

# BEAUTIFUL LITTLE FOOL

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE COOL GIRL FROM F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE GREAT GATSBY* TO GILLIAN FLYNN'S *GONE GIRL*

87 years after F. Scott Fitzgerald famously published *The Great Gatsby*, Gillian Flynn less famously published *Gone Girl*. While both novels are American and prominently feature G-alliteration in their titles, they seldom draw comparison<sup>1</sup>, as these superficial commonalities do not form a cohesive literary connection. However, the two novels share a deeper trait: they provide insight into Fitzgerald's and Flynn's contemporary societies with moral ambiguity and cultural criticism. They employ their main characters to convey these sub-textual messages, especially in discussing the roles of women in American society.<sup>2</sup> *Gatsby's* Daisy, the demure, coy, beautiful cousin of Carraway, and *Gone Girl's* Amy, the ruthless, brilliant, and, yes, beautiful wife of Dunne, appear starkly different, though they play analogous roles in conveying the authors' messages of the books. Both characters reveal information about the roles and standards of women in their distinct periods of American history. Moreover, Fitzgerald and Flynn illustrate through Daisy and Amy respectively that maintaining the image of femininity necessitates projecting the illusion of vulnerability or weakness.

At the innermost level, the women's awareness of their own contrived behavior in their marriages demonstrates the importance of creating an intellectually-weak façade in order to appear more feminine. *The Great Gatsby* presents a first-hand, introspective account that expounds the role of projected weakness towards the beginning of the novel when Carraway recounts his conversation with Daisy when he first visits her home. Daisy shares the anecdote of how she reacted to finding out the sex of her baby, saying how she hoped her future daughter would "be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool" (Fitzgerald 17). Fitzgerald, through this one desperate wish, introduces the "beautiful little fool" standard, effectively asserting that the "best" virtues of womanhood in the 1920s were beauty and unintelligence. Since Tom's affair with Myrtle severely compromises the fidelity of their marriage, Daisy's cynicism likely stems from her knowledge of his illicit relationship. Internally speaking, Daisy aspires to be "fool[ish]" enough to overlook her husband's indiscretions in hiding his affair and beautiful enough to keep his attention on her in the future, apparently resigned to the obligation of faking intellectual weakness in order to be perceived as a desirable woman. Though Flynn doesn't broach the topic in Part 1 of the novel, *Gone Girl* addresses feigned

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<sup>1</sup> As evidenced by a few all but fruitless searches of the Internet

<sup>2</sup> *The Great Gatsby* and *Gone Girl* both feature protagonists named Nick: Nick Carraway and Nick Dunne. They will therefore be referred to by their surnames in order to avoid confusion.

ineptitude during the first chapter post-Diary Amy. When Amy explains how she falsified her true identity in the diary and in her relationship with Dunne, she discusses how she “was playing...the girl a man like Nick wants: the Cool Girl,” a girl who was “hot and understanding” (Flynn 222). Here, Amy expresses a very similar sentiment to what Daisy said to Carraway, creating the Cool Girl standard. “Hot” is the modern “beautiful” and “understanding,” in context, is code for “foolish.” She adopted the Cool Girl persona in order for Dunne to like her. When reflecting upon her Cool Girl days, she recalls, “It was as if he hollowed me out and filled me with feathers...I didn’t think past the first step of anything, that was the key” (Flynn 223). Amy’s use of “hollowed” and “feathers” evokes a lifeless stuffed animal or even a doll. To extend the metaphor, Dunne removed her core and replaced it with a soft, fluffy filler plucked from a dead animal. Winning Dunne’s love, she claims, transcended merely dumbing herself down, it necessitated creating a veneer of insipidity. The “key” to being adored by Dunne was simply to stop pondering the world around her and just to accept “the first,” most superficial layer of life without questioning it. Both Daisy and Amy acknowledge that they have put on airs of beauty and sub-intelligence in order to appear more appropriately feminine to their husbands.

Daisy and Amy each have secondary men who idolize them, Jay Gatsby and Desi Collings. They are drawn to Daisy and Amy respectively because of the women’s apparent emotional vulnerability. From Gatsby’s first rendezvous with Daisy after their years of separation, he demonstrates adoration at her weakness; Carraway notes that “he literally glowed...like an ecstatic patron of recurrent light” at Daisy’s “throat, full of grieving, aching beauty” (Fitzgerald 89). Carraway’s observations have a romantically sadistic edge to them. He admittedly finds “beauty” in her raw, emotional state as she “grieve[s]” and “ache[s],” though not nearly to the extent of Gatsby. Fitzgerald frequently references light in Gatsby, but he does so deliberately and often unobtrusively. By declaring that Gatsby “literally glowed,” he proclaims Gatsby happy far and beyond the pale. Gatsby is “ecstatic.” His reaction demonstrates that to please him, Daisy must appear vulnerable. In *Gone Girl*, Amy exploits this common fixation between Gatsby and Desi to her own self-serving ends. When considering Flynn’s other novels and textual clues within *Gone Girl*, one can infer that Desi has mild Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy (MBP), a condition where a caretaker finds pleasure/satisfaction in the illnesses of those in his care. Amy states that as a “white-knight type,” Desi is drawn to “troubled women” and is “never happier than when he’s at a bedside” (Flynn 324). Though Desi’s satisfaction from vulnerable women greatly outweighs the norm for men, his fascination with “troubled women” does represent the general male appreciation for female weakness. Amy takes advantage of Desi’s fetish when they first have sex, where she fakes “gentle, kittenish noises” and tries “to work up some tears because [she] know[s] he imagines [her] crying with him the first time” (Flynn 365). Sleeping with Desi plays a critical role in her plan to return; she requires his semen to validate her fabricated claim of rape and, most importantly, his trust so she can drug him with the sleeping pills. In order to win his favor, Amy must build an emotional, “kittenish” façade. She admits to

faking what she thinks “he imagines” for him to find her attractive, demeaning her own behavior to pet-like adoration. Similarly, while Amy certainly does not embody the traits of “gentle” and “tear[ful],” she adapts them to appeal to Desi. While her intentions transcend the small matter of Desi’s interest in her, Amy’s affected vulnerable persona arouses Desi, which speaks to male perception of weakness. Though Daisy’s tears are most likely much more organic than Amy’s, both men find projected emotional weakness to be attractive.

Despite the fact that both *Gatsby* and *Gone Girl* demonstrate how men and women themselves relate to the illusion of weakness, only the latter illustrates the societal palate for weakness in women. In *Gone Girl*, this form of weakness manifests as physical and situational. While in hiding, Amy describes her public, televised persona as “the beautiful, kind, doomed, pregnant victim of a selfish, cheating bastard...” (Flynn 284). Presumed dead, Amy elicits great sympathy from the public through talk shows like the referenced *Ellen Abbott*. Also, because she is “beautiful,” her story gains the tragically romantic angle. She becomes a “victim” and any man stupid enough to harm her becomes a “bastard.” Amy exploits these societal presumptions even further by faking her pregnancy. “It’s easy to like pregnant women...as if it’s so hard to spread your legs and let a man ejaculate between them,” she narrates (Flynn 258). Since pregnant women are deemed fragile and more susceptible to harm, they draw greater collective sympathy. In a shockingly dramatic manner, Amy demonstrates how as a woman, receiving public support relies upon casting oneself in a weak, vulnerable light. In *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald does not make a societal claim similar to Flynn’s. Since the largest sense of society in *Gatsby* comes from parties, where the novel focuses chiefly on intimate interactions between characters, the notion of public perception of women does not significantly arise, particularly in Daisy’s case since she does not share Jordan’s celebrity. Therefore, *Gone Girl* shows how society appreciates projections of physical and situational vulnerability while *Gatsby* does not.

Why do both novels develop very similar claims about self- and male-perceived illusions of weakness but make starkly different points when society is introduced? This distinction likely speaks to differences between the times. While the spirit of the Roaring Twenties and that of the world today share similarities, they are not identical. We live in the age of information and communication. Internet and television media transform events into news and news into spectacles. But more importantly, Fitzgerald’s use of Carraway as narrator implies that the male perspective *was* society back in the 1920’s. If Daisy were in a similar situation to Amy, her appeal to men through emotional and intellectual weakness would constitute her public perception. There wouldn’t be the *Ellen Abbott* effect of *Gone Girl* where other women would sympathize with a pregnant or abused woman. The eyes of men were the eyes of society. Therefore, America in the Roaring Twenties was much more patriarchal a society than many people believe due to its reputation of brazen feminism. When viewed in conjunction with *Gatsby*, *Gone Girl* demonstrates how Gillian Flynn ventured beyond Fitzgerald and elucidated

the effect of society's male-dominant nature. Furthermore, she used Amy's manipulation of projected weakness to demonstrate the fragility of patriarchal thought. The battle to equality between genders in societal perception stretches on. Fitzgerald concludes *The Great Gatsby* by proclaiming, "So we beat on, boat against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 180). Flynn, on the other hand, claims that the "current" is the patriarchal past itself.

**WORKS CITED**

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner, 2004. Print.

Flynn, Gillian. *Gone Girl*. New York: Crown, 2012. Print.