

Jazz Age Sweeties:

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

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Literature reflects the history of its era. The United States fought in WWI as a member of the Allies and contributed to the victory against totalitarianism. Through the signature of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, it gained economic benefits as one of the "Big Four" member in the Paris Peace Conference. The sugar of economic bloom was then sprinkled across America and made it great until today. Men, having access to easy money, were also enjoying the privilege of being a superior member of the society as breadwinners. In comparison, women were less critical than men, as though with a mounting position through the grant of political powers like the right to vote in the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution (Quffa 146), it was not unusual for men to have mistresses for 'sweets' besides tedious work: women to men are but sex objects and possession. Women are sweets for lust; and the United States, as a metropolitan society, is but a "whited sepulchre" (Conrad 110). While women are sweets to men; wealth and position are sweets to women, but the sweetness at first bite could conceal its poisonous and bitter reality. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* reflects how women were treated unequally during the Roaring Twenties. The following examines Tom Buchanan's relationships with Daisy Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson in terms of Tom's treatment of them as possessions, and how he maintains the relationship with them. It is observed that women in America during the 1920s were in an inferior position — in which gender inequality in America was still deep-

rooted despite its modernity.

Daisy and Myrtle are similarly the possessions of Tom. Daisy, as Tom's wife, had established quite a stable marriage relationship with Tom. Tom only sees Daisy as a trophy for the competition among men, due to her popularity. Comparing the time before and after he won the argument with Gatsby over Daisy: Tom "exploded" (Fitzgerald 84) and spoke "savagely" (85) towards Gatsby when he was fighting for Daisy, and also insulted Gatsby as "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (83). After defeating Gatsby, Tom "talked incessantly, exulting and laughing" (87) on their way back to Long Island. The behaviour was similar to that when he is competing on the football field. He devastates others then cheers excitedly after winning the championship trophy. The comparison above brings out that Tom merely perceives Daisy as one of his trophies showing that he had gotten the most popular girl in Louisville. Though people could not directly see through the splendid wrapping of Tom and Daisy's marriage, if they unveiled it, they would see how ugly the candy inside is. Standing in the substandard side of the marriage, Daisy was nothing but a trophy to Tom.

The adulterous relationship of Tom and Myrtle is a display of Myrtle being sexually possessed by Tom. Although being "the first sweetie [Myrtle] ever had" (24), and Myrtle retains the hope that Tom would divorce Daisy someday to marry her instead, Tom is ignorant about the love that grows

in her. However, that is not in Tom's view. His love for Myrtle would never go more in-depth to a psychological level; and he never showed his affection towards Myrtle, and he never cares about her as he (in securing the trophy) does to Daisy. Myrtle, pathetically, was just a bonus sweet to Tom; while his desire could be universally imposed on any women on his will. There is an Asian saying that "a woman becomes a man's when they have sexual relationships", Myrtle, as Tom's mistress, had been sexually possessed by Tom, yet she could never reach his heart even though she stares at Jordan (whom she mistaken as Tom's wife) with eyes "wide with jealous terror" (79). It is not sure whether she is attracted by Tom so profoundly, but her love and jealousy towards Tom could never bring her to a higher position in the society than being Tom's mistress, his plaything. Myrtle craves to get to her desired sweet by climbing up the social ladder, which leads to her tragic death, when she tries to get to "Tom's car" (which Daisy was driving insanely). Her love and desire to attain a superior position in the society, or in her relationships was never fulfilled.

Tom only loves Daisy and Myrtle for they are a trophy and a plaything to him. They bring glory and sensual pleasure that his corrupted nature had been wrapped under his power as a powerful man in society. Daisy and Myrtle, as women, were treated as subhumans as they meant merely possession to Tom in different forms. Sweets are made for the

enjoyment of men when they consume, but become futile if they are not enjoyed as they are supposed to.

Tom's "love" for Daisy and Myrtle is superficial, which is conveyed through details throughout the novel. Daisy is a girl who lusts for money. Her desire for money is seen as follows:

She wanted her life shaped now, immediately – and the decision must be made by some force – of love, of money, of unquestionable practicality... There was a wholesome bulkiness about this person and his position, and Daisy was flattered. (Fitzgerald 96)

The above quote demonstrates how Tom got Daisy. Daisy is thirsty for money; she hopes to find someone who comes from the same world of "old money" as her. Tom came from a prosperous family and was famed as a national football player, which was the exact sweet of wealth and position that she lusted for. She chose Tom over Gatsby to get to her instant sweet. Tom's family had already slipped down to an "anticlimax" (6), but he still managed to keep Daisy by his side by their social connections. The fact that their reputation may be lost within a night amongst the higher society deterred them from divorcing. Standing on Daisy's viewpoint, she has to stick to Tom so that she can remain in her ignorant castle and enjoy a luxurious life doing nothing day-by-day. Tom needs Daisy to maintain his "family

steady" (Li and Jia 877). In this sense, to Tom, their marriage is just a thing that he can buy with money, instead of with his sincere love towards her. He looked down to their marriage as just an exchange of business, rather than something meant to be sacred.

Ironically, as a sweet to Tom, Myrtle's aim to become superior was a poison to her life. Myrtle is but a mistress who hopes to jump high through Tom, in exchange for his sexual pleasure. Tom enforces his male desire of seeking physical pleasure on Myrtle (Li and Jia 877). Tom treats Myrtle a little bit more than a mistress. He provided her with a luxurious material life, such as a flat in New York and would join the party in the flat even after "they had both disappeared" for sex (20). This act of Tom was no different to finding a prostitute and paying her after gratifying his sexual desire. He seeks sexual pleasure from Myrtle and "yawned audibly and got to his feet" (22) in the party at Myrtle's flat after disappearing. He immediately loses interest in Myrtle after he enjoys the "sweet" sex with Myrtle. Later, Tom sobs for Myrtle when he knows that she was dead (90), hinting that he might possibly have some other feelings for Myrtle. However, that feeling just lasted for a moment. In a later conversation between Nick and Tom, he referred to Myrtle's death as "run over a dog" (114). He belittles Myrtle in front of Nick, to whom he need not conceal his emotions as Nick knows his affairs, but he did not intend to defend her, or show any sympathy. Tom

and Myrtle only built their relationship on top of their sexual, bodily relationship, which was over following the physical death of Myrtle.

Even though Tom's method in keeping his relationship with his wife and his mistress are seemingly different, they have a similar atmosphere of exchange. Tom and Daisy make use of one another's wealth and social status; while Tom and Myrtle exchanged sexual pleasure with material wealth. Women are weak in a sense that they can never be "superior" without men, and this is the reality of gender relationships in 1920s America — women are of inferior position.

Tom's violence in his relationship with Daisy and Myrtle is also distinctive, partially because of their socio-economic status. Daisy, as a member of the "old money" class, had inherited enormous wealth and social connections. Even with a wealthy and socially-connected family, Daisy was still an inevitable target of discrimination as a woman. Tom imposed psychological violence on her. He treats Daisy with a dismissive attitude, and there were not many scenes in the novel of them communicating, indicating their distant relationship. Tom ignores Daisy's suggestion for going to town, and that does not make sense if a man is treating a woman sincerely — he can refuse but never ignore. This could be further elaborated through the scene when Pammy, Tom and Daisy's daughter was born. The

fact that Tom betrayed Daisy, having a mistress "was insisted upon wherever he was known", that it was an open secret that Daisy understood well that she is but a trophy to be displayed in Tom's house. A man will never cheat on his wife if he is sincerely in love with her. Tom was "God knows where", probably meeting his mistress (Fitzgerald 13) when Daisy was giving birth to Pammy. He looked down to Daisy, by supposing that she was a "beautiful little fool" who thinks that he was just off to work. Tom received phone calls a lot, which he openly picks up as if Daisy does not seem to be aware that he was talking to a mistress. Men disregard women's intelligence, supposing that they do not think and observe deeply. Tom psychologically tortured Daisy, which made her unhappy with the marriage though she had once been in love with Tom. The sweetness of love gradually vanished with the chronic violence in the marriage.

On the other hand, Tom was comfortable to unveil his brutal nature in front of Myrtle, as she is from the "no money" class. Tom need not be afraid if anything happens, even if Myrtle dies. They were in a secret relationship that no one (except Nick and Myrtle's friends and Catherine) knows. He could stand away from any incidents or any physical wound of Myrtle as they were not expected to have any connections. Thus, he reveals his real personality. In a discussion between Myrtle and Tom, Myrtle teased Tom for sticking to Daisy too much and called her name "Daisy!

Daisy! Daisy!" (25) directly, instead of mentioning her "Mrs. Buchanan". Her words angered Tom, as she disrespected not only Tom but Daisy and their marriage. Facing a woman who was "no-one", he can release his impulse. So, he "broke her nose with his open hand" (25), making her "face bruised and her nose swollen" (100). Sadly, Myrtle could not revolt from his violence. She was a woman without money, and she could never upset Tom so that she would lost her chance to get to her candy — a higher socioeconomic status. Thus, she tolerated the costs for climbing up, not only because she was poor, but also as a woman, she was always being looked down on.

Though there is gender inequality in American society, women from different social class receive different treatment. Tom's offences to the women were different. Daisy was only scolded in one sentence "crossly" by Tom when she described him as a "brute of man, a great, big, hulking physical specimen" (10). Tom did not impose physical cruelty on her, as he relied on their marriage and her family for his own sake. He was afraid of losing the economic privilege from Daisy, so he dares not hurt her. Nevertheless, Daisy, if without family privilege, would end up the same as Myrtle in the same case of offending Tom - physically beaten up, never having the power to fight against patriarchy. Myrtle's social position was futile in helping her in her relationship with Tom, through which she hopes to be more superior. In the American society, capital

and masculinity are shields against violence; and one should climb higher so that there are fewer people above them, and more people below them. Myrtle had no shield nor power. Her identity as a woman pushed her down further in the social hierarchy. She could always be dominated but not dominating. In summary, although women are inferior themselves in the American society, there is another hierarchy among women, in which the richer are less inferior, but in all sense, never as superior as men.

In conclusion, Tom Buchanan's relationships with Daisy Buchanan and Myrtle Wilson portrayed that women in American society were of an inferior position. The *Great Gatsby* successfully portrayed the conflict between genders in a love relationship. Men are always stronger, and women have no choice but to fit in the patriarchal society that they had built. Brutally, a fundamental key to success is to be a man; otherwise, it is rare for a woman to climb up the social ladder and reverse the situation of women being discriminated against and downtrodden. The mention of Ella Kaye's story in Chapter 6 ignites the hope for women to fight for gender equality, yet it is just a spark. Women remained inferior not only in the world in the novel but also in American society. 鳥結糖

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