woman on the stretcher, in a scene imagined by Nick as representing his idea of the East. This woman is a casualty, dependent on men to carry her, but utterly powerless as she is incapacitated. She has no identity and ‘no one cares’; a feminist might ask if she is meant to represent all women or a type of woman (the ‘flapper’ type?) or if she represents all of American society in the East.

**Patriarchal attitudes**

Feminist analysis might also explore:

* The attitudes towards women expressed by any of the characters
* The power relations between men and women
* Ways in which patriarchal values are enforced or resisted by the characters.

The idealisation of Daisy, and the struggle between Tom and Gatsby over her, as if she is a possession or token, would be a clear starting point. The dialogue mostly refers to Daisy in the third person or demands that she reinforce the statements of either male, with the final declaration from Tom: ‘She’s not leaving me!’ Tom is a particularly domineering and powerful male figure, oppressive towards male and female characters alike, and he seems to be almost a caricature of patriarchy, mocked subtly by Daisy and Jordan in Nick’s presence:

We’ve got to beat them down,’ whispered Daisy, winking ferociously towards the fervent sun.

Tom’s hypocrisy, as he defends the family while engaging in numerous affairs, doesn’t necessarily undermine his power. However, the ideal of the ‘nuclear family’ (certainly a powerful concept in the 1920s) is undermined by his actions. Throughout the novel, marriage, often seen in feminist criticism as a patriarchal construct, is a failed institution. Infidelity is the norm, with misunderstanding, discord and violence erupting in every relationship (‘I’ve got my wife locked in up there’).

Perhaps most problematic for some feminist readers is Nick’s comment, phrased to assume the reader’s agreement: ‘Dishonesty in a woman is something you never blame deeply.’ Whilst Gatsby idealises women, creating an unachievable image of Daisy, Nick moves towards stereotyping women and, even though his attitude is accepting, this is a negative idea of women which feminist critics might challenge.

**Feminist analysis of narrative**

The above approaches privilege the female characters within the text, but it is also possible to consider the novel in terms of the ways it is constructed, particularly the non-linear ways in which the narrative proceeds. Where there are layers of narrative voices, several climactic episodes or ambiguity, feminist critics might claim that this is a more ‘feminine’ style of writing ([ecriture feminine](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/ecriture-feminine" \o "ecriture feminine)), despite being written by a man for a mixed audience. The choice of Nick, a male narrator, is also open to feminist analysis. He is to some a very feminine character, despite maintaining his focus on Gatsby’s experience as a subject.

Feminist criticism might also explore the novel in terms of [genre](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/genre): The Great Gatsby is ostensibly a ‘love story’ and uses mostly domestic settings, but it intersects with several other genres, including ‘mystery’ , ‘quest’ and ‘[bildungsroman](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/bildungsroman)’, and it is as absorbed with cars and wealth, male competition and display, as it is with romance.

# Myrtle

[Sensual energyThe constraints of povertyA passionate death](http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2426)

## Sensual energy

Myrtle Wilson is described by Nick as having great ‘vitality’ and he focuses on her body for much of the opening description. She is ‘in the middle thirties’, married to George Wilson, and ‘thickish’ or ‘faintly stout’ with ‘rather wide hips’. Nick observes that she ‘carried her flesh sensuously’ and appeared to be ‘smouldering’. Once she is in Tom’s apartment in New York, her ‘intense vitality’ becomes ‘impressive hauteur’. She is also revealed to be acquisitive and greedy, enjoying a shopping spree using Tom’s money.

Like Gatsby, Myrtle is ambitious to attain social prestige. She also exemplifies the hedonism and amoral attitudes of the time. She explains her rationale for engaging in an affair with Tom, a complete stranger whom she met on the train and then got into a taxi with, with [carpe diem](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/carpe-diem) urgency:

All I kept thinking about, over and over, was ‘You can’t live forever; you can’t live forever.’

## The constraints of poverty

Myrtle wants more from life than her conditions afford her. Her sensual voraciousness appears to have drained her husband and she now walks through him ‘as if he were a ghost’. She says she married Wilson ‘because I thought he was a gentleman,’ but soon discovered he’d ‘borrowed somebody's best suit to get married in’.

Myrtle is next seen in passing, ‘straining at the garage pump with panting vitality’ as Nick and Gatsby drive towards New York for a lunch appointment. This momentary image of her prefigures the later instances of passing by the garage, as the wealthy characters impinge on the lives of the poor characters.

## A passionate death

When Nick, Jordan and Tom drive into New York in Gatsby’s car, we have another glimpse of Myrtle, ‘eyes, wide with jealous terror’ as she misidentifies Jordan as Tom’s wife. This is important for the narrative, as it provokes the jealousy which may motivate her leaping at the car when it returns from New York (this time carrying Daisy and Gatsby). Myrtle’s death is crucial to the narrative chain of events, as her avenging husband then kills Gatsby and himself. Furthermore, the description of her death represents the extinguishing of vitality in a more general sense.

Even in death, the language associated with Myrtle is active rather than passive:

Myrtle Wilson, her life violently extinguished, knelt in the road and mingled her thick dark blood with the dust… her left breast was swinging loose like a flap… The mouth was wide open and ripped at the corners, as though she had choked a little in giving up the tremendous vitality she had stored so long.

This provides a stark contrast to the depiction of Gatsby’s death. His blood is mixed with water rather than earth, and his death is presented in passive dreamlike terms, using images of the water and impersonal terms to represent his body.

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# Daisy

[Shallow idolIdealised loveUnsullied and unattainableDaisy’s voice](http://crossref-it.info/textguide/the-great-gatsby/34/2424)

## Shallow idol

Daisy Buchanan, aged 23 during the main events of the novel (she is 18 years old in 1917), comes from a wealthy family in Louisville, and has been married to Tom since 1919. She is introduced as a charming but insincere character, entertaining and well-seeming, but ultimately frivolous and dishonest. She is disillusioned with her marriage. She knows that Tom has a mistress and we learn that he has had several affairs during their marriage. Daisy has a young daughter, Pammy, whom she seems to love, but doesn’t interact with a great deal in the novel.

## Idealised love

Daisy’s initial relationship with Gatsby occurs in 1917, from around October until ‘one winter night’. Jordan describes this as an ideal romance, cut short only by her family stopping her from going to New York to see him leave for active service. The nature of her early relationship with Gatsby is obscured by the use of Gatsby’s narration, with some contribution by Jordan, all mediated by Nick.

The second relationship with Gatsby occurs in 1922 and is equally brief, this time cut short by Tom’s intervention. However, she twice chooses Tom over Gatsby because he is more financially and socially secure, despite being temporarily seduced by Gatsby’s display of wealth.

## Unsullied and unattainable

Daisy’s symbolic colour is white. She is repeatedly associated with white clothing, a white car, a white face, a ‘white girlhood’, and exists in Gatsby’s memory as a shining icon of purity, ‘gleaming like silver, safe and proud’. She does have sex with Gatsby in 1917 (and, it is implied, during her affair with him in 1922), but the social norms are reversed in that it is Gatsby who ‘felt married to her’ and was the one ‘betrayed’ whilst Daisy:

vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving Gatsby – nothing.

This is repeated exactly in 1922, when Daisy vanishes with Tom, leaving Gatsby to answer for Myrtle’s death and to face his end alone.

## Daisy’s voice

Daisy’s ‘low, thrilling voice’ is presented in Chapter 1 as having a special quality which captivates men and promises ‘gay, exciting things’. It may also be something she exploits:

I’ve heard it said that Daisy’s murmur was only to make people lean towards her; an irrelevant criticism that made it no less charming.

Later in the novel, her voice is a source of power and fascination for Gatsby. It ‘couldn’t be over-dreamed’ and cannot disappoint, no matter how extravagant the illusion. Nick describes it as a ‘deathless song’, emphasising in one sense an almost transcendent spiritual quality, but the choice of ‘deathless’ also carries negative and even [Gothic](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Gothic) connotations.

When Daisy sings, her voice is equally powerful – in Chapter 6, she sings along to the music at the party, and Nick comments that:

each change [in the melody] tipped out a little of her warm human magic upon the air.

The power of Daisy’s voice is deconstructed in Chapter 7 when Gatsby identifies that ‘Her voice is full of money’. Nick confirms this, elaborating:

That was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it…

Thus Daisy’s seductive power is revealed to be her wealth, and it is her voice which is the last vestige of her presence, referred to as ‘the voice’ and ‘that lost voice across the room’, begging to be able to retreat when faced with the need to make an active choice of mate. After this point, Daisy is only glimpsed at a distance, through a ‘rift’ at a windowsill and then gone. The iridescent bubble of her allure has been shown to be insubstantial.

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