

Ava Brocchini

Catherine Mintler

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### The American Dream Reimagined

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Jillian Cantor's *Beautiful Little Fools* offer differing pursuits of the American Dream, mainly through changes in the narrative point of view, plot, and characterization. While Fitzgerald's novel, narrated by the insightful yet unreliable Nick Carraway, offers a male-gaze perceptive of the self-made man and doomed woman, Cantor's feminist novel reclaims the voice of its female protagonists and outlines the limitations and biases of the original book. By retelling the story of *The Great Gatsby* from different points of view, *Beautiful Little Fools* challenges the received reading of *The Great Gatsby* as merely a critique of the American Dream as it pertains to Gatsby. Instead, it argues that its ultimate missing piece lies in its lack of female agency and reinforcement of rigid class structures, a piece that *Beautiful Little Fools* examines by reclaiming the voices of its female characters and their American Dreams, exposing the biases of Fitzgerald's male-centered narrative.

*Beautiful Little Fools* overturns this male-dominated perspective by putting Daisy, Jordan Baker, and Catherine at its forefront, giving them voices that were all but mute in Fitzgerald's novel. One of the most famous lines in *The Great Gatsby* is when Daisy cynically remarks that the best thing a woman can hope to be is a "beautiful little fool." (Fitzgerald Chapter 1). In Fitzgerald's adaptation, the scene is too frequently taken as evidence of Daisy's mindless personality. But Cantor's re-telling presents it as one of profound self-discovery. In *Beautiful Little Fools*, Daisy is acutely aware of the roles society has defined for her and knowingly plays into them to survive. This shift in interpretation takes the blame away from individual women and onto the broader social structures that force them into narrow roles. At the beginning of the

story, Daisy's American Dream is not as straightforward because her character is much different than the girl we see in *The Great Gatsby*. We know that she marries Tom so that her mother does not lose her house, as shown in her narration when she says, "I could not let Mother sell the house. I tried to imagine where we might go and what might become of us, penniless, homeless... If Adelaide Cummings had married a multimillionaire from Chicago—why couldn't I? I knew what I had to do. I knew how I would fix everything." (Cantor 45). Her motive for marrying Tom is not a selfish, social-climbing pursuit like it is portrayed by Nick in the original novel. Daisy chooses Tom to support her family. After she is married to Tom for some time in the story, it becomes clear that Daisy's American Dream is to have power, but she never gets that power because Tom does not share it. We see this through Daisy's thought, "Money would give me a couture dress, and diamonds, and Tom. But it would give me this, this red-hot power, too." (Cantor 85). When Daisy was trying on her wedding dress in Paris, the seamstress told her that she had the body of a duck. Then, Mrs. Buchanan told her to demand an apology, which she did. This is when she realizes that she will gain a sort of power with her new last name, but we see throughout her marriage that her power is not the kind that she had imagined. It isn't until she leaves Tom at the end of the novel with her daughter that we see Daisy truly empowered because she is leaving what others would say is her American Dream, when in reality, the freedom she gains when she leaves him is the dream she was pursuing all along.

For Daisy's best friend, Jordan, the American Dream looks slightly different. Cantor paints her as a woman attempting to exist in a world that affords her a measure of independence as a professional golfer but continues to demand conformity to traditional femininity. Her choices, made to seem selfish in Fitzgerald's novel, are rewritten as acts of resistance in a world that offers her few sensible alternatives for achieving success. Jordan's dream is to be

independent and pursue her goal of being a professional golfer. She said, “I came in second in the tournament, and two weeks later, back in Louisville, I received a letter from Mr. Hennessey, head of the Women's National Amateur Golf Tour, inviting me to join the tour in May.” (Cantor 49). Jordan retaining her independence and becoming a professional golfer is a different way of imagining how a woman could make her place in the world and pursue her goals in the early twentieth century. However, we also see how a single decision that goes against societal norms can send your career crashing down when Jordan says, “This article was about me. It said I, Jordan Baker, had moved the ball, and that was how I’d come in first place yesterday... ‘Mrs. Pearce told us how she saw you do it. Mrs. Pearce saw everything.’” (Cantor 159). Jordan’s sexuality and love for Mary Margaret led to her professional downfall in the golf industry and tainted her image through the “cheating” scandal. Jordan’s point of view in *Beautiful Little Fools* shows us the “real” reason why her golf career came to a halt because, in *The Great Gatsby*, the only evidence we have of her golf career comes from Nick’s perspective.

In addition to Nick’s view of Jordan, his classism is revealed through his view of Myrtle as a social-climbing gold digger. However, Cantor sympathizes with Myrtle’s character much more in *Beautiful Little Fools*. At the beginning of the story, Myrtle’s version of the American Dream is to move to the city away from her father and the farm she grew up on. However, moving to the city does not mean you can automatically participate in the glamour of city life. You need financial backing to enjoy this lifestyle, which she did not have because her husband, George, was poor. So we see her dream evolve into escaping the Valley of Ashes. Her sister, Catherine, said, “‘I’m worried about you,’ I said. ‘I want to help you. You deserve so much better, Myrtle.’” (Cantor 164). Catherine was talking to Myrtle in response to discovering bruises on her body that were from George abusing her. Myrtle thought that staying with him was better

than being alone and trying to make it on her own. This shows that although she deserved a lot better than the situation she was in, most women of that era felt trapped in their marriages because they thought they could never live without a man in their lives. However, we see a dichotomy of this idea through Catherine.

Catherine's character is less prevalent in *The Great Gatsby* than in *Beautiful Little Fools*. Cantor depicts her as a strong-willed woman who wanted to break away from their society's gender norms. Catherine's American Dream was to have autonomy and not be ruled by a man. We see her character shine when she says, "I want the Nineteenth Amendment to pass the Senate. I want us to have a voice, a real voice in this country. Imagine that, Myrtle. Imagine not needing any man. Imagine if being a woman were enough." (Cantor 61). The Women's Suffrage Movement was highly prevalent during this time. The Nineteenth Amendment was not passed until 1920, so women still did not have the right to vote in this story. Voting gives you a voice in your life and future and influences how you are governed, which is precisely what Catherine wanted.

Although Catherine never wanted to be controlled by a man, she still built relationships with various men throughout the story. The one we see the most is her relationship with Jay Gatsby. In *The Great Gatsby*, his American Dream is to be with Daisy. However, in *Beautiful Little Fools*, we see that his pursuit of the American Dream is not as romantic as Nick presents it. He is not just a romantic hero trying to regain Daisy's love. He has an affair with Catherine. He is also controlling and manipulative, which is seen when he pays Myrtle to sit by Tom on the train, "He takes the nine o'clock train from East Egg into the city every Friday. I want you to find him on that train, sit with him, and talk to him.'... Why was he willing to pay me \$100 to find a man on a train and sit and talk to him?" (Cantor 200). We can clearly see that he is a much

more sinister character. He is not just a gangster and a bootlegger; he is cunning and uses people. Fitzgerald and Cantor reveal the moral decay behind Gatsby's pursuit of wealth differently, but both acknowledge that it was built on shady dealings. This suggests that success often comes at an ethical cost, complicating the notion of a pure and attainable American Dream. Literary scholar William Cain explains, "It feeds them great hopes, great desires, and it's extraordinary, the efforts that so many of them make to fulfil those dreams and those desires, but that dream is beyond the reach of many, and many, they give up all too much to try to achieve that great success." (Anderson, NP). Although Gatsby came about his wealth illegally, readers have so much more sympathy for him in *The Great Gatsby* because Nick portrays him innocently as a poor little boy who did everything he could to make it big and try to win over his first love.

Ultimately, *Beautiful Little Fools* is both a critique and a necessary expansion of *The Great Gatsby* that pressures its limited examination of class and the American Dream. While Fitzgerald's novel examines these issues from the perspective of a privileged male narrator, Cantor's reimagining gives voice to the silenced women, resulting in a far more subtle and damning critique of the structures that trap them. By doing so, *Beautiful Little Fools* forces readers to reconsider the legacy of the original novel, not just as a critique of the male American Dream, but as a condemnation of how gender and class intersect to make, and more typically break, individual lives. In doing so, it offers a compelling counter-narrative that will not let its female characters be diminished to symbols in a man's tragedy.

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