

Daisy Buchanan, Fran Dodsworth, Kate Clephane:

Upper class women in three novels of the 1920s

by

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INTRODUCTION

As I have immersed myself in literature of the 1920s, I have been troubled by the discontented, trivial lives of the upper class female characters. They're an intelligent, vital, attractive group of women; yet even with, in most cases, financial freedom, they have few opportunities for independence and fulfillment. Despite the decades that separate my life from theirs, despite the freedoms they lack and I take for granted, and despite my decidedly non-upper class status, I recognize these women's frustrations and lack of choices. It became important to me to analyze their predicaments; they are stuck, and I wanted to understand why.

The 1920s, framed by the "devastation and brutality of World War I and the cataclysm of the crash and the Great Depression" (Brown 2) is a period with distinct style and mood. While characterized by prosperity, Henry Ford's Model T, and the flapper, the decade was nonetheless a time of fear, intolerance, and violence. The Federal Volstead Act of 1919, which prohibited the sale (but not the consumption) of alcohol, resulted in the illegal manufacturing and selling of "bootleg whiskey"; Al Capone and the era's other notorious gangsters, who took advantage of the bootleg business, drew immense media attention. Immigration was on the rise, as was racism, and the Red Scare, culminating in the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti stands as graphic proof of "both the fear and the vulnerability of Coolidge prosperity" (Brown 6). Into the Twenties marched the "new

woman,” fresh from her victory in the suffrage campaign, seemingly ready to “face a new day—equal, at least at the polling place, and free to turn to new issues” (Brown 29). The upper class woman of the Twenties, represented here by her fictional counterparts, faces problems of her own, but she remains curiously untouched by the events of the period.

Were the women I discuss in this paper my friends, I would recommend that they head off to college or a profession and join a health club; in my 1990s feminist view, intellectual and physical exercise are the keys to happiness, or at least to survival. But jobs and communities of female athletes were not, with a few exceptions, options available to wealthy women seventy-five years ago. If one assumes that the novel is tangled in the values of the culture from which it springs, the lives of these women of the Twenties become particularly poignant: they are our ancestors (*The Great Gatsby's* Daisy Buchanan was born in 1899, only seven years before my Grandma Ruth), and many of the problems they face have yet to be solved.

That the women from the novels under discussion (*The Great Gatsby*, *Dodsworth*, *The Mother's Recompense*) are of the upper class makes a difference; as Scott Fitzgerald observed, the rich “are different from you and me. . . and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand” (“The Rich Boy” 152).¹ As I've studied the

novels and the plight of women in general, I have needed to remind myself often that class, just as surely as time, is a variable separating me from these women. It has been an interesting exploration.

I began my studies assuming “upper class” to be a function of money and status in society, recognizing that sometimes, especially in small towns, one may retain upper class status even if funds dwindle. However, Susan Ostrander in *Women of the Upper Class* points to exclusivity as a component of her definition of upper class: “that portion of the population that owns the major share of corporate and personal wealth, exercises dominant power in economic and political affairs, and comprises exclusive social networks and organizations open only to persons born into or selected by this class” (4-5). Ostrander asserts that upper class women, often without knowing they do so, work hard to perpetuate their upper class status. This concept I will discuss further.

The novels I have selected offer a variety of lively women. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is the story of Jay Gatsby, who, by dubious means, attempts to amass enough money to buy his way into upper class society and win back Daisy Buchanan, the love of his younger days. Daisy’s friend Jordan Baker reveals to the novel’s narrator Nick Carraway that Daisy and Gatsby had been in love several years earlier, but that Daisy’s upper class status had prevented her from marrying Gatsby, who was poor. Gatsby goes off to war, and Daisy eventually marries the

upper class Tom Buchanan. What Gatsby fails to understand is that becoming rich will not guarantee him upper class status, and Daisy remains unattainable.

Daisy, the former belle of Louisville, is beautiful and glamorous, but desperately bored and dissatisfied. Daisy's intelligence, which Fitzgerald paints delicately with a couple of winks and witty comments—"It's so hot," she complained. "You go. We'll ride around and meet you after." With an effort her wit rose faintly, "We'll meet you on some corner. I'll be the man smoking two cigarettes'" (*Gatsby* 83)—makes her unhappiness especially painful. In addition to Daisy, Fitzgerald gives the reader Jordan Baker, Daisy's old friend, and Myrtle Wilson, the mistress of Daisy's husband Tom. Of Daisy and Tom's economic class, there is no doubt: for a wedding gift, Tom gives Daisy a pearl necklace worth, in 1918, three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.

Daisy is complex, and critics who see her as unintelligent, unsophisticated, and "empty" (Matterson 44-5) are not reading her carefully enough. Sarah Beebe Fryer paints a poignant picture of the young Daisy's love for Gatsby and the profound impact the end of the affair has upon her: "[F]or a year she withdrew from her customary social engagements and rejected dates with attractive, eligible men. The girl who had been so sought after began to associate only with men who could not possibly compete with Gatsby. Daisy had, in effect, retreated from the risk of falling in love again"

(Fryer 161). Although Daisy sustains a correspondence with Gatsby for over a year, she can't wait forever: "Her need for stability was immediate, and she attempted to satisfy that need through something tangible, something close at hand" (161).

Gatsby's failure to return soon enough, coupled with the pressure Daisy feels to marry, results in her union with Tom Buchanan. "And," writes Fryer, "having made a formal commitment to her choice of Tom Buchanan for a husband, Daisy apparently allowed herself to fall in love with him. Jordan describes Daisy's devotion to Tom shortly after they returned from their honeymoon. . ." (162). Tom, too, with his infidelity, fails Daisy, and Fryer suggests that "[t]hrough Tom as well as through Gatsby, Daisy has discovered that romantic love leads to emotional anguish" (162). Small wonder that Daisy occasionally sounds jaded.

Though there is reason enough to pity Daisy, the text gives cause to judge her, as well. By virtue of their class, Tom and Daisy are careless: "[T]hey smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made. . ." (*Gatsby* 120). Daisy's carelessness results in Myrtle Wilson's death, and she is indirectly responsible for Gatsby's and George Wilson's deaths as well (Lehan 78). In Daisy and Tom's final scene together, there is "an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture, and anybody would

have said they were conspiring together” (*Gatsby* 97). “Conspiring” suggests that Daisy tells Tom that she was driving Gatsby’s car and that she killed Myrtle, but whether she confides in Tom or not, Daisy is irrevocably part of the chain of events which results in Wilson shooting Gatsby and then himself. Daisy, who embodies beauty and desirability, invites speculation upon the situation of the upper class woman.

Fran Dodsworth, of Sinclair Lewis’ *Dodsworth* (1929), is a vain and egocentric character who demands notice. *Dodsworth* is the story of Fran’s husband Sam Dodsworth, who, upon retiring from a hugely successful career in automobile manufacturing, attempts to find passion and fulfillment. At Fran’s insistence, the two leave for an extended trip to Europe, where Fran has a series of love affairs. Sam eventually divorces Fran and marries Edith Cortright, with whom he will return to the United States and begin a new career. Lewis calls Fran the “villain of the piece” (xii), but before she and Sam are married, Fran is honest about what she wants from life: “Oh, Sam, my dear, but I’m so grasping! I want the whole world, not just Zenith! I *don’t* want to be a good wife and mother and play cribbage prettily! I want splendor! Great horizons! Can we look for them together?” (6) Sam’s response, “We will!” (6), is a promise he doesn’t keep, and although her disappointment may not give her the right to be cruel, it does explain her frustration. At forty-one Fran is literally begging for life:

Only to do all that, to grab the world, we must not be bound by the feeling that we're tied to this slow-pokey Zenith till death do us part from the fun of adventuring! Oh, Sam, I'm absolutely not going to let my life be over at forty—well, at forty-one, but no one ever takes me for more than thirty-five or even thirty-three. And life would be over for me if I simply went on forever with the idiotic little activities in this half-baked town! (30)

Fran's impassioned monologue rings throughout the novel and makes it difficult for a contemporary reader to judge her as harshly as Lewis' text encourages.

The Mother's Recompense (1925), by Edith Wharton, is, in several ways, a contrast to the other two novels. In addition to the fact that I deal here with a female author's female main character, the text has a less modern feel to it than *Gatsby* or *Dodsworth*. Wharton's setting is an older, more aristocratic New York than Fitzgerald portrays, due in part, I suspect, to the fact that, when *Recompense* was published, Wharton had been living in Europe for eighteen years. Wharton, at sixty-three², if a bit out of touch with American life, was nonetheless well qualified to write about the effects of aging on an upper class heroine. Kate Clephane, having fled, eighteen years previously, a repressive marriage to John Clephane, and deserted their young daughter Anne, is forty-five when the story opens, and has been summoned back to New York by the now adult Anne. John is dead, as is

his mother Mrs. Clephane, who has been raising Anne. While living in exile in France, on an allowance from the Clephane estate, Kate's existence is thrifty, although she has enough money for a full-time maid and new clothes. At heart, however, she is upper class, and the New York society she re-enters is opulently rich and carefree.

The novel engenders far more reader resistance than does *Gatsby* or *Dodsworth*, because the crux of the plot is problematic. While in exile on the Riviera, Kate has had a love affair with a younger man named Chris Fenno; later, Fenno meets Kate's daughter Anne and the two fall in love. Kate's opposition to a marriage between Chris and Anne is fervent, and although she claims to no longer love Chris herself, her reaction has the appearance of jealous lover. Kate's sense of panic becomes almost overwhelming, and she feverishly plots to prevent the marriage. While I recognize that such a situation would be difficult and uncomfortable for Kate, her reaction seems inexplicably extreme. Wharton directly addresses Kate's feelings about Chris and Anne's relationship late in the novel, in only one sentence: "And, in the mad phantasmagoria, there was Chris himself, symbolizing what she had flown in her wild escape; representing, in some horrible duality, at once her sin and its harvest, her flight and her return" (203). I accept the explanation, but with 1998 morality, I can't really understand it; since I reject the concept of Kate's love affair as sin, I can't empathize with her guilt.³ However, Kate, as a widow, adds an element of

depth to my female characters. In addition, she examines the mother/daughter relationship, which Daisy and Fran do not.

Kate, more than Daisy or Fran, controls her own destiny, but all three have limited options. They are all ornamental women, living in a world where beauty and youth are necessary to attract men, and where attracting men is necessary for economic survival and emotional support. The question one must ask is how this could be, at a time when women have just won the vote and more women than ever are entering college, in a decade personified by Gertrude Ederle, Amelia Earhart, and Margaret Mead. The answer may be that the walls that restrain Kate, Daisy, and Fran are secure and strong and that blasting through them is not possible. In trying to understand these boundaries, I turn first to the past.

In hunting and gathering societies, the earliest known form of human society, women's dual roles—bearing and raising the young, and collecting and preparing food—were central to survival (Brownmiller 222-3). This suggests that, Adam and Eve notwithstanding, earliest woman was not seen as functionally inferior to man. As land was cultivated and permanent towns created, and stratified classes began to develop, “the necessary tasks of reproduction and nurture were no longer at the vital center of human and endeavor” (223). Central, instead, was physical strength and dominance and a “carefree reproductive system” (223), decidedly male characteristics. As means of survival shifted from agricultural to industrial, women's value

decreased even further. “The hearth, the broom, the spinning wheel and the cradle had been honored symbols of the female share in the household partnership of productive family labor, but the home itself as a central place of work was diminished in importance when spinning and weaving, among other skills, were gradually supplanted by mass production” (224). Even breast milk was supplanted, first by a wet nurse of a lower class, and later by formula. “In a poignant example of feminine sentiment used as a wedge against female ambition, childbirth itself was placed under male supervision when the skills of midwifery were surpassed by medical study from which women were barred as unfit by their delicate nature” (225).

Although I may see cause for optimism in the plight of women, my counterparts in the early part of this century must surely have been reeling from the onslaught of nineteenth century “scientific proof” of woman’s inferiority. Charles Darwin’s revolutionary ideas about evolution permeated not only the field of biology, but the social sciences as well (Russett 4), and Darwin was confident of woman’s intellectual inferiority to man (81). His evidence: “Imagine two lists, one of men and one of women, of those most eminent in poetry, art, music, history, science, and philosophy: ‘the two would not bear comparison’ ” (41). Therefore, “if men are capable of a decided preeminence over women in many subjects, the average of mental power in man must be above that of women” (Darwin qtd. in Russett 41). Cynthia Eagle Russett suggests that scientists, in “inserting lesser orders

(women, savages) between themselves and the apes” (14), sought to distance man from animal. “If human beings could no longer lay claim to being a separate creation just a little less exalted than the angels, then a human hierarchy of excellence was needed more than ever. Women and the lesser races served to buffer Victorian gentlemen from a too-threatening intimacy with the brutes” (14). Fran Dodsworth was born in 1884, two years after Darwin’s death, and while her independent mindset represents in drastic ways a departure from the late nineteenth century construct of female inferiority, she and other women of the Twenties can’t help but have felt doubt about their worth when confronted with such recent and pervasive scientific evidence.

Furthermore, Kate and Fran, middle-aged in the 1920s, were both young women at the turn of the century, influenced by a trend toward what Maureen Montgomery calls the “culture of display.” In New York especially, the upper class “advertised their wealth and performed ‘class acts’ in laying claim to high social status” (Montgomery 122). The display culture was a gendered one, in which “[s]ociety women signified with their bodily presence and appearance high social class and respectability, which in turn reflected on their male provider’s monetary wealth” (117).⁴

Daisy, Fran, and Kate all attempted to live within the confines of tradition—mother, wife—but none was successful.⁵ Still, none shows any particular awareness of what is happening politically or culturally in the

1920s. Most significantly, the 19th Amendment, giving suffrage to women, and ratified in 1920, figures not at all. (In fact, given the emphasis on alcohol, especially in *The Great Gatsby* and *Dodsworth*, I would say that Prohibition was a more prominent issue in upper class America than was women's rights.) These women seem to feel no sense of political or social autonomy.

I should point out that social historians have suggested that the 1920s was a period of backlash against feminism and, for reasons I'll discuss later, most definitely a time of women being encouraged to stay home and be housewives, which can help to explain the women characters' lack of yearning to find fulfillment outside of the home. Significant, too, is that both Fitzgerald and Wharton, at the time these novels were published were living in Europe. Fitzgerald hadn't been there long enough to lose an awareness of American political and cultural issues, but Wharton surely had. Most significant of all, however, is that Daisy, Fran, and Kate are all upper class women. I contend that class, more than any other variable, is what kept them confined.

CHAPTER 1: BEAUTY/DRESS

There was a feminist component in the rhetoric of early twentieth century beauty writers (Banner 206). “The belief in the moral superiority of women—an ideal central to pre-World War I feminism—was closely connected to democratic beauty ideals. Both feminists and beauty experts argued that spiritual qualities were more important to creating and maintaining the appearance of beauty than were physical attributes” (206). Beauty, therefore, was available to any woman who chose to follow the “proper ethical path” (206). Feminists had long been concerned with the importance placed by society on physical appearance. Indeed, since the mid-nineteenth century, “feminist leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton had called for the advent of a natural woman whose face and figure would be shaped not by fashion, but by vigorous exercise and healthy living” (206). In some respects, however, beliefs about beauty in the early twentieth century accepted, rather than challenged, the male-dominated culture. For example, beauty literature advised that, to maintain her youthful appearance, a woman “remain calm and serene and avoid mental and emotional exertion” (207). A woman who is avoiding mental exertion can hardly be competitive in the classroom or at work. Furthermore, an assumption underlying the concept of beauty was that looks were important for advancement at work and to prevent husbands from being attracted to younger women (207).

In the nineteenth century, older women were set apart from the young by rules governing their clothes, physical appearance, and behavior. While “American society revered the image of the saintly grandmother who presumably played a key role in family cohesion and governance” (Banner 219), she was, at the same time, viewed with contempt. Men at thirty-five and forty might still be considered young (219), but “married women by virtue of the marital state were eliminated from the category of ‘youth,’ and by their mid-thirties were considered old” (220). By the twentieth century, such double standards did not apply; married and middle-aged women became free to do, dress, and act as they wished. At the same time, the woman who was no longer young became a lucrative market for the commercial beauty culture, for “it was not that normal physical attributes of old age—white hair, wrinkles, sagging muscles—were seen as beautiful, but rather that the cultural prohibitions against older women’s attempting to look beautiful were dropped” (225). On the one hand, then, older women became liberated in the sense that they were free to step outside of societally-prescribed expectations. However, in stepping into a new sphere—a sphere whose rules were determined by the commercial beauty culture—older women became part of a competitive world in which beauty was based on external attributes.

In terms of beauty, writes Banner, “1921 was a pivotal date in the history of women’s looks”:

Not only did a major shift in beauty standards occur about that time, but that year also marked the start of Atlantic City's Miss America pageant, the most famous and longest-running of all American beauty contests. The event made a national ritual of the by then powerful notion that the pursuit of beauty ought to be a woman's primary goal.

(16)

Since the 1920s, youthfulness has formed the basis of what is considered physically attractive in women: “[an] unlined face, hair neither gray nor white, a slim body with good muscle tone have been the signs of beauty achieved” (Banner 278). The flapper, that indisputable symbol of the Twenties, with her youthful athleticism, met these standards of beauty. But while the flapper expressed her sensual freedom by discarding her corset and donning a shorter, looser dress, she undermined her new-found freedom by binding her breasts. And while she represented vitality and the new consumption-centered lifestyle, the flapper also supported the male-dominated culture: on film, the flapper “was invariably a college student, a working woman, secretary, or saleslady. The cultural focus on fashion and after hours activity in the lives of these women glamorized the working world for women while trivializing it” (279). Furthermore, the flapper had her sights set on winning a husband, a message that contradicted her outward appearance of freedom.

Daisy, Fran, and Kate all possess culturally desirable looks, and, in each case, this beauty is significant to the text, since it is, to a large extent, what allows them to attract men. Daisy, her cousin Nick (the narrator) says, has a face that is “sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth” (*Gatsby* 7)⁶; Daisy’s friend Jordan Baker tells Nick that, back home in Louisville, Daisy was “by far the most popular of all the young girls. . . . She dressed in white. . . and all day long the telephone rang in her house and excited young officers from Camp Taylor demanded the privilege of monopolizing her that night” (*Gatsby* 49). Fitzgerald gives relatively few details about Daisy’s appearance, but her desirability is evidence of her beauty.

That Daisy is slim, one also may assume;⁷ although Fitzgerald doesn’t describe her physique, he does write that her friend Jordan is a “slender, small-breasted girl”⁸ (*Gatsby* 8). Daisy and Jordan must be slim to wear the flapper clothing that the women at Gatsby’s parties wear. A relevant point about slimness is that these very clothes, which provided freedom in allowing women to finally take off their corsets, also, unfortunately required a slender build: “The dancing flapper who epitomized the postwar generation was ideally thin and small-breasted in her waistless shift. Her unlucky sisters who also wanted to be New Women resorted to binding in order to suppress the superfluity of their bosoms” (Brownmiller 39). And, according to Naomi Wolf, “dieting and thinness began to be female

preoccupations” (184) at about the same time. Certainly slimness is a characteristic consistently awarded to beautiful women in novels of this period. The lower-class, less refined Myrtle Wilson provides a contrast to Daisy and Jordan: “She was in the middle thirties, and faintly stout, but she carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can. Her face. . . contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering” (*Gatsby* 17).

It is interesting to note that the text gives conflicting details regarding one aspect of Daisy’s appearance: the color of her hair. Daisy says of her daughter Pammy, who has “yellowy hair” (*Gatsby* 77), “She looks like me. She’s got my hair and shape of face” (77). Later in the novel, however, *Gatsby* kisses Daisy’s “dark shining hair” (100). Stephen Matterson suggests that the conflict illustrates the ambiguity of Daisy’s role in the novel: “The fair-haired woman is considered desirable, aloof, idealized; the dark-haired is considered sexually active and therefore more ‘available.’ Fitzgerald’s vagueness about Daisy reflects his confusion about her role” (Matterson 57-8).

Like Daisy and Jordan, Fran is slim; Lewis says so repeatedly. In *Dodsworth*, though, Lewis uses this detail not only as an element of Fran’s beauty—she needs to be slim to look sleek in her elegant clothes—but also to illustrate Sam’s misconception that Fran is fragile and child-like, a

woman to be protected: “He knew that she was the most exquisite child in the world; he knew that he was going to marry her and keep her forever in a shrine” (Lewis 3). The dual constructs of slimness and frailty are scattered throughout the text, but it is quite clear that while Sam’s sympathies lie with Fran, Lewis’s do not. She is selfish, cruel, and manipulative with Sam, turning every disagreement into a personal attack: “Oh, Sam, if I could only make you see that it was your ignorance, your impotence, and not my fault—” (312). “She was, in fact, a genius at planting in him an assurance of his inferiority” (24). Such a woman is not fragile.

Yet Fran herself plays the child: “I was cross, last evening. . . I felt kind of lonely. I was naughty, and you were so sweet. I’ll be good now” (Lewis 60). If she isn’t satisfied with the life she has led, neither is she ready to be independent. And despite her understandable frustration with the roles of wife, mother, and committee member, Fran doesn’t know what she wants, beyond holding onto her youth and earning even more male admiration: “We’ve drained everything that Zenith can give us—yes, and almost everything that New York and Long Island can give us. . . . In Europe, a woman at forty is just getting to the age where important men take a serious interest in her” (30-1). Fran hasn’t made a connection between her unhappiness and the ornamental, subservient role of women.

Fran has blonde hair, not only to match her fair, Midwestern beauty, but because her hair needs to shine coolly, unfeelingly, as Fran shines:

“glossy in her gray squirrel coat and her small cloche hat, snuggled too contentedly against Lockert’s shoulder” (Lewis 66); “Fran’s shiningness in a combination of white glove silk” (71); “a rather theatrical star in her white satin with a rope of pearls about her gesticulatory right arm” (73). Though it is tempting to accuse Fran of dying her hair a harsh platinum, her ancestry is Swedish, so her hair color is probably natural.

The lovely Edith Cortright, with whom Lewis rewards Sam, is also slim, with a “taut frailness of body” (Lewis 337), though she is far more natural looking than Fran. Edith loves the earth and the “eternal elements” (362), and, “in an age of universal bobbing, [Edith] kept her hair long, parted simply and not too neatly” (338). Edith is also consistently described as having lovely, slender hands. Of Sam’s three women in this text, only Nande Azeredo avoids being cast as fragile. Nande is a “tall, rather handsome girl, with a face as broad between the cheek bones as a Tartar” (324), and she is as passionate and vigorous as Fran is cool. But after only three days, Sam leaves Nande because she lacks refinement and because he imagines Fran watching them in mockery.

Clearly, Sam prefers women he can protect. Thorstein Veblen, in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), his analysis of the upper class, describes the servant woman/“high-class wife” dichotomy: “It is more or less a rule that in communities which are at the stage of economic development at which women are valued by the upper class for their service, the ideal of

female beauty is a robust, large-limbed woman” (106). For a “high-class wife,” “the ideal then includes the characteristics which are supposed to result from or to go with a life of leisure consistently enforced. . . . The resulting. . . ideal of beauty takes cognizance chiefly of the face, and dwells on its delicacy, and on the delicacy of the hands and feet, the slender figure, and especially the slender waist” (106). Even so apt a social critic as Lewis seems to have failed to recognize that in rewarding Sam with another slender, physically frail woman, he is supporting the construct that Veblen describes.⁹

Kate Clephane, too, is a beautiful woman, but Wharton makes clear that it’s an aging sort of beauty. Six years earlier, Kate recalls, when on a memorable week alone with Chris Fenno, “she had watched the farmyard life waking at dawn under their windows, while she dashed herself with cold water and did her hair and touched up her face before he was awake, because the early light is so pitiless after thirty” (Wharton 4). And now, at forty-five, her beautiful, unruly hair is graying. Kate is fighting the effects of aging, to be sure, and refers to her dressing table as “that last battlefield where the daily struggle still renewed itself” (7). Still, Kate is very different from Fran and Daisy in that she has escaped—by running away from—the ornamental lifestyle and, since the end of her affair with Chris, has not made eliciting male admiration her sole purpose. It is significant, however, that once Kate returns to New York, she quickly becomes aware that her old

friend Fred Landers is still in love with her; thus, Kate knows that she has, if she wishes, a male to support her.

Once Anne cables her mother to return to New York, youthfulness and beauty become less important to Kate. As she moves from the role of elegant-yet-financially-strained-expatriate to that of mother, her appearance requirements change. It is acceptable to be forty-five and graying if one has a adult daughter: "You forget that I've a grown-up daughter, Madame Berthe. . . . A daughter of twenty-one; I'm joining her in New York next week. What would she think of me if I arrived in a hat more youthful than hers? See, I'm growing gray on the temples—don't try to make me look like a flapper" (Wharton 16-17). While Kate proudly insists that she is aging, her family in New York thinks her otherwise. Anne exclaims, "And what a beautiful mother you are! Nollie was saying tonight that you're younger looking every day. And nobody wears their clothes as you do. I knew from that old photograph that you were lovely; but I couldn't guess that you hadn't grown any older since it was taken" (123). In refusing to acknowledge that her mother is aging, Anne not only pushes Kate to continue the battle at the dressing table, but she also hampers Kate's return to the role of mother. Kate wants to appear older than Anne; she is proud to be Anne's mother. If Kate does seem young to New York society, her youthful beauty is a sort of punishment, a mockery of fate. It foreshadows Kate's ultimate failure to become, in every sense, Anne's mother.

As one would expect, both Kate and Anne are slim, and having “kept her figure” is part of Kate’s beauty. And despite the strength that allows her to leave New York—and Anne—a second time, Kate is frail enough that she twice becomes faint upon receiving emotionally charged news. This tendency to faint—a physical weakness—exists in disturbing juxtaposition with Kate’s remarkable fortitude. Furthermore, the text provides a contrast to Kate’s apparent frailty: her niece, daring, divorced Lilla, the “bold huntress, who damned up and down the birds she missed, smoked and drank with the men, and in the evening lay back silent, with lids half-dropped over smouldering sullen eyes, and didn’t bore one with sporting chatter or sentimental airs” (Wharton 115). Is Lilla the “new woman,” or is she a curious aberration, who will be straightened out when she marries an older, extraordinarily rich, man? The concept of physical strength is tangled here, and Kate’s fainting seems misplaced, especially since the text offers no other evidence of physical weakness in Kate.

The women in the three texts do little to maintain either their beauty or their slender physiques. According to Rayna Rapp and Ellen Ross, *Ladies Home Journal* called the twenties the decade of the “cosmetics revolution,” and “[m]ass circulation pulp journals full of Avon, Ponds and Woodbury ads created home markets for products that disseminated images of feminine attractiveness” (100). If Daisy has beauty routines, and one would guess that, despite her youth, she does, the reader is not privy to

them. And because Daisy and Jordan do an inordinate amount of simply lying about on couches, one might wonder how long their slimness will last. (Fitzgerald does, however, portray Jordan, a professional golfer, athletically. She wears “her evening dress, all her dresses, like sports clothes” (*Gatsby* 33) and she has “slender muscles in her arms” (12).) Despite Fran’s concern with a youthful appearance, the only mention of a cosmetics routine is in this passage: “[Sam] had dutifully brought her heavy silver mirror, her brush and comb, her powder. . . . When she had made herself a bit older by making herself youthful, she sat up in bed to read the *Zenith Advocate-Times*” (Lewis 9). It’s easy to imagine Fran sitting at a dressing table strewn with little bottles and jars, fastidiously creating the face that assures that “no one ever takes me for more than thirty-five or even thirty-three” (30). Fran does exercise: back home in Zenith she played tennis, danced, and took riding lessons twice a week; in Europe she is undaunted by miles of walking. Freed of the corset, and wearing flowing clothing and shorter skirts, women of the Twenties are able, finally, to exercise. Only Kate shows no sign of having discovered physical activity.¹⁰

In describing the ornamental wife, Veblen writes, “She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence of pecuniary strength” (107). The twentieth century females of this paper follow the same pattern. Kate is widowed, yet one may gather, from her glorious jewels and the family opera box, that the role she played before leaving her husband

was, indeed, that of lovely wife on husband's arm. Fran, too, has lived an existence which revolves around Sam's; she supervises household and children, and aside from volunteer work, apparently has no life of her own. Daisy is the most ornamental of the three; she is the prize that Tom owns and Gatsby desires.

If the reader of the late twentieth century might wish to argue that "things have changed," Susan Ostrander's book *Women of the Upper Class* suggests otherwise. The thirty-six upper class women in her 1984 study are utterly subordinate to their husbands. They do "whatever is necessary for their husbands to be happy and successful in work, and by adjusting their own lives to their husbands' desires" (Ostrander 43). Furthermore, they recognize the importance of being attractive. Says one, "When we go out, I like to know I will look as good as I can" (40). Ostrander suggests that in subjugating themselves to support their husbands, upper class women help to perpetuate the upper class lifestyle. Certainly, this is a theory one might apply to Daisy and Fran (and Kate, until she escaped). By not having careers themselves, by running their households smoothly, by assuring that their husbands are not disturbed from the business of earning and managing wealth, and by being available to serve as ornaments at social events, these women deftly, if subconsciously, support the power structure in which they live.

CHAPTER 2: WORK

Daisy, Fran, and Kate all lack outlets for their skills and intelligence—Fran especially has proven her executive skills in managing her corps of household workers—though the texts suggest that each would each thrive in an intellectually fulfilling career. However, the American upper class woman has never tended to work. Veblen claims that her status doesn't allow it: "Propriety requires respectable women to abstain more consistently from useful effort and to make more of a show of leisure than the men of the same social classes" (126). Indeed, even now, upper class women keep themselves busy with volunteer work, but rarely with paid employment.

Victorian social theorists believed that the improved condition of women—that is, "exemption from productive labor, that they might better devote themselves to the bearing and rearing of children" (Russett 131)—demonstrated a more civilized, progressive society. The United States and western Europe stood, they maintained, at the top of the social order, while primitive cultures of Asia and Africa stood at the bottom, and the difference between them was in the role of women. "The contrast was stark: on the one hand, the pampered Victorian woman, beloved wife and fond mother, safely supported in the confines of her comfortable home; on the other hand, the aboriginal female, perhaps only one among many wives, beaten and abused by a dictatorial spouse and charged with all the drudge work he would not lower himself to perform" (131). One might question why social

scientists felt the need to associate “primitive cultures” and female physical labor with spousal abuse; nonetheless, the idea that societies with pampered, protected women are morally superior to those in which women perform physically taxing labor is echoed in the stay-at-home upper class wife/mother of today.

Daisy Buchanan notwithstanding, it is difficult to imagine that upper class women anywhere have been so completely pampered that their lives consist of nothing but sitting in drawing rooms, wearing elegant clothing, and doing needlepoint or embroidery (or, in the case of Daisy, apparently doing nothing at all). Even in the richest homes, someone has always been responsible for planning menus and social events, overseeing servants, housekeepers, and nannies, purchasing and maintaining clothes for the family, managing household expenses, and sustaining social contacts and correspondence. If one considers the responsibilities of running an upper class household, it becomes clear that the construct of “pampered woman” has surely been more ideal than fact. What Victorian social theorists were missing is that their women were working, but they were working in the home, where no one could see them. These women had the onerous task of working while simultaneously appearing not to.

Beyond the facts that working outside the home conflicts with a woman’s ornamental lifestyle by making it more difficult for her to appear on her husband’s arm at appropriate times and that someone might

mistakenly think that the family needs the money, there is a further cultural explanation for women of the Twenties staying home. America needed women to stay home and work at being consumers. As American homes were electrified, and as productive capabilities increased in the United States, the advertising industry targeted women; as “primary consumers of household goods, [their] psychology could be manipulated to sell” (Duggan 79) the appliances, cleaning supplies, packaged food, cosmetics, and ready-made clothing rolling out of American factories.

The increasing availability of the automobile should have given the upper class woman more freedom.¹¹ And, indeed, she did leave home and enter the public sphere—alone—to shop and to socialize. In *Gatsby*, for instance, Daisy drives herself to tea at Nick’s house, illustrating that she is free to come and go as she pleases. However, it is Daisy driving this same vehicle of freedom—albeit Gatsby’s car this time—that results in Myrtle’s death. In *Gatsby*, the automobile is used more to display upper class carelessness than freedom. The car, then, may be viewed simultaneously as a means of entry into public space and a symbol of a class that expects its women to stay home.

The upper class woman remained as curiously untouched by cultural influences as she was by gaining the vote. Although she had the greater mobility provided by automobiles, she still lacked autonomy and decision-making power within the household. And if Daisy, Fran, and Kate reflect

upper class woman of the Twenties, she certainly had no desire to swim the English Channel, fly across the Atlantic, or study anthropology in Samoa. In addition, if upper class women of today are an indication, Daisy and Fran—and Kate, when she was still living with her husband—had little say in how family money was spent, outside of the expenses of running the household. Ostrander contends that even when upper class women have money of their own, they tend to turn over the management of finances to their husbands. In doing so, she adds, “they give up the freedom to order their own lives and the ability to speak with an equal voice in family decisions” (65). Being in charge of finances gives the husband power: in every decision involving expenditure of money, the man’s vote will be more heavily weighted than the woman’s.

Fran’s finances provide an interesting aside. She has twenty thousand dollars a year of her own from investments, presumably managed by Sam. (Lewis doesn’t specify Sam’s salary as president of the Revelation Motor Company, but Alex Kynance’s offer to Sam when his company purchases Revelation is “eight-five [eighty-five thousand] . . . with a good chance for a hundred thou in a few years” (19). In 1925, a “hundred thou” was the equivalent of 1-1.5 million in current dollars.) And in Europe Fran spends her money so freely that she runs out; in a letter to Sam after he has returned to Zenith, she writes, “Would you mind transferring five thousand (dollars) to my account at the Guaranty, Paris? Food here is more expensive

than I had expected, and I've had to buy some more summer things—I found a shop in Montreux with simply *darling* hats . . .” (198). Four letters later she asks for another “couple of thousand” (202). And when the two are in the process of dissolving their marriage, Sam says, “I’ll instruct my bank to send you ten thousand a year, on top of your own money. That seems to end everything” (312). Fran’s extravagance contrasts with the relative frugality and fiscal responsibility of the women in Ostrander’s text, although they, like Fran, must go to their husbands when they need more money.

Despite compelling reasons for the upper class woman not to work, contemporaneous texts suggest that doing so would give Daisy, Fran, and Kate satisfaction that they currently lack. Beatrice Hinkle, in an article for *Harper’s Magazine* called “The Chaos of Modern Marriage” (1925), suggests that industrialization and fewer children to care for have left women with too much time on their hands, and the resulting idleness and mindless pursuit of pleasure is destructive not only to women, but to the institution of marriage (Hinkle 4).¹² “It is the refusal of the women to become a parasitic class, in spite of wealth and every facility to do so, that is the best insurance against the ultimate disintegration of marriage and the decay of American civilization” (4). She adds that society has changed, and the “suppression of the woman’s individuality and her personal needs and wishes for the sake of her husband, the submersion of herself in his life and interests. . . has become no longer acceptable” (5). Furthermore, Hinkle

maintains that women have “cast aside the maternal ideal as their goal” (9), and are demanding recognition as individuals, rather than as wives and mothers. Idealistic though she may have been, Hinkle’s argument is strong.

Upper class women of today cite the importance of raising their children themselves as a primary reason for not working outside the home. In reading Ostrander’s text, one notes a definite attitude of moral superiority: “We don’t have someone else taking care of our children. You’ve got to raise your own children if they’re going to succeed” (Ostrander 71) and “I try to be here when they get home from school. I feel women who don’t do that are shirking their job. I have always arranged my activities so I’ll be home” (73). Every working mother hears this sort of righteous comment and must balance her emotional and professional needs with those of her children. Some mothers feel that subjugating their own needs makes them better mothers and gives their children a better opportunity for success. One wonders, though, what upper class women want for their daughters. The women in Ostrander’s study speak of private school educations, coupled with music and dance lessons, followed by impressive degrees from elite colleges. The question is, what comes next? Either these daughters will use their educations for fulfilling careers of their own, or they will follow in their mothers’ footsteps, sacrificing their potential to care for their children.

Daisy, Fran, and Kate all have daughters, and all, in one way or another, reject the role of motherhood. In the case of Daisy, Fitzgerald gives only a smattering of details, yet there is evidence enough that Daisy is not the kind of mother that Ostrander's women claim to be. Daisy mentions her daughter to Nick early in the novel: "You ought to see the baby. . . . She's asleep. She's three years old. Haven't you ever seen her?" (*Gatsby* 7); a few pages later Daisy tells of hoping, when learning that her baby is a girl, that she'll be a "beautiful little fool" (12).¹³ Midway through the novel, the child, whose name is Pammy, appears, to tell her parents and their guests goodnight: "'Bles-sed pre-cious,' [Daisy] crooned, holding out her arms. 'Come to your own mother that loves you.' The child, relinquished by the nurse, rushed across the room and rooted shyly into her mother's dress" (78). A few lines later, the nurse leads Pammy away, and the child is never mentioned again, neither by her parents, nor by Gatsby, who wants Daisy to marry him. It is possible, of course, that Daisy spends hours every day with Pammy, perhaps teaching her the alphabet and such, but it seems likely that the aforementioned nurse is raising Pammy Buchanan.

Fran sees herself as finished with the business of mothering. And, certainly, her children do seem self-sufficient. Brent, who is as materialistic as his mother—"When I was a kid, a man with a limousine was a little tin god, but now a fellow that hasn't got a yacht simply isn't in it" (Lewis 177)—is so busy having fun with his friends and trying to get rich that he barely

has time to see his father when Sam returns to the United States. Emily is married, and her husband Harry is doing so well financially that Emily turns down Sam's offer of a gift of cash (185). But, more than anything else, her children make Fran feel old: "Madly though I adore them and long to see them, I'm almost afraid to, they'd make me feel so old, whereas now if you could see me in white blouse, shamelessly crimson skirt, white shoes and stockings, you would say I'm a flapper. . ." (200).

That Fran wishes to be considered a flapper contrasts with Kate's insistence that she, with a daughter of twenty-one, cannot dress like a flapper. While Kate is trying to reestablish herself as a mother, Fran is trying to escape motherhood and—eventually—grandmother-hood. Fran is pleased when she is mistaken for Sam's daughter. She is, in essence, discarding the roles of wife, mother, and grandmother. Her vanity and her need for male admiration are so great that she tries to make herself grow younger rather than older, and she never sees that she is judging her own value by the men that she is able to attract.

Because Fran is so absorbed in her fantasy of youth and beauty and attracting men, she is devastated by the news that she has become a grandmother. That Fran and Sam had not known that Emily was pregnant brings into question the closeness of the Dodsworth family, but Fran's reaction is oddly unmaternal: "What good would it do if I were there? Could I help her? I could not! I'd just be in the way. Heavens, any trained

nurse would be of more value than a dozen me's, and she's surrounded with only too much love and solicitude" (Lewis 289). Rapp and Ross suggest that the Twenties, by focusing on consumerism, automobiles, movies, and a new adolescent peer culture, reorganized the family unit, severing, especially, relationships between same-sexed kin (Rapp 102-3). Fran's reaction to having a new grandson may seem cold, but it's probably true that Emily doesn't expect her mother to be there, passing along hints on childcare.

Fran is indignant when Sam questions her loyalty to Emily and the new baby:

Let me tell you. . . , when there *was* something I could do for her, and for Brent, I did it! I'm not for one second going to stand any hints from you that I'm not a good mother—and loyal! For twenty years. . . , there wasn't one thing those children wore that I didn't buy. There wasn't a thing they ate that I didn't order. You—oh, yes, you came grandly home from the office and permitted Em to ride on your shoulders and thought what a wonderful parent you were, but who'd taken her to the dentist that day? I had! Who'd planned her party and written the invitations? I had! (Lewis 279)

While there is a recognizable ring of truth in this description of the organizational aspect of motherhood, Fran conceives of motherhood primarily as time spent, as does Sam, who mutters to himself two pages later, "And this business of her having been such a devoted mother! Ever

been a time when the children hadn't had a nurse or a governess, with plenty of maids?" (281)

Kate, of course, has not been present for clothes-ordering, party-planning, and trips to the dentist; Anne's grandmother, the elder Mrs. Clephane, took over such duties at Kate's departure. Unlike Fitzgerald and Lewis, Wharton lets the reader feel some of the anguish and conflicts of motherhood. Kate was suffocating in her marriage to John Clephane,¹⁴ and, in leaving her husband, she "lost" Anne: "'lost' was the euphemism she had invented. . . , because a mother couldn't confess, even to her most secret self, that she had willingly deserted her child" (Wharton 13). Anne was three when Kate left; "left her, with a dreadful pang, a rending of the inmost fibres" (13). A year later, Kate writes repeatedly to the Clephanes, begging to be allowed to see her daughter, but receives in response only a letter from the family lawyer, requesting that she "cease to annoy her husband's family" (14). When Anne is ten, Kate returns to New York for the funeral of her mother and dreams of abducting, or at least visiting, Anne; when she hears that the family is on vacation in the Rockies, Kate returns to France. There is textual evidence, then, that Kate most definitely has maternal longings and cares for her daughter.

When Kate reunites with Anne, both mother and daughter long to redevelop the mother-daughter relationship. Kate's quiet humility and Anne's lack of bitterness prevent the two from falling into a chasm of blame

and misunderstanding. Indeed, their reunion seems almost too perfect. Kate fails to recognize, though, that she cannot expect to be the only person whom Anne loves, and when she realizes that there is a man in Anne's life—even before she knows that it is Chris Fenno—Kate feels her life unraveling: “[T]he mere possibility of a husband made everything incalculable again” (Wharton 69). Perhaps, given how little time Kate has had with Anne, her unwillingness to share her daughter is understandable. Still, daughters must be allowed to grow up; Anne says so herself: “Can't we agree, mother, that I must take my chance—and that, if the risks are as great as you think, you'll be there to help me? After all, we've all got to buy our own experience, haven't we?” (186) A “mother's recompense,” then, may be seen as letting go, as severing—at least partially—the mother/daughter tie. Kate eventually recognizes this truth and sails for France, losing her daughter a second time; yet one wonders whether she would have arrived at the same denouement had she been successful in bullying Chris out of the marriage with Anne.¹⁵

In the upper class household are women who are paid to do work traditionally considered to be “women's work”: namely, cooking, cleaning, and childcare. In fact, even less wealthy characters, like Wharton's Chris Fenno and Fitzgerald's narrator Nick, have “help.” (Present as well in these texts of the Twenties are butlers and bartenders, who are male.) Although the presence of servants is apparent throughout each of the three novels,

generally the “help” is silent and unnamed—Pammy Buchanan’s nurse, for example—so one must pay particular attention to Kate Clephane’s maid Aline, since Aline is given not only a name but also a small speaking part and a bit of a personality.

In the time that Kate is existing in Europe on her “small allowance” from the Clephane estate, she chooses to stay in cheap hotels so that she can afford to keep Aline: “One couldn’t afford everything, especially since the war, and she preferred veal for dinner every night to having to do her own mending and dress her hair” (Wharton 5-6). Aline’s relationship with Kate suggests that she has been Kate’s maid for a very long time, and in fact, left the Clephane household with Kate, but Wharton’s description of Kate’s late-night flight from the house to the waiting car of Hylton Davies includes no mention of a maid. Such an absence illustrates the unseen aspect of this class of people. Aline is “ugly, neat and enigmatic” (6) and since she knows everything—“news reach[es] her by every pore, as it circulates through an Eastern bazaar” (248)—it is safe to guess that she is fully aware of Kate’s affair with Chris Fenno. This is interesting because Kate is terrified of anyone finding out, yet never considers that Aline might betray her secret.

Perhaps the assumption that Aline will be loyal to Kate and not spread the news of Chris and Kate’s history, or worse, the failure to recognize that Aline holds this power over her employer, is the upper class

Wharton's. Fitzgerald, writing in the same year about upper class people in the same city (New York), makes no such assumption. When Daisy and Gatsby begin their affair, Gatsby replaces his household help: "My Finn [Nick's maid] informed me that Gatsby had dismissed every servant in his house a week ago and replaced them with half a dozen others, who never went into West Egg Village to be bribed by the tradesmen" (*Gatsby* 75). Gatsby tells Nick, "I wanted somebody who wouldn't gossip. Daisy comes over quite often—in the afternoons" (75). Of the two approaches, Fitzgerald's seems more pragmatic.

Lewis uses treatment of servants to favorably contrast Edith with Fran. Fran, Sam thinks, is a "sergeant major" (Lewis 347) in her dealings with servants, plumbers, the bootlegger, and such. "She was chummy with them only when they assured her of her beauty and power" (347). On the other hand, Sam admires Edith's careless, but friendly, incompetence with her servants, who argue and contradict: "They seemed to be sharing some secret joke with her; and when she smiled at Sam, in her tired way, after a voluble colloquy with the butler, he wished he could be admitted to their tribal companionship" (347). It seems a contradiction, however, that Edith, who lives alone and rather simply, still has multiple servants.

The carelessness and opulence of these upper class characters surfaces if one stops to imagine how such a small household as Edith's could support even one servant. (It is difficult to understand how cooking

and cleaning for Edith could provide much work. One presumes that she dresses herself and does her own hair, since it is “parted simply and not too neatly” (Lewis 338).) Fitzgerald provides the best illustration of the utter impracticality of the upper class. When Gatsby shows Daisy his multitudinous shirts, and throws them “one, by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. . . and the soft rich heap mounted higher. . .” (*Gatsby* 61), Daisy is struck by the beauty of the shirts. A middle class woman would be more likely struck by the mess: a servant will spend hours refolding, and perhaps re-ironing, the shirts.

Sam recognizes Fran’s lack of outlets for her energy and talents, and is also looking for a way to lure her home, when he suggests that she might be interested in helping him design homes for the Sans Souci Company. She is not interested, and, indeed, the only kind of work that is acceptable for the upper class woman, says Ostrander, is volunteering. However, the sort of volunteering one chooses is important. Ostrander contends that upper class women are not generally involved in direct service kinds of volunteer work: “They do not, for example push a flower cart in the hospital; answer telephones at the school or library; staff the entry desk at the museum; or comfort sick, abused, or neglected children and adults” (Ostrander 112). Upper class women are active instead on boards of cultural institutions (such as art museums or theatres), hospital

organizations, and agencies like the United Way. They are in leadership positions, often directly involved in fund-raising (112).

Fitzgerald's text gives no evidence that Daisy does volunteer work, but both Kate and Fran are active. Kate, who is secretary of a charitable committee at the Rectory, does so to earn respectability in her community of socially tarnished expatriates. Committee work helps her to fill her days. The textual proof that Fran does volunteer work is her willingness to "chuck all those beastly clubs and everything. They don't mean anything; they're just make-believe, to keep me busy" (Lewis 12-13). That Fran can "chuck" these organizations illustrates one of the biggest advantages of volunteer work: it allows a woman flexibility; flexibility to accompany her husband on business trips, attend functions at her children's schools, and, as in Fran's case, to take extended vacations. Furthermore, suggests Ostrander, volunteer work helps upper class women to justify their class privilege, in that they feel they are giving something back to society. This justification works to uphold social stratification, since it allows the class to rationalize its elite position (Ostrander 138-9). Thus, in volunteering, as in avoiding paid employment, the upper class woman works to perpetuate her class. Unfortunately, in doing so, she sacrifices her own autonomy. Textually, this lack of autonomy is evidenced in Daisy's aimless boredom, Kate's continued financial dependence on a family whose conventions she finds suffocating, and Fran's pathetic attempts to attract men by appearing ever younger.

CHAPTER 3: MARRIAGE

By the Twenties, women were beginning to have some control over marriage and reproduction—via employment and contraception (Duggan 77)—but marriage, for the upper class woman, was still a necessity. For the class as a whole to remain intact, women and men must marry, and they must select spouses from within the upper class.

Although Daisy, at eighteen, falls in love with Jay Gatsby, one doubts that she needed to be told of the impossibility of marrying him. (That Gatsby fails to understand that money, even huge sums of money, will not buy him membership in Daisy's class is one reason this novel is so poignant. The American Dream has limitations.) So Daisy marries the fabulously rich, and upper class, Tom Buchanan.

Fitzgerald gives only Jordan Baker's version of the wedding—and Jordan is, Nick says, a liar—but, nonetheless, the story seems plausible. Jordan tells Nick of finding Daisy half an hour before the rehearsal dinner “lying on her bed as lovely as the June night in her flowered dress—and as drunk as a monkey” (*Gatsby* 50). Daisy has a crumpled letter in one hand—the implication is that it is from Gatsby—and she instructs Jordan to “Tell ‘em all Daisy's change' her mind” (50). Jordan gives Daisy spirits of ammonia and a cold bath, and a half hour later, the scene is over. Daisy and Tom get married, and Jordan tells Nick that she's never seen “a girl so mad about her husband” (51). Five years later, when Gatsby comes back to

claim Daisy, it's difficult to see, from Nick's descriptions, any affection between the Buchanans, although Tom professes to love his wife: "And what's more I love Daisy too. Once in a while I go off on a spree and make a fool of myself, but I always come back, and in my heart I love her all the time" (88). Indeed, there is textual evidence that Tom and Daisy are not faithful to each other, since Tom is currently having a "spree" with Myrtle Wilson¹⁶ and Daisy is having an affair with Gatsby. If not faithful, though, Tom and Daisy belong together; they have a curious, "unmistakable air of natural intimacy" (97). One sees, by the end of the novel, that the Buchanans belong to a class that acts to exclude others from its membership, and such exclusion, in this case, results in tragedy.

Although neither Tom nor Daisy is portrayed, finally, as a particularly admirable human being, Daisy has gotten a lesser deal from the marriage. For one thing, Tom is physically abusive: he has bruised Daisy's little finger (*Gatsby* 8) and he breaks Myrtle's nose (25). He has had multiple affairs, yet thinks that "women run around too much these days" (69). And although Daisy shows signs of defiance, in the end, when Tom says "She's not leaving me!" (89), Daisy doesn't leave. If one asks what, exactly, Daisy has gained from this marriage, the answer is: a child, someone to manage her money, continued membership in the upper class (accompanied by travel, material goods, and a certain amount of freedom to do as she chooses, within established limits), and sporadic companionship and sex

(which must be countered by the physical abuse). She could take Pammy and leave, and probably she would continue to have family money, but she would give up the class membership. This is a sacrifice Daisy is unlikely to make.

Kate Clephane speaks plainly about her marriage, and it is, from her perspective, a miserable one. "I couldn't breathe" (Wharton 13), she says. Kate paints a picture of a marriage in which she is trapped by social convention: "In the first years of her marriage there had been the continual vain effort to adapt herself to her husband's point of view, to her mother-in-law's standards, to all the unintelligible ritual with which they barricaded themselves against the alarming business of living" (58). Although the text does not permit observation of Kate's marriage to John Clephane first-hand, the impression Wharton gives is that Kate's unhappiness is caused by the role upper class society forces her to play; the role is purely ornamental, and it stifles Kate. The Clephane jewels, which Anne gives to her mother upon Kate's return to New York, represent Kate's ornamental status. They are splendid jewels, and that Kate has not thought about them in years implies that they are not especially important to her. However, "John Clephane was fond of jewels, and particularly proud of his wife's, first because he had chosen them, and secondly because he had given them to her. She sometimes thought he really admired her only when she had them

all on. . .” (61). Bejeweled, Kate is a walking symbol of her husband’s wealth and status.

Kate is unhappy enough in her marriage that she flees it—and Anne—in order to save herself. This is not an independent act, since Kate goes directly from her marriage into a relationship with Hylton Davies, a rich man with “his flourish and his yachting clothes, and the big shining yacht” (Wharton 14). And in doing so, Kate does not succeed in finding happiness, independence, or even escape from social expectations. In fact, Kate notes, “the prison of her marriage had been liberty compared with what she had exchanged it for” (58). Once the affair with Davies is over, Kate lives alone (with Aline) in a series of hotels in France and Italy; her lifestyle is not extravagant, but because she is still living on Clephane money, she is dependent upon the family. Furthermore, Kate must “keep up appearances”; in whatever dreary expatriate community she lands, she is careful to do whatever is necessary to pay the “goddess of Respectability” (23). Wharton grants Kate the power to leave New York—and Anne—a second time and the strength to end her pattern of throwing herself into “the arms of some man she didn’t care for” (228), but Wharton does not grant Kate happiness. The end of the novel finds Kate back among the same Riviera crowd, still living on Clephane money, still filling her day with boring committee meetings, social events in which her behavior is prescribed, and

trips to the milliner and dressmaker. As an upper class woman, she does not have other options.

Like Kate, Fran Dodsworth attempts to take control of her own life, and, like Kate, she does not succeed. A notable difference between the two women is that Lewis's text allows little room for sympathy with Fran. He allows her to present her case early in the text—"I'm begging for life. . ." (Lewis 31)—but he soon turns her into a villain.

Of Fran's status as ornamental wife one can have no doubt. As John Clephane enjoyed his jewel-adorned wife, Sam enjoys Fran: "In her shaggy Burberry. . . and her orange tam o' shanter, she suggested autumn days and brown uplands. . . . He was cumbersomely proud of her, of the glances which the men passengers snatched at her as they swung round the deck" (Lewis 36). To Sam, Fran's appeal to other men is a reflection of him, since she is his wife. Sam contradicts himself, though, when mentally comparing Fran with Edith later in the text: he reflects "that Fran had an unsurpassed show-window display but not much on the shelves inside" (224). There's plenty of evidence that the passionate Fran is far from being empty on the inside, but what is most disturbing about Sam's thought is that he has been married to Fran for over twenty years, and has, the text suggests, wished for her to be the upper class wife that she is. If he is changing his mind now, he ought to recognize it as such, rather than blaming Fran for being the woman he has, if not created, at least condoned. Like Daisy and Kate, Fran

has acquired from her marriage children, material goods, companionship, and upper class status. Certainly she does not have happiness or a sense of fulfillment.

Lewis addresses sex directly, as Fitzgerald and Wharton do not. One is privy to Sam's sexual desire for Fran, as she repeatedly scorns, and tries to prevent, his advances. Fran clearly does not find Sam sexually appealing at this point in their marriage—perhaps she did at one time—but textual sympathy is with Sam:

At the hotel she said hesitantly, "Uh, Sam—do you mind—I thought you'd be tired after the journey. . . . so I got two single rooms, instead of a double. But they're right next to each other."

"No, maybe better rest," he said.

She came with him into his room, but she hovered near the door, saying with a dreadful politeness, "I hope you will find the room all right. It has quite a nice bathroom."

He hesitated. "I'll unpack later. . . ." Wretchedly he noted that she looked relieved. He had given her but a tap of a kiss. She had demanded no further caress. (Lewis 208-9)

Over and over, Sam reflects upon what the 1920s described as Fran's frigidity: "she was far from him and [he knew] that he was not to touch her body, her sacred, proud, passionately cared-for body" (56) and "she had

become to him a nun, taboo, and any passion toward her was forbidden” (280).

In the real world, many women have friends; the absence of female friendships is noticeable in all three of these texts. Granted, Daisy has Jordan, whom she has known at least since the time of Daisy’s marriage five years earlier, but when the two women appear together, the effect is primarily visual: “They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house” (*Gatsby* 6) and “Tom came out. . . followed by Daisy and Jordan wearing small tight hats of metallic cloth and carrying light capes over their arms” (80). The two dress alike, like preteen “girlfriends,” but they don’t interact with one another in the text, and when in the same scene, Daisy and Jordan speak more to the men present than to each other. Given that they have been friends for a long time, one would expect their words to convey a bit of the history between them. Instead, they barely seem to hear each other; in fact, Nick says, “[s]ometimes she and Miss Baker talked at once, unobtrusively and with a bantering inconsequence that was never quite chatter” (9). If there is warmth and camaraderie between the two, it is evidenced off stage; the text gives no hint as to what Daisy and Jordan might have been discussing before Nick’s attention is focused upon them.

Fran's relationships with women are based more on competition than on friendship. Madame de Pénable, whom the Dodsworths meet in Paris, enthusiastically adopts them into her social circle, at least in part because she saw "that Sam was likely to keep Fran from snatching such of [the European] men as the De Pénable wanted to hold for her own" (Lewis 138). When Sam returns to America to attend his Yale reunion, Fran chooses to stay in Europe with Renée de Pénable, but the two are soon competing for the affection of Arnold Israel: "she accused me of carrying on an affair with Mr. Israel and of stealing him from her which was idiotic as well as false because I must say she never did have him so how could I have stolen him from her even supposing I had the slightest desire to" (200-1) Fran wins Arnold, but must move out of the villa she is sharing with Renée, and, despite her professed innocence, is indeed having an affair with Arnold Israel.

Aside from the short-lived friendship with Renée, the only female relationship Fran appears to have is with Matey Pearson, the wife of Sam's best friend Tub. Matey is unpretentious and unsophisticated, but Fran finds her dull and fat. One wouldn't think that Fran would feel the need to compete with Matey, to whom she is clearly superior in terms of glamour, but she does: "[Y]ou don't expect me to look a fright, like Matey Pearson, do you! I'll make her eyes start out of her head with the Marcel Rochas frock I got in Paris. . ." (Lewis 376). An interesting point is that while Lewis

portrays Matey as being goodhearted and sincere, in contrast to Fran's cool beauty and selfishness—"Fran said that she was vulgar. She said that Fran was lovely" (284)—it is Matey who recommends to Sam that he "chuck Fran and let yourself be happy again" (291). Matey may have Sam's interest at heart, but her lack of loyalty to Fran dilutes Fran's supposed selfishness and helps to de-villainize her.

Although Kate Clephane calls her Riviera society a "female world" (Wharton 4), there is no evidence that she has a particularly close relationship with any of the women. To the contrary, in fact, she seems merely to tolerate the women and the meetings because they help to fill her time—and her engagement book. When she returns to New York, Kate's social life consists of Anne and the same Clephane family members she has always found suffocating: "There they all were, the faces that had walled in her youth. . . . 'This is what I ran away from,' she thought; and found more reasons than ever for her flight" (121). Kate herself addresses her lack of friends:

Then, as to friends—was it because she was too much engrossed in her daughter to make any? Or because her life had been too incommunicably different from that of her bustling middle-aged contemporaries, absorbed by local and domestic questions she had no part in? Or had she been too suddenly changed from a self-centred

woman, insatiable for personal excitements, into that new being, a mother, her centre of gravity in a life not hers? (82-3)

Given that Kate has, the text suggests, no history at all of female friends, her analysis of her current lack may be read as a series of excuses; there is no evidence that Kate has looked for friends.

Daisy, Fran, and Kate could all benefit from a network of supportive females; all are unhappy, dissatisfied women, and all are lacking intellectual and emotional fulfillment. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, according to Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, there did exist a female world: "These supportive networks were institutionalized in social conventions or rituals that accompanied virtually every important event in a women's life, from birth to death" (60). At the center of the female world Smith-Rosenberg describes is "an inner core of kin" (62), and the essence of this core is the mother/daughter relationship (64). Daisy and Fran have, it would seem, no "kin"; furthermore, Fran has already severed her relationship with Emily, while Daisy seems to be in the process of doing the same with Pammy. In the way of kin, Kate has only two elderly aunts, and with Chris Fenno between Kate and Anne, the mother/daughter relationship is awry.

One explanation for the absence of a "female world" in the three novels is a historical one. In the twentieth century, suggests Smith-Rosenberg, exists a tendency to "dichotomize" love and sexuality (58); relationships may be heterosexual or homosexual, the former being normal

and the latter deviant. When society views love as a dichotomy, rather than on a continuum, it risks losing the close same-sex friendships that fall between the categories of “heterosexual” and “homosexual.” And, according to Lisa Duggan, the Twenties was, indeed, a period of backlash not only against feminism, but against lesbianism (75). It was a time, she writes, when “unmarried women, childless women, and lesbians became the targets of psychological theories of inadequacy and the subject of popular anxiety and pity” (77). Thus, one might reasonably conclude that the lack of female friendships in *Gatsby*, *Dodsworth*, and *Mother’s Recompense* is a reflection of the authors’ awareness of social attitudes toward lesbianism.¹⁷

In addition, however, one need also keep in mind that that Daisy, Fran, and Kate are all upper class women; as such, they face more restrictions than do women of other classes. This is a class that depends, in large part, upon its women to maintain, and give credence to, its superiority; it follows that this would also be a class less tolerant of the sexual deviation that close female friendships might imply. These three women, then, face repression by class and by social attitude toward sexuality, as well as by the heterosexual marriage itself.

Furthermore, that each woman tries, and fails, to defy convention suggests that there is no escape for the upper class woman. Daisy attempts to leave Tom—albeit one could well question her level of dedication to the plan—but is reeled quickly back by Tom’s refusal to take her relationship

with Gatsby seriously. Fran challenges the upper class rules that require a wife's loyalty to her husband; additionally she refuses to recognize that she cannot simultaneously be mother to Emily and Brent and daughter to Sam. For her offenses, Fran is sent back to Zenith to be a grandmother. And Kate quickly finds that flight from marriage and motherhood does not buy liberty. Even when John Clephane dies, widowhood does not free her from the confines of marriage and class.

NOTES

¹ Fitzgerald's words in their entirety are:

Let me tell you about the rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand. They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves. Even when they enter deep into our world or sink below us, they still think that they are better than we are. They are different. ("The Rich Boy" 152-3)

² When *The Great Gatsby* was published in 1925, Fitzgerald was 29; when *Dodsworth* was published in 1929, Lewis was 44.

³ Another explanation for Kate's fervent opposition to a union between Anne and Chris is that Chris, in marrying Anne, becomes Kate's son-in-law; as Kate's relationship with Chris moves from lover to mother (-in-law), their affair becomes retroactively incestuous.

The construct of incest is central to a previous Wharton novel. In *Summer* (1918), the heroine, Charity Royall, turns down a sexual advance from Lawyer Royall, who has been her father since he rescued her from "the Mountain" as a little girl. Charity views Royall's sexual passion as a

weakness and recognizes the power it gives her over him—“lawyer Royall ruled in North Dormer; and Charity ruled in lawyer Royall’s house (*Summer* 23)—but her fear and repulsion of his desire remain constant throughout the novel. Even when Charity runs out of choices and, pregnant by an upper class lover, is forced to marry Royall, she is afraid of a sexual union with this man who has been her father. On their wedding night, Charity lies in bed, “trembling with a fear that ran through her veins like ice. ‘What have I done? Oh, what have I done’ she whispered, shuddering to her pillow. . . and shaking at every footstep that approached” (283). Royall spends the first night sleeping in a chair and Charity is immensely relieved. Whether the two will eventually have a sexual relationship is unclear, but the incestuous overtones are undeniable, in that Charity, in the eyes of North Dormer, will be seen now as the wife of the man who raised her.

⁴ The opulent display of wealth, especially in regards to women, reached such a pitch that the very success of a major social event lay in the opportunities it provided for the wealthy to be seen by each other and by the public (124). At the Metropolitan Opera House, described in 1904 by the *New York World’s* society page as “the most gorgeous and brilliant spectacle known to the local world of fashion (qtd. In Montgomery 123), upper class female spectators served also as the role of spectacle (131). Many of Wharton’s novels use women at the opera to portray females as both ornament and commodity. When Kate attends the opera with Anne, she

initially feels herself to be the center of attention: “As she entered the opera-box Kate Clephane felt as if the great central chandelier were raying all its shafts upon her” (Wharton 63). Quickly, however, she recognizes that Anne has supplanted her: “After all, in this new existence it was Anne who mattered, not Anne’s mother; instantly, after the first plunge, Mrs. Clephane felt herself merged in the blessed anonymity of motherhood” (64). At the opera, Kate is genuinely willing to move, literally and metaphorically, into the shadows of the opera box. It is, after all, a life she willingly fled years earlier.

⁵ I address motherhood in Chapter 2 and marriage in Chapter 3.

⁶ Fitzgerald’s emphasis on Daisy’s “brightness” acts as a contrast to her aimless lifestyle. Despite Daisy’s wit, intelligence, beauty, and wealth, she is imprisoned by upper class codes and expectations.

Critic Sarah Beebe Fryer provides another reading of the description of Daisy’s face: “Though her overall countenance is of sorrow, her face is somehow fragmented—turned into a set of beautiful objects, much as Tom and Gatsby turn her into an object to suit their needs. And in her face, as in her life, vitality coexists with suffering” (158).

⁷ Slimness is an aspect of beauty that has changed since the nineteenth century. In a text by Prof. B.G. Jefferis, M.D., Ph.D., and J.L. Nichols, A.M., titled *Light on Dark Corners, A Complete Sexual Science*, the authors tell women that “[n]o weakly, poor-bodied woman can draw a man’s love like a

strong, well-developed body. A round, plump figure with an overflow of animal life is the woman most commonly sought, for. . . [the] life of the offspring depend upon the physical qualities of wife and mother” (130). It is interesting to note that this strong, robust woman needs to have small feet: “Small feet and small ankles are very attractive, because they are in harmony with a perfect female form, and men admire perfection. Small feet and ankles indicate modesty and reserve, while large feet and ankles indicate coarseness, physical power, authority, predominance” (130).

⁸ That Fitzgerald specifies that Jordan is small-breasted is puzzling, since large breasts have consistently been a sign of beauty, sexuality, and ability to nurture. One explanation is that Jordan is asexual; another is that Jordan’s small breasts complement her athleticism and flapper clothing.

⁹ The concept of frailty warrants further comment. Although Sam may want to view Fran as frail and in need of protection, I find her quite robust: “In a cool blue coat and skirt, with a white blouse, her hair, pale and light-touched as new straw, her slim legs so silken, her shoulders so confident, she was the American athletic girl, swift to dance, to play tennis, to drive like a cyclone” (Lewis 208). I suggest that Sam, in wanting to protect women, is revealing his desire to repress them, to keep women at a level where they need protection.

¹⁰ Upper class women of the 1890s set a precedent of participation in sports that most of the female characters in these three texts choose not to follow.

Sports are significant because they allowed turn-of-the-century elite women to lay claim to public space and to modify their dress to give them greater freedom of motion. The social elite were a “capricious set of people who indulged in fads, which they abandoned when the mood struck them, and the leisure trade suffered from their fickleness” (Montgomery 99). Among the sports adopted and discarded were horseback riding, ice skating, roller skating, and cycling. Cycling, in particular, caused a great deal of consternation, since, for reasons of safety and comfort, women wore bloomers or divided skirts. These unfeminine alterations to dress, coupled with the “astride” position on the bicycle itself suggested manliness, provoking great anxiety among the society journalists who monitored upper class behavior.

None of the three main female characters I analyze here is particularly athletic. Kate’s niece Lilla, however, is not only a sportswoman but a “bold huntress” (Wharton 115), who participates in a sport even today considered “male.”

¹¹ Automobile ownership increased dramatically in the Twenties. In 1919 there were 6.7 million passenger cars in the U.S.; by 1920 that number had risen to 23.1 million (Brown 7).

¹² I have already noted, however, my disbelief that upper class women—aside from Daisy—were idle.

¹³ Daisy says, “She told me it was a girl, and so I turned my head away and wept. ‘All right,’ I said, ‘I’m glad it’s a girl. And I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool’ ” (*Gatsby* 12). Daisy is being melodramatic; although she is cynical, she makes no other gender-related remarks.

¹⁴ I discuss Kate’s marriage to John, and her reasons for leaving, in greater detail in Chapter Three.

¹⁵ To have three texts in which the main female characters reject the traditional duties of motherhood seems an eerie coincidence unless this, too, might be a class issue. All three women have, by benefit of their class, unnamed women who help to raise their children. Although I treat servants only briefly here, their absence in literature about the upper class speaks to the self-importance of the class.

¹⁶ Before the 1890s, wives and mistresses occupied distinctly different worlds. Women gaining the freedom to move about in public with relative independence, combined with “the access of respectable women to new places of nighttime entertainment” (Montgomery 118) blurred the boundaries between the space of wives and mistresses. In *Gatsby* Tom rents a space—an apartment—for his rendezvous with Myrtle, while Daisy lives at the Buchanan home. That the boundaries have become indistinct is illustrated in Myrtle’s freedom to invade Daisy’s space by calling Tom at home. However, when mistress and wife collide—literally—it is at a point

outside both of their spheres, suggesting the danger of the two worlds intermingling.

¹⁷ Despite the fact that, during the Twenties, the marriage rate rose and the age of both men and women at marriage dropped (Duggan 77), the decade was also a time when increasing numbers of women “ began to replace heterosexual marriage with lesbian relationships” (88). Although society continued to repress women, cultural changes were making it more possible for women to exist outside of the heterosexual marriage. As I have already suggested, however, upper class women had fewer choices.

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