

## **Women's Drive for Power: Women and Cars in Selected Works of F. Scott Fitzgerald**

This paper examines the relation between female characters and cars in three F. Scott Fitzgerald's novels: *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender is the Night* and *The Beautiful and Damned*. The introduction offers a brief explanation of the role of stereotyping and generalisation, while the analytical part of the paper examines a concrete stereotype that depicts women as bad drivers, and it also draws a parallel between driving a car and handling power and authority. The main part of the paper focuses on illuminating the characterisation of women through the lens of correlation between their driving skills and gender. Female characters at the steering wheel are portrayed as a danger to themselves and everyone else on the road. Their feminine qualities hinder their driving abilities, thus making them incapable of controlling the power the car gives them and, by extension, any type of power.

**Key words:** F. Scott Fitzgerald, feminist criticism, American literature, 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature, women drivers

The evolution of humankind has to a great extent been propelled by humans' need for order. The desire to organise and structure the world around us has acted as a catalyst for numerous changes and advancements throughout history. In line with this, our mind seeks to categorise people around us with a view to facilitating the process of image creation, and does so by assigning individuals to groups based on some shared characteristic. This categorical, stereotypical thinking, therefore, serves "to simplify and streamline the person perception process" (Macrae and Bodenhausen 2000: 96). This process, then, breaks down the complexities of the world and aids our reasoning by helping us find logical patterns in the world around us. However, categorising people based on one common feature is a double-edged sword, as it can lead down a dangerous path of oversimplification if we are not careful enough. People are not made on the assembly line and cannot be treated like products that need to be labelled. Nonetheless, society has a proclivity for doing just that, and centuries of putting individuals into specially designated boxes has had an enormous, mostly detrimental, effect on our way of thinking.

One of the most influential divides in our society is the one conditioned by the gendered dichotomy, as men and women have been perceived as opposite sides of the

spectrum for so long (and still are, to a certain extent). Having been consigned to their “proper sphere” for centuries, women have been denied access to everything labelled as male prerogative, i.e. anything that conveys power, control and dominance. Depiction of women as “excessively sentimental” and “unfit to take care of themselves” served as a pillar on which patriarchal society built the system that rendered women dependent on men in their lives. Thus, everything that can be perceived as a symbol of power is immediately described as the opposite of feminine. Accordingly, numerous stereotypes surround situations in which women engage in predominantly masculine-coded activities.

Driving a car is one such activity. Although women have never been officially barred from earning a driver’s license in America, the early days of automobile industry rarely saw women in the driver’s seat (Veevers 1982: 172). Perhaps one of the reasons behind ladies’ decision to let their husbands be at the wheel is the fact that women have always been labelled as bad drivers. They are considered less capable and unable to maintain control. This sentiment about female drivers is still ubiquitous, regardless of the fact that studies have shown that “women have lower rates of involvement in both traffic accidents in general, and in those traffic accidents which lead to fatalities” (Veevers 1982: 174). How was, then, the stereotype of women as bad drivers created? And why?

The appearance of cars provided women with an opportunity to break the bonds tying them to the domestic sphere. Clarke notes that “[c]ars offer convenience, comfort, and, above all, power” (2007: 1), but that these are chiefly offered to men. As mentioned before, women have never been legally prevented from driving, but their skills have always been deemed inferior to men’s. Women drivers were, especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, predominantly considered inexperienced, as driving was an activity which required a fair amount of control and stability on the agent’s part, qualities which were rarely attributed to women. Unlike men, they were new to such kind of responsibility, as they had been denied opportunities to exercise any type of power in the past.

With the change it brought and the importance of its role in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it comes as no surprise that the car was used as a symbol and a vehicle for describing the realities of the period. Clarke argues that being “[b]oth material necessity and imaginative icon, the automobile plays a critical role in defining American identity and serves as a crucial yet remarkably overlooked element within twentieth-century American fiction” (2007: 1).

One of the best-known authors from that period, F. Scott Fitzgerald, relied heavily on this symbolism of cars and used it to illustrate relationships and characters, as well as a foreshadowing device. That being said, this paper places emphasis on female drivers and

their connection to cars and power in three Fitzgerald's novels: *The Great Gatsby*, *Tender is the Night* and *The Beautiful and Damned*.

## **Analysis**

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Fitzgerald lived and wrote, saw the continuation of the revolutionary momentum created in the previous century. One of the numerous nineteenth-century reform movements that still produced considerable ripples in society during Fitzgerald's time was the Women's Rights Movement. The "New Woman", which was the ideal of womanhood that emerged at the very end of the nineteenth century, advocated the idea of independent, career-driven women, women who "were interested in gaining greater access to education, employment, and economic and civic rights, and in changing expectations concerning personal behaviour" (Cruea 2005: 199). However, society's values and expectations regarding women's roles and position were still unsettled and often paradoxical, as they were presented with choices of assuming the role of a traditional wife and adopting the values of a self-sufficient "New Woman" (Makowsky 2011: 29). New ideas are always slow to take root, so the centuries-old, preconceived notion of women's designated roles was still in full bloom. Fitzgerald himself was not very keen on accepting modern attitudes of the youth as he seemingly still endorsed the idea of women's inferiority. In a 1923 interview with B. F. Wilson, titled "F. Scott Fitzgerald Says: 'All Women over Thirty-five Should Be Murdered'" he expressed his stance on women and their fight for equality quite vociferously:

Much later, the suffragette type came into existence. You know how she clamored for independence. She was a horrible person. A woman of thwarted desires endeavoring to satisfy her restlessness by demanding from men that which they had refused to surrender by persuasion. She couldn't attract men; therefore she decided to fight them. (Bruccoli and Baughman 2004: 56)

This quote goes in line with anti-suffragette posters which notoriously depicted women's rights advocates as physically unattractive with a view to dehumanising them and stripping them of the only asset women were supposed to bring to the table – their appearance. This particular interview furthermore provides a rather interesting account of Fitzgerald's general opinion on the opposite sex, as he went on to ask his interlocutor: "Don't you think men are

much nicer than women? Don't you find them more open and aboveboard, more truthful and more sincere? Wouldn't you a whole lot rather be with a bunch of men than with a group of women?", which was followed by his stating that talking to girls mostly requires drinking alcohol on his part to keep him engaged or else he would "have to leave the room" (Brucoli and Baughman 2004: 58). He further confessed in one of his notebooks that his liking of men was reflected in his wish to emulate them, while liking women manifested itself in his desire to "own them, to dominate them, to have them admire me" (as cited in Brucoli 1993: 38).

Luong notes that the "contradiction between the fictional character and the author led Fitzgerald to constantly seek to maintain a balance between the new attitudes of the young men and women of his era with the conservative nature of his [own] standards of manners and conduct" (2010: 2). However, it seems that he was not able to fully curb his own judgement when it came to women in the driver's seat, as he "saw women and cars as a deadly combination" (Clarke 2007: 57). Female characters in the three selected novels are depicted as a danger on the road and unable to control and take proper care of their cars. The automobile offers them a chance to hold power in their hands, but they prove incapable of wielding such power time and time again.

The world of *The Great Gatsby* is inhabited by three notable female characters: Daisy Buchanan, Jordan Baker and Myrtle Wilson. The former two, being of better social and material standing, have access to cars, while the latter's connection to the automobile is of a more symbolic nature. The most dramatic representation of the possible consequences that placing power and control in women's hands can produce is seen in the example of Daisy. Following a rather turbulent day in New York, Gatsby lets Daisy behind the wheel, although she is visibly shaken by the events of the day. This, however, proves to be the wrong decision, as it leads to a tragedy:

You see, when we left New York she was very nervous and she thought it would steady her to drive – and this woman rushed out at us just as we were passing a car coming the other way. [...] Well, first Daisy turned away from the woman towards the other car, and then she lost her nerve and turned back. (Fitzgerald 2020: 143)

Daisy's feminine, overly emotional nature proves fatal, as it is the primary culprit for the catastrophic outcome. Furthermore, another womanly trait hinders her ability to successfully manage the vehicle – her timorousness, which leads her to "[lose] her nerve" and swing back towards the woman. The victim – Myrtle Wilson – is killed on the spot and Daisy panics and

speeds up in an attempt to get away. Gatsby later tells Nick: “Daisy stepped on it. I tried to make her stop, but she couldn’t, so I pulled on the emergency brake. Then she fell over into my lap and I drove on.” (Fitzgerald 2020: 143–144). Not only is she incapable of handling the power the car has given her, but she also refuses to hold herself accountable for her actions, tries to avoid the consequences and relinquishes the control of the car to Gatsby. This situation seems to offer a slightly different, yet equally detrimental take on the stereotype of “a damsel in distress”, a young woman in need of a male saviour, which is further emphasised when Gatsby decides to take the blame for the accident. This may be a manifestation of Fitzgerald’s own desire to “save” women around him, since “he always wanted to educate or improve the women he knew”, as when he “provided detailed written instructions on how to improve [his sister Annabel’s] image and make herself more popular with the boys” (Brucoli 1993: 73).

Jordan Baker’s connection to cars becomes obvious upon a closer inspection of her name, as she was named after “two cars marketed to women, the Jordan Playboy and the Baker Electric” (Clarke 2007: 57). Nick openly calls her “a rotten driver” (Fitzgerald 2020: 60) and advises she should either be more careful or stop driving altogether. Her carelessness regarding cars is further emphasised by Nick’s recollection of a party in Warwick, when she “left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down, and then lied about it” (Fitzgerald 2020: 59). Like Daisy, she refuses to own to her mistake and is, therefore, unfit to wield the power vested in her by the automobile, let alone something of a bigger consequence. However, the reason behind her incompetence is different from the one that hinders Daisy. In fact, she is at the opposite side of the spectrum. While Daisy’s excessively emotional feminine side exerts adverse effects on her driving skills, Jordan’s problem is her lack of emotion towards cars and people around her. She is careless and rests her hope on other people being cautious instead of her, stating that they will “keep out of my way”, since “it takes two to make an accident” (Fitzgerald 2020: 60). Additionally, Makowsky points out a detail about a scene in which she almost hits some workmen, noting that her driving indicates that “she is barely skirting disaster” (2011: 35).

The last female character from *The Great Gatsby* whose connection to cars will be examined is Myrtle Wilson. She does not drive herself, but her life is certainly influenced by cars, as she is married to a car mechanic and, ultimately, killed by a car. Her relationship with her husband and the affair she has with Tom Buchanan may be indicative of her struggle to gain some power and control over her life. George Wilson is a simple car mechanic who earns his living taking care of other people’s cars. He is just a minor, negligible figure in the

power-dealing game – he just assists his superiors, ensuring that power tools are working properly. Over the course of their marriage, Myrtle becomes dissatisfied with this status and begins asserting control over her husband. Her dominance over George is a step towards claiming power for herself, although she cannot drive, and is unlikely to learn due to her inferior social status. She turns to having an affair with a married man, a man with his own car, capable of establishing authority. However, Tom keeps Myrtle separated from his world: he insists on meeting her in Manhattan, although everyone, apart from her husband, seems to know about their illicit affair. Moreover, he does not go there by car (which is being fixed, but not by Myrtle’s husband), but boards the same train as Myrtle, so the two of them and Nick go to New York together, “or not quite together, for Mrs Wilson sat discreetly in another car” (Fitzgerald 2020: 27), further emphasising the detachment. She is walking against the wind, she has a sense of moving, but the wind is relentlessly pushing her back, so her subjective feeling of progress is greater than the reality of it. Her effort to claim power is abruptly stopped when she gets hit by a car – a car which is, in an ironic twist of fate, driven by her lover’s wife. She is, in a sense, killed by the same thing she was running towards. She was trying to climb above her “designated place” and, just like Icarus flying too close to the Sun, met a tragic end. The instance of Daisy hitting Myrtle with a car – and killing her instantly – therefore serves as a double proof of the danger that is inherent in women’s drive for power – it is a menace to everyone.

*Tender is the Night* hosts one female character of importance for this paper – Nicole Diver. Her marriage to Dick, shiny on the outside, is full of subterranean cracks which gradually become apparent as the story unfolds. She was sexually abused by her father in her youth and suffers from mental breakdowns as a result, which is how she ends up meeting Dick, a young psychologist hired to help her. They fall in love and get married and Nicole’s mental health benefits from having him close at all times. However, she is still affected by hysterical fits from time to time, which is enough to paint a picture of her as a highly dangerous and unstable person. Women are, in general, labelled as “too emotional”, but Nicole’s predisposition to hysteric outbursts officially seals it. The beginning of one of her manic episodes takes place at a fair. She has been troubled by doubts about Dick’s infidelity, which propels her into a spiralling fit of jealousy. She rides in a Ferris wheel car, “laughing hilariously” (Fitzgerald 2018a: 175), before moving her dangerous instability to a real car. Nicole is in the passenger’s seat on the way home, but she tries to snatch the wheel and almost kills everyone in the car. Dick is, quite like Gatsby when Daisy is behind the wheel, forced to try and salvage what he can.

He had turned up a hill that made a short cut to the clinic, and now as he stepped on the accelerator for a short straightaway run parallel to the hillside the car swerved violently left, swerved right, tipped on two wheels and, as Dick, with Nicole's voice screaming in his ear, crushed down the mad hand clutching the steering wheel, righted itself, swerved once more and shot off the road; it tore through low underbush, tipped again and settled slowly at an angle of ninety degrees against a tree. (Fitzgerald 2018a: 177)

This scene is a nearly perfect representation of her mental health and a depiction of her breakdowns – she swerves left and right, comes dangerously close to flipping, quiets down with a crash and needs Dick to facilitate the process. It also, once again, serves to support the point about the threat that is a woman behind the wheel, with special emphasis placed on her emotional instability and fragility.

Nicole's hysteria, the main reason for which she is perceived as unstable and unable to control her own conduct and anything placed in her hands by extension, was considered a uniquely feminine disease for a long time. The understanding of the causes of hysteria has come a long way, from "wandering womb" to suppressed trauma and inherently oppressive nature of patriarchal society. Most explanations of these causes rest on gendered dynamics, but there was a switch in perspective, propelled largely by feminist thinkers: one of the earliest interpretations of hysteria listed getting married as the cure, because a husband would be able to calm the "wandering womb" and "keep it in check" (Veith 1965: 11). However, as women began finding their voices and managed to raise them enough to be heard, men's role in the story about hysteria went from a hero to a villain. As the perspective of the story shifted from an unreliable male narrator to the first-person female point of view, it has been argued that "hysteria is caused by women's oppressive social roles rather than by their bodies and psyches, and [women historians] have sought its sources in cultural myths of femininity and in male domination" (Showalter 1993: 287). Likewise, Nicole's hysteric outbursts stem from traumatic experiences caused by a man. She is seen as too erratic to be allowed to handle the power a car gives her, let alone anything of greater consequence, but the reason behind her fickleness is the same group that enjoys wielding the said power – men. The group labelling women as "unfit" to be in positions of authority is the same one holding the said positions, thus forming a vicious circle that is hard to break and that keeps power out of women's reach.

The last novel that will be part of this analysis is *The Beautiful and Damned*. Its main female character is introduced in a rather interesting way – through a dialogue between Beauty and The Voice, an incorporeal entity that prepares Beauty for her next reincarnation. It is stated that Beauty is reborn every one hundred years, and that this time it will grace the earth as a “susciety girl”<sup>1</sup> who is, as The Voice explains, “a sort of bogus aristocrat” (Fitzgerald 2018b: 23). The Voice also describes Beauty’s next destination as a country where “ugly women control strong men”, which horrifies Beauty:

THE VOICE: (*very much depressed*): Yes, it is truly a melancholy spectacle. Women with receding chins and shapeless noses go about in broad daylight saying “Do this!” and “Do that!” and all the men, even those of great wealth, obey implicitly their women, to whom they refer sonorously either as “Mrs So-and-so” or as “the wife”.

BEAUTY: But this can’t be true! I can understand, of course, their obedience to women of charm – but to fat women? To women with scrawny cheeks? (Fitzgerald 2018b: 23)

It becomes obvious as the story unfolds that this Beauty is none other than Gloria Gilbert (later Patch), but this particular description is interesting because it mirrors the quote from the already mentioned interview, “All Women over Thirty-five Should Be Murdered”, which Fitzgerald gave a year after the book’s publication. The quote in question is his comment on the statement which produced the headline for the interview. When his wife, Zelda, says that he is “a crank on the subject of women” and believes “all women over thirty-five should be murdered”, Fitzgerald responds:

I mean the women who, without any of the prerogatives of youth and beauty, demand continual slavery from their men. [...] You know the type. There are thousands of them. They sit back complacently and watch their husbands slave for them; and, without furnishing any of the pleasantries of life for their husbands, they demand the sort of continual attention that a charming fiancée might get. They make tame-cats of them. They are harridans and shrews who continually nag and scold until the men are driven idiotic. (Brucoli and Baughman 2004: 58)

These two segments once again emphasise the notion that women are nothing but ornaments in society and encapsulate the ubiquitous belief that, in case of women, beauty equals value.



Gloria Gilbert is a character who is well aware of the worth of her beauty and youth and feels acutely the ephemeral nature of these assets as time goes by. Her physical appearance is what makes her desirable and gives her a certain power over men. However, this type of power is just a diluted simulacrum of the power men hold and makes her all the more dangerous and unfit to be given control, which is reflected in her driving. When she asks Anthony to let her behind the steering wheel, he looks at her suspiciously and makes her swear she is a good driver. She assures him of her skills, but it soon transpires that their definitions of a “good driver” differ. As soon as Gloria put the car in gear, it made “a horrible grinding noise” and “[t]heir heads snapped back like marionettes on a single wire as the car leapt ahead and curved retchingly about a standing milk wagon” (Fitzgerald 2018b: 133). She proceeds to ignore Anthony’s advice and warning, which leads him to believe that “he made a grave mistake in relinquishing control and that Gloria was a driver of many eccentricities and infinite carelessness” (Fitzgerald 2018b: 134). Anthony then demands she let him drive, which she reluctantly does, and they spend some time driving in silence. However, he soon succumbs to the pressure of this silence and gives her control of the car again, only to witness her losing her way after ducking down a side street in order to avoid crashing into a streetcar, followed by her driving over a fire hydrant and ripping the transmission from the car.

Another detail worth observing is the fact that Gloria lets out a laugh “which seemed to Anthony disquieting and in the worst possible taste” and proceeded to yell “Here we go!” and “Whoo-oo!” as she was starting the car (Fitzgerald 2018b: 133). This is something that connects her to other female characters from Fitzgerald’s works mentioned earlier. Her laugh parallels that of Nicole Diver from *Tender is the Night*, who is “laughing hysterically” as she is affected by one of her manic episodes right before she tries to snatch the wheel from her husband and almost kills everyone in the car. Her exclamations and general carelessness resemble that of Jordan Baker from *The Great Gatsby*, who, just like her, does not seem overly concerned with her on-road behaviour and how it might affect others.

## **Conclusion**

This brief overview and look into the connection between female characters and cars in the selected works of F. Scott Fitzgerald sought to unearth the misogynistic beliefs regarding women and power that are embedded in the fabric of the patriarchal society. The invention of the car and the power and freedom it gave to its driver threatened the established gender norms as it offered women “a position from which to construct individual identity,

exercise individual agency, and chart a course as acknowledged individuals [...] [It] extends and erases the boundaries of home, further obliterating what remained of the notion of separate spheres” (Clarke 2007: 4). What started as a helpful invention meant to facilitate the challenges of everyday life suddenly transformed into a weapon that could be used to dismantle patriarchal values propelling society. Thus, it hardly comes as a surprise that women were discouraged from driving, and the only connection between women and cars that was emphasised was the comparison between female bodies and cars. After pointing out this relation that connects women and cars, Clarke goes on to note the complexity of the matter that lies in the fact that, in spite of its feminine qualities, “the car, as a powerful machine, also remains to a degree masculine. It is masculine in its power yet feminine in being a body that is ridden and mastered” (2007: 23). In any case, it remains being marketed towards men, as “the best thing a girl can be in this world [is] a beautiful little fool” (Fitzgerald 2020: 19), a statement that, unfortunately, retains the same level of veracity in today’s society it enjoyed in Fitzgerald’s time.

---

<sup>1</sup> The meaning is “society”, but it is spelled like this in the original text.

## Bibliography

Brucoli, J. Matthew. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1993.

Brucoli, J. Mathew and Judith S. Baughman, ed. *Conversations with F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004.

Clarke, Deborah. *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth-Century America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.

Cruea, M. Susan. "Changing Ideals of Womanhood during the Nineteenth-Century Woman Movement". *ATQ* 19 (2005): 187–204.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Tender Is the Night*. Richmond: Alma Classics, 2018a.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Beautiful and Damned*. Richmond: Alma Classics, 2018b.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. Richmond: Alma Classics, 2020.

Showalter, Elaine. "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender". In *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, 286–344. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Luong, B. Merry. "A Woman's Touch in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*: Pulling the Women Out of the Background". Master's Thesis. Georgia State University, 2010.

Macrae, C. Neil., and Galen V. Bodenhausen. "Social Cognition: Thinking Categorically about Others". *Annual Review of Psychology* 51 (2000): 93–120. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.51.1.93>. (accessed 18. 10. 2022)

Makowsky, Veronica. "Bad Driving: Jordan's Tantalizing Story in 'The Great Gatsby'". *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 9 (2011): 28–40.

Veevers, Jean. "Women in the Driver's Seat: Trends in Sex Differences in Driving and Death". *Population Research and Policy Review* 1, no. 2 (May 1982): 171–182. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138442>. (accessed 18. 10. 2022)

Veith, Ilza. *Hysteria: The History of a Disease*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.

**Марија Миљковић**  
[Miljkovic-Marija@outlook.com](mailto:Miljkovic-Marija@outlook.com)  
Независна истраживачица  
Београд

<https://doi.org/10.18485/knjiz.2022.12.12.3>  
УДК: 821.111(73).09-31 Фицџералд Ф. С.  
Оригинални научни чланак

## **Женска жеља за моћи: жене и аутомобили у изабраним делима Френсиса Скота Фицџералда**

Овај рад испитује везу између женских ликова и аутомобила у три романа Ф. Скота Фицџералда: *Велики Гатсби*, *Блага је ноћ* и *Лепи и проклети*. Уводни део анализе доноси кратко објашњење улоге стереотипа и генерализације у друштву, а потом прелази на испитивање конкретног стереотипа који жене представља као лоше возаче и повлачи паралелу између вожње аутомобила и управљања влашћу и моћи. Главни део рада усредсређује се на расветљавање карактеризације жена кроз призму везе између њихових вештина вожње и пола. Женски ликови су за воланом приказани као опасни по себе и све остале на путу. Њихове феминине одлике ограничавају њихове способности вожње, што их чини неподобним да контролишу моћ коју им ауто доноси и, самим тим, било коју врсту моћи.

**Кључне речи:** Ф. Скот Фицџералд, феминистичка критика, америчка књижевност, књижевност 20. века, жене возачи

**Примљено: 9. 7. 2022.**

**Прихваћено: 17. 8. 2022.**