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Source: *American Literature*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (Jan., 1975), pp. 574-578

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2924582>

Accessed: 06-04-2015 12:10 UTC

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*“Only Her Hairdresser . . .”: Another Look at
Daisy Buchanan*

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IN A 1972 newspaper article, Hollywood columnist and Fitzgerald intimate Sheilah Graham complained that Ali MacGraw was not an appropriate choice to play Daisy Buchanan in the forthcoming Paramount film of *The Great Gatsby* because the actress is “dark, olive complexioned, and with the look of an Indian,” while Fitzgerald’s character is “blonde, blue-eyed, feminine, and frivolous.”¹ Interestingly, the novel both supports Miss Graham and refutes her; Fitzgerald describes Daisy in contradictory ways. This contradiction can be partially explained by an examination of Daisy’s dual origin. In part, too, the discrepancy reflects a fundamental duality in Daisy herself, her simultaneous embodiment of traits associated with the fair and the dark women of romantic literature.

Fitzgerald offers varying descriptions of Daisy’s hair color. When her three-year-old daughter makes a momentary appearance in the novel, Daisy holds her and asks, “‘Did mother get powder on your old yellowy hair?’”² Later in the same conversation, Daisy tells Nick Carraway: “‘She looks like me. She’s got my hair and shape of the face’” (p. 140). But while mother and daughter seem here to be unmistakably blonde, elsewhere in the novel Daisy is clearly a brunette. On the last afternoon before *Gatsby* goes off to the War, he and Daisy sit together silently; “now and then she moved and he changed his arm a little, and once he kissed her dark shining hair” (p. 180). It is presumably this dark hair that several years later lay “like a dash of blue paint across her cheek” (p. 103).³

¹ “Casting ‘The Great Gatsby,’” *Washington Evening Star*, Jan. 10, 1972, p. B-7.

² F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, 1925), p. 139. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

³ Several people have suggested to me that the novel’s first chapter offers further indication that Daisy is dark. When Tom expounds his notions of racial superiority, he immediately cites as “Nordics” Nick, Jordan, and himself, but includes Daisy only after an “infinitesimal hesitation” (p. 16). To some readers, Tom’s pause indicates that Daisy does not have a blonde, Nordic appearance. The context, however, suggests a more probable explanation. Just before Tom’s remark about Nordics, Daisy has been ridiculing him. It seems likely that the resentful Tom was therefore reluctant to include her in his circle of superior beings and hesitated before doing so.

Additional instances of this inconsistency in Daisy's description appear in early versions of the *Gatsby* manuscript. In a passage crossed out and reworked, Nick tells of coming upon Daisy and Jordan Baker sitting on the couch in the Buchanans' East Egg home. Daisy is "Tom Buchanan's wife, the dark lovely girl beside [Jordan]"⁴ A contrasting passage that also did not survive Fitzgerald's revisions depicts Daisy at one of Gatsby's parties. She is somewhat appalled at the drunken, indecorous hilarity around her. As she and Gatsby make their way through the crowd to his house, the revellers look at her "as deep breathing roses might look at a frail pastel flower."⁵ Dark lovely girl or frail pastel flower? The manuscript offers the same inconsistency as the novel's final text.

These conflicting images very likely reflect Daisy's dual origin. Several critics have noted in passing that she has been drawn from two women in F. Scott Fitzgerald's life—his early lost love, Ginevra King, and Zelda Sayre, who of course became his wife. Richard D. Lehan, for example, states that Fitzgerald brought to *The Great Gatsby* "his resentment over losing Ginevra King and almost losing Zelda Sayre (who combined are Daisy Fay)."⁶ Numerous small details support this dual identification. Notes that Fitzgerald made on the endpaper of his copy of André Malraux's *Man's Hope* indicate that he based his description of Daisy's wedding on "memories of Ginevra's wedding."⁷ Matthew J. Bruccoli has pointed out that an early manuscript version of *The Great Gatsby* gives Daisy's maiden name as Machen, which was Zelda's mother's maiden name.⁸ Like Daisy of the dark shining hair, Ginevra King was "a startling brunette beauty."⁹ Zelda, on the other hand, had "honey-gold hair" and "deep blue eyes."¹⁰ If Fitzgerald, in creating Daisy, was drawing on his experience with both women, it is understandable that she has qualities of each.

What is curious is that, although the dark and fair descriptions

⁴ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby: A Facsimile of the Manuscript*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Washington, D.C., 1973), p. 14. Hereafter cited as *Gatsby MS Facsimile*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

⁶ *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Craft of Fiction* (Carbondale, Ill., 1966), p. 61. See also Andrew Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald* (New York, 1962), p. 150; Kenneth E. Eble, *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New Haven, Conn., 1963), p. 88.

⁷ Reproduced in *Gatsby MS Facsimile*, p. xvii.

⁸ Introduction to *Gatsby MS Facsimile*, p. xxiii, n. 17.

⁹ Turnbull, p. 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

seem fairly well balanced, most readers come away from the novel convinced like Sheilah Graham that Daisy is blonde.¹¹ Obviously, they are responding not so much to the physical descriptions Fitzgerald provides as to the symbolic suggestiveness with which he endows Daisy, a suggestiveness achieved in part by extensive use of color. From the "hundred pairs of golden and silver slippers" among which she dances in Louisville (p. 181) to the "little gold pencil" she offers Tom at Gatsby's party (p. 128), Daisy belongs in the realm of gold. Her voice is "full of money"; she is "the king's daughter, the golden girl" (p. 144). She is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, the fair-haired princess of the fairy tales.

The golden girl dwells "high in a white palace" (p. 144), and throughout the novel white rivals gold as the principal color associated with Daisy.¹² The flower after which she is named is white with a gold center. As scores of critics have noted, she almost always dresses in white. Even when Gatsby first meets her in Louisville, "she dressed in white and had a little white roadster . . ." (p. 90). Like gold, white undoubtedly reinforces the reader's impression of Daisy's being blonde. Considered most simply, white is much closer in appearance to light hair than to dark. More significantly, though, white has traditionally suggested purity and innocence, qualities that romantic convention has long attributed to fair rather than dark women: Scott's Rowena rather than Rebecca; Hawthorne's Priscilla and Hilda rather than Zenobia or Miriam; Cooper's Hetty Hutter and Alice Munro rather than their sisters Judith and Cora.¹³ So strong is the hold such cultural conventions have on the imagination that it is difficult to envision a brunette Daisy all in white.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that color symbolism alone gives rise to the impression that Daisy is a blonde. Much about her personality supports the image projected by Fitzgerald's use of

¹¹ For example, in 1973 I posed the question of Daisy's hair color to two of my American literature classes; of the seventy-five students responding, sixty-one thought Daisy was blonde. So, too, ultimately, did those responsible for casting the recent Paramount film.

¹² For one extensive discussion of Fitzgerald's use of white and gold, see Milton R. Stern, *The Golden Moment: The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Urbana, Ill., 1970), pp. 267-288.

¹³ For further discussion of dark and fair women in romantic fiction, see Frederic I. Carpenter, "Puritans Preferred Blondes: The Heroines of Melville and Hawthorne," *New England Quarterly*, IX (June, 1936), 253-272; Philip Rahv, "The Dark Lady of Salem," *Parisian Review*, VIII (Sept.-Oct., 1941), 362-381; Perry Miller, "The Romance and the Novel," in *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 241-278.

gold and white. Daisy shares a number of traits in common with the fair-haired heroines of the romantic tradition. Like Alice Munro in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* or Priscilla in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, Daisy is passive, security-minded, and pragmatic. In love with the dashing Lieutenant Gatsby, she nonetheless chooses the course of "unquestionable practicality" and marries the wealthy, solid Tom Buchanan, reassured by the "wholesome bulkiness about his person and position" (pp. 181–182). She is flattered by Gatsby's monumental efforts to regain her, but, when pushed to act, she looks at Jordan and Nick "with a sort of appeal, as though she realized at last what she was doing—and as though she had never, all along, intended doing anything at all" (p. 158). In the end, she elects to stay with her socially respectable husband; she and Tom close ranks and retreat "back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together . . ." (p. 216). Also like her blonde literary forebears, Daisy comes from acceptable Anglo-Saxon stock; the dark woman, by contrast, usually is descended from some exotic lineage that includes black, Jewish, Indian, or simply "foreign" blood. Finally, there are the purity and innocence that characterize the fair-haired heroine. In Daisy, though, these take the form of coldness and sterility of soul (which, interestingly, are also traditionally suggested by the color white). Daisy is moved by Gatsby's romantic gestures on her behalf, but she finds offensive that which "wasn't a gesture but an emotion" (p. 129). She and Jordan talk "with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter, that was as cool as their white dresses and their impersonal eyes in the absence of all desire" (p. 15).

But side by side with the sexually anaesthetic blonde is still the dark-haired Daisy. Fitzgerald's jaded, cynical young sophisticate who has "been everywhere and seen everything and done everything" (p. 21) certainly has spiritual affinities with the knowledgeable, experienced dark women of Cooper, Hawthorne, Scott, and Melville. Less adventurous and independent than, say, Judith Hutter, Hester Prynne, Rebecca, Zenobia, or Isobel, Daisy nonetheless shares with them their unsheltered exposure to life, including the sexual side of life. The dark woman exudes sexuality. Cora Munro's presence excites the young Indian warriors; Miles Coverdale conjures up visions of a naked Zenobia; Pierre Glendenning struggles in vain against the incestuous passion that drives him to abandon his golden-haired

fiancée to follow his dark, mysterious half-sister. In some ways, Daisy seems out of place in such company. But if Daisy the blonde is a “nice” girl in a white dress, perhaps it is Daisy the brunette who sleeps with Gatsby before he leaves for the War and whose “low thrilling voice” (p. 11) offers a powerful sexual appeal. Jordan Baker knows of Daisy’s “absolutely perfect reputation” in Chicago, and yet she has her doubts about her friend’s conduct. She confides to Nick: “Perhaps Daisy never went in for amour at all—and yet there’s something in that voice of hers . . .” (p. 94). Nick, too, recognizes the voice’s appeal and believes that it was this sultry voice, “with its fluctuating, feverish warmth,” that held Gatsby most (p. 116). Significantly, in an early manuscript draft, Fitzgerald not only refers to Daisy as a “dark lovely girl” but also uses the same terms to describe her seductive voice—“the dark lovely voice of Daisy Fay.”¹⁴

It may be true that Daisy’s variable hair color results primarily from her dual origin in Ginevra King and Zelda Sayre. But more is involved than just a minor inconsistency in descriptive detail. Romantic tradition assigns diametrically opposed roles to fair and dark women. In his creation of Daisy, Fitzgerald reflects the influence of this tradition. The character that results is both cool innocent princess and sensual *femme fatale*, a combination that further enhances Daisy’s enigmatic charm.

¹⁴ *Gatsby MS Facsimile*, p. 221.