

Daisy Buchanan: Victim or Victimizer?

In reviews of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, there is typically more focus on either Nick Carraway, the narrator, or Jay Gatsby, for whom the novel is named, rather than any of the secondary characters. However, particular attention should be paid to Daisy Buchanan, as her effect on Gatsby steers the course of the novel's action. Gatsby's feelings for her influence his lifestyle and eventually result in his death. One critical article explores Daisy's presence in the novel in an unusual way. In "'Herstory' and Daisy Buchanan," Leland S. Person, Jr. portrays Daisy incorrectly when he states: "Daisy, in fact, is more victim than victimizer" (Person 250). His article cites numerous examples of Daisy's status as a victim of both Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby – cowed wife of the former, idealized object of the latter. But this interpretation of Daisy fails to take into account everything readers learn of her personality and the way she attempts to manipulate those around her to assure her own security and comfort in life. The article's view is that "If she is corrupt by the end of the novel...that corruption is not so much inherent in her character as it is the progressive result of her treatment by the other characters" (Person 251). This view is shortsighted and does not acknowledge Daisy's own responsibility for her actions. She allows herself to be treated as she is by the other characters because by doing so, she can continue to seek money and security. These are the two most important things in life to Daisy. Early in her introduction as a character, we learn that she

thinks a lot of herself: “I’ve been everywhere and seen everything and done everything...Sophisticated – God, I’m sophisticated!” (Fitzgerald 17) With this opinion of herself, it is clear that Daisy does not need to be considered a victim, but rather someone who is intensely self-centered.

There is considerable evidence that Daisy is more concerned with money and material goods than emotions like love: “Several readers of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* have found that the voice of Daisy, a voice ‘full of money,’ helps form a central part of her characterization” (Settle 115). Daisy comes from a background of comfortable living, and that is what she intends to maintain by marrying well. Gatsby realizes this, to an extent. Although he did not originally intend to fall in love with her, once he did, he knew that in order to keep her, he would have to represent himself as a man with something to offer her: “...he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe that he was a person from the same stratum as herself – that he was fully able to take care of her” (Fitzgerald 149). Despite Gatsby’s apparent wealth, when he goes away to war, Daisy will not wait for him to return. She is so obsessed with maintaining her lifestyle, and having financial security, that she cannot even wait for someone she supposedly loves to return from war: “And all the time 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” (Fitzgerald 151). The decision she made was Tom.

Tom Buchanan represented security for Daisy. He was wealthy, and he was at hand – unlike Gatsby, away at war, putting his life (and his supposed wealth) at risk. Daisy agrees to marry Tom because “There was a wholesome bulkiness about his person and his position, and Daisy was flattered. Doubtless there was a certain struggle and a certain relief” (Fitzgerald 151). The key word in this passage is *position* – Daisy was impressed by Tom’s status and wealth; the struggle was rooted in her fond feelings for Gatsby – she had agreed to marry him, but he was not there. So there would be an emotional struggle involved, but obviously she settled it by deciding to marry Tom – hence the “relief” of having her future and financial prospects settled: “An overview of the story of Gatsby himself is also not without evidence of Daisy as wrecker-temptress. Although she has given her promise to Jay, she marries another” (Settle 118). Her betrayal of this promise is one more example of Daisy’s selfish nature, and further proof that her position is not that of a victim in this novel. Unfortunately, Gatsby is unaware of her true nature, because he tries to rationalize her marriage to Tom: “She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me!” (Fitzgerald 130) Daisy may have loved him, but Gatsby seems to be forgetting that she did not know at the time that he was poor – without this key point, his rationalization becomes “She only married you because she was tired of waiting,” which is much less of a victimized status than he would like to believe.

One of the points in Person's article seems to actually prove the opposite of what he is writing about. His article has focused on Daisy as the victim of the story, but he says: "She seems able to transform the material world into some ephemeral dreamland in which objects suddenly glow with symbolic meaning" (Person 255). This is exactly what Daisy does, but it shows that she is materialistic and money-driven, not the product of her treatment by the other characters. It is likely that this aspect of her character is what drives Gatsby to earning his riches under questionable circumstances – he wants Daisy to love him again, and the only way he can think of to achieve this is by being as fabulously wealthy – or more so – than Tom, no matter how he earns the money. In his desperation, he has to show off his wealth to her, to assure himself that she will have something to make her love him again. He recognizes Daisy's materialistic nature, which is why he will not meet her just anywhere, but wants to spring his house and money on her first:

He had waited five years and bought a mansion where he dispensed starlight to casual moths – so that he could "come over" some afternoon to a stranger's garden... "Why didn't he ask you to arrange a meeting?" "He wants her to see his house... [Daisy's] not to know about it. Gatsby doesn't want her to know. You're just supposed to invite her to tea." (Fitzgerald 78-79)

Gatsby hopes that if she sees the grand house and property first, that will be her initial impression of him, and then he can show her the rest of his possessions to earn her love.

After all the effort Gatsby has put into becoming as wealthy as he originally led Daisy to believe, it is only logical that he continues to woo her with displays of his vast fortune. "Daisy belongs in the realm of gold" (Korenman

576), and Gatsby has to have something that will appeal to her monetary nature. He shows her around his house, brags about the fantastic parties with interesting people: “Look around,’ suggested Gatsby...’You must see the faces of many people you’ve heard about” (Fitzgerald 104). He is trying to appeal to Daisy’s materialistic side because that is the foremost concern of her character. She is attracted to wealth and things of quality: “For Daisy was young and her artificial world was redolent of orchids and pleasant, cheerful snobbery and orchestras...” (Fitzgerald 151). Gatsby sees what matters most to Daisy, and he wants so badly to make her love him as she used to. Knowing what is important to her, he uses his possessions to determine whether he was getting through to her: “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” (Fitzgerald 91). If he can prove to her that he can provide the wealth and affluence she wants, Gatsby believes he can win Daisy back.

When he has conducted her through the entirety of his grand house, with nothing left to show her he pulls open the closet and starts pulling out his expensive clothing:

He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. (Fitzgerald 92)

If he was dealing with anyone other than Daisy, this action would have seemed extremely arrogant. Yet it has the effect he wanted; Daisy, having seen what

Gatsby has, begins crying: “Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily... ‘It makes me sad because I’ve never seen such – such beautiful shirts before’” (Fitzgerald 92). The question is, does her hesitation in naming the shirts as the source of her sadness indicate that she does not mean the shirts at all? We have seen that Daisy equates objects with symbols, and if Gatsby’s shirts are a symbol of his wealth, perhaps her tears are because she thinks she could have had greater wealth if she had waited for Gatsby instead of marrying Tom.

Daisy is not the only one who equates material goods with status and personal worth. Gatsby does this as well. In this way, they are probably perfectly suited to each other, but the difference is Daisy’s desire for security and wealth *immediately*. She will not wait for Gatsby because he is lacking in that one area: “...she was tired of waiting for me” (Fitzgerald 130). Five years later, Gatsby still wants to marry Daisy, but he wants her as she was before, and “If Daisy fails to measure up to Gatsby’s fantasy, therefore, he for his part clearly fails to measure up to hers...in other words, Daisy becomes his female double” (Person 251). Despite Person’s intention to use this point as further evidence that the occurrences of the novel are not Daisy’s fault, portraying her as Gatsby’s double changes her status from passive victim to active participant. She knows what she wants – happiness through wealth – and if Gatsby cannot provide it for her, she will find it with someone else. Tom can provide what she wants, so she makes what almost amounts to a business decision when she chooses to marry him. We learn about the attributes that attracted Daisy to Tom through Nick:

“Her husband...a national figure in a way...His family were enormously wealthy – even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach...It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that” (Fitzgerald 6). Marrying Tom means that Daisy will not lack for money; he has a background of family wealth and an impressive record as a football player – status and riches, which are Daisy’s qualifications for a good match. She is not in love with him, and he does not show any great affection towards her that we can see at the beginning of the story. But, like Gatsby’s shady dealings with Meyer Wolfsheim, Daisy does not always choose the most commendable moral choice when ordering her life.

Person’s article tries to take away the responsibility Daisy has for her own choices in 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” (Person 253). This is true, but notice some of the words Person used – “choosing” and “allowed.” Daisy believed that Gatsby had money; that is why she loved him in the first place. At the time of her marriage to Tom, she had already promised to marry Gatsby, but she made the choice to break that promise and marry Tom. Even when she got a letter from Gatsby right before her wedding, she went through with it, proving that although Tom’s money may be a “crude force,” she knew what she wanted. “Daisy is passive, security-minded, and pragmatic” (Korenman 577); the driving force in her life is security and money, so Tom’s money would not seem “crude” to her. She knows she is giving up love by marrying Tom, and her choice proves what is the most important to her. Daisy

struggles briefly with this choice when she gets a letter from Gatsby right before her wedding. She gets drunk and seems to regret saying 'yes' to Tom:

She had a bottle of Sauterne in one hand and a letter in the other... "What's the matter, Daisy?" I was scared, I can tell you; I'd never seen a girl like that before. "Here deares'." She groped around in a wastebasket she had with her on the bed and pulled out the string of pearls. "Take 'em down-stairs and give 'em back to whoever they belong to. Tell 'em all Daisy's change' her mine. Say 'Daisy's change' her mine!" (Fitzgerald 76)

Something in Daisy is telling her she not to go through with her decision to marry Tom, but she decides to ignore the warning and marry him and his money anyway.

Daisy's fixation on money and wealth show how skewed her priorities are, and along with this, her lack of morality. We have already seen how she married Tom even while she had promised to marry Gatsby. Five years later, when they finally meet again, she can be found playing with Gatsby's affections just like she did when they first met. He adored her and had money (she thought), so she got involved with him. Once he returns, she still seems more interested in his money than in Gatsby himself. The experience is also giving her a chance to relive her past courtship with Gatsby, with the added excitement of sneaking around behind Tom's back. She has not taken this affair with Gatsby as far as Tom took his affair with Myrtle Wilson, but as a married woman, this emotional affair is still inappropriate. To her, going about secretly with Gatsby is just fun and games, up until the point when Gatsby reveals what they have been doing and tells his grand plans to Tom, Nick and Jordan – that Daisy is going to leave Tom. It is at this point that she realizes she took things too far: "She hesitated...as though she

realized at last what she was doing – and as though she had never, all along, intended doing anything at all. But it was done now. It was too late” (Fitzgerald 132). Even after all this happens Daisy falls back to what she always does – chooses the easiest path to security. She does not really want to take any risks, even for love: “Her frightened eyes told that whatever intentions, whatever courage she had had, were definitely gone” (Fitzgerald 135). Part of the enjoyment of her emotional affair with Gatsby was planning how they could be together. But in reality, it would be too much of a scandal for her to do anything like actually leaving her husband and child to be with Gatsby, whom she supposedly loves: “She is flattered by Gatsby’s monumental efforts to regain her, but...in the end, she elects to stay with her socially respectable husband” (Korenman 577). We could applaud Daisy’s morality in choosing her wedding vows over her affair if she had not already demonstrated immoral behavior in regards to Gatsby in the first place, beginning with the broken marriage promise, then leading him on while married to Tom, and, as will soon be discussed, playing a role in his death.

Perhaps Daisy did not directly cause Gatsby’s death through any specific actions, but her *inaction* “forces the story to be played out to its logical conclusion” (Person 257). She is the one to strike and kill Myrtle Wilson, Tom’s mistress, with the car. This causes Myrtle’s husband to seek revenge, and he goes after the wrong person. He does this because “...from what we know Daisy apparently never tells Tom that it is she, not Jay Gatsby, who has run down Myrtle – an act of omission on the part of Daisy that leads to Gatsby’s killing at

the hands of Myrtle's husband" (Settle 118). This may be the cruelest thing we have seen Daisy do to Gatsby. He feels so strongly about her that he will actually take the blame for her killing a woman: "'Was Daisy driving?' 'Yes,' he said after a moment, 'but of course I'll say I was'" (Fitzgerald 143). Daisy's failure to admit her part in Myrtle's death is morally inexcusable, particularly when the consequences are considered. She killed Myrtle, and sparked the murder suicide that ended the lives of two other men and destroyed the reputation of both, particularly Wilson: "So Wilson was reduced to a man 'deranged by grief' in order that the case might remain in its simplest form. And it rested there" (Fitzgerald 164). None of these examples portray Daisy as a victim; rather, she clearly is the cause of most of the problems of the story. From the Wilsons, to Gatsby, to her own family life, she has destroyed any sense of security for those around her – yet through her silence, maintained her own.

After Gatsby's death, it is clear how selfish and self-absorbed Daisy really is: "Finally, in an act of ultimate social betrayal, Daisy fails to attend Gatsby's funeral" (Settle 118). Gatsby's death was indirectly her fault. Her attendance at the funeral might have had a social impact if anyone had known about this besides Nick, but they did not, so she could have gone to the funeral. In fact, she should have gone. They had a substantial history together; it may not have been the healthiest relationship, but it was a relationship nonetheless: "I can't describe to you how surprised I was to find out I loved her, old sport...she was in love with me too" (Fitzgerald 150). To honor that, and also the sacrifice Gatsby

was willing to make for her in saying that he was the one who killed Myrtle, Daisy should have attended the funeral.

However, Daisy is not the type of person who is willing to acknowledge the needs or sacrifices of others. As Nick notes: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made..." (Fitzgerald 179). Based on this observation, it is easier to argue that Gatsby was more of a victim than Daisy – had he never gotten involved with any of them, he would not have been murdered and may have lived out his life quite peacefully. Of course, then there would be no Great Gatsby, but what is frightening is the idea that Daisy's morals will be passed on to the next generation: "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'" (Person 253). This ideal releases Daisy from the responsibility of facing her own twisted values. A "beautiful little fool" does not have to think about how her actions affect others. She can let others take care of her, and is not responsible for what she does or the lives which are ruined around her. She is even able to get Tom and Gatsby arguing frantically over who will possess her: "'I'm going to take better care of you from now on,' [said Tom]. 'You don't understand,' said Gatsby, with a touch of panic. 'You're not going to take care of her anymore'" (Fitzgerald 133). Although she never intended to reveal her affair with Gatsby, once it becomes open knowledge her

desire to be protected and spoiled become the underlying issue of the situation – Daisy has again successfully manipulated a situation in her favor.

Daisy is a character whose main concern is money and material stability. Although Person's article suggests that "Nick and Gatsby progressively devitalize Daisy's symbolic meaning until she exists as a vulgar emblem of the money values which dominate their world" (Person 255), a closer look at her personality shows that she existed this way before they even met her. She is obviously capable of affection, even love, as demonstrated by her early relationship with Gatsby: "[Daisy] wanted to see him and feel his presence beside her and be reassured..." (Fitzgerald 151). However, her overriding concern is wealth and financial security. Leland S. Person, Jr. says that viewing Daisy as anything other than a victim in The Great Gatsby "belittles the complexity of the novel" (Person 250). But in reality, Person's interpretation is the one that does this – by seeing her as a victim, he does not go deeper into Daisy's personality to unearth the motivations behind her relationships with Tom and Gatsby. Yes, Tom cheats on her, and Gatsby idealizes her and views her as a path to reclaim his youth, but she is not an innocent person within this story: "I've had a very bad time, Nick, and I'm pretty cynical about everything" (Fitzgerald 16). Daisy's cynicism about life is not necessarily her fault, but it does contribute to the way she relates to others and the things in life that are important to her. Money is at the top of that list, and even though love is something she can feel for others and receive in return, when given the choice between the two, money and the stability it provides her will always win out. Daisy Buchanan of The Great Gatsby is not, as

Leland S. Person Jr. would have us believe, a victim of Gatsby or Tom or any of the other characters of the novel; she is simply a woman who cannot find anything within this world to be more important than material wealth, and she pushes all obstacles out of her way in order to accomplish her own selfish dreams and desires.

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