Literary Criticism: Talking about Meaning

Literary Criticism is the study, evaluation, and interpretation of literature. Literary criticism illustrates for the reader how fiction creates meaning.

Reading this kind of text allows us to recognize models as well as practice in the language and logic of analysis, and to ultimately better understand the interacting elements of fiction. It makes known the explicit connections it describes between the text and conclusions about its meaning. By reading criticism ourselves, we become familiar with a wide array of views about the novel and can better demonstrate the importance of the passages and their influences on other elements of the book. Below are four different excerpts from essays focusing on *The Great Gatsby*.

**Annotate the following essays. Your annotations should:**

1. Highlight the author’s main argument. What point is he/she making about F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*?
2. Highlight three significant details. What are some of the details from the novel the author uses to support the argument?
3. Underline two ideas that you find particularly interesting or thought-provoking. Note their importance in the margins.
4. Consider the author’s rhetorical style and approach. What works and what doesn’t?
5. Craft two discussion questions for each article (refer to a specific line and page #).

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**Article #1**

Q1:                                                                                           Q1:

Q2:                                                                                           Q2:

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**Article #2**

Q1:                                                                                           Q1:

Q2:                                                                                           Q2:

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**Article #3**

Q1:                                                                                           Q1:

Q2:                                                                                           Q2:

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**Article #4**

Q1:                                                                                           Q1:

Q2:                                                                                           Q2:
“...next they’ll throw everything overboard...”: a feminist reading of The Great Gatsby

In a sudden panic over his discovery that his wife has taken a lover, Tom Buchanan, from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (1925), exclaims, “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” (137; ch. 7). In addition to Tom’s double standard for his own and his wife’s behavior (as well as his racism), this statement reveals Tom’s assumptions that the moral structure of society rests on the stability of the patriarchal family and that the stability of the patriarchal family rests on the conformity of women to patriarchal gender roles. Of course, through the vehicle of Nick Carraway’s narration, the novel clearly ridicules Tom’s position: “Flushed with his impassioned gibberish,” Nick observes, “[Tom] saw himself standing alone on the last barrier of civilization” (137; ch. 7). Nevertheless, I think it can be shown that The Great Gatsby also shares Tom’s view of patriarchal gender roles.

The novel was written and is set in the decade following World War I, which ended in November 1918. The Roaring Twenties, or the Jazz Age, a term coined by Fitzgerald, was a period of enormous social change in America, especially in the area of women’s rights. Before World War I, American women did not enjoy universal suffrage. In 1920, two years after the end of the war (and after seventy-two years of organized political agitation), they were finally given the vote. Before the war, standard dress for women included long skirts, tightly laced corsets, high-buttoned shoes, and long hair demurely swept up onto the head. A few years after the war, skirts became shorter (in some cases, much shorter), laced corsets began to disappear (indeed, the most bold and unconventional young women wore few, if any, restraining undergarments), modern footwear frequently replaced high-buttoned shoes, and “bobbed” hair (cut short and worn loosely) became the fashion for young women.

Perhaps most alarming for proponents of the old ways, women’s behavior began to change. Women could now be seen smoking and drinking (despite Prohibition), often in the company of men and without chaperones. They could also be seen enjoying the sometimes raucous nightlife offered at nightclubs and private parties. Even the new dances of the era, which seemed wild and overtly sexual to many, bespoke an attitude of free self-expression and unrestrained enjoyment. In other words, as we often see during times of social change, a “New Woman” emerged in the 1920s. And, again as usual, her appearance on the scene evoked a good deal of negative reaction from conservative members of society, both male and female, who felt, as they generally do at these times, that women’s rejection of any aspect of their traditional role inevitably results in the destruction of the family and the moral decline of society as a whole.

This view of women as the standard-bearers of traditional values, whose presence as nonwage-earning supervisors of hearth and home was deemed necessary to maintain the moral structure of society, became the dominant patriarchal ideology of the industrialized nineteenth century as the home ceased to be the place where the family worked together to earn their living and men went off to earn the family bread at various occupations in the towns. That is, as woman’s economic role in the home disappeared, a spiritualized domestic role was created for her in order to keep
her, among other things, from competing with men on the job market. Thus, although most Americans believed the survival of America’s moral structure depended on traditional gender roles, it was really the nation’s economic structure, which gave economic dominance to men, that depended upon the axiom “a woman’s place is in the home.” Of course, another advantage of keeping women at home, modestly dressed and quietly behaved, was that it reaffirmed men’s ownership of women’s sexual and reproductive capacities. The threat posed by the New Woman of the 1920s, then, had repercussions on many levels of public consciousness.

Literary works often reflect the ideological conflicts of their culture, whether or not it is their intention to do so, because, like the rest of us, authors are influenced by the ideological tenor of the times. Even a writer like F. Scott Fitzgerald, who cut a dashing figure among the avant-garde social set of the 1920s and who was himself married to a New Woman, was subject to the ideological conflicts that characterized his age. One might speculate that it was precisely his experience of “life in the fast lane” that created some (conscious or unconscious) misgivings about the changes occurring in America during the 1920s. Or one might speculate that he was able to accept the New Woman only as long as he could view her as psychologically troubled and in need of his help, a situation illustrated in his semi-autobiographical novel *Tender Is the Night* (1934), as well as in his turbulent life with his wife, Zelda. However, it’s not my intention to examine Fitzgerald’s life but to examine the ways in which *The Great Gatsby*, his most enduring work, embodies its culture’s discomfort with the post–World War I New Woman.

We see this discomfort in the novel’s representation of its minor female characters, and we see it in more complex ways in the novel’s characterizations of main characters Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson, who, despite their numerous differences, are all versions of the New Woman. We can assume that Nick’s descriptions of these characters represent the novel’s ideological biases, and not merely his own, because the text portrays Nick sympathetically, unlike Tom Buchanan. In addition to the sympathy Nick evokes by the author’s use of first-person narration—because we see the narrative events through Nick’s eyes, we are able to more or less “walk in his shoes” —Nick also gains our sympathy because he tells his story in a sensitive and engaging manner, sharing with the reader his personal feelings: his desires, dislikes, fears, doubts, and affections. Finally, as the only character who is consistently aware of ethical considerations, Nick functions as the moral center of the novel. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that, whether or not Fitzgerald intended Carraway as a reliable narrator, many readers will be strongly influenced by Nick’s perspective.

The novel abounds in minor female characters whose dress and activities identify them as incarnations of the New Woman, and they are portrayed as clones of a single, negative character type: shallow, exhibitionist, revolting, and deceitful. For example, at Gatsby’s parties we see insincere, “enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other’s names” (44; ch. 3), as well as numerous narcissistic attention-seekers in various stages of drunken hysteria. We meet, for example, a young woman who “dumps” down a cocktail “for courage” and “dances out alone on the canvass to perform” (45; ch. 3); “a rowdy little girl who gave way upon the slightest provocation to uncontrollable laughter” (51; ch. 3); a drunken woman who “was not only singing, she was weeping too,” her face lined with “black rivulets” created when her “tears . . . came into contact with her heavily beaded eyelashes” (55–56; ch. 3); a drunken young girl who has her “head stuck in a pool” (113; ch. 6) to stop her from screaming; and two drunken young
wives who refuse to leave the party until their husbands, tired of the women’s verbal abuse, “lifted [them] kicking into the night” (57; ch. 3). Then there are Benny McClenahan’s “four girls”:

They were never quite the same ones in physical person, but they were so identical one with another that it inevitably seemed they had been there before. I have forgotten their names—Jaqueline, I think, or else Consuela, or Gloria or Judy or June, and their last names were either the melodious names of flowers and months or the sterner ones of the great American capitalists whose cousins, if pressed, they would confess themselves to be. (67; ch. 4)

In other words, all of these lookalike women who accompanied McClenahan to Gatsby’s parties invented names and biographies for themselves to impress their new acquaintances. We should not be too surprised, then, to hear Nick say, “Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply” (63; ch. 3), implying that women don’t seem able to help it: perhaps it’s just a natural failing, like so many other feminine weaknesses.

The only minor female characters we get to know a little better, both of whom fit the category of the New Woman, are Mrs. McKee—who is described as “shrill, languid, handsome, and horrible” (34; ch. 2)—and Myrtle’s sister, Catherine, who perfectly fits the negative stereotype outlined above. The novel gives Catherine a good deal of attention for such a minor character, perhaps because she has been chosen to represent the physical unattractiveness of her type, which is only hinted at in the descriptions of the other minor female characters.

The sister . . . was a slender, worldly girl of about thirty with a solid sticky bob of red hair and a complexion powdered milky white. Her eyebrows had been plucked and then drawn on again at a more rakish angle but the efforts of nature toward the restoration of the old alignment gave a blurred air to her face. When she moved about there was an incessant clicking as innumerable pottery bracelets jingled up and down upon her arms. She came in with such proprietary haste and looked around so possessively at the furniture that I wondered if she lived here. But when I asked her she laughed immoderately, repeated my question aloud, and told me she lived with a girl friend at a hotel. (34; ch. 2)

This is the description of a rather revolting, loud, vulgar young woman whose opening words to Nick are an obvious lie. And Catherine fulfills the expectations such a description raises by the vulgar nature of her conversation with Nick concerning Myrtle and her “sweetie” (39; ch. 2) and by her claim that she doesn’t drink, which we learn is a lie when she turns up drunk at George Wilson’s garage the night of Myrtle’s death. Her vulgarity, as well as her foolish- ness, is further revealed in her description of her and her girlfriend’s experience in Monte Carlo: “We had over twelve hundred dollars when we started but we got gypped out of it all in two days in the private rooms. We had an awful time getting back, I can tell you. God, how I hated that town!” (38; ch. 2).

One could argue that the novel’s bias here is not sexist, but classist, for all the women described above belong to the lower socioeconomic strata of society. However, there are several male characters from these same strata who are described sympathetically. For example, George Wilson is portrayed as a simple, hardworking man who, despite his other limitations, is devoted to his wife. Mr. Michaelis, who owns a coffee shop in the “valley of ashes” (27; ch.2), is kind to
George and tries to take care of him after Myrtle’s death. And even the two party-going husbands mentioned earlier, themselves sober, tolerate their wives’ drunken abuse with admirable patience. Thus it is these women’s violation of patriarchal gender roles, not their socioeconomic class, that elicits the novel’s condemnation.

The novel’s discomfort with the New Woman becomes evident, in a more complex fashion, in the characterizations of main characters Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker, and Myrtle Wilson. Despite their striking differences in class, occupation, marital status, personal appearance, and personality traits, these three characters are all versions of the New Woman. Like the minor female characters who embody the New Woman in appearance and social freedom, Daisy, Jordan, and Myrtle look and act the part. Their hair and clothing are very modern, and they don’t feel, as their mothers and grandmothers surely did, that they must behave modestly in public by avoiding hard liquor, cigarettes, and immodest dancing. In addition, all three women display a good deal of modern independence. Only two are married, and they don’t keep their marital unhappiness a secret, although secrecy about such matters is one of the cardinal rules of patriarchal marriage. Jordan has a career of her own and, on top of that, it’s in the male-dominated field of professional golf. They all prefer the excitement of nightlife to the more traditional employments of hearth and home. There is only one child among them, Daisy’s daughter, Pammy, and while Pammy is well looked after by her nurse and affectionately treated by her mother, Daisy’s life does not revolve exclusively around her maternal role. Finally, all three women violate patriarchal sexual taboos: Jordan engages in premarital sex, and Daisy and Myrtle are engaged in extramarital affairs.

That the novel finds this freedom unacceptable in women is evident in its unsympathetic portrayals of those who exercise it. Daisy Buchanan is characterized as a spoiled brat and a remorseless killer. She is so used to being the center of attention that she can think of no one’s needs but her own. Although Myrtle’s death is accidental, Daisy doesn’t stop the car and try to help the injured woman. On the contrary, she speeds off and lets Gatsby take the blame. (One can’t help but wonder if some readers, at least in decades past, have said to themselves, “See what happens when you let a woman get behind the wheel of a car?”) Once she learns that Gatsby doesn’t come from the same social stratum as herself, she retreats behind the protection of Tom’s wealth and power, abandoning her lover to whatever fate awaits him. Indeed, much of our condemnation of Daisy issues from her failure to deserve Gatsby’s devotion. Although she lets Gatsby believe she will leave her husband for him, Nick observes during the confrontation scene in the New York hotel room that “[h]er eyes fell on Jordan and me with a sort of appeal, as though she . . . had never, all along, intended doing anything at all” (139; ch. 7). Even her way of speaking is frequently so affected—“I’m p-paralyzed with happiness” (13; ch. 1); “You remind me of a—of a rose, an absolute rose” (19; ch. 1); and “Bles-sed pre-cious. . . . Come to your own mother that loves you” (123; ch. 7)—as to make it difficult to take anything she says seriously. Thus, on top of all her other sins, she’s a phony.

Jordan Baker is characterized as a liar and a cheat. Nick catches her lying about having left a borrowed car out in the rain with its top down, and apparently she was caught cheating during a golf tournament, though she managed to get away with it under circumstances that imply the use of bribery or coercion: “The thing approached the proportions of a scandal—then died away. A caddy retracted his statement and the only other witness admitted that he might have been mis-
taken” (62–63; ch. 3). Like Daisy, Jordan exhibits a lack of concern for others that manifests itself in a refusal to take responsibility for herself, as we see when Nick reports that she drove her car “so close to some workmen that our fender flicked a button on one man’s coat” (63; ch. 3). Her response to Nick’s admonition that she should drive more carefully or not drive at all is a careless remark that “They’ll [other people will] keep out of my way. . . . It takes two to make an accident” (63; ch. 3). When Nick says, “Suppose you met somebody just as care- less as yourself” (63; ch. 3), Jordan’s manipulativeness is revealed in her response: “I hope I never will. . . . I hate careless people. That’s why I like you” (63; ch. 3). And her manipulation works: “for a moment I thought I loved her,” Nick admits (63; ch. 3). Of course, the fact that Jordan must cheat to succeed at golf also implies that women can’t succeed in a man’s field purely on their own ability. And her physical description completes the stereotype that women who invade the male domain are rather masculine: “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” (15; ch. 1). The word most frequently used to describe her appearance is jaunty. In other words, Jordan looks like a boy.

Surely, the most unsympathetic characterization of the three is that of Myrtle Wilson. She’s loud, obnoxious, and phony, as we see in her “violently affected” (35; ch. 2) behavior at the party in the small flat Tom keeps for their rendezvous. She cheats on George, who is devoted to her—so she doesn’t even have the excuse Daisy has of an unfaithful husband—and she bullies and humiliates him as well. She has neither the youth nor the beauty of Daisy and Jordan: “She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout. . . . Her face . . . contained no facet or gleam of beauty” (29–30; ch. 2) . . .

(Essay is on the classroom website if you want to read it in its entirety)