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The Women of Fitzgerald's and Hemingway's Fiction

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Both Fitzgerald and Hemingway base a great deal of their fiction on the turbulent period known as the "Jazz Age." They clearly capture the mood of the 1920's, a period of maladjustment in the aftermath of a world war, and in many respects the two men's ideas and attitudes are parallel. For instance, in examining their works, we see that both Hemingway and Fitzgerald view women as ruthless, manipulative creatures, who almost always lead the men with whom they are involved to their downfall. This attitude can be discovered in nearly all of their fiction.

Since much of Fitzgerald's fiction concerning male-female relationships closely resembles his relationship with his wife Zelda, we can help our reading by better understanding some of the details about their lives together. While Fitzgerald was in the army, stationed in Alabama, he met Zelda Sayre. Their courtship lasted a couple of years, but before she would marry him, Zelda required Scott to prove himself capable of supporting her in the lavish manner to which she was accustomed. Eventually the two found happiness in the center of a monied and carefree way of life. Over the years, however, because of financial pressures and Scott's inability to produce marketable writing, their idyllic life deteriorated as Scott struggled with alcoholism and Zelda with mental illness. Finally, Scott's dependency on alcohol grew and he died before finishing his last novel. Zelda, diagnosed as a schizophrenic, was institutionalized for the rest of her life.

While writing Tender is the Night, Fitzgerald was closely involved with his wife's illness and thus, much of the material for the novel was, inevitably, based on Scott's personal experiences. Tender is the Night explores the relationship between Dr. Dick Diver, a psychiatrist, and Nicole Warren Diver, a rich, mentally ill society girl. Dr. Diver first meets Nicole in the mental hospital where he is working and she is being treated. Dick is enchanted with Nicole, but tries to forget her after she is released. They accidentally meet again, however, and he realizes that he is in love with her. Nicole's older sister, Baby Warren, concerned about her sister's stability and well-being, tries to entice Diver into marrying her sister. She tells him about the Warren money and connections which, in the future, could be very valuable to him. For a moment, Dick comes to his senses and realizes that the Warrens want to "purchase" a doctor for their daughter. He says, "For Dick to marry a mental patient? How did it happen?"
Where did it begin? Big chance—oh yes. My God!—they decided to buy a doctor? Well, they better stick to whoever they’ve got in Chicago." (Tender is the Night, 152). But Diver is already completely enchanted with Nicole and ultimately marries her, both out of love and pity.

Diver’s marriage is the beginning of his end because, from that point on, his strength of character deteriorates and he is drained of self-esteem. Within the Diver marriage, the psychological phenomenon of transference occurs. Dick and Nicole start at opposite ends of the spectrum—she on the low side and he on the high. As Dick Diver enters the marriage a complete and happy individual, Nicole enters it a fragmented, hollow girl. As the novel progresses, however, Nicole rises and becomes complete, as Dick falls and ends a shattered man. Increasingly throughout the marriage, Dick is forced to play the dual roles of doctor and husband to his wife. Eventually, the strain of this arrangement affects his emotional stability and paralyzes his career. Each time she has a breakdown, Dick must pull Nicole back together. In one instance, Diver and Nicole are together on an afternoon outing at a carnival; as soon as they arrive at the fairgrounds, Nicole darts away and disappears. Diver chases after and finds her in the car of a descending ferris wheel, laughing hysterically. When he asks, “Why did you lose control of yourself like that?” she replies, “You know very well why.” (189). She claims that she saw a girl no more than fifteen years old, leering at Dick, and she is jealous. He tells her that “this business about a girl is a delusion, do you understand that word?” She replies, “It’s always a delusion when I see what you don’t want me to see.” (190). Their conversation ends with her crying in Dick’s arms, begging “Help me, help me, Dick!” (190). Fitzgerald describes their situation and the way in which it affects Dick in the following manner:

A wave of agony went over him. Dick tried to think what to do. The dualism in his views of her—that of husband, that of the psychiatrist—was increasingly paralyzing his faculties... In these six years she had several times carried him over the line with her, disarming him by exciting emotional pity or by a flow of wit, fantastic and disassociated, so that only after the episode did he realize with consciousness of his own relaxation from tension that she had succeeded in getting a point against his better judgement (8).

Another way in which Nicole drains her husband is through her wealth. Their lifestyle is dictated by her family’s money; and not only has Dick’s marriage to Nicole forced him to be a full-time, on-duty doctor, but her money has also forced him to associate with rich people both socially and professionally. It is difficult for Dick to maintain financial independence because he is surrounded by Warren money. The greatest compromise he makes to himself is allowing them
to buy a clinic for him. When his friend, Franz Gregorovius, proposes the forming of a partnership and purchasing a clinic with Diver, Dick is excited because he has a chance to commit himself to his career. He realizes, however, that his friend approaches him not because of Dick's professional prowess, but rather because of his access to financial backing. Once again, Dick feels that he has been bought by the Warrens. Now, not only was Baby able to buy a doctor for her sister, but now she has also bought Nicole a clinic and no longer must worry about her.

Because he must work full-time at his career and simultaneously give mental ballast to his wife, working at the clinic causes Dick to feel even more captured. When the parents of one of his patients remove their child from his care because they believe Dick has acted irresponsibly, we see Dick's career come to a humiliating end. After this, Dick leaves the clinic and completely dissociates himself from his work. The final blow to Dick comes when Nicole has an affair with Tommy Barban, a friend of the Divers', and later decides to leave Dick to marry this man. The once promising young and well-educated psychiatrist who possessed every advantage, has been reduced to an aimless existence: drinking, moving from one small town to the next, and surviving on the belief that he once had promise. Fitzgerald, in this work, portrays women as vampires who emotionally bleed the men in their lives until the men are helpless. Nicole had brought about Dick's professional and personal demise, and we sense from Fitzgerald's portrayal that a woman's independence must be gained at a man's expense.

In another of Fitzgerald work, *The Great Gatsby*, we again witness the destruction of a man at the hands of a woman. The novel focuses on Jay Gatsby, a romantic idealist, and his downfall. We observe him as he devotes his life to the dream of recapturing the moments of his past with a woman who has come to represent that past. Years earlier, he had fallen in love with the beautiful Daisy Fay, but before their relationship crystallized into something permanent, Gatsby was drafted. In the intervening years, Daisy marries a fellow socialite, Tom Buchanan. When Gatsby returns from the war and discovers this, he shapes his entire life around the dream of regaining Daisy and their past relationship.

Originally Gatsby was a Midwestern farm boy, but seeing the lavish lifestyle Daisy is used to, he feels that he must match, if not exceed, the resources Tom Buchanan has in order to lure Daisy away from him. Through bootlegging and other illegal activities, Gatsby accumulates a fortune and, in the hope of impressing her, he throws lavish, glittering parties. His bashes, however, appear ostentatious and vulgar because he is part of the *nouveaux riches* and lacks the savoir-faire and finesse associated with old money. Daisy, rather than finding the parties enjoyable and impressive, thinks they are gauche and unpleasant. At one, she is, however, attracted to a director with his protege, and here, we gain some insight into Daisy's personality. Gatsby says to the Buchanans,
“Perhaps you know that lady.” He points to a “gorgeous, scarcely human orchid of a woman who sat in a state under a white-plum tree. ‘She’s lovely,’ Daisy exclaims, ‘I’ve never met so many celebrities. I liked that man—what was his name?’” (The Great Gatsby 106). Gatsby tells her that he is a small producer and Daisy’s retort is, “Well, I liked him anyhow.” (106).

At the party, the director and actor appear as a sort of “scene” in a play, and this unreality is what attracts Daisy because she prefers acting and false gestures to genuine emotion. Daisy, though a woman of unlimited financial resources, is devoid of inner resources. This emptiness is emphasized in a couple of ways throughout the novel. For one thing, she develops and changes very little; she is static, as the physical description of her indicates. She is described as being “buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. She was in white, and her dress was rippling and fluttering as if she had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house” (98). And, even to other characters, Daisy appears to have an intrinsic void in her life. We see this when Jordan, a friend of the Buchanans, approving of the Gatsby-Daisy affair, says that “Daisy ought to have something in her life” (81).

Through a mutual friend, Nick Carraway, Gatsby is reunited with Daisy, and she agrees to what essentially would be considered an affair. We see that Gatsby, however, feels unworthy of Daisy because she prefers acting and false gestures to genuine emotion. Daisy, though a woman of unlimited financial resources, is devoid of inner resources. This emptiness is emphasized in a couple of ways throughout the novel. For one thing, she develops and changes very little; she is static, as the physical description of her indicates. She is described as being “buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. She was in white, and her dress was rippling and fluttering as if she had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house” (98). And, even to other characters, Daisy appears to have an intrinsic void in her life. We see this when Jordan, a friend of the Buchanans, approving of the Gatsby-Daisy affair, says that “Daisy ought to have something in her life” (81).

Through a mutual friend, Nick Carraway, Gatsby is reunited with Daisy, and she agrees to what essentially would be considered an affair. We see that Gatsby, however, feels unworthy of Daisy; as a member of the aristocracy, Daisy would never leave her socially acceptable husband for a man of Gatsby’s lower social status. She does, however, allow herself to have a casual affair with Gatsby and enjoys the affection and attention of two men. She plays with Gatsby partly out of nostalgia, partly to spite her husband, but mostly to relieve her boredom. To her, their affair is just a game, and she reveals her attitude toward him when she tells him he resembles a man in an advertisement on a billboard. In advertisements external beauty, wealth, and youth exist, but are all illusions. Illusion is what Daisy likes about Gatsby; she does not want him for himself, but for the illusion of what he represents.

The beginning of Gatsby’s tragic end comes toward the end of the novel when Tom’s mistress, Myrtle Wilson, is accidentally killed by a hit-and-run driver in a yellow car. As it turns out, the car belongs to Gatsby and at the time of the accident, Daisy had been driving. When the authorities come seeking the murderer, Gatsby, in a final gallant effort, takes the blame for Daisy. Afterwards, Gatsby takes her home and stays outside her house in case Tom, realizing Daisy is the real killer, should try to harm her. What Gatsby does not realize, however, is that she conspires with Tom to pin the blame on him, knowing that Myrtle’s husband is planning to avenge his wife’s death by killing her murderer. Before Gatsby is killed, Tom and Daisy go to New York and leave the chaos they created for someone else to take care of. Here, the morally casual Daisy shows herself to be truly callous and selfish; by sacrificing Gatsby to preserve her own safety,
she is essentially an accomplice in the crime along with her husband and Wilson. Daisy Buchanan represents one of Fitzgerald’s “deadly” women. Her destructiveness, however, goes beyond Gatsby’s dream and leads the man, whose entire existence was devoted to her, to his death.

Just as it is important to understand Fitzgerald’s background, it is equally important to know about the significant male-female relationships Hemingway had. Hemingway has often been accused of disliking women, even of being antagonistic toward them. Part of this dislike stems from his relationship with his mother, Grace Hemingway, who was an artistic and talented perfectionist, but only a mildly successful musician. Hemingway, however, viewed her as being extremely manipulative and considered her to be a “selfish and destructive mother and wife.” Hemingway always felt that she was a “domineering shrew who drove her husband to suicide” (Kert 21). To quote Charles Lanman, one of Hemingway’s friends, “he always referred to his mother as ‘that bitch.’ He must have told me a thousand times how much he hated her and in how many ways” (Kert 21). Many of Hemingway’s friends and acquaintances agreed that part of the reason for his preoccupation with masculine power in his life and in his fiction stemmed from his need to deal with and erase the memory of his mother dominating his father. “His problems in his own relationships with women and his passive fictional heroines, then, no doubt originated with his determination never to succumb to any woman in the way he had seen his father do” (Kert 21).

Beside his mother, the other significant relationships he had with women were with his four wives. No matter how devoted they were to him, Hemingway could never sustain a satisfying relationship with any of his wives because he became bored, critical and abusive of them. At one point, while married to Mary Welsh, Hemingway, very cynical about marriage, said that the “best approach to women is to compliment them, make love to them and then keep them off guard” (Kert 435).

For Hemingway, equality in a relationship or a marriage was unappealing. He had nothing but contempt for men who allowed themselves to be dominated by a woman. In Hemingway’s opinion, a woman should be supportive of her husband and ask nothing for herself. Her role should be to praise men, satisfy their egos and sex drives and offer them constant approval. Pete Lanham, another friend of Hemingway’s, concluded that “Ernest hated all women except the one who was currently a good sex partner” (Kert 425).

His fiction reflects his reality, and Hemingway’s attitude toward women is exemplified repeatedly throughout his novels. In his fiction there are two types of females. The first, the “deadly female,” is beautiful, callous and always wants to control the man with whom she is involved. Just the opposite is the other
Hemingway female; she is utterly passive and utterly devoted and submissive to men. She treats them almost worshipfully and wants nothing more than to merge her identity with her lord’s.

An example of the “deadly” female appears in Hemingway’s short story, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.” Francis Macomber is an immature, boyish man who has yet to attain his manhood. Margot, his wife, is pretty, callous, and always wants to maintain the upper hand in their relationship. The Macomber marriage is a tenuous one; the reason Margot stays with him is that he has money and she is able to control him. She is considered “bad” for Francis because she has never allowed him to become a man—live up to Hemingway’s code of courage, honor and endurance. The action of the story centers around a buffalo hunt and the attainment of manhood through the hunt. The first time Macomber goes out hunting, he gets frightened and backs down from the challenge which the animal presents him. In addition to dealing with the loss of self-respect for being a coward, Macomber must also put up with his wife’s scorn and insults as Margot constantly berates him for his lack of machismo and his pusillanimity. Margot thinks of her husband as a coward and she seems to have him under her thumb right where she wants him. At the end of the story, however, Francis faces a charging buffalo and does not run from the challenge. Before he has the opportunity to shoot the animal, however, Margot shoots and kills Francis. For a brief moment before his death, his fear was gone and his manhood was attained. However, Margot realizes that if she allows her husband to become a man she will lose the ability to control him.

The Macomber marriage is just the kind that Hemingway despised, where the man is wealthy and weak and the woman is beautiful and manipulative. “The story is an indictment of wives who assert their power through physical attractiveness and become deadly when threatened with the loss of that power” (Kurt 275). Once, Hemingway, in a discussion of the origins of some of his work, said that he had known Margot Macomber in real life and that he had “invented her complete with handles from the worst bitch he knew” (Kurt 489). Robert Wilson, a character in “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” sums up very well the character of Hemingway’s “deadly” female when in reference to Margot he says, “These women are the hardest, cruelest, most predatory, and their men have softened or gone to pieces nervously as they hardened” (Kurt 489).

In another story, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” the focal point is also the corruptive power of women. Here, we see Harry Walden, a writer, as he faces death. Through flashbacks and dialogue, we view segments of his life and discover, among other things, the relationship between him and his wife, Helen.
Harry had married a rich, loving woman and because of her money, he had become accustomed to leading an easy, luxurious life. Unfortunately, he becomes dependent on her and lazy in his relaxed existence. We learn that one of his greatest fears is that he will die before he completes his best work. As he lies dying, he realizes that he has sacrificed his writing talent and, in terms of his artistry, has wasted his life. When he realizes that he is indeed going to die before he writes his masterpiece, he is angry at Helen because he feels that she and her wealth caused him to sacrifice his talent since he was not forced to write in order to make a living. In Hemingway’s eyes, Harry does not live up to the stoic demeanor, because he wasted his talent and essentially his life. Most likely, Hemingway blames the woman for this character’s ruin.

Just the opposite of these deadly women are the saintly, passive women like the character Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*. Catherine is undoubtedly modeled after Agnes Von Kurowsky, a nurse during WWI, who was one of Hemingway’s first loves. She ended the relationship, and Hemingway, severely jolted, never forgot her. Catherine represents Hemingway’s ideal heroine—one who is submissive and supportive of her husband and is fulfilled in life by just being with the man she loves. Catherine is a very beautiful, proper, and feminine woman who is warm, sensitive, and self-sacrificing, always willing to play a motherly role for her love, comforting and pitying him when he needs it.

The plot focuses on love in wartime. Frederic Henry is an American volunteer in the Italian army during WWI when he meets Catherine Barkley, a nurse, at the British hospital. Outwardly, Frederic is unpatriotic and ruthless, an individual living for the moment. Underneath his tough exterior, however, lies a caring, sensitive man. Catherine, having recently lost her fiancé in the war, plans never to fall in love again. However, a deep caring develops between the two and they plan to be together for the rest of their lives.

As mentioned, Catherine is Hemingway’s ideal woman; throughout the novel, she is devoted and submissive to Henry and greatly desires his approval. She wants nothing than to be with Henry, serve him, and essentially merge her identity with his. At one point, as Catherine and Henry talk about the length of her hair, she says, “I could cut mine and we’d be just alike, only one of us blonde and the other of us dark. Then we’d both be alike. Oh, darling, I want you so much I want to be you too. I want us to be all mixed up. I don’t want you to go away. Why, darling, I don’t live at all when I’m not with you” (Kurt 425). Her willingness to sacrifice her happiness is evident in a short scene at a bar where Catherine is getting tired and Frederic is playing billiards and enjoying himself. She says, “Don’t let me spoil your fun, darling. I’ll go back whenever you want” (Kurt 275). For a while, the two live for and thrive on their love, content just to be with one another. However, their paradise ultimately ends when Catherine gives birth to a stillborn baby and then dies herself. Just what they
both feared and hoped would never happen, has happened. After her death, Frederic discovers that one cannot say farewell to arms; one must learn to live with death and accept and tolerate whatever life doles out.

After looking at some of the works of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, we find that neither possessed a very positive view of women. Fitzgerald’s women, though all charming and beautiful, are hollow; this vacuousness usually hides behind the facade of a charming socialite like the character Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*, of Nicole in *Tender is the Night*. Hemingway feels much more antagonistic toward women, as is apparent in the short story, “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” as well as in other Hemingway fiction. In their writing both men reflect their vision of reality, basing their fiction on personal experiences they have had with women. Perhaps we can conclude that writing was, for them, a means of expressing and dealing with their own fears about being dominated and manipulated by women.

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