

To Own and to Be Owned – The Question of Ownership in *The Great Gatsby*

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Abstract

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Gatsby is in a constant quest for ownership - from accumulating wealth to winning Daisy over. This paper aims to briefly examine the question of ownership in The Great Gatsby, with regards to assets and people, particularly through the contrast between Gatsby's material possessions and his desire for emotional ownership of Daisy, taking into account the partnerships and love triangles that appear between the characters, as reflections of various power dynamics.

Keywords: *ownership; materialism; old money; new money; feminism*

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Introduction

The *Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald is set during the Jazz Age of the 1920s and focuses on Jay Gatsby, a wealthy and enigmatic man known for his extravagant parties. Gatsby is driven by his desire to reunite with Daisy Buchanan, a former lover. The story is told through the eyes of Nick Carraway, Daisy's cousin and Gatsby's neighbor, who becomes deeply involved in the lives of these affluent and morally complex individuals.

As Gatsby chases his idealized version of the American Dream, the novel explores themes of love, wealth, ambition, and the corrupting power of money. The narrative ultimately leads to tragedy, exposing the emptiness behind the era's glitz and glamor and the disillusionment that comes from pursuing unattainable dreams.

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald integrates modernist elements, offering a complete portrayal of the 1920s. The novel is set in a time marked by widespread materialism and changing socio-cultural norms, and captures key principles of modernist ideology. Modernism, a

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20th-century literary movement, revolutionized literature by defying cultural norms, rejecting established traditions and offering fresh perspectives on humanity's place in the universe (Tariq *et al.*, 2022, p. 181). Through characters such as Gatsby and the Buchanans, Fitzgerald depicts the American society using the themes of materialism, the American Dream and moral uncertainty.

Gatsby's extravagant parties symbolize the pleasure-seeking mentality of the people living during the 1920s, while his lavish mansion represents the emptiness caused by the relentless search for happiness in material possessions. At his core, Gatsby represents the line of passage between the conservative American society and the modern, progressive era of the 1920s. Furthermore, through Nick Carraway's narration, Fitzgerald subtly criticizes the American Dream and its core values that are seen even in our contemporary society.

This paper aims to explore the question of ownership, as it appears in *The Great Gatsby*, with a particular focus on Jay Gatsby's quest for winning Daisy Buchanan back, in contrast to his drive for the accumulation and the display of wealth, as well as on the similar dynamics that appear between adjacent characters such as Tom Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson.

Concerning the methodology of this study, our approach is qualitative, focusing primarily on character analysis to understand the question of ownership presented in the novel. Using Foucaudian feminist literary criticism, the study examines the way gender and class dynamics manifest through the characters' relationships - notably Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, Tom Buchanan, and Myrtle Wilson. Textual analysis and a close reading of the text is combined with information from secondary sources on feminist theory and the socio-cultural context of the 1920s. This framework is meant to provide a feminist reading of the way materialism and ownership influence the actions of the characters, while keeping our analysis contextualized and consistent. Our paper intends to deliver a critical perspective of how power, gender, and class issues are diffused to the point of being essentially inseparable from the relationship dynamics presented in *The Great Gatsby*. We will refer to this phenomenon as the issue or the question of ownership in the content of this study.

This issue of ownership is immediately visible, even after a superficial analysis of the main character, Jay Gatsby, whose quest for material possessions, and for the possession of Daisy Buchanan, a long-lost sweetheart that appears as the icon for lavishness, is revealed even before

he makes an appearance. He is the focal point of the narrative, his place highlighted by the narrator, Nick Carraway's borderline obsession with his person. Gatsby appears as the source of action, and he is engaged within the most complicated question of ownership in the novel.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1 Power over gender

Once Gatsby's place as the main character in the ecosystem of the narrative has been established, we attempt to shatter the dynamics between the characters of *The Great Gatsby* and to view them through the lens of feminist theory, with a particular focus on the question of ownership as a contrasting element to the idea of women's agency. Feminist theory in literary criticism is the literary criticism that employs feminism as a lens through which instances of literary texts are analyzed. It suggests that women have been historically represented as objects under the male perspective (Napikoski, 2020). For instance, a feminist understanding of heterosexual relationships in literature or any piece of art or media deals with power in terms of the possibility of women to resist men's domination and to exercise their agency in order to empower themselves (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 240). A reading of *The Great Gatsby* from this perspective has the potential to reveal a novel outlook on the relations - including the power relations and those pertaining to class and gender - established between characters, and their patriarchal or anti-hegemonic aspects (Fischle, 2016, p. 1).

According to Gretchen Danielle's Fischle's thesis, "many critics agree that Fitzgerald was sexist in his understanding and construction of his female characters, and that he wrote women that were clichéd and only embodied the archetypes by which women of 20th century prose usually find themselves represented" (Fischle, 2016, p. 3). Veronica Makowski states that F. Scott Fitzgerald employs the female character as a mere prop that is only narratively useful (Makowski, 2011, p. 28). The female characters are rarely given the right to confession, and when they are awarded it, it is fugitive and superficially explored by Nick Carraway, the ever-careless narrator. They are in the background of "a man's book" (Matterson, 1991, p. 57).

Female characters appear, first and foremost, much more in the image of Caroline Ramazanoglu's interpretation of Foucauldian "docile bodies". Their subservience, be it nuanced or not, reflecting the rigors and rebellions of the era, raises questions about what forms of resistance to relations of power are appropriate or effective (Ramazanoglu, 1993, p. 252). Women's decisions, the reflections of their agency, and their place in the rapports established with other characters, create a microcosm telling of the discrete structures of power lying underneath Nick Carraway's narration and perspective.

The attributes of "docile bodies" are malleability and submission; they are subjected to manipulation and transformation carried out by the interactions with those around them that have power (Foucault, 1977, p. 136). A permanent position of objectified submission renders a body "docile" to the source of the power: in this case, women remain to some degree submissive to the men, regardless of their social status, that has a limited intervention. Thus, the social relations of power are held in place by this framework of "docility" of women towards men (McNay, 1993, p. 31) - after all, the women are to be owned by men, they are to be flaunted or possessed, with varying degrees of respect to their autonomy and agency.

To further deepen their aspect of Foucauldian "docility" towards the male characters, the women of *The Great Gatsby* are secondary to the male characters (Matterson, 1991, p. 58). They enter relationships with them, have extramarital affairs, without ever experiencing a full exercise of agency, not in the way the men do. They are not driving forces of the narrative, and appear rather as plot devices.

Moreover, the women in *The Great Gatsby* are products of their era; they appear hedonistic and unconventional to some degree. Despite their apparent empowerment through unconventionality, they never cross the class and economic lines. The female characters (Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson) are different and share a considerable portion of the narrative focus, even though they are not always shown in a positive light. They appear in contrasting roles (Prislin, 2018, p. 87). Daisy represents both sides of the American Dream - the glitz and the hollowness - through her wealth and elevated social status. Jordan, as a professional golfer, reflects a new form of female independence. Despite it all, she remains emotionally distant and morally unclear. Myrtle, in contrast, embodies the challenges faced by the lower class, striving to improve her situation but ultimately held back by her circumstances.

Contextually, the role of women and the placement of their agency in the social system of the era depicted in *The Great Gatsby* were undergoing significant changes. During the so-called American “Jazz Age” - syntagm widely believed to have been coined by F. Scott Fitzgerald himself (Bellot, 2017) - the passage of the Prohibition law in 1920 brought about structural social change. Once obtaining alcohol became illegal, organized crime flourished and favored the rise of a fruitful bootlegging market. Simultaneously, the Prohibition oversaw changes regarding the place of women within society (Hernández García, 2014, p. 10). Until then, only men could smoke and drink in public places. Everything changed with the opening of the speakeasies or illegal bars, where women initially were welcomed to drink, dance, and flirt (West Davidson et al., 2001, p. 582). This challenged the prior expectation for women to be wives and mothers only. The rise of the flapper, be it subversive in nature, does not exempt the female characters from *The Great Gatsby* from the exercise of men’s power, particularly through the ownership of men over them.

1.2 Ownership and materialism

A definition of ownership one can encounter in a dictionary is “a bundle of rights and duties” (Bergström, 2000, p. 101), being closely intertwined with the larger concept of the American Dream. According to Adams (1931), the American Dream is the “dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (p. 363). In other words, the essence of the American Dream is the belief that each individual has the capacity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, perseverance, and initiative. The American Dream is nothing more than a form of *translatio imperii*, the transition of power from Europe to America, the evolution of age-old European values, and their refinement to forge a new society, the American one (Știuliuc, 2011, p. 364).

We can see the link between ownership and the American Dream throughout the entirety of *The Great Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby is, in essence, the embodiment of the pursuit of the American Dream. At his core, he is just a

man who comes from a humble background and tries to build wealth and status, hoping that he will win Daisy Buchanan back. By having a high social status and possessing wealth, he believes that he can attain the so-desired love and happiness with Daisy.

Gatsby's quest for ownership, however, is in truth a quest for self-actualization (Zhu et al., 2023, p. 51). Thus appears the ownership he craves, over the sumptuous home, over the pleasant amphitryon persona, over the expensive furniture, clothes, artifacts, cars or other assets, and, ultimately, over Daisy, the woman with the voice "full of money" (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 92), the epitome of old money and exclusivity, unattainable through her place both as Tom's wife and beyond the class demarcation. Ownership compels the main character in his chase after the promised American Dream, an escape from his own roots, and in this pursuit Daisy, initially the woman of his dreams, becomes a mere asset of his Dream.

Daisy Buchanan becomes the driving force behind Gatsby's downfall, as her influence over him is partly rooted in her enchanting voice, one that mesmerizes Gatsby and places him under Daisy's spell (Persson, 2019, p.3). Under the sway of her influence (rather the influence of her image), Gatsby is continuously transformed throughout the novel and this pursuit eventually leads him to a woman who has everything he longs for - affluence and class - yet remains beyond his control. His desire to own Daisy shapes him into a person who is determined to compromise everything to win Daisy's attention and affection, thus owning her (Persson, 2019, p.16). Instead, through these actions, Daisy owns him, her image compels and moves him. He is given the false sense of ownership, but through his erratic behavior, it is evident which party psychologically possesses the other. Daisy is not explored as a character, as a person, appearing secondary, almost vapid and, just like all women depicted in this novel, emotionally passive. Her idealized image exercises some sort of possession over Gatsby (Matterson, 1991, pp. 57-58), however this ownership is not strong enough to compete with Gatsby's obsession to socially and physically "own" her.

Concerning the material aspect, the 1920's were a fascinating and significant period in American history, characterized by economic growth. The end of World War I marked a time of celebration, social and cultural change and everyone embraced the American Dream- with hard work, you could achieve social status and wealth. The "Jazz Age" truly was a

flamboyant era: “flappers with fringed sequin dresses, headbands and bobbed hair, feathers, long cigarette holders, bootlegged liquor from Prohibition, and more martini glasses than anyone could possibly need” (Fern, 2022). Extravagance and materialism are defining words for the Roaring Twenties. The pursuit for the American Dream caused people to love money and possessions, in hopes that they will feel validation - both on a personal and social level.

Money is a central theme in the novel, perhaps one of the main drivers in shaping the character’s personality, highlighting the stark contrast between “old money” and “new money” in both of the individuals’ lives. The archetype of “new money” is represented by Gatsby, the man who made a fortune by himself, while “old money” is represented by characters like Daisy and Tom Buchanan, having generational wealth (Khalid, 2023, p. 131). Gatsby is chasing materialism only to impress, and to ultimately own Daisy, throwing lavish parties and pretending to be someone he is not, trying to seek validation not only from Daisy and his own projection of her, but from the other upper-class people alike.

Fitzgerald paints a perfect image of American materialism in *The Great Gatsby* through Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan. Money is the main element that moves the narrative forward: the characters remain so fixed on possessions that they become disconnected from life, values and priorities. Gatsby wants to achieve the American Dream, he wants to have it all, but he gets lost, he loses himself in his pursuit. According to Ward and Wackman (1971), materialism is a mindset, a belief that possessions and money lead to contentment and influence (p. 422).

Both Gatsby and Daisy are consumed by materialism, seeking pleasure in wealth. Gatsby’s rise to fortune through bootlegging contrasts sharply with Daisy’s inherited “old money.” His efforts to win Daisy and gain acceptance among the wealthy emphasizes the difference between classes, with the elite maintaining their superiority through their social status alone.

Jay Gatsby’s evolution depicts well the impact of materialism and obsession. Motivated by his obsession and love for Daisy, Jay’s life purpose becomes acquiring wealth to win her attention, but also to self-improve his humble status, to be a member of the high class, in a perpetual negation of his origins. His unwavering search for prosperity and enjoyment, to ultimately attain his objective, shapes his character across the novel. He organizes over-the-top parties, attended by high-class people, and

continuously spends ludicrous amounts of money, all in an attempt to project a wealthy persona within Daisy's perception. Nevertheless, as the story progresses, Gatsby realizes that his pursuit of wealth is meaningless, that true happiness and love is not found in material possessions, leaving him feeling empty (Arum, 2019, pp. 34-36).

Daisy, as well as Jordan Baker, appear as projections of the American Dream from beyond the class demarcation. Daisy becomes the main drive for the novel's main character, her position of generational wealth so desirable for him that her presence by his side is more than a mere trophy, but a key of access to a world he desired since he has known himself, since he has become aware of his own position in the social hierarchy.

The women in *The Great Gatsby* appear as assets rather than fully-fledged characters - expressions of materialism, functions of ownership that have the capacity to award a certain quality to men. This dynamic - to own and to be owned - is expressed through the relations established between the female and male characters, in the form of couplings and even love triangles.

2. Character analysis

2.1 Relationships - couples and love triangles

The relations that are established between the main characters manifest thus as couples and love triangles. In their atomic interactions, the toolbox set up via our theoretical framework can shed light on their inner workings, and on the place and role of women as assets.

The relationship between Tom and Daisy Buchanan appears to be the mold for the wealthy couple of the era. She is presented as wealthy, yet "a victim of the moral decay and aggression of the upper class society" (Al-Guzo, 2022, p. 2). She marries Tom Buchanan, subscribing to "the version of the dream that applies to women, that marriage to a successful man is not the symbol of success but success itself" (Parr, 1981, p. 667). Her husband, Tom Buchanan, is narrow-minded and cruel, but wealthy, with a high social standing. She is visibly, yet lethargically upset with his infidelity: "Tom's got some woman in New York." (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 14). However, she does not want to divorce, because that would mean losing her stability and security, aspects that Tom provides in their marriage. Her

stability comes with a price, becoming a victim of an abusive relationship, not only emotionally, but also physically: "That's what I get for marrying a brute of a man, a great, big, hulking physical specimen" (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 12). Nevertheless, she finds her happiness, later in the novel, cheating on Tom with Jay Gatsby. When Tom finds out about the affair in Chapter 7, he becomes offended by her wife's actions and confronts Gatsby, trying to put him in a bad light, so that Daisy might fall out of love with him: "'I found out what your 'drug-stores' were.'" He turned to us and spoke rapidly. "He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong" (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 102). Through this relationship, Fitzgerald paints a picture of the patriarchal society of the 1920s. Tom objectifies Daisy and reduces her to a mere possession, a trophy, but Gatsby does the same thing, even though he projects an ideal over her.

The affair between Daisy and Gatsby is a rekindling of an old flame, the two having been lovers in the past, long before Gatsby acquired his current wealth. They appear as childish, careless, disregarding the possibility of being discovered by her husband.

Tom's affair with Myrtle Wilson is conversely possessive and materialistic. He treats her to countless gifts, and to the opportunity to act out her fantasy of being a high-life woman, be it for one evening at a time. His infidelity is overt, as if he takes pride in his capacity to entertain the attention of another woman, besides his wife. Tom sees Myrtle as an object of desire, as another trophy: "I want you to meet my girl." (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 21), and he uses his social and economic power to seduce her. Myrtle, longing for status, and dissatisfied with her marriage to George, is drawn to Tom's wealth, seeing him as a golden ticket to a better life. However, Tom is abusive, he "broke her nose with his open hand" (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 30), showing no sympathy for her well-being and her feelings, asserting his dominance over her. Despite the emotional and physical torment, Myrtle still glorifies Tom, putting him on a pedestal, seeing him as a coping mechanism for her miserable marriage to George. Myrtle's idealization of Tom ultimately becomes her demise, being run over by Gatsby's Rolls Royce, thinking that Tom has come to take her away.

Whereas the picture of the “docile body” is nuanced and complicated by the class issue when it comes to Daisy Buchanan, it becomes starkly visible in the case of Myrtle Wilson. Violence and aggression are the most direct reflections in the asymmetries of power that concern the thesis of this paper.

In analyzing the two couples, one can deduce that Tom and Myrtle represent a rudimentary iteration of Daisy and Jay Gatsby. The latter partnership appears as much more joyful and elaborate than the first. For Myrtle, Tom is the one that possesses the much-desired access to the upper class, “old money” world. For Gatsby, it is Daisy who owns this key of access. However, Tom and Myrtle’s relationship seems to be less emotionally nuanced than Daisy and Gatsby’s, the power - both in terms of gender and class - concentrated in Tom’s hands.

The love triangles appear as consequences of infidelity, but the power relations weaved within them shed further light on the question of ownership, and the elements that are attached to it, such as gender or class.

2.2 To own and to be owned - instances of ownership

Daisy’s image is much more elaborate than that of a trophy or an icon for Gatsby; she represents the high life, the generational wealth, the quality of being “made of money”, the gateway to the fundamental switch up from his humble roots to those of the upper class. He obsesses over her image, insofar as he seeks to own her, *de facto* guided by an acute sense of her material superiority over him. He buys his house in West Egg, across from her “red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion” (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 8), hosts excessive parties where everyone is welcome, regardless of class belongingness, in the hopes that she will attend. When he does get to meet her, through Jordan Baker and Nick Carraway, he appears clumsy and eager to impress her.

They tour his mansion, and he displays a boyish hunger for her approval, an instance of him being under the heel of her class superiority: “he hadn’t once ceased looking at Daisy, and I think he revalued everything in his house according to the measure of response it drew from her well-loved eyes. Sometimes, too, he stared around at his possessions in a dazed way, as though in her actual and astounding presence none of it was any longer real” (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 71). Her ownership over him is

discreet, and has its roots in relations of class and, thus, power, introducing a layer to the gender difference and

Furthermore, his regression to his younger self, eager to impress the richer Daisy, becomes evident once he begins to showcase the shirts in his closet. Clothing, even though visibly high quality and expensive, is still a commonplace thing for members of the upper class. Through this scene, the main character reveals, in his rush for any validation from Daisy, while he parades his belongings and his beloved assets, his unchangeable belonging to the “new money”.

In contrast, his desire to own her, as the ultimate symbol of his transition from his humble roots to the world of the upper class, manifests itself through his expressed desire for Daisy to explicitly choose him over Tom: “He wanted nothing less of Daisy than that she should go to Tom and say: “I never loved you.” After she had obliterated four years with that sentence they could decide upon the more practical measures to be taken” (Fitzgerald, 2020, pp. 84-85). This desire to be chosen, to be the one who gets to “have” Daisy instead of Tom, is the ultimate proof for his quest of ownership. She is an asset, be it a beloved asset, for his ascension.

Another instance of the question of ownership in *The Great Gatsby* is visible in Tom’s relationship with Myrtle Wilson. He treats her to a puppy, lavish evenings and drinks, intentionally fulfilling her fantasy of being rich - even though she belongs to the “valley of ashes” (Fitzgerald, 2020, p. 20), a working-class neighborhood. However, his objectification and ownership of her are overt - he takes her from her home, in the presence of her husband, claiming her presence as if he is entitled to it. Later on, as Myrtle Wilson plays out her fantasy by organizing a get-together in an apartment in the city, he hits her and breaks her nose, and he does so for the simple reason that he can. He views her as a prop rather than an asset, a source of fun and excitement; he is entitled to her, and he acts accordingly. She is acutely in the position to be owned.

The question of ownership - to own and to be owned - pervades in the dynamics between the characters of *The Great Gatsby*, but can be ultimately reduced to the class demarcation, a line impossible to cross. For Daisy and Tom, extramarital affairs are fun and novel experiences, whereas for Myrtle and Gatsby, they are much more: promises of growth. The fine line between being the owner and the owned, this power dynamic that can be reduced to the money, power, and gender, acts as a magnetic pull that drives the characters down the road of the novel’s storyline, towards their

final destination. Gatsby meets his demise, killed by the grieving George Wilson, Myrtle's husband, and none of his acquaintances attend it. Daisy chooses Tom, and moves away. Myrtle Wilson is killed by a car driven by Daisy, an accident for which Gatsby takes the blame. His quest for ownership - over the mansion, the persona, the cars, the clothing, and even over Daisy, the woman "made of money" comes to a halt. The class demarcation becomes even more visible once he dies, unveiling the driving forces of their world. Owning is never enough. Ownership that is gained, be it earned or not, cannot come close to ownership one is born with.

Concluding remarks

The women in *The Great Gatsby* appear first and foremost as subjects of the "own or owned" dynamic, in an ecosystem profoundly marked by class, money, materialism, social expectations of their place under the hand of men. Ownership appears as a polymorphic aspect, that awards the relationships and the power dynamics behind them a convoluted quality. Nothing is merely as it seems in the world of *The Great Gatsby*, in spite of the matter-of-factness of its narrator, Nick Carraway, since the spectre of ownership haunts its entire construction, from the relationships established between characters, to the narrative itself.

A feminist reading of this novel provides insights into the place of women in the grand mechanism of ownership. They are treated differently, and get to treat others differently, for reasons that can be reduced to their material conditions, to their provenience, to their class. Their place, of a relative subservience to men, leaves them in the position to be owned rather than to own, but Daisy Buchanan's class, her belonging to the "old money" world, allows her to assume a place of considerable power in the narrative.

The question of owning or being owned gives rise to different stages and types of power dynamics that act as driving forces for the characters and the storyline, proving that everything can be reduced to power. The class demarcation, the line to not be crossed, lies immobile even after the turbulent events that transpire, even in life and death, beyond gender or effort or worthiness, marking the definite and unavoidable distinction between being the owner or the owned.

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