From Idealization to Emptiness: Female Self-Commodification in *The Great Gatsby*

Jessica Jay

Abstract: This essay examines the portrayal of female sexuality in *The Great Gatsby* (2021 as a local of both allure and moral corruption, reflecting the conflicting societal attitudes towards love, attraction, and female autonomy in the 1920s. In this essay, I argue that F. Scott Fitzgerald critiques capitalist greed by exposing the dissonance between culturally idealized femininities and his female characters's manipulative, materialistic tendencies. In this way, female characters come to embody and symbolize capitalist decay.

In *The Great Gatsby* (2021), the portrayal of female sexuality as a source of both glamour and corruption reflects the conflicting societal attitudes towards love, attraction, and female autonomy during the 1920s. I argue that by illustrating the dissonance between culturally idealized femininities and the real, manipulative, and materialistic nature of his female characters, F. Scott Fitzgerald critiques capitalist greed as a force that commodifies selfhood. This portrayal of lust and seduction as superficial and manipulative forces displays a deeper fear of female independence within American capitalist society.

During the lead up to the 19th Amendment, and in the period that followed—which is generally understood by historians as the era of first-wave feminism—female independence became more accepted in mainstream American culture, and the "New Woman" emerged as a symbol of shifting economic, political, and social roles (Dumenil). According to Emin Tunc, the New Woman embodied American values of "self-actualization and liberation" by actively engaging with education, political advocacy, and contracep-

tion, while rejecting the restrictive norms of the Victorian era (187). However, the 1920s also saw a shift towards "lifestyle feminism," or commodification of female fashion and behaviour, where "various discourses of mass culture co-opted the rhetoric of feminism" (Sanderson 3). Many social critics worried that the New Woman had developed a strong attachment to personal comfort and an increasing desire for luxury, reflecting a growing sense of self-indulgence and materialistic aspirations (Tunc 185). Sanderson contends that Fitzgerald was "both fascinated and disturbed" by these shifting gender dynamics in the context of the hedonistic decadence he perceived within American society (1). Indeed, in his 1931 reflection "Echoes of the Jazz Age," Fitzgerald writes that "this was the generation whose girls dramatized themselves as flappers, the generation that corrupted its elders and eventually overreached itself less through lack of morals than through lack of taste" (253). In any case, such conceptions influenced Fitzgerald's depictions of female sexuality, which, in *The Great Gatsby*, he portrays as both alluring and corrosive. In a novel where desires—both sexual and material—are a driving force behind the central narrative tragedies, women's sexuality becomes emblematic of a pervasive, yet ambiguous, corrupting force. Through the continual association of femininity with superficiality and excess in this novel, moral and social decay is linked to the gendered consumerism which took charge of American culture in the 20th century.

Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker are seductive, elegant, and often enigmatic female characters. Their personas are erotically idealized, and they come to represent abstractions such as fulfillment and self-sufficiency, respectively. This differs from the depiction of female sexuality in a lower class context, where Tom Buchanan, Myrtle's upper class lover, treats her poorly and makes it clear that he desires her merely physically. However, upper class femininity is shown to be superficial as well. Introduced amidst the "white palaces of fashionable East Egg," where Nick first visits the Buchanans in their Georgian colonial mansion, Daisy and Jordan appear integrated with their luxurious en-

vironment (59). Nick finds the two young women clothed in flowing white dresses, "buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon," ensconced in a serene setting of "gleaming white" French windows, billowing curtains, and a view of "fresh grass" (60). With its pristine white setting, this image evokes a sense of angelic purity and thus establishes upper class domesticity as an ethereal feminine ideal. In this context, Nick's eroticization of both women highlights their value and attractiveness within their wealth: "slenderly, languidly, their hands on their hips" (63). This easeful, confident posturing is also evident in Jordan's aloof, self-possessed attitude—"if she saw me out of the corner of her eyes she gave no hint of it"—as well as in Daisy's iconic "low, thrilling" voice (61). The initial connection between wealth and desirability, reinforced by the serene imagery of the Buchanan mansion, constructs an illusion of superior value attached to Daisy and Jordan. As the novel unfolds, the gap between these idealized portrayals and the reality of the women they depict becomes increasingly apparent.

Daisy, in particular, epitomizes capitalism's envisioned rewards, reflecting the upper class feminine ideal that was increasingly constructed through advertising in the 1920s. The association between Daisy and perfection is frequently symbolized by the colour white. Daisy's tendency to dress in white (107), her self-proclaimed "white girlhood" (69), and her "white roadster" (108) reinforce this image. To Gatsby especially, Daisy represents more than just romantic satisfaction: her selfhood signifies an almost transcendent possibility. Nick, our narrator, often adopts Gatsby's perceptions of Daisy as a luxurious love object, and describes her as being elevated "high in a white palace" as "the king's daughter, the golden girl," with a voice "full of money" (139). These comparisons simultaneously exalt Daisy as a mystical figure but also reduce her value to superficial and material markers of identity, mirroring a logic of commodification seen in advertisements. During this period, advertisements increasingly moved towards selling "a state of mind, a lifestyle, a worldview, and constitutive reflection of the consumer for whom the product was intend-

ed" (Rabinovitch-Fox). Daisy's character functions similarly to a commodity insofar as she is an object of desire whom Gatsby hopes to "purchase" through his wealth. Indeed, Gatsby's desired lifestyle was acquired through money, and Daisy's love for Tom Buchanan was shaped by the "practicality" of his money and class (161). In this context, Daisy is a perfect "reflection of the consumer" for Gatsby because she represents not only the embodiment of societal validation but also an achievement that will transport him back to "some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy" when he was young (133).

The idealized image of Daisy is ultimately subverted. As the novel progresses, Daisy's true morals and emptiness become increasingly apparent. While Daisy's association with white is not virginal, it is deeply tied to the conceptual states of youth, purity, and perfection: Gatsby's fantasy relies on the premise that Daisy will renounce her love for Tom and be solely and purely committed to him. In reality, she remains faithful to her superior social class and indirectly causes Gatsby's death. This moral descent coincides with what A.E. Elmore describes as an "ironic use of colour imagery and symbolism," wherein whiteness "begins as a symbol of beauty, goodness, and truth" which devolves into something with "an ugly and markedly evil character" as the Buchanan's moral corruption becomes undeniable (440). This inversion is effective not only because it reverses traditional connotations of the colour white but also because it reveals a glaring absence within Daisy's character. After Gatsby's death, Nick speaks with Tom and Jordan but has no further contact with Daisy. As a result, Nick is unable to construct a narrative for Daisy that reflects on her guilt or lack thereof: "She vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving Gatsby—nothing" (159). Daisy's complete absence of emotion leaves her white and empty, bereft of the idealistic significance initially associated with her character. The symbolic transformation from idealization to emptiness shows how Daisy's allure as a romantic object was primarily based on a superficial image of wealth and masculine self-fulfillment.

While Daisy's status as the "golden girl" is in many ways projected onto her by desiring men, it is also an image that she herself maintains and uses to her advantage. Despite socializing with a "fast" and "wild" crowd in her youth, she emerged with an "absolutely perfect reputation" and maintained her popularity with both men and women (110). While wealth protects Daisy from being seriously condemned for promiscuity, it is Daisy's carefully constructed charisma and command over her own sexualization that makes her so alluring. This power of charm is most vividly located within her voice. Some critics have likened it to the "seductive attractiveness in the voices of the Sirens" who paradoxically embody "female preciousness" at the same time as "deadly danger" (Settle 165). From this analytical standpoint, Daisy's voice can be seen as an intentional affectation that, like an accent, signifies social class. Certainly, it is a form of social and sexual currency that reinforces her value within a materialistic, patriarchal framework. Nick notes that people have criticized Daisy for using her murmur "only to make people lean towards her," but he dismisses this as an "irrelevant criticism that makes it no less charming" (61). This aspect of manufactured intimacy, present in many of Daisy's behaviours, subtly frames her interlocutor as an admirer. Her self-sexualization is further complicated by her interactions with Nick, where she flirtatiously asks, "Are you in love with me?" (115) and offers, "If you want to kiss me any time during the evening […] just let me know and I'll be glad to arrange it for you" (129). These moments, even in the context of offhand jokes, suggest that Daisy is not only comfortable being an object of desire but actively positions herself within the sexualized gaze of men. This deliberate self-sexualization reflects Daisy's understanding of her desirability as a key aspect of her selfhood, and a form of currency in the social economy of wealth, beauty, and desire.

Jordan's behaviour towards men is also portrayed as intentional. In both her career and social life, Jordan establishes a dynamic in which she is never "at a disadvantage" (96). Her careful choice of romantic partners, which is

based on the avoidance of "clever, shrewd men," ultimately allows her more leeway for manipulation (96). Jordan manipulates her image to avoid responsibility for her "insolent" actions, such as leaving a borrowed car's top down in the rain and her golf cheating scandal (96). This behavior—which Nick calls "dealing in subterfuges"—is also linked to more intimate desires, as it allows her to "satisfy the demands of her hard jaunty body" while remaining innocent (96). This characterization links Jordan's selfish manipulation in both realms to her underlying sexual desire, which is a conception amplified by her association with the aesthetic of the New Woman. While Jordan's athletic, masculine body and "self-sufficiency" (61) are qualities that Nick is initially attracted to, her independence outside of this context is not so positively portrayed. Tom comments that Jordan's family should not let her "run around the country" as she does, because she is a "nice girl" (68). Similarly, a "persistent undergraduate" at one of Gatsby's parties believes that "sooner or later Jordan was going to yield him up her person to a greater or lesser degree." (85) This perception likely stems from the assumption that, unlike the married women around her, Jordan embodies the sexually liberated "modern woman" often depicted in fashion media. These instances display Jordan as someone who is perceived as promiscuous, perhaps to a greater degree than she is, simply based on her independent appearance in terms of marriage and career. Fitzgerald himself viewed the "loosening of binary gender distinctions" as a troubling shift, fearing it encouraged men and women to adopt each other's worst traits (Sanderson 12). In Jordan's case, her competitiveness and recklessness—traits historically encoded as masculine—are portrayed as signs of moral decay, reinforcing the notion that excessive freedom leads to indulgence and decadence.

Myrtle is the most overtly sexualized female character in *The Great Gatsby*, and her self-commodification is the most obvious. Her physicality is described in sensual terms, with Nick noting that she "carried her surplus flesh sensuously" and had a "perceptible vitality" (72). Although her overt fixation on sexual pleasure and materialism posi-

tions her in an unsympathetic light, the abuse she endures contextualizes her desires within the oppressed position she occupies as a woman of the lower class. Myrtle uses her sexuality to gain, or at least simulate, the agency that she lacks. Myrtle's sexual and material desires are evident from the moment she meets Tom: "She smiled slowly and walked through her husband as if he were a ghost and shook hands with Tom, looking him flush in the eye" (72). The contrast between her husband as an immaterial ghost and Tom's distinctly "hulking" material presence emphasizes Myrtle's corporeal and material desires as being entwined with one another (14). Similarly, in her attempts to mimic upper class femininity, she depicts both a lack (her inability to rival Daisy's elegance) and an excess (a desperate overcompensation). Her repeated changes of dress—shifting from "dark blue crepe de chine" to a "brown figured muslin" and finally to an "elaborate afternoon dress of cream-coloured chiffon" (76)—show her transition from Wilson's wife to Tom's mistress, through which she displays an increasing effort to embody a wealthy persona. Nick observes that "with the influence of dress her personality had also undergone a change" (76). This comment suggests that in the presence of Tom especially, Myrtle's identity becomes malleable, shaped by her outward presentation. Myrtle's gory death, in the context of her superficiality, lower class status, and promiscuity as a character, comes to symbolize a form of punishment.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald portrays female sexuality and independence as intricately tied to materialism and commodification, reflecting broader societal anxieties about gender and morality during the 1920s. By illustrating the dissonance between culturally idealized femininities and the manipulative, materialistic realities of his female characters, Fitzgerald critiques the ways in which capitalist greed distorts selfhood and relationships. His depictions of Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle reveal how femininity is shaped and constrained by the logic of commodification—wherein identity is fashioned through wealth, appearance, and desirability, often at the cost of authenticity and agency. What emerges is a world that is "material without being real"

much like Gatsby's world without the hope he constructed within Daisy (169).

Works Cited

Dumenil, Lynn. "The New Woman and the Politics of the 1920S." *OAH Magazine of History,* vol. 21, no. 3, 2007, pp. 22–26. JSTOR. Accessed 3 Feb. 2025.

Elmore, A. E. "Colo[u]r and Cosmos in 'The Great Gatsby.'" The Sewanee Review, vol. 78, no. 3, 1970, pp. 427–43. JSTOR.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "Appendix D: The Irreverent Spirit of the Jazz Age." "*Echoes of the Jazz Age*," Scribner's Magazine, 1931, pp. 460–462.

---. *The Great Gatsby.* Edited by Michael Nowlin. Broadview Press, 2021.

Rabinovitch-Fox, E. "Baby, You Can Drive My Car: Advertising Women's Freedom in 1920s America." *American Journalism*, 33(4), 372–400. 2016.

Sanderson, Rena. "Women in Fitzgerald's fiction." The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Cambridge. Edited by Ruth Prigozy. Cambridge University Press, 2002. ProQuest.

Settle, Glenn. "Fitzgerald's Daisy: The Siren Voice." *American Literature,* vol. 57, no. 1, 1985, pp. 115–24. JSTOR.

Tunc, Tanfer Emin. "This Side of Sexuality: Reproductive Discourse in the Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, pp. 184–201. *JSTOR*.