

Daisy Buchanan, the Heart of *The Great Gatsby*

Fitzgerald in fact created a novel which says that it is impossible to face reality.¹

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Everyone agrees that Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*² is one of the most striking love stories in modern American literature. The inordinate ambition and "extraordinary gift for hope" (8) of James Gatz seduces not only his past lover but the reader as well, so that it is little wonder if the critics — but for a few noticeable exceptions³ — have focused their studies on Jay Gatsby rather than on Daisy Buchanan. Beyond the undeniable fact that Gatsby is the central character of the novel, we would like to state in the following lines that the true pivot of the

1. Gary J. Scrimger, "Against *The Great Gatsby*", in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Great Gatsby*, ed. by Ernest H. Lockridge, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968, p. 81.

2. F. S. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, first published in 1925. The Penguin edition is quoted in this essay.

3. Among them, Joan S. Korenman, "Another look at Daisy Buchanan", in *American Literature*, 50 (Jan 1975), pp. 575-78; Leland S. Person Jr, "'Herstory' and Daisy Buchanan", in *American Literature*, 50 (May 1978), pp. 250-57; Sarah Beebe Fryer, "Beneath the Mask: The plight of Daisy Buchanan", in Scott Donaldson, *Critical Essays on F.S. Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*, G.K. Hall & Co, Boston, Mass, 1984, pp. 154-67.

plot is embodied by Daisy who has definitely more substance than most of Fitzgerald's commentators are willing to admit.

Unquestionably Tom Buchanan's wife has often been outshone by the strong, gaudy personality of her husband and the insatiable, unrealistic desire of her lover. To many readers, she appears like just one of Tom's possessions — even if she is the most sophisticated and treasured one — or like a pale unsatisfactory figure who cannot compare with the ideal woman haunting Gatsby's unrestrained imagination. She merely looks like a spoiled woman-child, whose ironical or humorous remarks do not allow the reader to grant her any real profundity. Significantly she is drawn by an eye-catching actress she meets incidentally at Gatsby's as though she recognized in the young woman her own mirror image. As Marius Bewley puts it:

Daisy likes the moving picture actress because she has no substance. She is a gesture that is committed to nothing more real than her own image on the silver screen. She has become a gesture divorced forever from the tired sameness of human reality. In effect, this passage is Daisy's confession of faith.⁴

One is forced to admit that Daisy's character seems to lack any depth, as if she were a mere surface on which a rather lovely face and refined clothes had been hastily painted. When she reaches Nick's unpretentious home in West Egg, he only sees of her face "a damp streak of hair lay[ing] like a dash of blue paint across her cheeks." (83) Moreover, her weightlessness is immediately perceived by Nick on the occasion of his visit at the Buchanan's when the "wind die[s] out about the room" and she "balloon[s] slowly to the floor." (13) But what brings discredit upon her in the reader's eyes and makes her case radically hopeless is her basic inability to take it upon herself to confess her fault. Her cowardice and total lack of moral sense make her appear like a paragon of selfishness and irresponsibility.

Within hours, she makes a series of equally important self interested and destructive choices. She does not return to the scene of the accident. Nor does she tell either the police or Tom that she was driving the car, an act of omission that eventually leads Gatsby to death. She also does not call Gatsby the morning after the accident, does not attend his funeral and does not send a message or flowers.⁵

⁴ Marius Bewley, "Fitzgerald and the Collapse of the American Dream", in *Francis Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. by Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985, p. 39.

⁵ Susan Resneck Parr, "The idea of Order at West Egg", in *New Essays on The Great Gatsby*, ed. by Matthew J. Bruccoli, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 68.

However, though the narrator's attitude toward his cousin varies between a discreet disapproval and a sympathetic complicity, he never seems to realize what motivates her nor what is her actual role in the plot. On top of that, he eventually shows suspicious leniency with her at the end of the novel. For even after the tragic denouement, Nick does not condemn Daisy for her despicable attitude after the accident she caused, putting the blame on Tom first, as if she had only been dragged along with him into the whole mess.

I couldn't forgive *him* or like *him*, but I saw that what *he* had done was, to him, entirely justified. It was all very careless and confused. 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... (170) (emphasis added)

Now if Gatsby's blindness is easily understandable, how can we account for Nick's? His lack of objectivity⁶ is all the more important that he is the narrator of the story and that a good understanding of his point of view is the key of the general intelligence of the novel and of Daisy's character in particular. It would certainly be exaggerated to assert that Nick *also* is in love with Daisy; nevertheless that he is attracted and seduced by her is quite visible especially when he describes her in the act of speaking. Clearly enough it is her voice then which holds him spellbound.

It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. [...] 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. (15)

Nick's insistence on Daisy's voice — "there's something in that voice of hers..." (75) — confirms the strong attraction that it exerts over him. Indeed her voice "playing murmurous tricks in her throat" (101) is so fascinating that the melody of it prevents Nick to understand the meaning of the words she pronounces: "The exhilarating ripple of her voice was a wild tonic in the rain. I had to follow the sound of it for a moment, up and down, with my ear alone, before any words came through." (83) Aware or not of the power of its "warm human

⁶ Nick's attitude toward Daisy somewhat contradicts what he said to the "incurably dishonest" Jordan Baker: "I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known." (59)

magic" (104) on other people⁷ Daisy, with her voice "full of money," (115) irrevocably lures Gatsby.

She had caught a cold and it made her voice huskier and more charming than ever, and Gatsby was overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver, safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor. (142)

Indeed, she seduces Nick as well, not so much thanks to the tantalizing tune of her voice, but by dragging him without further ado into the maze of her private life. The "little heart to heart talk in the veranda" (24) during which she half-confesses her conjugal frustrations triggers off the whole process. Later on, Nick's further involvement — forced by Gatsby — in his cousin's love affair parallels his favorite fantasy so uncannily that it perfectly satisfies his unconscious voyeuristic tendencies.

I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue 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. (57)

Ineluctably ensnared by the joys of vicarious love, Nick follows the lovers everywhere, from the day of their reunion to the final break-up. When the couple meets again after almost five years of separation, Nick feels "the loud beating of [his] own heart" (83) and when he fancies them kissing each other "[his] lips part[...] like a dumb man's (106).⁸ Intuitively aware of her cousin's repressed feelings for her, Daisy teases him with repetitive allusions to his unconscious commitment. Having replied to Nick's invitation for an afternoon tea at his place she asks ingenuously "Are you in love with me [...] or why did I have to come alone?" (83) When Nick brings her to one of Gatsby's Saturday night parties she proposes mischievously: "If you want to kiss me any time during the evening, Nick, just let me know and I'll be glad to arrange it for you. Just mention my

⁷ "Her voice compelled me forward as I listen..." (19) Nick remarks, involuntarily corroborating the gossips: "I've heard it said that Daisy's murmur was only to make people lean toward her; an irrelevant criticism that made it no less charming." (14)

⁸ Nick's identification with Gatsby is particularly clear in this somewhat oneiric scene as both of them experience unsuccessful attempts of long repressed memories to emerge into their conscious minds. Nick's analysis of Gatsby's motivations — "he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy" (106) — stirs in him "an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that [he] had heard somewhere a long time ago [...] [and that] was incommunicable forever." (107)

name. Or present a green card. I'm giving out green — " (101) The green card is a — deliberate (?) — echo of the "green light that burns all night at the end of [her] dock" (90), indicating that Daisy's comprehension of what is actually going on is not as poor as her sometimes foolish attitude may imply. At any rate, her golden youth gives her enough self-confidence to make her aware of the impact she has on men. As if she foreshadowed Nick's secret embarrassing fondness for her, she manages to divert preventively his feelings toward a substitute in the person of her closest friend.

'In fact I think I'll arrange a marriage. Come over often, Nick, and I'll sort of — oh — fling you together. You know — lock you up accidentally in linen closets and push you out to sea in a boat, and all that sort of thing — ' (23)

On the face of it, Jordan Baker looks enough like Daisy to be repeatedly mixed up in Nick's descriptions of the two young sophisticated women,⁹ "both in white" (13), "ballooning slowly to the floor" (13), "lay[ing] upon an enormous couch, like silver idols" (110) and even confused in one voice: "'We can't move,' they said together." (110) In fact, Daisy's view of the situation proves remarkably becoming for Nick and Jordan fall together into the trap — though with not much enthusiasm. Moreover, Nick's further comments corroborates Daisy's intuition: "Unlike Gatsby and Tom Buchanan, I had no girl whose disembodied face floated along the dark cornices and blinding signs, and so I drew up the girl beside me, tightening my arms." (78) Though it seems clear that a real love affair with Nick would generate an awkward situation for both of them — he is only her second cousin, but nevertheless Tom's friend — Daisy's spontaneous initiative to arrange immediately a liaison with somebody else so that *she* remains in the background is significant of her emotional position. The critics have underlined that to be safe and keep her mental balance she had to stay away from any deep affective involvement.

Nick's keen observation of her behavior demonstrates not that she is unable to feel and express strong emotions, but that she deliberately avoids them, because she recognizes the pain they can entail. Daisy clings — unsuccessfully — to a gay superficial "careless" worked in an effort to protect herself from what are the terrifying dangers inherent in caring.¹⁰

Indeed her brief but intense liaison with Gatsby in Louisville and the painful separation that follows make her emotionally vulnerable. For the first

⁹. After all, even Myrtle Wilson takes one for the other...

¹⁰. Sarah Beebe Fryer, *Ibid.*, p. 154.

time, the young frivolous golden girl is authentically in love, so much so that she is ready to challenge the rules of her caste and create scandal in her family when she realizes that she is about to lose her beloved.

Her pitiful reaction on her wedding-day reveals the true nature of her feelings for Tom and that her love for him is largely the result of a transference process, which confirms what Daisy herself avows when she is cornered both by Gatsby and Tom: "I did love him once — but I loved you too." (126) Though one can admit that "she loved Gatsby in a romantic way, and Tom in a more practical way,"¹¹ Daisy's excessive manifestations of tenderness for Tom undoubtedly verify the presence of a transference process — always of hysterical nature — at work in her.¹² It is the after-effect this equivocal situation adds to Tom's inveterate womanizing which makes her bitter an bitter, ineluctably leading her to emotional carelessness. Her obstinate temperance¹³ — which is so remarkable in a world where so many people drink hard — has become a strict necessity for her, for getting drunk would recall unhappy repressed memories and now censored feelings associated with Gatsby.¹⁴ The shallow, whirling world and superficial crowd — Nick would say "rotten" — surrounding Daisy allow her to remain distanced from any possible personal affective involvement and protect her from the pangs of love.¹⁵ So her fascination for the young actress is now perfectly clear.

The actress appeals to Daisy not because she is too shallow to appreciate emotion, but because the actress appears to have achieved the emotional invulnerability Daisy herself has come to desire.¹⁶

We get the measure of the vacuity of her sentimental life when Jordan Baker remarks that after all, "Daisy ought to have something in her life." (77)¹⁷

11. Sarah Beebe Fryer, *Ibid.*, p. 165.

12. Jordan Baker ironically relates: "I thought I'd never seen a girl so mad about her husband. If he left the room for a minute she'd look around uneasily, and say: 'Where's Tom gone?' and wear the most abstracted expression until she saw him coming in the door. She used to sit on the sand with his head in her lap by the hour, rubbing her fingers over his eyes and looking at him with unfathomable delight. It was touching to see them together — it made you laugh in a hushed, fascinated way." (75)

13. Jordan Baker testifies: "She came out with an absolutely perfect reputation. Perhaps because she doesn't drink" (75)

14. The young woman who having "drunk a quantity of champagne" (52) at one of Gatsby's parties sang with tears in her voice symbolizes Daisy's dread to get drunk again.

15. But not from the torments of jealousy... From this point of view, Tom cannot give her the feeling of security she has always been craving for.

16. Sarah Beebe Fryer, *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Indeed, the unexpected reappearance in her existence of the man who — involuntarily — is the cause of her present emotional coldness acts like a catharsis¹⁸ and enables her to be in love again and enjoy it. Apparently cured of her affective frigidity she nevertheless remains vulnerable and her new psychological balance is still fragile as the final denouement of the novel too clearly indicates. Disappointed once more by the very man who already made her suffer in the past and unable to bear it she immediately frees herself from any further commitment with Gatsby and loses interest in whatever may happen to him. By doing so she once again plays the deciding move that curves the destiny of the other protagonists.

It is generally agreed that only Tom Buchanan can be cynical enough to manipulate other people — or cold-bloodedly impose his will to somebody "as though he were moving a checker to another square" (17) —, whatever the consequences of his acts. But as regards Gatsby's tragic end it is Daisy herself who, consciously or not, holds Tom the weapon used in the crime. Indeed, her silence about the exact circumstances of the accident eventually leads to Gatsby's death by providing Tom with a tantalizing means to dispose of his rival. She obviously does not plan the whole business — nor does she plan Myrtle's death — but her cowardly, irresponsible attitude proves to be dreadfully efficient since she literally *kills two birds with the same stone*.¹⁹ As a result, she actually gets rid both of her husband's mistress and of a past that is now too painful. She eliminates the two factors that made her suffer and perturbed her shallow happy little personal universe: Myrtle Wilson who brought her the agony of jealousy and Gatsby who deceived her twice, once by not being here when she wanted and needed him, the second time by not being the man he pretended to be. Thus *her* vengeance, not Tom's,²⁰ is complete.

Now one may rightly wonder what gives such an irresolute, superficial person as Daisy Buchanan enough power to achieve her ends and weigh heavily on the destiny of other people. It is certainly not the strength of her character, nor her intuition or clairvoyance which paradoxically are rather Tom's trump cards:

17. There is here an interesting mirror effect: it is now Nick's and Jordan's turn to arrange a love affair for Daisy.

18. It is during the "beautiful shirts" episode at Gatsby's that her emotional armour breaks into pieces.

19. Even three, though George Wilson's death was of no consequence for her.

20. Even if Tom Buchanan has the satisfaction to have reconquered his wife, the loss of his mistress must make his triumph somewhat bitter.

"You think I'm pretty dumb, don't you?" he suggested. 'Perhaps I am, but I have a — almost a second sight, sometimes, that tells me what to do.'" (116) We can guess that the seductiveness of her youth as well as her beauty — and her wealth — exercise a strong attraction over men. Gatsby "felt married to her" (142) and Nick, bewitched by her voice, is captivated by the "stirring warmth [that] flowed from her, as if her heart was trying to come out to you in one of those breathless, thrilling words." (19) As for Tom, he married her under circumstances that were largely shaped by her will (whim?) to find immediate safety and comfort.

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.

That force took shape in the middle of spring with the arrival of Tom Buchanan. 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. (144)

So they got promptly married because *she* wanted it. Thus it is not so much Tom's love for his wife²¹ that always brings him back to her but the complicity engendered both by their common life²² and by their belonging to the same caste. "They weren't happy [...] and yet they weren't unhappy either. There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would have said that they were conspiring together. (138) What Tom cannot actually bear in his wife's liaison is not the suffering engendered by jealousy but the fact that he feels dispossessed, spoiled by a man who does not belong to his world. He feels robbed of a part of his identity.²³ So it is merely as an object which is about to be lost that Daisy triggers off Tom's reaction of defence of his property. Similarly, the strong attraction she exercises on Gatsby is mainly due to her position as an object in his romantic fantasy. He is not so much seduced by the *real* Daisy as by what she represents for him on a phantasmal level.

²¹. There must be some truth, after all, in what he says to Gatsby: "Once in a while I go off on a spree and make a fool of myself, but I always come back, and in my heart I love her all the time." (125)

²². Here again, Gatsby's pretensions force Tom to unveil his feelings: "there's things between Daisy and me that you'll never know, things that neither of us can ever forget." (126)

²³. Tom's fear to be overcome by "inferior people" is symbolically illustrated by his warning to Nick: "It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things." (18) He explained his theory again to Daisy to discredit Gatsby and expose his real intentions: "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out... Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions, and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white." (124)

She was the first 'nice' girl he had ever known. [...] He found her excitingly desirable. [...] It excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy — it increased her value in his eyes. [...] He knew that Daisy was extraordinary, but he didn't realize just how extraordinary a 'nice' girl could be. She vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life. (141-42)

The image, not the person, give him the strength to overcome his social handicap — by fair means or foul. But if Daisy as a coveted object helped to the rise of the Great Gatsby, the *real* Daisy hastens his fall. For their reunion after a long separation abruptly changes the rules of the game, changing Daisy's status as well. She is no longer an inaccessible object symbolized by that "single green light, minute and far away" (25) but a lovely woman in the flesh, anchored in the real world, with all the inadequacies which are part and parcel of the real life. Assuredly Gatsby's "count of enchanted objects had diminished by one" (90) and by making Daisy his mistress, he lost his dream.

There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams — not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything. [...] No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man can store up in his ghostly heart. (92-3)

Though, the direct contact with reality does not suffice to annihilate completely Gatsby's immoderate dream as he is firmly convinced that he can reshape the world around Daisy, bend it to his wish and "fix everything just the way it was before." (106) But the real world resists to his will, as hard as a rock, embodied by Daisy herself who now has a husband and a little daughter. Although Gatsby "ha[s] [n]ever really believed in [the child's] existence before" (111) he cannot ignore the husband's who, "feeling the hot whips of panic," (119) is ready to play any underhand tricks on his rival to keep his wife. We know that Gatsby draws his incredible self-confidence from his strong conviction that he can "repeat the past." (106) However, he learns to his cost that "money and dreams are not enough to alter the reality of time's movement, for Daisy had created a life separate from [him], a reality that [he] has difficulty accepting."²⁴

Indeed, the question of time is central in *The Great Gatsby*. Fundamentally, it is not Tom, but Daisy herself who jeopardizes Gatsby's conception of time, for Gatsby's fantasy cannot hold without Daisy's approbation. *She* has the power to make his dream come true or destroy it and Tom's verbal attacks are nothing as long as Gatsby thinks that she sides with him. It is not so much Tom's assaults —

²⁴. Susan Resneck Parr, *Ibid.*, p. 65.

which he takes, seeing the situation, with remarkable self-control — that knock him down as Daisy's silent reproach and unformulated but undeniable disillusion which he can read on her "terrified" (128) face.

He began to talk excitedly to Daisy, denying everything, defending his name against accusations that had not been made. But with every word she was drawing further and further into herself, so he gave up, and only the dead dreams fought on as the afternoon slipped away, trying to touch what was no longer tangible, struggling unhappily, undespairingly, toward that lost voice across the room. (128)

Undeniably, time has passed and Daisy is no longer the girl who "used to understand" and with whom he'd "sit for hours," (106) engrossed in each other's fascinating presence.²⁵ Significantly, Nick remembers just then that it is his birthday and confronted with the "formidable stroke of thirty" (129) he becomes suddenly aware of the ineluctable flowing of time with its trail of small misfortunes, "the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair." (129) Nick's temporary disarray parallels Gatsby's incurable helplessness: both are due to the action of time, and the distressing feeling that the past is lost for ever and ever. "'Jay Gatsby' had broken up like glass" not only "against Tom's hard malice," (141) but against the sheer reality of time. For Daisy is no longer the "most popular of all the young girls in Louisville" (73); she is now a wife and a mother and Gatsby can do nothing to alter this plain reality. But the very root of their present incompatibility lies deeper for they live now in two separate worlds where desire but also time do not follow the same laws. Gatsby believes that the arrow of time can be bent to suit his desire, in other words that the object of his wish — once lost — can be found again *for real*, unchanged, unaltered by the period of time that has elapsed since he lost it. That is the reason why he manages to make a fortune so quickly literally making his past his future by merely applying the old adage according to which *time is money*. If he could accept the idea that Daisy is no longer the young girl she used to be, he may be able to love her 'safely' in adultery, but he wants to cancel the past four or five years and "return to a certain starting place" (106) so that they could "go back to Louisville and be married from her house — just as if it were five years ago." (106) Unfortunately for him, Daisy's very presence challenges the "present quality of his happiness" (92) for to

²⁵ While Gatsby is enthralled by the wealthy world Daisy belongs to, she is attracted by what makes him different from the men she used to go around with: "she was in love with me too. She thought I knew a lot because I knew different things from her..." (142-3)

Gatsby's circular conception of time²⁶ she opposes her ordinary, plain notion of the irrevocability of the swift passage of the years.

'In two weeks it'll be the longest day in the year.' She looked at us radiantly. 'Do you always watch for the longest day in the year and then miss it? I always watch for the longest day in the year and then miss it.' (17)

In those lines, Daisy exposes in her own words not only her vision of the flowing of time but also the very mechanism of desire: don't we all long for something remarkable which at times seems within reach and which we let go sort of unawares, just to realize when it's too late that we have missed it one more time? In fact, the circularity of the movement is not submitted to the passing of time but it actually creates, engenders it. Here is the fundamental axiom that Gatsby tries to break and that Daisy expresses naively but involuntarily enforces. It is the recurring cycle of the seasons that makes the years go by. By reasserting the superiority of time, that absolute master of human destiny, Daisy, not Tom, precipitates the fall of the Great Gatsby.

²⁶ During the afternoon tea-party, Gatsby symbolically almost *knock[s] down* Nick's old clock: "the clock took this moment to tilt dangerously at the pressure of his head. [...] 'I'm sorry about the clock,' he said. [...] I think we all believed for a moment that it had smashed in pieces on the floor." (84) This part of Gatsby's plans, which is a success, undoubtedly imperils the normal course of events...