The Great Gatsby, set in the “Roaring Twenties” is in many ways a treatise on social status and class in the author's contemporary USA. The novel is, at its core, about ascending the social ladder; the motivations behind this (importance of material wealth), how it is done and how it is influenced by gender, and how this is reacted to by those already at the top. While the story is most definitely character-driven, the narrator is merely a witness, there is no real antagonist, and the characters can even be said not to be attempts at portraying real people, but rather means of describing social life at the time. The author divides society into groups defined by wealth and social status; classes if you will. The United States is traditionally seen as an egalitarian society, where every citizen has equal opportunity of reaching the “American Dream” of wealth, prosperity and happiness, essentially a “classless” society, in contrast with for example the United Kingdom. F. Scott Fitzgerald can be said to argue against this notion, pointing out that not only does a class-based society exist in the United States, but that the focus on material wealth that characterizes the “Jazz Age” he describes, motivates people to succeed financially no matter the cost.

The author also discusses the role of gender within the class framework. With a few exceptions, each of the social groups are represented by at least one person of each sex. The expectations, freedoms and restrictions imposed on the characters based on their sex becomes apparently when contrasting Tom and Daisy Buchanan, Jay Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson.

The narrator, Nick Carraway is a middle class Yale graduate from the Midwest. He is relatively young, 29 years of age in the beginning of the novel, unmarried, and has recently begun working as a bond salesman in New York. He has no aspirations of joining fine society, he knows
his place. He is also firmly placed in the middle of all the other characters, with regards to social status, and he is generally polite, rarely speaks out of manner and is therefore tolerated and accepted. Overall, regarding the class and gender aspects of the novel, Carraway is largely unimportant. He is a witness, and his role is to give the reader a means to observe the other characters.

Tom Buchanan (along with his wife Daisy Fay Buchanan, whom I will get back to later), represents the “old money”, that is the established upper class. He could be said to fill the role of the novel's antagonist, if such a term could be applied. He is portrayed almost exclusively in a negative light. Shortly after we are introduced to the character, he brings up a supposedly scientific account on how “we’re Nordics”, “we produced all the things that go make civilization”, and how “we” have to prevent the inferior races from taking over. “It is up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things.”

Mr Buchanan is also hypocritical with regards to both social status and gender. He is generally skeptical of “new money” millionaires like Gatsby, and frequently makes negative remarks about bootleggers, claiming that Gatsby most likely is one. (“A lot of these newly rich are just big bootlegger's you know.”). However, he also drinks, on nearly all social occasions. Near the end of the novel, before the Buchanans, Gatsby, Carraway and Baker go on their trip to New York, he brings with him a bottle of whiskey: “Tom came out the house wrapping a quart bottle of whiskey”. Presumably willing to drive under the influence, he also reveals his need to be discreet about his alcohol consumption in light of prohibition, and hides the bottle in a towel.

As for his views on gender and feminism, he expresses a negative attitude towards independent women. He disapproves of Jordan Baker's lifestyle, “[her family] oughtn't to let her

---

1 The Great Gatsby p. 18
2 The Great Gatsby p. 104
3 The Great Gatsby p. 115
run around the country this way”⁴, and in response to Daisy's attending of Jay Gatsby's parties he says “By God, I may be old-fashioned in my ideas, but women run around too much these days to suit me.”⁵ However, while he is advocating conservative “Christian” values regarding women in family life, he is also a notorious adulterer. During the course of the novel he has a relationship with Myrtle Wilson (which in the end leads to her death), and during the trip to New York it is implied that his extramarital activities were the reason the Buchanans left Chicago. Daisy, to Nick: “Do you know why we left Chicago? I'm surprised that they didn't treat you to the story of that little spree.”⁶ Early in the novel it is also revealed that the Buchanans had “drifted here and there unrestfully”⁷ before moving to East Egg, and in light of Daisy's comment the reader might speculate if this was the cause of several relocations.

Tom Buchanan's wife, Daisy Fay Buchanan, is also of “old money”, but her gender and personality makes her role in society, and in the novel, somewhat different. She does not (or at least to a lesser degree) share her husband's attitude of superiority, but is rather carefree, some would say careless. This is exemplified by her attitude towards her daughter, whom she generally leaves with her nanny. Daisy's wealth allows her a degree of material freedom, but at the same time it provides a restriction on which the whole premise of the novel is based, neatly summed up by a line from Francis Ford Coppola's screenplay adaptation of the novel: “Rich girls don't marry poor boys.”⁸ She had a love affair with Jay Gatsby some years prior to the events of the novel, when he was a military officer stationed in her hometown of Louisville. Due to her social status marriage would be unacceptable, and this situation is Gatsby's primary motivation for striving to move up the social ladder. As Gatsby puts it: “She only married you [Tom] because I was poor,

---

⁴ The Great Gatsby p. 23  
⁵ The Great Gatsby p. 100  
⁶ The Great Gatsby p. 125  
⁷ The Great Gatsby p. 11  
⁸ The Great Gatsby 1974 film adaptation
and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me!”

At the end of the novel, after the deaths of Myrtle Wilson and Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway remarks that “They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made...” All in all, Fitzgerald portrays the “old money” upper class as immoral, hypocritical, self-righteous, irresponsible and generally unaccepting of social mobility.

Jay Gatsby represents the “new money”, self-made millionaires and opportunists having acquired their wealth through varies they various “new” industries that sprung up in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Originally coming from a working class family, he changed his name from James Gatz to Jay Gatsby and attempted to hide his background, at which he is enjoys a fair amount of success by simply not discussing it, and letting rumour about his person, of various credibility, spread freely. “Somebody told me he killed a man once.” His lowly family background is revealed by a reporter from New York approaching Carraway to inquire about Gatsby ("James Gatz – that was really, or at least legally, his name.") and confirmed at the end of the novel when his father, Henry C. Gatz, shows up after his death.

As mentioned earlier, we learn that Gatsby prior to the events of the novel is an army officer stationed at Louisville, where he meets Daisy Fay, later Buchanan. It is strongly implied that his struggle to attain wealth and status is partly, if not mainly, motivated by his desire to marry Daisy. Through the shady underground figure Meyer Wolfshiem, he sets up a bootlegging

---

9 The Great Gatsby p. 124
10 The Great Gatsby p. 170
11 The Great Gatsby p. 45
12 The Great Gatsby p. 94
13 The Great Gatsby p. 158
business, using a chain of drugstores as a front. He makes a fortune in the illegal sale of liquor, becomes a millionaire. He settles in an enormous estate at West Egg, close to the East Egg property of Tom and Daisy Buchanan, where he holds extravagant parties, hoping Daisy will show up one day. He ends up using Carraway to set up a meeting, and while the initial reunion of Gatsby and Daisy is awkward, they begin a love affair.

In the end, Gatsby is shot by George Wilson, as Tom Buchanan has led George to believe Gatsby was the driver of the car that hit Myrtle (Tom: “I told [Wilson] the truth.”

Very few people show up at his funeral, hardly any of Gatsby's high society associates, and his underworld connections come to claim whatever they feel they have ties to.

While not a major character in the story, Myrtle Wilson is nevertheless important when considering the author's representation of gender in the novel. Like Gatsby, she is from the lower classes, and expresses a desire of upward social mobility. However, unlike Gatsby, she is largely prevented from doing so due to her gender. Instead, she has to go through a man, more specifically Tom Buchanan, with whom she has an extramarital affair. She expresses an interest in matters expensive, and has never forgiven her husband for “appearing gentlemanly” when he in fact had to borrow a suit for the wedding. “The only crazy I was was when I married him. I knew right away I made a mistake. He married somebody's best suit to get married in...”

One interesting thing to note is that it appears that while Gatsby works to attain wealth as a means to acquire love, Myrtle Wilson uses love (or at least, sex and companionship) to acquire wealth. However, this may be an oversimplification, since we know Gatsby had been working to improve his social status since an early age (exemplified by his schedule from 1906), and it is implied that Myrtle genuinely cares for Tom.

14 The Great Gatsby p. 169
15 The Great Gatsby p. 37
16 The Great Gatsby p. 164
George Wilson, Myrtle's husband, is also a representative of the lower classes, however, unlike his wife and Jay Gatsby, he is a simple man with no grand ambitions.

It is difficult to derive a specific message from the novel's portrayals of class and gender. It seems, at least on first glance, almost naturalistic in its conclusion: If you strive to advance your place in society, you are overstepping your boundaries, and it will come back to you in the end. However, again, this might well be an oversimplification, given that the people of the upper classes are portrayed as immoral and careless, and that Jay Gatsby and Myrtle Wilson in part have to sacrifice their own morality to be able to succeed in reaching the top. More than anything, the novel is likely a description of the “Jazz Age”, rather than a moral story.

**Bibliography:**
