

## The Flappers and the Faded Values: A Study of Women in the Fiction of Fitzgerald

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### ABSTRACT

The America of the 1920s was distinguished and damned for different reasons. The period was referred as, Roaring Twenties, the Jazz age, the Golden age and every title speaks about the spirit of the age. It was an age of transition with tremendous changes in art, politics, economy, and culture. People of the era viewed life with a new spectacle admiring money, social status, beauty, and freedom. Especially women of the 1920s had many changing roles. In the post war period the image of the Victorian women subsided and the new women appeared with great cultural advancements. Women's attitude towards life shocked the conservatives. Women assumed new roles as Flappers establishing a new culture and way of living. The current study focuses on Fitzgerald's portrayal of the modern women in the select novels, *This Side of Paradise (TSP)*, *The Beautiful and Damned (BD)*, and *The Great Gatsby (GG)*.

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Fitzgerald was a prominent writer of the post war period. He is a spokesman of the deeds and pleasures of the younger generation of his times and rather a participant too. The age in which he lived can be best described as a period in which all the virtues and values had been lost. Fitzgerald himself was shocked at the mores and morals of his time. It was an era that spoiled his youth and career. Including Fitzgerald, most of the Americans were victims of the hedonistic era. The changing morals, normalisation of alcohol, sexual liberty, emphasis laid on personal freedom, the greed for status, power, wealth and other pleasure seeking activities lead to the downfall of young men and women. The progress in science and technology seemed to be deceptive as the societal values faded rapidly. Life seemed to be beautiful and people felt like living in a paradise. But in real life was darker and damned than ever before. The popular practices made life shallow attaching no greater meaning.

American women gained significance and their roles in family and society varied a great deal. Industrialisation and urbanisation changed the very nature of women. During the War, women occupied the work places of men as men were busy in the war front. Women became more powerful after achieving their suffrage in 1919. The nineteenth amendment of the constitution helped women to get their voting right. Though there were signs of women empowerment, the political freedom gained by women encouraged them to press for personal freedom also. A woman with Victorian values had become a rare scene, as the new world presented only Gibson girls. In the description of Dorothy Brown the new women wore "a short skirt and heavy square-toed shoes, a mannish collar, cravat, and vest and a broad-brimmed felt had tipped jauntily on one side" (30).

Modern women with novel ideals appeared on stage resisting old ideals and values. There came a revolution in the morals and manners, and the liberated young women

who were the immediate successors of Gibson girls were identified as flappers. The flappers were the peerless products of the Jazz age. They did everything that was disapproved by their elders. One of the reasons that made Fitzgerald a famous literary personality was his creation of the flapper. Zelda, a celebrity of the period had been a source of inspiration for Fitzgerald in his creation of flappers. The flappers and young debutantes became role models for thousands of young women. They bobbed their hair, wore only short skirts, lived a pleasure seeking life, and were free from parental authority.

The heroines of Fitzgerald defied all social norms and had a major concern for personal freedom and pleasure. Excessive freedom and reckless sexual liberty made them the 'New Women' of the 1920s. The unconventional roles assumed by the new women were viewed as a means of their self expression. The older generation looked upon the new women as a sign of social degradation and they were alarmed at their life style. A girl with a cigarette in mouth, cocktail in hand and dancing to jazz was a perfect icon of the twenties. The flappers and their culture became one of the inseparable symbols of the twenties. According to Meyers, the word flapper means, "...a young harlot in the early nineteenth century, and then an immoral girl in her early teens at the turn of the twentieth century, to a young girl with her hair not yet put up in 1905, and finally to an unconventional young woman with short hair in the 1920s" (59). They represented Modernism and epitomized the status of new women of the new era.

Fitzgerald was remarkable in his description of flappers and their manners. He was a keen observer of the changes that occurred in women's nature and presented many golden girls, popular daughters, debutantes in many of his short stories and novels. Rosalind Connage, sister of Amory's Princeton friend Alec, can be regarded as the original flapper. Fitzgerald observes, "She (Rosalind) is one of those

girls who need never make the slightest effort to have men fall in love with them. Two types of men seldom do: dull men are usually afraid of her cleverness and intellectual men are usually afraid of her beauty. All others are hers by natural prerogative" (TSP 154). Rosalind has a thorough knowledge about men. She detests women and loves men for their sex. She is extremely beautiful to disturb men, "There was that shade of glorious yellow hair, the desire to imitate which supports the dye industry. There was the eternal kissable mouth, small, slightly sensual, and utterly disturbing" (TSP 158).

Modern women had high spirits and were influenced by the new moneyed class. Isabella, a beautiful girl whom Amory admires has high spirits. She is simply admired by men for being gorgeous and young men in her company see her as a "pretty kid – worth keeping an eye on" (TSP 63). She enjoys the company of men and has fallen in love with many. She falls in love with Amory's smartness and joins him for a date. She foresees her future thereby revealing the attitude of girls of her age:

...everything was wonderful tonight, most of all this romantic scene in the den, with her hands clinging and the inevitable looming charmingly close. The future vista of her life seemed an unending succession of scenes like this: under moonlight and pale starlight, and in the backs of warm limousines and in low, cosy roadsters stopped under sheltering trees – only the boy might change, and this one was so nice. (TSP 65)

The modern public accepted smoking and drunken women as both had extended its horizon to the female part of the society. Rosalind in *This Side of Paradise* is described by her sister as "a sort of a vampire ... she hates girls... she's average – smokes sometimes, drinks punch, frequently kissed" (TSP 157). Anthony advises Gloria not to smoke much, "Oh, Gloria, if you smoke so many cigarettes you'll lose your pretty complexion!" (BD 53). Gloria loves to smoke; she detests reformers and people who try to change her "I detest reformers, especially the sort who try to reform me" (BD 53).

Rosalind devotes much time for pleasure seeking and does not have serious principles in life, "She is quite unprincipled; her philosophy is carpe diem for herself and laissez faire for others" (TSP 157). Her philosophy reveals her attitude towards life. She does not seem to be virtuous but disturbing. Rosalind breaks her relationship with Amory for financial reasons. The money which Amory earns, thirty five dollars a week from his job, in an advertising concern could not support her in any style. Amory heels the pain caused by Rosalind by throwing himself to alcohol. Rosalind rejects Amory Blaine for financial reasons. She marries a wealthier Dawson Ryder, sacrificing her real love for the sake of money and status. Like Rosalind, Gloria the heroine of *The Beautiful and Damned* marries Anthony only for the wealth that he is to inherit from his grandfather. Both rent an apartment after their marriage and it is filled with people at week-end parties. It is to be noted that Zelda married

Fitzgerald only after his success of publication of his first novel.

Women played new roles and were not afraid to expose their beauty and physique to others. They wanted to break conventions in their clothing and make-up. Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* is a member of the established American Aristocracy. She is an attractive, wealthy and shallow young lady who always dresses herself in flimsy white dresses. Talks about women's bodies had become a common place event. In *The Beautiful and Damned*, Maury narrates to Anthony about his meeting with Gloria, "Well, this girl talked about legs. She talked about skin too – her own skin. Always her own" (45). Likewise, Nick observes the physique of Jordan Baker in *The Great Gatsby* "She was a slender, small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage, which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet"(12). With attractive fashionable clothes women disposed the tradition roles and accentuated sexual appeal thereby becoming sexual objects. Casual kissing, smoking, drinking, and flirt were very common among the youth. Amory in *This Side of Paradise* is for sure that "any popular girl he met before eight he might quite possibly kiss before twelve" (55 ).

Fitzgerald's heroines are beautiful and they attract his male characters easily. Gloria Gilbert, who is an epitome of beauty is both careless and fascinating. The words in the title of the novel address Gloria both as beautiful and damned. Anthony, the hero of the novel acknowledges the damned beauty in Gloria in a conversation with Dick, "Good-looking – in fact damned attractive" (BD 33). Women in Fitzgerald's fiction are flippant, selfish, negligent and in short good for little. They seek for more wealth, more kisses, more security and more entertainment. They dream for unrestricted freedom and financial autonomy that is not within their grasp. They marry for defence and so naturally choose prospective husbands. Like Fitzgerald's wife Zelda, they all live with the American dream, becoming mad with it. They are strong-willed, ambitious, and outspoken. Their material desires are easy to identify rather than their spiritual, intellectual and emotional desires. Nick, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* describes the personality of Daisy that many men admired, "Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget" (7). She has married the wealthy Tom Buchanan and in spite of wealth she is bored and careless.

The heroines of *This Side of Paradise* became role models for the younger generation of the modern era. Fitzgerald himself described his first book as "a novel about flappers written for philosophers" (Sanderson, 149). Amory Blaine, the protagonist of the novel encounters various women in the novel who play important roles in his life. Isabelle, Rosalind, and Eleanor attract Amory, and in turn he shows interest in their colour, wealth, love, confidence, and openness. These young girls challenge traditional ideals and are dare enough to pose under spotlights for public view. On his Triangle trip, Amory gets into contact with one of the

petting parties and finds that, "None of the Victorian mothers – and most of the mothers were Victorian – had any idea how casually their daughters were accustomed to be kissed" (TSP 54). Amory is astonished at the conduct of girls, "eating three-o'clock, after –dance suppers in impossible cafes, talking of every side of life with an air half of earnestness, half of mockery, yet with a furtive excitement" (TSP 54). Amory observes Isabella's acquaintances with many men and wants to enrol himself in that list, "She (Isabella) had bowing acquaintance with a lot of young men who thought she was a "pretty kid – worth keeping an eye on" (TSP 62 – 63).

Gloria is the embodiment of modern American women who were dominant over men and their great flaw was their futility. Her irresponsible nature is described by her own mother, "Gloria has a very young soul – irresponsible, as much as anything else. She has no sense of responsibility" (BD 37). The manners and morals of Gloria is disapproved by her father, "she stayed out late, she never ate her meals, she was always in a mix-up – he had irritated her once and she had used toward him words that he had not thought were part of her vocabulary" (BD 38). Gloria is highly conscious of her beauty and worried about her body's shape when she carries a child. She shares her view with Anthony, "I value my body because you think it's beautiful. And this body of mine – of yours- to have it grow ugly and shapeless? It's simply intolerable. ...And then afterward I might have wide hips and be pale, with all my freshness gone and no radiance in my hair" (BD 169).

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Tom, Daisy's husband develops a relationship with Myrtle, who is the wife of Wilson, a garage owner. Tom and Myrtle have secret meetings in the apartment they have rented at New York, which is revealed to Nick by Jordan, "Tom's got some women in New York" (GG 11). Modern women treat money and beauty as precious things in life and Myrtle's sister Catherine proves that, "Catherine, was a slender, worldly girl of about thirty, with a solid, sticky bob of red hair, and a complexion powdered milky white" (GG 22). Daisy shared love with Gatsby when he was stationed in the army in Louisville. Soon bored and impatient she started to develop affairs with men of her social class. That was how she met and fell in love with the wealthy Tom. After her marriage the couple led a meaningless and shallow life. However she enjoys the wealth and social prominence that her marriage has brought in.

Fitzgerald depicts his heroines as flappers who belong to a wealthy society or the one who desires to be wealthy. His women characters often have difficulty in making choices between love and money, and eventually choose the latter. They marry men who are affluent but could not find happiness in their life after marriage. Their sexual behaviour, their attitude towards love and sex, their smoking and drinking habits are all examples of the defiance of morality and traditional values during the twenties. The flappers are a symbol of all that is modern. They are new, exhilarating and as well shameless. The activities of the so called flappers were enough to shock the older generation.