

The Great Gatsby: Feminism in the Jazz Age

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Abstract: In this thesis, the author aims to analyze the female images in the *Great Gatsby* and the causes of female tragedy from the perspective of feminism in the jazz age. It takes the three main female characters (Daisy, Jordan and Myrtle) as analyzed objects. The core content of this paper is to combine the social background of the jazz age and relative feminist theories, with an aim to analyze the representative characteristics and distinctive traits of the three main women in the novel by using qualitative research methodology. First of all, this paper introduces the feminist ideology. Then it expounds the main ideas of feminist literary criticism, which are combined with the author Fitzgerald's personal experience to elaborate the causes for the tragic fates of the main characters. Just like many female characters in the novel, there were an increasingly growing number of "modern women" who were in the pursuit of women's own independence and freedom, which led to the prevalence of the feminism in the whole society.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the *Great Gatsby*

The story was written from Nick's point of the view. Nick came to New York from his home in the Midwest, right next to the stately home of the book's protagonist, Gatsby. When Gatsby was young, he lost his heart to a wealthy woman named Daisy. But he lost her at that time because he was poor and forced to the war. When he came back from the war. He did business in an illegal way, and became a man with large amounts of money. Daisy married Tom who had many mistresses so that Daisy's married life was not happy. Material satisfaction could not fill her spiritual void. Gatsby did everything just for Daisy. And he came back, wanting married with Daisy. At last he was dead for Daisy, but nobody came to his funeral except his father and his friend Nick. Since Nick witnessed and deeply disgusted the human reality of the ingratitude, he left the inane New York city and returned home.

1.2 Introduction to Fitzgerald

As far as I'm concerned, Fitzgerald's gravestone has the end of *the Great Gatsby* engraved: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." This sentence neatly summed up his legendary life, as well as the superb accomplishment of his literature.

Throughout Fitzgerald's novels, he describes the mental situation and social life of young

Americans at the Jazz Age. In his novels, people were all crazy and blindly pursuing the American Dream, the social class gap became increasingly escalated. Fitzgerald found that in the face of the cruel and indifferent reality, it was more likely for the youngsters to lose their direction towards life completely and finally step by step towards the destruction. Furthermore, when many people were still immersed blindly in their American Dream, only the sacrifice of outstanding youth can arouse people's conscience to the people from all walks of life and realize the ugliness and indifference of human nature.

1.3 Significance of Study

The theoretical research value of this paper lies in the elaboration for the social phenomenon of gender inequality, and it shows the development of feminism in the jazz age by using theoretical analysis and qualitative research.

The practical research value of this thesis lies in the analysis for the distinctive characteristics and fates of the three main female figures in the novel. In addition, it analyzes the reasons for women's tragic fate and shows their struggle for independence and freedom under the influence of the patriarchal society. Last but not least, the writer noticed that Freud's psychoanalysis has greatly promoted female sexual liberation movements. All in all, the author further illustrates the validity of applying feminist theory to the female analysis of the *Great Gatsby*.

2. Literature Review

In China, among the feminist studies of scholars, we can tell that the gender inequality Luo Xiaoyan wrote in "*Interpretation from the Perspective of Feminism in The Great Gatsby*". In this paper, it points out that the female characters in the novel were all attached to men, and the author Fitzgerald portrayed women negatively, especially for Daisy's description. As Fitzgerald himself believed that women in the novel were passive, and it is "*a man's book.*" To some degree, the narrator Nick's interpretation of female characters, had the latent sense of male power and misogyny. Secondly, according to the research of Zhang Qin in "*Female Values in the 'Jazz Age' from female Characters in The Great Gatsby*", Fitzgerald described that although three women came from different social classes and culture, they all chose to depend on men in order to realize their own American dreams.

In the research of foreign scholars, according to Masoumeh and Naser in their "*Representation of Women as the 'Second Sex' in The Great Gatsby*", in a patriarchal society, men have higher status than women. In the novel, men are given the privileges of controlment and regulation, and the world belongs to male. In other words, female characters are constructed as what the feminist critic Simone De Beauvoir called "*the secondary sex.*"

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Feminism

The first wave of feminism began in the second half of the 19th century and continued to the early 20th century. The word "Feminism" appeared in France, meaning the liberation of women. At first, the feminist movement aimed to pursue gender equality and promote the ideology of equal rights. Along with French and British bourgeois-democratic revolution advocated freedom and independence, the feminist movements rose up and the feminism developed. At that time, feminists argued for gender equality and political rights. What they opposed were aristocratic privilege and polygamy, and stressed that there was no obvious difference between gender in intelligence and

ability.

3.2 Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism, which emerged in the 1960s, is a literary criticism theory developed by the women's liberation movement in Europe and the United States at that time. Feminist literary criticism holds that it is necessary to make a new interpretation of literary works from the perspective of women, to criticize the male-centered western civilization and the behavior of distorting the image of women in male literature, and to excavate and establish women's own literary tradition and literary classics.

The prosperity of the western feminist literary criticism is the feminist movement from the political field germination to the cultural and literary field. From feminist standpoint, they reviewed the literature tradition, and challenged the patriarchal center bias. Feminist literary criticism has always focus on the classics and authority in its protest on the expression of gender inequality and tried to change the patriarchy rooted in the feudal ideology.

4. Case Analysis of the Great Gatsby

4.1 The Interpretation of Negative Female Images

Fitzgerald's attitude towards women was ambivalent. On the one hand, he had amorous adoration towards women and thought that women were elegant and attractive. On the other hand, he held on his deepest distrust and disgust of women. From his perspective, he firmly believed that women were physically appealing but destructive to men. Then there is no doubt that it is the place where misogyny comes from. The misogyny tendency in the novel is reflected in many levels, such as the disastrous attack on women's character building; the dishonest judgment on them; as well as the superficial, artificial and vulgar depiction of them.

4.1.1 Daisy---Pure But Indifferent Delilah

In *the Great Gatsby*, Daisy was gradually transformed from an innocent girl into a worldly beauty, and this image was actually created based on the author Fitzgerald's own experience. To some extent, the character of Daisy reflects a combination of certain characters of Zelda, Fitzgerald's wife and Geneva, Fitzgerald's first love. The characters of his girlfriend and wife left a profound influence on the characters of Daisy. It is undoubted that the emotional entanglements between Daisy and Gatsby are the epitome of Fitzgerald's early experience.

We can see that it is Fitzgerald's ups and downs life experience that contributes to Daisy's artistic image typically, as a Delilah. In the novel, Daisy was portrayed as superficial, vacuous, having no thought, and no soul human beings. In other words, the author made these female images are either unethical, ruthless gold diggers or spoiled, cynical baddies. Without doubt, Daisy Buchanan of *the Great Gatsby* is one of those women.

4.1.2 Jordan---Twisted Soul in the Glitzy World

In the 1920s of America, on the one hand, capitalism developed into the stage of monopoly, with rapid economic development, sharp expansion of material wealth and unprecedented prosperity. But on the other hand, with the first world war ended, the traditional moral values and ideal religion were about to be collapsed. Instead, individual hedonism occupied almost everyone's heart, which led to the society in the vicious cycle of flashy material enjoyment, and self-interest behavior. It was so-called a moral wasteland of America.

Jordan lived in this society that money was supreme, material desire was rampant, spirit was barren, and morality was degenerate. It is the era of the emptiness that made her gradually abandon the virtues of human beings. Under such circumstances, Jordan became completely dishonest, hypocritical, selfish and sophisticated. Then it is no wonder that she had a twisted soul in the materialistic world of hedonism.

4.1.3 Myrtle--- Coexistence of Beauty and Decadence

The image of Myrtle was closely related to the dispute between “East and West”, the relationship between “Men and Women”, the importance of “Money and Love” and other literary themes of Fitzgerald. From the perspective of sexual relation, Myrtle Wilson was regarded as the major supporting role of the novel, her image of “gold digger” can not only set off the leading characters, but also has vivid personality and profound connotations. Myrtle's appearance can be described as “beautiful” but “vulgar” inseparably. All of her beauty constitutes a unique attraction to Tom. What's more, it's explicit that there are certain similarities with Tom's essential vulgarity, so they can develop their relationship into semi-public lovers. The complexity of Myrtle's image also reflects Fitzgerald's distinctive writing style, a kind of creative but complicated inner world, and his contempt as well as regret for Myrtle's tragical fate. In a word, it is this unique writing style that contributes to the intriguing charm source in the novel.

4.2 Gender Inequality in the Jazz Age

In the jazz age, Fitzgerald was at the height of his creativity when he wrote *the Great Gatsby*. The first World War had just ended and there was no full-blown economic crisis. As a result of the war, traditional Puritan morality had collapsed and Hedonism had flourished. In such a social circumstance, people gradually lost themselves and immersed in the material enjoyment. At the same time, people's moral bottom line began to loosen, selfishness and greediness began to breed, which also corrupt the whole society.

The Patriarchal ideology which prevailed from the beginning of the establishment of the United States became the mainstream of the society in the jazz age just after the war. In the traditional western ideology, women are male accessory and are subordinate to men. That is to say, men are absolutely dominant in family and social life. *The Great Gatsby* described in such a period that the patriarchal ideology was crammed in the whole society, making the social status of women extremely low.

4.3 The Tragedy of Female

4.3.1 Causes for Daisy's Tragic Fate

In my opinion, Daisy was a victim of the patriarchal society, there are three main causes for her tragical fate: the individual rejection of women towards feminism; the social system in the jazz age had a great impact on women's thoughts and the influence of patriarchal ideology on the tragedy of female destiny. To some degree, the loss of female egoism in the patriarchal society is inevitable and irresistible. Since all she was brought up to do was learn how to be a noble lady of the upper-class society, the growth environment of Daisy determines her extreme dependence on men. Therefore, Tom, who came from the same social class as Daisy, won her love with a pearl necklace worth 350,000 dollars. With such a wealthy marriage, Daisy met her needs for both material wealth and social status, so that she had the so-called “security”.

4.3.2 Causes for Myrtle's Tragic Fate

As far as I am concerned, since the ancient times, the patriarchal ideology has been rooted in human development, which can even be traced back to the *Bible*. In the *Bible*, the gender inequity and imbalance lie in the fact that Eve is just the rib of Adam. Since then, the society became male-dominant and men occupied the higher position in the sexual relationship, while women were secondary and they had lower sexual status. *The Great Gatsby* is set in 1920s of America, when the social status of women was still far below that of men. Plus, the patriarchal ideology was still prevalent at the expense of the oppression of women's rights. Although the rebellious spirit of women began to sprout, the mainstream value of the male-dominated society still maintained its core content, and even stigmatized the image of women. As a consequence, Myrtle was one of those pitiful women, who were not only victimized by gender inequality, but they were also victims of the jazz age and the American dream, rather than the perpetrators.

5. Conclusion

Francis Scott Fitzgerald was one of the greatest American writers in the 20th century, he was well-known for his famous novel "*The Great Gatsby*". This paper takes Daisy, Jordan and Myrtle, three women in the jazz age as the research object, focuses on the interpretation of the three women's unique characteristics. What's more, it is combined with the author Fitzgerald's personal experience to analyze the causes for their tragic fate.

Meanwhile, guided by feminism, the writer expounds the social reality of gender inequality under the patriarchal system. By virtue of their unique gender advantages, the men in the novel persecute and discriminate against women in family life, social status and other aspects, making women in a submissive position. This gender inequality also reflects in the traditional concept of loyalty for love, which is related to sexual differences.

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author recreates the monetarist society, the oppression of the patriarchal system and the disdain for the women of the new age make them lose their own ideas and shape their deplorable characters. From the perspective of feminism, the male-centered society is abnormal. If women need to be truly liberated in the society, the society should change the prejudice against women and throw away the shackles.

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