To Live In A Man’s World:  
 A Look at the Portrayal of Women

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Since they’re human beings, women are diverse; different women will have different personalities, lives and power levels. Throughout Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and O’Neill’s Netherland, the diversity of women’s power levels is well represented throughout both novels, and both are equally accurate in portraying women respective to how much power they have. Power is the freedom of choice, the social status and the ability to have ambitions. In Netherland, Hans, the protagonist, revisits earlier events in his life in New York. He goes through a tough time in his relationship with his wife Rachel, meets an interesting individual named Chuck Ramkissoon and experiences some strange events. He eventually ends up reuniting with his wife, reflecting on the events and considering the strange death of Chuck. This can be more or less compared to The Great Gatsby, which follows through the strange life of an enigmatic personality named Gatsby through the eyes of Nick Carraway. Gatsby is in love with Daisy, who is an influential character in the story. Because she is the wife of Tom Buchanan, Gatsby’s desire to be with Daisy leads to a conflict as Tom is a very demanding character, who himself is associated with a mistress. This story too ends with the enigmatic and interesting character dead, and the protagonist reflecting upon him. While Netherland successfully elaborates upon the freedoms a woman can independently enjoy, it also touches on the subject of the effects a typical patriarchal society can have on the minds of women. The Great Gatsby goes even further with this concept and shows strong and realistic examples of the consequences for women living in a world that biases power towards men. Both novels indicate that, while the societies are more or less centered on favoring men, women are not necessarily always the underdog, and the power women possess can greatly change the outcome of certain situations that may arise. Depending on their social status and professional statuses, the different women in both novels are more powerful than or less powerful than men.

Firstly, there is at least one female character in each novel that clearly has more power than a main character who is a man. Jordan Baker from The Great Gatsby and Rachel Van Der Broek from Netherland are excellent examples of this; Baker lives independently without relying on any man. She is shown as being a rebel who does not conform to the societal standards for women at the time; she refuses to be the delicate, obedient and simple object a strongly patriarchal society would expect her to be. Instead, she chooses to do what she feels is right for her, even if this means highly selfish actions, such as using men to her advantage. Nick initially describes her by saying:

She was incurably dishonest. She wasn’t able to endure being at a disadvantage, and given this unwillingness I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool, insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard jaunty body. (Fitzgerald 63-64)

Jordan is easily in more power than Nick because of her almost straightforward strong personality as well as the wealth she possesses. Women in power are no exception to Netherland either, as Rachel is easily one of the most powerful and strong willed characters in the whole novel. Most of her mother’s feministic traits have been passed on to her and, while being very clear about her demands for equal opportunity and power, she makes a considerable amount of money because of her job as a successful lawyer. She trumps Hans in terms of power, and she doesn’t hesitate to let him know this. Hans quotes her saying “I don’t need to be provided for! I’m a lawyer! I make two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year!” (Fitzgerald 232). It is never clearly indicated whether or not those are the exact words she yells at Hans, or whether those are the words he seems to hear that hold the same meaning she intends to deliver. In either case, she isn’t hesitant to let her husband know that she is very independent and only chooses to associate with a man for social reasons, not for financial or power-related reasons. Powerful women have obviously been portrayed quite successfully in both novels, showing that even in traditionally patriarchal societies, they possess more power than the general population of men - but women at the other end of the spectrum are no exception.

Because both novels very clearly show women with varying levels of power, both of them also successfully show women who are inferior to men in that area. Daisy Buchanan from The Great Gatsby and Anne Ramkissoon from Netherland are no outliers. Daisy is a very interesting case because she, while being in possession of lots of wealth through her husband and other means, still has no personal freedoms that let her dictate her own life. She feels the need to have her rights, and do as she pleases, but is too afraid to speak up against the patriarchy she has to live under. While talking to Nick about the first hour after she gave birth to her daughter, she states that she told the nurse that “the best thing a girl can be in this world [is] a beautiful little fool” (Fitzgerald 20). This does much in the way of explaining how she feels about the society she lives in; her desire to be independent and free from the constant oppression her husband makes her live through is notable. She feels that her revolt alone would only be the cause of destabilising the sad but stable life she is living right now. She would rather be a “beautiful little fool” than anything that she can’t be guaranteed as a better alternative. Slightly less notably, there is also the side-character of Anne Ramkissoon, who is known to live under and accept the typical demands of a patriarchal society where men demand women to be obedient and compliant. She doesn’t utter a single word, not even after the death of her supposed oppressor (Chuck) about wanting a free life. Chuck once mentions to Hans “My theory is, I need two women. One to take care of family and home, one to make me feel alive” (O’Neill 378). While he never mentions his opinions on whether or not he’d be fine with his wife feeling the need to have two husbands, it can be assumed that he would never expect her to do anything of the like, because shortly afterwards we see how Chuck views women as being “responsible for the survival of the world” (O’Neill 379) while men “are responsible for its glories”(O’Neill 379). Knowing Chuck’s opinion on women, it can be assumed that Anne lives under his power. Additionally, throughout the novel, her English is shown to be very poor. In New York at the time, it was very hard to get by without being able to converse fluently. She would therefore have to rely on Chuck to take care of most of her legal matters and conversation with others, furthering her dependence on him. In both Daisy and Anne’s cases, they have to rely on a man for any power they may indirectly possess and have none of their own.

In conclusion, Netherland and The Great Gatsby both represent the varying levels of power women can possess, and touch upon the subject of powerless women in patriarchy. The novels successfully portray women as is realistic to the time period: most situations in terms of power are generally favored towards men but which can easily have exceptions such as Daisy and Jordan. The novels both elaborate on the idea that, while the world is yet to undergo progression in terms of equal power for women, some outliers have already earned their fair share of power.

Works Cited:

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