Wings Of Fire: **Volume 4 (2026), No. 1**

Oppression Under Our Gaze: Daisy, Gatsby, and The Reader

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Daisy Buchanan changes depending on how she is seen and understood both by the men in the novel and by readers of The Great Gatsby, *leaving her trapped between being a symbol and a human being.*

Baxter, Brelyn. 2026. "Opression Under Our Gaze: Daisy, Gatsby, and The Reader," *Wings of Fire*. Volume 4, No. 1.

Perhaps the most revealing truth about *The Great Gatsby's* Daisy Buchanan is that the more closely she is examined, the harder she is to define. She is firmly on the line between various different contrasting identities, showing how the privilege she holds due to her beauty and power is also what hinders her in a patriarchal world. The male characters' perceptions of Daisy–shaped by their own desires, fantasies, and entitlement–give rise to different versions of her that conceal her true self, influencing how the readers view her as well. Depending on the lens through which she is viewed, she changes dramatically. Some readings uphold her as a symbol of the glistening emptiness of Gatsby's failed dreams, while others present her as a fully realized woman restricted by gendered expectations, class pressures, and her own fears and insecurities. A feminist perspective highlights her ensnarement in era-typical gender roles and how the narratives created about her limit her agency even further, while a traditional and moral lens would highlight the destruction caused by her carelessness. These varied and often opposing interpretations of her character demonstrate that Daisy's complexity is an integral part of *The Great Gatsby*, deliberately crafted to blur the lines between morality and malice as well as those between a symbol and a person. This makes the ambiguity of her role and the oppressive, patriarchal forces that define her image central to the novel's themes of illusion, social constraints, and desire.

Daisy's tragedy is not just that men in the novel misunderstand her, but that their fabricated versions of her overshadow her. The most common and enduring interpretation of Daisy exists through the context of Jay Gatsby. Daisy, to him, is a representation of all he wishes to attain: wealth, status, a past he aims to reclaim. Glenn Settle argues in the article "Fitzgerald's Daisy: The Siren Voice" that Daisy is best understood through her voice, one that is described as being "full of money" by Gatsby (Fitzgerald 75). This, of course, aligns Daisy with a vision of wealth, as something inherently desirable to Gatsby, who rose to prominence from nothing. Settle uses this idea of desire to create a comparison between Daisy and mythological sirens, who lure sailors to their death via their songs. Settle sees Daisy's voice as serving a similar function: people are drawn to her not because of who she is, but what she represents or promises. Sirens in myth are characterized as being enchantingly dangerous. Throughout the article, Daisy is portrayed similarly. Settle writes, "An overview of the story of Gatsby himself is also not without evidence of Daisy as wrecker-temptress. Although she has given her promise to Jay, she marries another" (Settle 118). The language Settle uses to describe Daisy is hostile throughout the article. He refers to her as an "enchantress-betrayer" (Settle 118) and to sirens as "amalgamation[s] of women, fish, and/or bird," (Settle 115) further setting Daisy apart as a malicious

symbol and possibly even a monster, alienating her as opposed to seeing her as a fully realized human being. Settle's article treats each move made by Daisy as a strategic attack on Gatsby's love for her, a fundamentally wicked way of toying with him. He suggests that she uses Gatsby and destroys his life with reckless abandon, even if she herself is clueless to the extent to which she is hurting him. This reduces Daisy to a symbol of the inevitability of Gatsby's downfall, the harbinger of his demise. Settle treats Daisy as an active participant in Gatsby's ruin via her voice, which Fitzgerald repeatedly describes in terms such as "thrilling" and "lovely," or, in one notable case, as having "fluctuating, feverish warmth," (Fitzgerald 97). Gatsby is drawn not to Daisy, but to what her voice promises. Through this argument, Settle coddles Gatsby while vilifying Daisy.

Leland S. Person Jr. is vehemently opposed to reading Daisy as a symbol. In "'Herstory' and Daisy Buchanan," an entirely feminist reading of *The Great Gatsby*, Person rejects the idea of Daisy as a symbol, going so far as to say all who engage the text through that reading have entered a competition to malign her character. Instead he argues that Daisy is a person first and foremost, with her existence as a symbol to Gatsby as secondary. One particular issue brought up by Person is the fact that Daisy is viewed through the eyes of Nick Carraway: "A persistent problem for the contemporary critic of *The Great Gatsby* is the reliability of Nick Carraway as narrator, and certainly any effort to revise current opinion of Daisy's role must begin with Nick," (Person 2). Of course, Gatsby's view of Daisy is dramatically skewed, but, because he is the narrator, Nick's perspective on Daisy is offered to the reader as the objectively correct one. Person argues that, despite being much more reasonable and pragmatic than Gatsby, Nick has his own distorted view of women: "While he is far more circumspect and pragmatic than Gatsby, in his own way Nick maintains a similarly fabulous (and safely distanced) relation to women. In effect, he represents another version of that persistent impulse among Fitzgerald's early protagonists to abstract women into objects of selfish wish-fulfillment," (Person 3). In this sense, the reader is being urged not to take what Nick tells them about Daisy at face value. Nick is biased towards a specific view and ideal of women, allowing any woman who does not adhere to this standard to receive scorn or judgement. Throughout the article, it is stressed that Daisy exists within the confines of a patriarchal society and a controlling marriage. Person takes the stance that Daisy's words and actions over the course of the story are not that of a siren's song, but are instead a survival strategy. Person paints her as an innocent victim navigating a world that does not value women and contends that she exists not as an object of desire, but rather a human being with her own desires.

The essay "'Good girls' and 'Bad Girls' in The Great Gatsby" by Linn Karlsson combines both of the previous arguments about Daisy to build a complicated fusion of interpretations. Karlsson begins by claiming that women are not characterized, but instead *categorized* by the patriarchy. Through this framework, Karlsson uses the ideas of the "good girl" and the "bad girl" to view women within *The Great Gatsby*, claiming that these roles are imposed upon women by men, not something that women actively or perfectly fit into of their own volition. Karlsson uses Nick's first meeting with Jordan as an example of this imposition: "Nick gives an image of Jordan looking masculine by comparing her appearance to that of a young cadet. Although Jordan's appearance is fashionable, looking masculine in a culture that is still patriarchal is not always positive" (Karlsson 6). The "good girl" is identifiable as passive, pure, and domestic. Karlsson argues that the text assigns Daisy to the role of good girl, claiming that her general outward behavior aligns with that criteria. Myrtle Wilson is appointed the role of "bad girl," a category marked by being assertive, sensual, and transgressive. Karlsson argues that, because of these designated identities, the women in *The Great Gatsby*, as well as women in the real world, are never free from the patriarchy no matter what actions they take: "The classification of 'good' and 'bad' depends on how well the women characters fit into traditional gender roles, obey patriarchal society, and conform to the construction of femininity of the time in which the novel is set. A 'good' girl lets herself be used by men while a 'bad' girl usually takes herself off the male market" (Karlsson 7). Despite the classification of 'bad girl' coming from a place of resistance to the patriarchy, the need for a classification by men in and of itself continues to chain women to the patriarchy. The categorization of each female character into worthy and unworthy groups is done by

men according to what men desire in a woman. Because of this, despite the fact that Daisy also is unfaithful to her husband and engages in an affair, she is still of higher moral standing in the eyes of men because of her performance of appropriate femininity. Her punishment is to give up her own desires and submit to the patriarchy. Myrtle, on the other hand, is not willing to forgo her ambitions of wealth, therefore being too masculine, and she is punished by death.

As previously mentioned, it is most common for readers to view Daisy through the eyes of Gatsby, as a desirable woman who represents wealth and power. Gatsby's vision of her is ever present, extending to all aspects of the book. "'Only Her Hairdresser…': Another Look at Daisy Buchanan" by Joan S. Korenman spotlights how Daisy's duality manifests even in her physical appearance. The article opens by quoting a critique of the choice of an actress for a film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, saying that the actress does not match the image of Daisy as "blonde, blue-eyed, feminine, and frivolous," because the actress who was cast had darker features (Korenman 1). Korenman states that the depictions of Daisy's physical appearance vary throughout the novel, beginning with the blonde hair that is most identifiably Daisy Buchanan. When Daisy's young daughter appears, Daisy says to her, "Did mother get powder on your old yellowy hair?" and then goes on to say, "She looks like me. She's got my hair and shape of the face" (Fitzgerald 73). In addition, gold and yellow are often associated with Daisy, with her wealth being a significant part of her character, and the fact that the car that Daisy was driving when she killed Myrtle was yellow. However, Korenman points out that:

> ...while mother and daughter seem here to be unmistakably blonde, elsewhere in the novel Daisy is clearly a brunette. On the last afternoon before Gatsby goes off to the War, he and Daisy sit together silently; "now and then she moved and he changed his arm a little, and once he kissed her dark shining hair" (p. 180). It is presumably this dark hair that several years later lay "like a dash of blue paint across her cheek" (p. 103). (Korenman 1)

The strong association Daisy has with gold outweighs her apparently canonical dark hair, as in most adaptations of *The Great Gatsby*, she is played by a blonde actress. Through the symbolism of hair, Korenman asserts that the imposition of symbols onto Daisy distorts even the readers' perception of her, further blurring her true self.

It is clear that while Fitzgerald was indeed using Daisy as a symbol of Gatsby's dreams and aspirations, she is also a character in her own right. We can consider her as a complete personality with her own flaws and depth. However, by playing second fiddle to two prominent male characters, she is defined by their views and understandings of her. Were the story to be told from a different point of view, perhaps Daisy's character might have been revealed from different angles. Both Person and Karlsson touch on the idea of how Nick's judgement of women from a patriarchal standpoint affects the reader's view of the female characters. In this sense, the reader is not seeing an unbiased version of them, especially not Daisy, as she is doubly defined by men–Gatsby's view of her and Nick's view of her, which is heavily influenced by the former.

In becoming a symbol for the men around her, Daisy loses her autonomy. Placed on such a high pedestal, she is unable to be herself. Nick muses to himself as Gatsby and Daisy spend time together, "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" (Fitzgerald 61-62). Here, Nick acknowledges the lack of say that Daisy has in her relationship with Gatsby. So long as Gatsby idealizes her in his head, she is not free from his expectations. When she fails to live up to his lofty ideals, it is no one's fault but Gatsby's for expecting that of her in the first place. Because of this, Gatsby's obsessive love for Daisy and what she represents to him acts as a form of oppression. Nick, who is more reasonable than Gatsby in this regard, tries to reason with him, saying that he can't repeat the past. Gatsby, blinded by love and ambition, replies as follows, "'Can't repeat the past?…Why of course you

can!'" (Fitzgerald 69). Gatsby's insistence that he can recreate the perfect relationship with Daisy that he recalls from all those years ago pressures her to fit into the replication of his romanticized memory. It erases her freedom and agency and imposes a rigid narrative onto her. This is a stark contrast to their initial whirlwind romance, where she eventually chose to marry Tom Buchanan for stability, retreating into a hollow, materialistic, and controlling marriage. Back then, Gatsby was a symbol of freedom to her in comparison to a life with Tom. Now, he is just another man who wishes to control her. In the fight between Tom and Gatsby, Daisy is put on the spot to confirm her allegiance to either man. '"Oh, you want too much!' she cried to Gatsby. 'I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past.' She began to sob helplessly. 'I did love him once—but I loved you too'" (Fitzgerald 82). The fight over the claim of Daisy alone disregards her independence and reduces her to a belonging of either man to lord over the loser–a side effect of patriarchal societal views that objectify women and treat them as property to be owned. However, what Daisy stresses is that Gatsby has changed. He is no longer a personification of a key to the cage she is in, he is now another cage.

The inclusion of "I can't help what's past" shows Daisy's awareness of the permanence of her choice to marry Tom and the responsibility that she must take as a result. In choosing to marry Tom, she chose to leave her old life behind. While she was enticed by Gatsby's reappearance in her life, she ultimately decides she must abide by her vows. It is within this line that Settle might argue that this is a shallow acknowledgement of Daisy's "wrongdoings." If one is to interpret Daisy as having led Gatsby on, then this would be an incredibly insincere apology and a tone deaf response to his proclamation of love, entirely avoiding placing the blame upon herself. In addition, if it is to be believed that Daisy is a temptress and a manipulator while Gatsby is an innocent man in love, then this is a brutal rejection following a strategic set-up. However, if Daisy is read as a woman trapped in a loveless marriage of convenience who has been reintroduced to the man she once loved in a less than desirable way, this reads as a frustrated woman trying her best not to break Gatsby's heart while trying to maintain her comfortable life. While the more earnest interpretation of Daisy is more aligned with the way Nick seems to see her, there is still much room for differing angles on her intentions and nature. Those that align more with Gatsby's idealized, symbolic view of Daisy create a meta-oppression for Daisy at the hands of the reader.

Korenman's hair theory also aligns with this meta-oppression. The image of a blonde Daisy Buchanan exists primarily as a result of the symbolism surrounding her. As previously stated, her association with wealth and glamor links her to gold while the yellow car she drove when she killed Myrtle links her to yellow. Her link to gold is especially prominent, as Gatsby views Daisy as a goal to reach, something he will be worthy of once he is wealthy. Everything about her ties back to money in Gatsby's eyes. When contemplating Gatsby's idea that Daisy's voice is "full of money," Nick thinks: "High in a white palace the king's daughter, the golden girl" (Fitzgerald 75). She is placed not only in a position akin to a pedestal, high up and unreachable to the average person, but she is also compared to royalty. She is a beacon of light at the end of the tunnel–or to be more precise, on the horizon–something pure that lingers in his memory, unattainable until the moment is right. In this context, her blondeness, a representation of her wealth, is also a representation of her purity. However, her character is not the sole source of purity, but also, according to Tom, she represents a racial purity. Fair complexions and blonde hair are traits associated with those of Nordic and Anglo-Saxon descent. This racial connection ties into the book Tom was discussing in chapter one called *The Rise of the Coloured Empires*: "The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be utterly submerged… It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things" (Fitzgerald 17). Tom also goes on to affirm that everyone present is of Nordic descent. Under the assumption that many people during the 1920s may have agreed with Tom on this matter, it is not without reason to assume that people would have connected purity of one's race to the purity of their character.

The vision of Daisy as an entirely pure being undermines her complexity, something that Gatsby repeatedly does. Karlsson is guilty of this assessment as well. Categorizing Daisy into the role of 'good girl' diminishes the impact of her adultery and the accidental murder of Myrtle. However, it would seem these crimes are forgiven due to her stellar performance as the designated 'good girl.' In addition, she chooses to return to the accepted order of a patriarchal society, to Tom, instead of leaving him for Gatsby. Choosing to stay by Tom's side despite the fact that he also cheated on her with Myrtle is a commitment to the 'good girl' ideals of domesticity and passivity, absolving her of any wrongdoing.

In contrast, a dark-haired Daisy does not reflect the deified being that Gatsby created. This Daisy represents a more cynical and jaded woman who understands her position in a patriarchal society and has begrudgingly accepted her role in it as well as her unfulfilling marriage as a byproduct of said society. It is in moments where Daisy shows more vulnerability where her hair is described as being dark. In these instances, there is a sense of sorrow. There is also the contrast to a brighter color representing purity set against a darker color. In this way, the blonde Daisy is untouched by time and loyal only to Gatsby, a "beautiful fool" wrapped in innocence and ignorance, whereas the dark-haired Daisy has, in her own words, "been everywhere and seen everything and done everything" (Fitzgerald 20) and has been disillusioned when it comes to love and her own autonomy. As an addendum, when Tom confirms the Nordic ancestry of everyone in the room, he quickly points out himself, Nick, and Jordan Baker until he reaches Daisy: "After an infinitesimal hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod, and she winked at [Nick]..." (Fitzgerald 20). In this case, all aspects of purity assigned to her by the men in her life are either called into question or outright contradicted. Dark-haired Daisy disrupts the image of the ideal Daisy. Because of this, the reader may subconsciously disregard her in favor of Gatsby's romanticized, blonde Daisy, participating in Daisy's oppression.

Daisy's reality crushes Gatsby's dream, pushing him, and then the reader, to ignore it. The biggest symbol of Gatsby's dream of Daisy that isn't Daisy herself exists in the green light. When Gatsby finally reunites with Daisy, he realizes she is different from what he has remembered or created in his head:

> "If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay," said Gatsby. "You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock." Daisy put her arm through his abruptly but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one (60).

The green light represented the possibility, the dream of Daisy, that was always just out of his reach. Now that Daisy is beside him, arm in arm, he realizes to some degree that she is a real person–not an object, not a symbol, but a person that is bound by the fears and constraints of her life. The light that once was a guiding star is reduced to nothing but a light. However, it is important to note that the light is close enough to Daisy that it is nearly touching her. The image of light touching Daisy is reminiscent of what happens when a person stands in front of a projector: the light shines on them, covering them in the projected likeness of whatever was meant to be displayed on a screen. In seeing the light here as a projector, Gatsby has not fully separated his ideal Daisy from the reality of her being. It lingers alongside her so long as the idea remains with him. The prevailing presence of the light shows that Gatsby has not yet given up. The enduring light loiters around Daisy, ready to encapsulate her. Even when her personhood is recognized, it is shunned in favor of a delusion.

The elusive nature of Daisy's character is by design. The closer one looks at her, the more she shifts between identities shaped by desire, class, and the gendered expectations of her time. She exists

in a perpetual tug-of-war between who she really is and the way the men in her life insist on perceiving her, leaving her trapped between being a symbol and a human being. The tragedy of her character comes not just from her own choices in life, but also in narratives that imprison her. Men's fantasies of her negate her agency and stave off disappointment in her true self. These sentiments extend beyond the minds of the men in the book, but to the readers and critics as well, all of whom choose to see her in a certain light. Even so, there are constantly new interpretations of her. The tension created between expectation and reality shown in Daisy makes her a vital part of *The Great Gatsby's* exploration of illusion and desire under the limitations of a patriarchal society. Through Daisy, Fitzgerald shows how a woman can be the center or driving force of a story and still be denied autonomy.

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