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“Herstory” and Daisy Buchanan

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FEW CRITICS write about *The Great Gatsby* without discussing Daisy Fay Buchanan; and few, it seems, write about Daisy without entering the unofficial competition of maligning her character. Marius Bewley, for example, refers to Daisy’s “vicious emptiness” and her “monstrous moral indifference.” To Robert Ornstein she is “criminally amoral,” and Alfred Kazin judges her “vulgar and inhuman.” Finally, Leslie Fiedler sees Daisy as a “Dark Destroyer,” a purveyor of “corruption and death,” and the “first notable anti-virgin of our fiction, the prototype of the blasphemous portraits of the Fair Goddess as bitch in which our twentieth-century fiction abounds.”¹ A striking similarity in these negative views of Daisy is their attribution to her of tremendous power over Gatsby and his fate. Equating Daisy with the kind of Circean figures popular in the nineteenth century, the critics tend to accept Gatsby as an essential innocent who “turn[s] out all right at the end.”² Daisy, on the other hand, becomes the essence of “what preyed on” Gatsby, a part of that “foul dust [that] floated in the wake of his dreams” (p. 2).

Such an easy polarization of characters into Good Boy/Bad Girl, however, arises from a kind of critical double standard and simply belittles the complexity of the novel. Daisy, in fact, is more victim than victimizer: she is victim first of Tom Buchanan’s “cruel” power, but then of Gatsby’s increasingly depersonalized vision of her. She becomes the unwitting “grail” (p. 149) in Gatsby’s adolescent quest to remain ever-faithful to his seventeen-year-old conception of self (p. 99), and even Nick admits that Daisy “tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal

¹ Marius Bewley, “Scott Fitzgerald’s Criticism of America,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby*, ed. Ernest Lockridge (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968), pp. 44, 45; Robert Ornstein, “Scott Fitzgerald’s Fable of East and West,” *ibid.*, p. 55; Alfred Kazin, “An American Confession,” in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work*, ed. Kazin (New York, 1951), p. 179; Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, rev. ed. (New York, 1966), pp. 313, 315, 312.

² *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1925), p. 2. All quotations from the novel are from this edition and will be cited in the text.

vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything" (p. 97). Thus, Daisy's reputed failure of Gatsby is inevitable; no woman, no human being, could ever approximate the platonic ideal he has invented. If she is corrupt by the end of the novel and part of a "conspiratorial" (p. 146) coterie with Tom, that corruption is not so much inherent in her character as it is the progressive result of her treatment by the other characters.

In addition to being a symbol of Gatsby's illusions, Daisy has her own story, her own spokesman in Jordan Baker, even her own dream. Nick, for example, senses a similar "romantic readiness" in Daisy as in Gatsby, and during the famous scene in Gatsby's mansion, Daisy herself expresses the same desire to escape the temporal world. "I'd like to just get one of those pink clouds," she tells Gatsby, "'and put you in it and push you around'" (p. 95). If Daisy fails to measure up to Gatsby's fantasy, therefore, he for his part clearly fails to measure up to hers. At the same time that she exists as the ideal object of Gatsby's quest, in other words, Daisy becomes his female double. She is both anima and Doppelgänger, and *The Great Gatsby* is finally the story of the failure of a mutual dream. The novel describes the death of a romantic vision of America and embodies that theme in the accelerated dissociation—the mutual alienation—of men and women before the materialistic values of modern society. Rather than rewriting the novel according to contemporary desires, such a reading of Daisy's role merely adds a complementary dimension to our understanding and appreciation of a classic American novel.

A persistent problem for the contemporary critic of *The Great Gatsby* is the reliability of Nick Carraway as narrator, and certainly any effort to revise current opinion of Daisy's role must begin with Nick. Without rehearsing that familiar argument in detail, we can safely suggest that Nick's judgment of Daisy (like his judgment of Gatsby) proceeds from the same desire to have his broken world "in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" (p. 2). Returning to a Middle West which has remained as pure as the driven snow he remembers from his college days, Nick flees an Eastern landscape and a cast of characters which have become irrevocably "distorted beyond [his] eyes' power of correction" (p. 178). Life, he concludes, is "more successfully looked at from a single window, after all" (p.

4), and the same tendency to avoid the complexity of experience becomes evident in Nick's relationship to women.³

While he is far more circumspect and pragmatic than Gatsby, in his own way Nick maintains a similarly fabulous (and safely distanced) relation to women. In effect, he represents another version of that persistent impulse among Fitzgerald's early protagonists (e.g., Amory Blaine, Anthony Patch, Dexter Green, Merlin Grainger of "O Russet Witch!") to abstract women into objects of selfish wish-fulfillment.⁴ Nick, after all, has moved East at least in part to escape a "tangle back home" involving a girl from Minnesota to whom he is supposedly engaged (p. 59). And in New York he has had a "short affair" with a girl in the bond office but has "let it blow quietly away" because her brother threw him "mean looks" (p. 57). In both cases Nick seems desperate to escape the consequences of his actions; he prefers unentangled relationships. Indeed, he seems to prefer a fantasy life with Jordan and even with nameless girls he sees on the streets of New York. "I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue," he admits, "and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove. Sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness" (p. 57).⁵ Even with Jordan, Nick manifests the sort of attraction to uncomplicated little girls that will seem almost pathological in Dick Diver of *Tender Is the Night*. Jordan, he enjoys thinking, rests childlike "just within the circle of [his] arm" (p. 81), and because he has no "girl whose

³ Two excellent arguments against Nick's reliability are R. W. Stallman's famous essay, "Gatsby and the Hole in Time," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 1 (Nov., 1955), 2-16, and Gary J. Scrimgeour, "Against *The Great Gatsby*," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby*, pp. 70-81.

⁴ In their heavily analytical categorization of "The Evasion of Adult Love in Fitzgerald's Fiction," *Centennial Review*, 17 (Spring, 1973), 152-169, Jan Hunt and John M. Suarez argue that the "Fitzgerald hero accomplishes two basic neurotic goals by idealizing his girlfriend: he evades her even as he consciously believes that he loves her, the process of idealization rendering her realistically unattainable; and, he avoids a mature relationship with other women because he operates under the fantasy that he has already committed himself to the idealized woman" (p. 153).

⁵ Fitzgerald admitted to a similar tendency in "The Crack Up." He says that he had always had a "secret yen for the Scandinavian blondes who sat on porches in St. Paul" and then notes that he had often gone "blocks to catch a single glimpse of shining hair—the bright shock of a girl I'd never know" (*The Crack Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson, New York, 1945, p. 73).

disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs" (p. 81), Nick tightens his grip on Jordan, trying to make of her what Gatsby has made of Daisy.

Despite the tendency of critics to view her as a "monster of bitchery,"⁶ Daisy has her own complex story, her own desires and needs. "I'm p-paralyzed with happiness" (p. 9), she says to Nick when he meets her for the first time, and even though there is a certain insincerity in her manner, Daisy's words do perfectly express the quality of her present life. In choosing Tom Buchanan over the absent Gatsby, Daisy has allowed her life to be shaped forever by the crude force of Tom's money. According to Nick's hypothesis, "all the time [Gatsby was overseas] something within her was crying for a decision. She wanted her life shaped now, immediately—and the decision must be made by some force—of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality—that was close at hand" (p. 151). Yet Daisy discovers as early as her honeymoon that Tom's world is hopelessly corrupt; in fact, Daisy's lyric energy (which so attracts Gatsby) must be frozen before she will marry Buchanan.

In a scene which has attracted remarkably little critical attention, Jordan tells Nick of Daisy's relationship with Gatsby in Louisville and of her marriage to Tom. Despite the \$350,000-dollar string of pearls around her neck, when Daisy receives a letter from Gatsby the night before the wedding, she is ready to call the whole thing off. Gatsby's appeal far surpasses Tom's, and the pearls quickly end up in the wastebasket. The important point to recognize is that Gatsby is as much an ideal to Daisy as she is to him. Only Gatsby looks at her—creates her, makes her come to herself—"in a way that every young girl wants to be looked at some time" (p. 76). Thus, it is only after she is forced into an ice-cold bath and the letter which she clutches has crumbled "like snow" that Daisy can marry Tom "without so much as a shiver" (pp. 77, 78). She has been baptized in ice, and with her romantic impulses effectively frozen, Daisy Fay becomes "paralyzed" with conventional happiness as Mrs. Tom Buchanan. Her present ideal, transmitted to her daughter, is to be a "beautiful little fool" because that is the "best thing a girl can be in this world" (p. 17).

⁶ See Hunt and Suarez, pp. 156–162.

Although Fitzgerald certainly depicts Daisy as a traditionally mysterious source of inspiration, even here he dramatizes the limitations of the male imagination at least as much as Daisy's failure to live up to Gatsby's ideal. Gatsby's world is founded on a fairy's wing (p. 100), and as the discrepancy between the real Daisy and Gatsby's dream image becomes apparent, Nick observes, Gatsby's count of "enchanted objects" is diminished by one (p. 94). In effect, Gatsby scarcely apprehended or loved the real Daisy; she was always an "enchanted object": initially as the "first 'nice' girl he had ever known" (p. 148), and then as the Golden Girl, "gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor" (p. 150). The essence of Daisy's promise, of course, is best represented by the magical properties of her voice; yet the process by which Nick and Gatsby research the meaning of that essentially nonverbal sound progressively demystifies the archetype. When Gatsby weds his unutterable vision to Daisy's mortal breath, he immediately restricts the scope of her potential meaning. Much like Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*, Fitzgerald demonstrates the recovery and loss of symbolic vision in *The Great Gatsby*.⁷

Early in the novel, for example, Nick only faintly apprehends the uniqueness of Daisy's voice. Like a fine musical instrument, Daisy's voice produces a sound so impalpable and suggestive that it seems purely formal. "It was the kind of voice," Nick says, "that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again" (p. 9). Full of creative promise, the voice seems to beckon the imagination into a new world of sensation, for "there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen,' a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour" (pp. 9-10). Here, in short, Daisy's voice seems full of unrealized possibility.

A vivid expression of an archetype which is fluid in form yet suggests nearly infinite designs, her voice inspires both Nick and Gatsby to wild imaginings. Nick, in fact, hears a quality in Daisy's

⁷ Charles Feidelson, of course, discusses *The Scarlet Letter* as a study of symbolic perception (*Symbolism and American Literature*, Chicago, 1953, pp. 8-12); and in *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1976), Nina Baym analyzes Hester Prynne's frantic efforts to subvert the oppressive authority of her emblematic letter by embroidering it (pp. 131-133).

voice which seems at first to transcend the meaning of words. "I had to follow the sound of it for a moment, up and down, with my ear alone," he says, "before any words came through" (p. 86). Daisy's effect is thus linked explicitly to the kind of auroral effect that a truly symbolic object produces on an artist's mind, "bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again" (p. 109). She seems able to transform the material world into some ephemeral dreamland in which objects suddenly glow with symbolic meaning. Thus, Gatsby "literally glowed" in Daisy's presence "like an ecstatic patron of recurrent light" (p. 90), and the objects he immediately revalues "according to the measure of response [they] drew from her well-loved eyes" suddenly seem no longer real (p. 92). Existing within a realm of as yet uncreated possibility, Daisy's essential meaning, in short, suggests a psychic impulse too fleeting to be articulated or brought across the threshold of conscious thought. Frantically trying to comprehend the impulse within himself which Daisy's voice evokes, Nick concludes: "I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever" (p. 112).

Like Gatsby with his "unutterable vision," then, Nick admits his failure to realize (and communicate) the essence of Daisy's meaning. Together, both men effectively conspire to reduce that meaning to a "single window" perspective. As successfully as the townspeople of *The Scarlet Letter* in their efforts to confine the punitive meaning of Hester's "A," Nick and Gatsby progressively devitalize Daisy's symbolic meaning until she exists as a vulgar emblem of the money values which dominate their world. Her voice was "full of money," Nick agrees; "that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals' song of it. . . . High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl. . . ." (p. 120). Paralleling Fitzgerald's sense of America's diminishing possibilities, Gatsby's action has the added effect of forfeiting forever his capacity to reclaim Daisy from Tom's influence. When he tries to become a

nouveau riche version of Tom, Gatsby ceases to have the power to take Daisy back to her beautiful white girlhood. No longer does he look at her with the creative look the “way every young girl wants to be looked at”; instead, Daisy becomes the victim of what has become Gatsby’s irrevocably meretricious look.

Because she, too, seeks a lost moment from the past, Gatsby succeeds momentarily in liberating Daisy from Tom’s world. However, just as the shirts in his closet “piled like bricks in stacks a dozen high” (p. 93) signal the disintegration of Gatsby’s obsessively constructed kingdom of illusion, Daisy’s uncontrollable sobbing with her magical voice “muffled in the thick folds” (p. 94) represents the end of her dream as well. Even as Nick apologizes for its simplicity, Daisy is simply “offended” by the vulgarity of Gatsby’s world (p. 108). Thus, although both characters do enjoy the moment “in between time” possessed of “intense life” (p. 97) which they have sought, Gatsby and Daisy inevitably split apart. When Tom reveals the real Gatsby as a “common swindler” (p. 134), Daisy’s own count of “enchanted objects” also diminishes by one. She cries out at first that she “won’t stand this” (p. 134), but as the truth of Tom’s accusation sinks in, she withdraws herself from Gatsby forever. For the second time, Tom’s crude, yet palpable force disillusions Daisy about Gatsby, and in spite of the latter’s desperate attempts to defend himself, “with every word she was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave that up, and only the dead dream fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undesperingly, toward that lost voice across the room” (p. 135). Because she cannot exist in the nether world of a “dead dream” which has eclipsed everything about her except the money in her voice, Daisy moves back toward Tom and his world of “unquestionable practicality.” Reduced to a golden statute, a collector’s item which crowns Gatsby’s material success, Daisy destroys even the possibility of illusion when she runs down Myrtle Wilson in Gatsby’s car.

Not only does she kill her husband’s mistress, thus easing her reentry into his life, but she climaxes the symbolic process by which she herself has been reduced from archetype to stereotype. At the moment of impact—the final crash of the dead dream into the disillusioning body of reality—it is surely no accident in a novel of

mutual alienation that Daisy and Gatsby are both gripping the steering wheel. Daisy loses her nerve to hit the other car and commit a double suicide (thus preserving their dream in the changelessness of death); instead she chooses life and the seemingly inevitable workings of history. She forces the story to be played out to its logical conclusion: Gatsby's purgative death and her own estrangement from love. Despite Nick's judgment of her carelessness and "basic insincerity," her conspiratorial relationship with Tom, Daisy is victimized by a male tendency to project a self-satisfying, yet ultimately dehumanizing, image on woman. If Gatsby had "wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy" (p. 111); if Nick had nearly recovered a "fragment of lost words" through the inspiring magic of her voice, then Daisy's potential selfhood is finally betrayed by the world of the novel. Hers remains a "lost voice," and its words and meaning seem "uncommunicable forever."