Women In American Literature Essay, Research Paper

The Vilification of Women in The Great Gatsby and Ethan Frome

Women have played an important role in American literature. Unfortunately, this role was often negative, without cause to be so. Edith Wharton’s Ethan Frome and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby are examples of American literature in which women are needlessly vilified.

In The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald presents three women in an especially bad light. Daisy Fay Buchanan, the narrator’s cousin, is the most obvious. Daisy is selfish and materialistic. She married her husband, Tom, because he was wealthy when he proposed to her. She ignored her true love, Jay Gatsby, because he was poor; this fact is evident when the two meet again after years apart and Daisy sees that Gatsby is rich now. Gatsby bought the house right across the bay from Daisy so he could be near her (Fitzgerald 83). Daisy admires all of his possessions and even considers leaving her husband for him, but in the end remains with Tom. This action is evidence of Daisy’s selfishness; the moment of their reunion means everything to Gatsby and nothing to Daisy, except for a game to help Daisy pass the time during her idle days (Magill 1144). The selfishness of Daisy is a detail that thrusts her into the role of a villain in the novel.

Daisy’s selfish nature is magnified a hundred times at the end of the novel. Driving home after an uncomfortable evening with Tom and Gatsby, she strikes and kills Tom’s mistress in Gatsby’s car. Daisy allows Gatsby to take all the blame for the accident. As a result, Myrtle’s husband kills Gatsby. To add insult to injury, Daisy does not even show up at Gatsby’s funeral, despite her role in his death. This uncaring personality further shows her selfishness and causes Daisy to look even worse to the reader.

Daisy’s interactions with her daughter display her self-absorbed nature plainly. Nick asks about the little girl, and Daisy’s only response on her first-born daughters life is “O, I suppose she talks and eats- and everything” (Fitzgerald 21). When Gatsby is visiting Daisy at her house, she only brings the little girl around because she “wanted to show her off” (Fitzgerald 123). Daisy uses her daughter to impress people, and does not have any real interest in the child’s daily activities; these actions show her self-absorbed nature.

Daisy appears immoral in The Great Gatsby. There is a “corruption which underlies Daisy’s world” (Goldenessays 1). She marries for money, turning herself basically into a prostitute. She is married, but one afternoon when Gatsby visits her at her house, “she got up and went over to Gatsby, and pulled down his face to kiss him on the mouth” (Fitzgerald 122). She considers leaving her husband for Gatsby. It is said that Daisy speaks in a “low thrilling voice…only to make people lean toward her” (Fitzgerald 13). She gossips about whatever she wants, and believes everything she hears; when speaking to Nick about his rumored engagement, she said that she “heard it from three people so it must be true” (Fitzgerald 24). Daisy’s gossipy personality makes her appear uncaring for those around her.

In addition to her lack of morals, Daisy is stupid. When the reader meets Daisy for the first time, she complains that Tom is “reading deep books with long words in them” (Fitzgerald 17). Later in the same meeting, Daisy tells Nick that she hopes her two year old daughter will be a fool- she says that “that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool” (Fitzgerald 21). The statement causes the reader to ask whether Daisy is really a fool or if she pretends to be one because that is all she thinks she can be in life; either way, she comes out looking stupid.

Myrtle is another character in The Great Gatsby who Fitzgerald vilifies. She symbolizes desire; her physical description is that of a voluptuous, seductive woman; Nick says she “carried her surplus flesh as sensuously as some women can” (Fitzgerald 29). The first time the reader is introduced to Myrtle, she “wets her lips…and orders her husband” (Fitzgerald 30). Myrtle is having a tawdry relationship with Tom (de Koster 92). Like Daisy, Myrtle is a married woman. However, Myrtle says she only married her husband because she thought he was a gentleman. Her sister says she was once crazy about him, but Myrtle says “the only crazy I was was when I married him!” (Fitzgerald 39). Despite the fact that Myrtle’s husband is a hard-working man who desperately wants to be closer to his wife, she loathes him enough to cheat on him and still feel no qualms about spending his money and living with him.

Myrtle does not appear to be very intellectual in the novel. Fitzgerald presents her as na?ve and low-class. For example, Myrtle reads “Town Tattle” and “Simon Called Peter,” two popular gossip magazines. Nick notices the periodicals when he is in her flat for the first time; on the same day, he witnesses Tom’s abuse of Myrtle. They argue over whether Myrtle has any right to say the name of Tom’s wife, and though Myrtle is surely aware of Tom’s temper, she encourages his rage by shouting “Daisy! Daisy! Daisy!” and “I’ll say it whenever I want to!” (Fitzgerald 41). Tom breaks Myrtle’s nose. This refusal to either leave Tom or make concessions to his violent nature show that Myrtle is incapable of making good decisions and adding to her overall immoral persona.

Another similarity in Daisy and Myrtle is materialism. Myrtle is apparently incapable of having real feelings of her own, so she relies on things to express emotion. Myrtle is forced to change clothes when she arrives at her apartment because the mood has changed; Fitzgerald says, “with the influence of the dress, her personality had also undergone a change” (Fitzgerald 35). Myrtle’s flat is described as being “crowded to the doors with tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continuously” (Fitzgerald 33). The rooms are so stuffed with her extravagant possessions, it is hard to navigate. However, Myrtle’s materialism cannot match Daisy’s, because she does not have the means to support the lifestyle; the vulgarity of the rich Daisy is matched by the crassness of the poor Myrtle (de Koster 94). Myrtle’s extravagant possessions show her selfish nature.

Fitzgerald writes Jordan Baker as Nick’s love interest in the novel. Jordan is presented in as poor a light as the other two women. She relates Gatsby’s entire life story to Nick despite the fact that Gatsby apparently doesn’t want Nick to know about it, and she has no problem mentioning that “Tom’s got some woman in New York” while the two are at the dinner table at Tom and Daisy’s house and Tom has gone to answer the phone (Fitzgerald 19). Jordan’s gossipy nature is revealed immediately, characterizing her from the start as immoral.

Jordan is a dishonest woman. Nick says that when they were in Warwick together, she “left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down and then lied about it.” Next, Nick recounts the story of Jordan’s first golf tournament; he says “there was a row that nearly reached the newspapers- a suggestion that she had moved her ball from a bad lie in the semi-final round” (Fitzgerald 62). Nick calls Jordan “incurably dishonest” (Fitzgerald 63). Jordan’s dishonesty adds to her habitual gossiping to further the image of her immorality.

Jordan admits to her on reckless behavior when she and Nick have a conversation about her driving ability. He tells her she is a bad driver, and if she is not going to be careful, she just should not drive. Jordan says “I am careful,” but Nick disputes this fact. When confronted again, Jordan says that other people are careful and it would take two people to make a wreck. Nick asks her what she will do if she ever encounters a driver as bad as herself, and she answers, “I hope I never will. I hate careless people” (Fitzgerald 63). Jordan knows she is a careless person but does not make the necessary changes in her life so that she might lose the title, despite the fact that she says she hates careless people.

In The Great Gatsby, women in general are portrayed as puerile annoyances. At Gatsby’s parties, the women are the ones who end up hopelessly drunk; they make fools of themselves, swimming in fountains and tearing their clothes. Nick listens as two drunken women bicker amongst themselves. Miss Baedecker, one of the women, apparently was so intoxicated that her head had to be stuck in a pool to revive her. She says, “anything I hate is to get my head stuck in a pool” (Fitzgerald 113). These irresponsible actions portray the women as incapable of caring for themselves, confirming that they are childish and in need of supervision in order to behave.

In addition to being annoyances to the men in the novel, the women are objects. Tom cheats on his wife over and over again and Nick admits he does not love Jordan, but he stays with her because he is bored. Furthermore, women are constantly referred to as “girls”: “men and girls” (43), “rowdy little girl” (51), “four girls” (67), “the girl addressed” (112), “radiant young girl” (115). All the women in the novel are grown except Daisy’s daughter, so the term has to be viewed as derogatory.

The next American author who vilifies women is Edith Wharton. Her novel, Ethan Frome, has two main female characters, Mattie and Zeena. Wharton initially uses physical description to present these women as villains. Mattie is young, vibrant and usually happy; she is a temptress to Ethan. Zeena, on the other hand, is harsh and cruel long before her time.

Wharton uses descriptive details to paint an image of Zeena in the reader’s mind; her features are as hateful as she is. Ethan observes her lying in bed in the early hours of the morning and says “her high boned face was taking a grayish tinge from the whiteness of the pillow” (Wharton 26). Later, she is described as “tall and angular” with a “flat breast” (Wharton 138). Before Zeena leaves to see the doctor, when she is convinced that her sickness is getting worse, Ethan says “her face looked more than usually drawn and bloodless, and the three parallel creases between her ear and cheek were sharpened and there were three querulous lines from her thin nose to the corners of her mouth” (Wharton 47). The negative description of Zeena’s physical appearance forces the reader to identify Zeena as a villain in the novel.

Ethan says that his wife is only seven years his senior, and he was only twenty-eight, but “she was already an old woman” (Wharton 47). Zeena had plenty of imagined ailments; when Zeena nursed Ethan’s mother until she died, Ethan thought she had remarkable skill, but later “saw that her skill as a nurse had been acquired by the absorbed observation of her own symptoms” (Wharton 52). The only time Ethan can convince himself that there is some semblance of peace in his house is when Zeena had Mattie to work for her and therefore had “more leisure time to devote to her complex ailments” (Wharton 44). Zeena is “wholly absorbed in her health” (Wharton 46). Zeena’s hypochondriac behavior causes her to be an unbearable person, dwelling on her own self-predicted dismal future.

Zeena is a miserable woman, and she makes those around her miserable. Ethan says he “did not remember ever having heard her laugh before” (Wharton, 57). Ethan says of Zeena’s forcing Mattie to leave without real reason “she had taken everything from him and now she meant to take the one thing that made up for all the others” (Wharton 85). Obviously, Zeena is forcing Mattie to leave to make Ethan more miserable; the night before the girl’s departure, Zeena had a “faint smile” that “deepened the vertical lines between her nose and chin” (Wharton 89). Later, when Ethan and Mattie are loading Mattie’s things onto the wagon, the corners of Zeena’s “straight lips seemed to quiver way into a smile” (Wharton 106). When Mattie is trying to thank Zeena for the year of work and board, Zeena only wants to talk to Mattie about some personal possessions she suspects Mattie of stealing. She is completely uninterested in whether the girl has anywhere to go or not. When Ethan meets Jotham after he has brought Zeena back to the farm, Jotham is in poor spirits. Ethan wonders if maybe Zeena did not get to see the doctor because if she did not, “the first person she met would likely be held responsible for her grievance” (Wharton 52). Zeena’s mean nature affects everyone around her.

Selfishness is apparent in Zeena. An example of Zeena’s selfishness is the way she refuses to use her red pickle dish: she says “I wouldn’t never use it, not even when the minister come to dinner or Aunt Martha Pierce” (Wharton, 91). Zeena’s selfishness is further exemplified when Mattie is leaving and she “I know there is a huckabuck towel missing; and I cannot take out what you done with that match-safe ‘t used to stand behind the stuffed owl in the parlor” (Wharton 100). She is more concerned with getting everything from Mattie that she can then she is with the fact that she is throwing a member of her family who is unprepared for work out of her home with nowhere to go. This selfish nature reminds the reader that Zeena is a hateful woman.

The red pickle dish that demonstrates Zeena’s selfishness also demonstrates Mattie’s role as a temptress to Ethan in the novel. She knows that Zeena would not want her to use the pickle dish but she brings it down despite the interests of her employer. She says “I had to get up on the step ladder to reach it…and of course she’ll know why I did it” (Wharton 62). Mattie says she just “wanted to make the supper table pretty” (Wharton 91). She chose the one night that Zeena would not be there to do it. When Ethan tells her there might be more snow on the way, she asks, “do you suppose it’ll interfere with Zeena’s getting back?” (Wharton 61). Mattie is enjoying her time alone with Ethan, trying to impress him with her beauty and homemaking skills, and she does not want his wife to interfere; this further illustrates Mattie’s role as a temptress to Ethan.

Mattie’s physical description is the extreme opposite of Zeena’s; she is beautiful, young and vibrant. When Mattie and Ethan come home from the social, Zeena stands in the door waiting for them, and Ethan is struck by her hard features. The following night, when Zeena is out of town, Mattie greets Ethan at the door, in the same position Zeena met them the night before. Ethan says that the candle she held “drew out a distinctiveness in her slim, young throat and her brown wrist was no bigger than a child’s… the candle light threw a lustrous fleck on her lips, edged her eyes with velvet shade and gave a milky whiteness to the curve above her brows” (Wharton 59). As Ethan watches Mattie dance, he notices her “painted lips,” “cloud of dark hair” and “dark eyes” (Wharton 21). Mattie is being described as stunningly attractive, a temptation for Ethan, reminding the reader of her immoral behavior; surely if she was a moral woman, she would not try to seduce Ethan the way she does when she wears make-up.

Further examples of Mattie’s seductive behavior include the use of color imagery by Wharton and her flirtatious body language towards Ethan. Red, the traditional color associated with seduction, surrounds Mattie. When Ethan watches Mattie dance at the social, he notes her “cherry colored fascinator” (Wharton 21). The pickle dish is red, and the night of the pickle dish incident, Mattie has “run a streak of crimson ribbon” through her hair (Wharton 59). This use of color imagery causes the reader to associate Mattie with infidelity.

When Ethan and Mattie actually begin expressing their feelings for one another, she is usually the catalyst. She does things to attract attention to herself from Ethan- “She let her lids slide slowly, the way he loved” (Wharton 46). When Ethan finally gets the nerve to touch the sewing Mattie is working on, she “lingers for a moment” before pulling away (Wharton 60). When the two kiss for the first time, Mattie is practically begging for it- she asks breathlessly “Is this where Ned and Ruth kissed?” (Wharton 80). Ethan was unable to control himself; he was married to an ugly cruel heartless woman and this beautiful, cruel, heartless woman was seducing him.

Besides her seductive nature, Mattie is incompetent both physically and mentally. When Ethan and Mattie are watching the sun set one night, she remarks “it looks just as if it was painted!” (Wharton 24). Apparently, Mattie is incapable of comprehending the beauty of nature without comparing it to something as superficial as a painting. Physically, Mattie is unable to adapt to the occasionally hard work she has to do at the Frome’s home. Ethan “does his best to supplement her unskilled efforts, getting up earlier than usual to light the kitchen fire, carrying in the wood overnight, and neglecting the mill for the farm that he might help her about the house during the day. He even crept down Saturday nights to scrub the kitchen floor after the women had gone to bed” (Wharton 25). Mattie’s inability to do her job causes hardship for Ethan and shows that she is unable to complete her job because she is a weak woman.

In general, women in Ethan Frome were seen as burdens. Ethan was forced to care for his mother, and once Zeena had become sure of her illness, he was forced to care for her as well. Ethan married Zeena out of fear of being alone and regretted it forever after, and he “often thought since that it would not have happened if his mother had died in the spring instead of the winter” (Wharton 35). Winter for Frome was a miserable time for Ethan, symbolizing loneliness and bitterness (Freeservers 1), and he married Zeena because of the loneliness. Ethan is a handcuffed convict, a prisoner for life (Magill 3537). Mattie and Zeena have trapped him in the hateful town until his death.

Edith Wharton and F. Scott Fitzgerald unnecessarily vilify women in their novels. Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby portrays women as objects, meant only for fun and pleasure, certainly incapable of independent thought or responsible action. Wharton’s Ethan Frome displays women as evil characters who seduce and tempt men, only to leave them hurt in the end. Wharton and Fitzgerald are typical of many American authors who needlessly vilify women in their novels.

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