



The Nameless Woman Myrtle Wilson And The Mechanism Of Economic Exclusion In F. S. Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby"

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ABSTRACT

Studies of the female image in "Lost Generation" prose are normally organized around two positions: the woman who meets the war directly and the woman who experiences it through its social consequences. Myrtle Wilson fits neither. This paper argues that she constitutes a third structural position, defined not by her relation to the war but by her exclusion from the post-war economy. This position is marked in the text by three features: an openly economic account of marriage, the most physically rendered death in the novel and namelessness. The paper also shows that the fates of the four female characters form a single system in which social position, and not personal quality, determines the outcome.

KEYWORDS: Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby, Myrtle Wilson, valley of ashes, class, economic exclusion, female image, Lost Generation.

INTRODUCTION

Research on the female image in "Lost Generation" fiction has largely been built on two models: the woman who encounters the war at first hand and the woman who encounters it through its social consequences [6; 34]. Catherine Barkley and Daisy Buchanan are the standard representatives of these models. Myrtle Wilson is usually mentioned in passing, either as an instrument of the plot or as an illustration of Tom Buchanan's character [3; 72]. Frequency data confirms this marginality, by our count her name appears some twenty-three times in the novel, against one hundred and eighty-five occurrences for Daisy and seventy-two for Jordan Baker. The present research proposes that Myrtle should be read as a third structural position rather than as a secondary figure and that it is this position which completes the typological range of the female image in the novel.

Materials and method. The primary text is F. S. Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" (1925), examined in the original. E. Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms" (1929) is drawn on as a comparative reference point where the argument requires a front-line term, since the two models under discussion were established on the material of both novels.

The method combines close reading with a functional analysis of the position each female character occupies in the narrative and with a class-oriented reading of the novel's symbolic system. The functional analysis proceeds along four parameters: social position, relation to the war, the character's voice in the text, and the outcome assigned to her at the close. These parameters are applied uniformly to all four female characters. Myrtle Wilson is described within the same frame as Catherine Barkley, Daisy Buchanan and Jordan Baker rather than as an exception to it. Frequency of naming and the share of text narrated in a female voice are used

in an auxiliary capacity, as indicators that make the distribution of narrative attention measurable.

Daisy Buchanan serves as the control case. Both women are married, both are connected to Tom Buchanan and both treat marriage as an instrument of social advancement. They differ decisively only in their position on the social scale. Any difference in consequence may therefore be attributed to class rather than to character or moral disposition.

Results and analysis. Myrtle neither goes to the front nor belongs to the privileged stratum behind it. She lives in the valley of ashes, the waste zone of the post-war industrial economy [7; 54]. Her fate exposes a gap between the two established models. Entry into the front-line model requires the kind of social opportunity Catherine possesses as a member of the British middle class. Protection within the behind-the-lines model requires the kind of capital Daisy possesses through her Louisville family. Myrtle has neither. The war does not reach her as physical danger, nor as a changed field of social choice, but as economic exclusion.

Marriage stated in economic terms. Unlike Daisy, Myrtle is allowed to speak directly about her own marriage and she describes it in openly economic language: "I married him because I thought he was a gentleman" [1; 35]. The sentence that follows turns on the word breeding, which fuses lineage and upbringing in a single term and makes the expectation explicit. She entered the marriage anticipating social ascent and declares without mediation that she was deceived.

The comparison with Daisy is instructive. Daisy's protest on the eve of her wedding is suppressed by the women around her and subsequently referred to as an incident. It is registered and then managed. Myrtle's protest is not suppressed but simply ignored, because she is socially insignificant. The two women hold the same view of marriage as an economic transaction, and the difference in consequence is produced by class position alone. This isolates class as the operative variable in the construction of the female image [2; 23].

Myrtle's death is rendered with a physical precision found nowhere else in the novel. The anatomical detail is not incidental. The only broken body in the text is a female body and it is presented through an organ associated with maternity [1; 137]. Nine years after the armistice, Fitzgerald transfers the iconography of the destroyed body from the battlefield into civilian space: the automobile takes the place of the shell and the valley of ashes takes the place of the trench [5; 31]. On this reading the war has not ended in 1918; it has changed the form in which it produces casualties.

The clearest marker of the third position appears at the close of the episode, where the narrator returns to the scene in a dream vision composed in the manner of El Greco: an unnamed woman in a white dress lies on a stretcher, and no one knows her name or takes any interest in it [1; 176]. Namelessness is the exact definition of the position Myrtle occupies. Daisy is protected by capital and Catherine is identified by her service, while Myrtle is recorded only as an unidentified body. The novel thus supplies its own formulation of exclusion, and it does so without authorial comment.

Placed beside the other female characters, Myrtle's fate reveals a consistent structure. Catherine, the woman who entered professional work, dies. Myrtle, the woman who attempted to cross a social boundary, is killed. Daisy, the woman who submitted completely to the existing order, survives unchanged. Jordan, the woman who preserved her independence, is removed from the narrative. These four outcomes are distributed not according to personal qualities but

according to social position and to the degree of deviation from the prescribed role [4; 65]. Within this structure Myrtle receives the severest sanction, because her deviation is the one the system can least accommodate: an attempt at ascent from below.

Conclusion. The analysis allows the following conclusions:

1. Myrtle Wilson constitutes a third structural position in the typology of the female image in "Lost Generation" prose. This position is defined by economic exclusion rather than by a relation to the war, and it completes the typological range established by the front-line and behind-the-lines models.
2. She is the only woman in the novel permitted to state the economic basis of marriage directly. The identity of her view with Daisy's, together with the difference in its consequences, isolates class as the decisive variable.
3. Her death transfers the iconography of the wartime destroyed body into civilian space, which extends the chronological boundary of war prose beyond the armistice.
4. Namelessness functions as the formal marker of her position and constitutes the most economical definition of exclusion the text makes available.

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