

# A Comparative Study of Female Relationships under Focalization: Taking *The Great Gatsby* and *Family* as Examples

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**Abstract**—The focalization theory aims to classify and categorize narrative techniques in the literature. This paper applies focalization to the female relationships in *The Great Gatsby* and *Family*, specifically those arising from a romantic relationship with the same male, as examples to explore the different characteristics of female relationships under different types of focalization. The study finds that *The Great Gatsby* uses the narrative with internal focalization in which the female relationships are presented as competitive, whereas in *Family* a combination of the narrative with internal focalization and the narrative with zero focalization is used in which the female relationships are presented as harmonious co-existence. The difference in female relationships is due to the different contexts of the works, the main themes of the works and the influence of the author's experiences.

**Index Terms**—Family, female relationship, focalization, *The Great Gatsby*

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Great Gatsby* is a novel written by Francis Fitzgerald, set in Jazz Age New York City and Long Island. The story is about Gatsby, who hopes to impress his first love Daisy with his wealth, but ends up in tragedy [1]. *Family* by Pa Chin, on the other hand, focuses on the storyline of the younger generation of the Kao family in the 1920s as they move from submission to rebellion in the face of the oppression of their elders, which turns out to cause the decline and disintegration of the Kao family [2]. This paper examines the two novels set in the same period as above from male focal characters based on focalization theory and develop a comparison of female relationships, to be specific, the relationship resulting from having a romantic relationship with the same man.

French structuralist literary theorist Gérard Genette argued that since the late nineteenth century, scholars have confused the mood, i.e. who is observing the story, and voice, i.e. who is the narrator, when exploring narrative techniques. To further clarify this confusion, building on the theories of his predecessors, Genette replaced the terminology with focalization, classifying and categorizing the various techniques into nonfocalized narrative or narrative with zero focalization, narrative with internal focalization, and narrative with external focalization [3]. Genette defined that nonfocalized narrative or narrative with zero focalization are narratives in which the narrator is omniscient and can narrate at will without the constraints of time, space or perspective;

narrative with internal focalization are narratives where the narrator's narrative is confined to what a character knows and feels, whereas speculating other characters' thoughts and activities based on observations; narrative with external focalization are narratives where the narrator tells less than the characters know [3]. The types of focalization can vary throughout the novel, rather than remain fixed. Gradually, focalization has also developed integrated with other fields of study. For example, Sui explored feminist narratives from the focalization perspective, arguing that the narrator's narrative with different types of focalization leads other characters and readers to observe and discover the inequalities between men and women [4].

Currently, some scholars have combined narrative theory with a feminist perspective to reveal the portrayal of victim women in *The Great Gatsby*'s narrative and the impact that patriarchy and traditional role genders have on them from a critical analysis [5]. Lauria, instead, started from the background of author Fitzgerald's life to explore similarities between Daisy, the novel's heroine, and the author's wife and girlfriends, and exposes Daisy's villainous substance [6]. However, neither examines the narrator, Nick, types of focalization in conjunction with female relationships.

The field of research on Pa Chin's novel *Family* has focused on comparative studies, mostly on the similarities and differences between Pa Chin's style and that of writers such as Eileen Chang [7], or on comparisons of equivalent themes such as the culture of family with Shimazaki Fujimura [8]. Some young scholars have also interpreted Pa Chin's novels through the lens of feminist critiques, such as Wang, who linked the change in the marriage system introduced by the Nanjing government to the narrative of marital conflict in the novel [9]. The current researches also lack comparisons with Fitzgerald's work, as well as a consideration of the impact of the shift in focalization on the narrative of female relationships.

In summary, the existing studies on *The Great Gatsby* and *Family* ignore the influence of male narrators and their impacts on the narratives of marital relationships and the authorial intentions behind them, as well as the similarities and differences of marital relationships in the novels, under different types of focalization. As Genette's focalization theory is quite consistent with a large number of narrative works and provides a good starting point for discussion and useful reference for research [10], this study, therefore, aims to apply Genette's theory to compare and contrast the female relationships from male narratives in *The Great Gatsby* and *Family*.

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## II. COMPARISON OF MALE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVES

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author adopted Nick as the main narrator and narrates the story in his narrative with internal focalization. *Family*, on the other hand, adopted Chueh-hui as the main narrator and narrates the story in both Chueh-hui's narrative with internal focalization and the narrative with zero focalization. Thus, there are similarities and differences in terms of narrator and types of focalization.

### A. Similarities and Differences in Types of Focalization

In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick's first-person narrative is mainly used to develop the narrative with internal focalization. In many storylines, Nick is a witness and a participant, for example, in the description of Nick helping Gatsby to meet Daisy, the awkward looks of Gatsby and Daisy are depicted from Nick, the focal character [11]. At Gatsby's funeral, the author also uses the Nick's narrative with internal focalization to depict to the bleak scene of the funeral [11].

*Family*, in contrast, revolves around the lives of three brothers, Chueh-hsin, Chueh-hui and Chueh-min, and is mainly developed from Chueh-hui's narrative with internal focalization and the narrative with zero focalization. In the storylines involving Chueh-hui, the author mostly adopts Chueh-hui's narrative with internal focalization, describing the development of the storyline and the depiction of the characters. In the storylines where Chueh-hui is absent, the author mostly uses the narrative with zero focalization, depicting the setting and characters in the scenes. For example, in the conversation scene where Chueh-hui pretends to tease Ming-feng, the author uses Chueh-hui's narrative with internal focalization to depict Ming-feng's disappointed reaction [12]. Whereas in the scene where Ming-feng committed suicide by throwing herself into a lake, the author portrayed the ripples and the sound caused by Ming Feng from the narrative with zero focalization [12]. It is thus evident that the author completes the narrative of this novel through both internal focalization and zero focalization that complement each other. This is different from the Nick's narrative with internal focalization in *The Great Gatsby*.

### B. Differences in Narrators

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author narrates the whole story from the bystander Nick, whereas in *Family*, the author uses Chueh-hui, one of the main characters, as the narrator.

Nick, a distant cousin of Daisy and college friend of her husband Tom, becomes Gatsby's neighbour when he moves to Long Island, and later becomes the boyfriend of Daisy's best friend Jordan. Unlike the nouveau riche represented by Gatsby and the aristocracy represented by Tom, although Nick's family from the Midwest is wealthy, he is only able to intersect with both classes without belonging to them. For example, the house Nick chooses to rent on the same island where Tom and Gatsby lived. Despite the location of the house allowing him to interact with Gatsby, it is not in the luxurious residential area of East Egg [11]. The author thus takes advantage of Nick's special status about each party to portray the development of the whole story, whereas at the same time using his perspective as a neutral observer to express his views and opinions about the characters.

In contrast to Nick, Chueh-hui is both the witness and the

narrator of events in *Family*. Chueh-hui's role as the young master of the Kao family has feudal and capitalist overtones, whereas he is not bound by the responsibility of carrying the family's burdens as his elder brother Chueh-hsin. This allows him not only to witness all kinds of absurd and sinful events in the Kao family, but as a first-hand witness, his moment of reflection and progress also drives the story, as well as involving him in the story of Chueh-hsin, Chueh-min, thus immersing the reader in the story.

The difference between Nick and Chueh-hui as narrators of the two novels is that Nick is involved in the story but mostly as a bystander, whereas Chueh-hui is one of the protagonists of the novel, experiencing the ups and downs of the entire Kao family. However, in both cases, the main narrator is male, either witnessing the story or participating in it.

## III. RELATIONSHIPS COMPARISON OF FEMALE RELATIONSHIPS

In both novels, Daisy's relationship with Myrtle and Jui-chueh's relationship with Mei is shown as female relationship resulting from a romantic relationship with the same man. In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy is Tom's wife and Myrtle is Tom's mistress, whereas in *Family*, Jui-chueh is Chueh-hsin's wife and Mei is Chueh-hsin's ex-girlfriend. These two pairs of relationships are each characterized by different types of focalization, different characterization, and different marriage and perceptions of marital relationships, resulting in the final two relationships being represented very differently.

### A. Different Types of Focalization

In *The Great Gatsby*, the author mainly adopts the internal focalization with Nick as the focal character to depict the female relationship between Daisy and Myrtle, whereas in *Family*, the author mainly adopts the internal focalization with Chueh-hui as the focal character and the narrative with zero focalization to depict the relationship between Jui-chueh and Mei.

In *The Great Gatsby*, a feature of the relationship between Daisy and Myrtle throughout the novel is that the two did not have any real interaction.

In the first half of the story, Myrtle and Daisy had an indirect confrontation during a date between Tom and Myrtle, where Nick was involved. In Nick's narrative with internal focalization, Myrtle and Tom got into a heated argument over whether or not she had the right to call Daisy's name, and Myrtle got slapped in the face and had a nosebleed by Tom [11]. During that date, Nick also discovered that Tom lied to Myrtle about his inability to get a divorce because Daisy was Catholic and restricted by doctrine, while in fact, Daisy was not Catholic [11]. Through Nick's narrative, it is possible to infer that the author implies Myrtle is not treated equally by Tom and cannot be Tom's wife.

And later in the story, Myrtle again had an indirect encounter with Daisy, mistaking Jordan, who was traveling with Tom, for Daisy, and Nick, who was present, described Myrtle's demeanor as jealous terror [11], which again exemplifies Myrtle's jealous attitude towards Daisy as a mistress while being unable to come forward due to the difference in status between mistress and wife and the fear

caused by Tom's favoritism.

At the end of the story, it can be speculated through Nick's narrative that Daisy drove Myrtle to her death without knowing the identity of Myrtle. The above narrative of various indirect encounters between Daisy and Myrtle reflects Tom's favoritism towards Daisy and the disparity in status between the two as wife and mistress respectively. The fact that there is never any face-to-face conflict between the two may suggest that Myrtle as mistress cannot replace Daisy and that the two cannot co-exist or live in harmony with each other.

In *Family*, Jui-chueh is Chueh-hsin's wife, while Mei is who Chueh-hsin once loved. Chueh-hsin was forced to marry Jui-chueh due to the entanglement of the previous generation. Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, the female relationship between Jui-chueh and Mei is portrayed mainly from Chueh-hui's narrative with internal focalization and the narrative with zero focalization. There are several direct communications and encounters between the two parties, and different characters have different attitudes towards the relationship from different types of focalization.

In the narrative with zero focalization, several interactions occurred between Mei and Jui-chueh, and as they did so they came to understand each other and even developed a sisterly bond. In their first conversation, Jui-chueh didn't know about Mei's past with Chueh-hsin, but still favored Mei [12]. In the subsequent communications, Jui-chueh knew that Mei's unhappy marriage to another man, and was very distressed and sympathetic to her plight [12]. Mei also felt Jui-chueh's sincerity and opened her heart to Jui-chueh. After several talks, they hugged each other tightly and promised to visit each other more often [12].

Another female character, Chin, also thought the two could get along harmoniously. In the narrative with zero focalization, Chin saw the way Jui-chueh and Mei interact with each other and believed that they are fond of each other [12]. She then told Chueh-hsin that there is a possibility for the two to get along harmoniously [12], which suggests her firm belief in this female relationship.

In contrast, the male characters viewed Jui-chueh and Mei in a different way. From Chueh-hui's narrative with internal focalization, he thought that Jui-chueh would be very distraught to learn that Chueh-hsin was actually in love with Mei all along. Both he and Chueh-min felt that there was no turning back between Mei and his elder brother Chueh-hsin because of the feud of the previous generation and the fact that Mei was already a widow. It is thus clear that the relationship between Jui-chueh and Mei cannot co-exist according to Chueh-hui's narrative, and that their mutual presence seems to be a disservice to each other.

In conclusion, Nick's narrative with internal focalization characterizes the inability of Daisy and Myrtle to co-exist with each other. Whereas in the zero focalized narrative, the female characters such as Jui-chueh, Mei and Chin all perceive each other as living in harmony, in contrast to the internal focalization narrative of the male character Chueh-hui, who perceives Jui-chueh and Mei as being unable to co-exist.

#### B. Different Characterization

In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy and Myrtle both embody gold-

worshipping, vain character traits; whereas in *Family*, Jui-chueh and Mei both demonstrate kindness and consideration for others. And these character traits exacerbate the nature of these relationships.

Under Nick's narrative with internal focalization, Daisy is characterized as a gold-digger. Nick described Daisy's voice as full of money and her actions during her visit to Gatsby's luxurious villa as occasional gasps of awe, oblivious admiration, and even crying in a pile of Gatsby's fancy shirts, which all reflect Daisy's money-worshipping side [11].

And in Nick and Myrtle's encounters, Myrtle's vain characteristics are also reflected in Nick's narrative with internal focalization. Throughout Tom and Myrtle's date, Nick mentioned Myrtle's change of clothes several times, her pestering Tom to buy her a puppy and complaining about the waiter not doing a good job, etc [11]. In Nick's narrative, Myrtle's several actions all reflect what Nick viewed as Myrtle's vain, pompous, and brutal snobbery.

In the narrative with zero focalization, both Mei and Jui-chueh feel guilty about each other. Mei believed that her presence interrupts Jui-chueh's marriage with Chueh-hsin and chose to maintain her distance from Chueh-hsin when he tried to approach her, such as when they met eyes, Mei actively lowered her head, and would push Chueh-hsin away when the two were alone [12]. This indicates that Mei is kind and does not want to break up another person's family by herself and does not want to suffer others when she has already been miserable due to her marriage.

Jui-chueh, on the other hand, viewed herself as the obstacle between Mei and Chueh-hsin, and even told Mei she wanted to step out of the trio's relationship [12]. After learning that Mei and Chueh-hsin were once in love, Jui-chueh did not become loathe Mei but rather grew more distressed, believing that her marriage to Chueh-hsin has harmed Mei. She first sympathetically asked Mei if she needed her help, and then revealed her heart to Mei, hoping that Mei would visit her more often, calling it a sign that Mei has "forgiven" herself [12]. After their conversation, Jui-chueh continued to care for Mei, like fixing her make-up, caring for Mei's cough, and bringing her medicine from time to time until Mei's death [12]. All these elaborate Jui-chueh's kindness and selflessness. Not only is she not jealous of Mei, but she sympathizes with Mei's tragedy and sincerely wishes she could help Mei and get along well with her.

#### C. Different Marriage Relationships and Perceptions of Marriage

In *The Great Gatsby*, neither Daisy nor Myrtle has a happy marriage, and both perpetuate the perception of money first in their marriages due to their money-worshipping characteristics; whereas in *Family*, Jui-chueh and Chueh-hsin's marriage is more harmonious, whereas Mei's own marriage is more unfortunate, and their perceptions of marriage are influenced by the traditional Chinese view of marriage.

It is evident from Nick's narrative with internal focalization that Daisy and Tom are not happily married in *The Great Gatsby*. At the beginning of the novel, Nick was invited to a small party with Daisy, Tom, and Jordan, and during the party, a ringing bell rang twice from Tom's mistress [11]. In Nick's narrative, Daisy pretended that

nothing happened and tried to maintain the illusion of a good marriage with her by quietly stopping Tom from answering the phone. These reflect Nick's belief that Daisy might be aware of the fact that the phone calls are coming from Tom's mistress, but she chose to hold back, not wanting the truth about her seemingly good but broken marriage to be revealed to the public. The breakdown of Daisy's marriage to Tom is also corroborated later in the story, such as the fact that it was the waitress from the honeymoon hotel who was in the car when Tom was in a car accident on his honeymoon, and the fact that Tom and Daisy left Chicago because of the many affairs Tom had there.

And Daisy has struggled to stay married not necessarily all because of her feelings for Tom and her children. After Daisy's reunion with Gatsby, Daisy gradually became attracted to Gatsby. However, in the ensuing argument between Gatsby and Tom, Daisy's attitude changed from favoring Gatsby to distancing herself from Gatsby and back to her marriage with Tom when she learns that Gatsby's wealth is smuggled [11]. It is also clear that Daisy's decision to stay married and abandon Gatsby again is probably due to the fact that the status and wealth represented by Tom is more attractive than Gatsby's 'ill-gotten gains'. All of these examples demonstrate that Daisy is portrayed in Nick's narrative as a money-grubbing, vain person who may not have maintained her marriage to Tom out of affection, but also out of a desire to maintain her status and wealth.

In Nick's narrative with internal focalization, it is clear that Myrtle's marital relationship is not happy and that she does not become Tom's mistress solely because of her affection for him. When first meeting Myrtle, Nick described how Myrtle ignored her husband Wilson like she saw a ghost [11]. This description shows that Nick perceives Myrtle's attitude towards her husband as contemptuous. And in the subsequent date between Tom and Myrtle in which Nick was involved, the conversation about Myrtle's husband Wilson came up, with Myrtle first responding with an expletive about whether or not she liked Wilson, followed by a reply that she married Wilson because she was tricked by him, mistaking him for a decent gentleman with learning and wealth [11]. Myrtle's contempt and disdain for her husband are also evident through Myrtle's comments about the marriage.

It is clear from the author's description of Myrtle through Nick's narrative that Myrtle belittled her husband and the marriage because of her husband's poverty. At the same time, she spent money lavishly in her relationship with Tom, and treated the waiters and other lower class people with authority. This contrast suggests that Myrtle's desire to replace Daisy may not only be for sentimental reasons, but more so for the desire to enjoy Tom's wealth and cross the class line so as to be in the upper class.

Unlike Daisy and Myrtle's marriage which intensifies the rivalry between the two, Jui-chueh and Mei's marital perceptions fosters their friendship. Both Jui-chueh and Mei's marriages are traditional, in which their parents decide who to marry and they do not have a choice. This similar marriage experience may allow them to empathize with each other. Both are also influenced by the traditional ideology of marriage, i.e. monogamy with multiple concubines, which may also enable the two to accept other's existence and live in harmony with each other.

In addition, unlike Daisy and Myrtle's emphasis on money, Jui-chueh and Mei do not value money also probably because, in their capacities as the daughter-in-law and the relative of the Kao family respectively, and the Kao family in the novel, as wealthy family, is relatively not lacking in monetary material. Secondly, unlike *The Great Gatsby* in which the author wants to convey the Jazz Age characteristics of women's money-worship and vanity, and the importance of the wealthy status of the man in the marriage relationship, *Family* is more about the author's desire to call on more young people of the time to take the path of revolution and not be bound by the feudal family through the awakening of characters such as Chueh-hui. This, in turn, gives the two pairs of female relationships different forms of expression, depending on the main theme of the work.

In summary, Daisy, Myrtle, and Jui-chueh, Mei are both female relationships resulting from a romantic relationship with the same man, but they embody very different characteristics of female roles and relationships. *The Great Gatsby* uses an internal focalization with Nick as the focal character, whereas in *Family* the internal focalization with Chueh-hui as the focal character and the narrative with zero focalization are used. In *The Great Gatsby*, only Nick's narrative exists and the author describes the relationship through Nick alone. In *Family*, the male author expresses two different attitudes through both the male and female characters, with the male characters, such as Chueh-hui and Chueh-min, believing that Jui-chueh and Mei cannot live together, whereas the female characters, such as Chin, believe that they can live together in harmony. In terms of characterization, Daisy and Myrtle are both vain, competing for Tom's status and wealth, whereas Jui-chueh and Mei are both kind, choosing to be considerate of each other and either giving in or co-existing in their relationship with Chueh-hsin. In terms of their marital relationships and perceptions, Daisy and Myrtle both place more importance on materialistic aspects, thus making their relationship more of a competitive one, whereas Jui-chueh and Mei may be more influenced by the traditional feudal ideology of monogamy and multiple concubines, not resenting each other's existence, and may even develop a relationship to get along with each other. It is also due to these factors that the two pairs of women's relationships are ultimately presented very differently.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The difference between the two female relationships, Daisy, Myrtle, and Jui-chueh, Mei, lies not only in the differences in characterization but also in the differences between Chinese and American marriages in the eyes of respective authors. Fitzgerald, influenced by his own relationship experiences and the Jazz Age, believes that in a marriage relationship, women care more about the man's money and status than their emotions. Fitzgerald's first love, Ginevra, is the prototype of Daisy, Gatsby's first love. Just as Gatsby always maintained a perfect impression of Daisy, Fitzgerald kept Ginevra out of his sight so that he could maintain her illusion of perfect innocence [13]. Daisy is not only a shadow of Ginevra but also a reflection of Fitzgerald's wife Zelda. Similar to Gatsby, who is unable to marry Daisy because of poverty, Fitzgerald was also strongly opposed by

Zelda's parents because of poverty [13]. The Jazz Age, on the other hand, was a time when working women were a new social trend and most women were still unable to earn a living on their own. This also led to marriage being the main way for women to change their wealth and social status. Therefore, in the author's eyes, women competed with each other around marriage.

In contrast, Pa Chin's view of marriage is influenced by traditional Chinese feudalism, whereas also experiencing the impact of Western culture. Pa Chin's early life experiences could be considered a blueprint for *Family*: *Family* is set in Chengdu, Pa Chin's hometown; the Kao family is full of references to Pa Chin's family, such as Pa Chin's father being the eldest son like Chueh-hui's father and Pa Chin having an older brother like Chueh-hsin, who had the responsibility of maintaining the family as the eldest grandson, and Pa Chin himself, like Chueh-hui, left Chengdu at a young age to study in eastern China and eventually broke up with his family [2]. The marital relationship that Pa Chin himself witnessed in a large and traditional family was that of monogamy and multiple concubinages, which was produced by the traditional ideology of parental order and matchmaking. In such an environment, female relationships with each other over the same man were not necessarily antagonistic, but could also be harmonious. At the same time, in this context, women may not be able to decide on their marriages, and thus they may not be able to weigh up money and emotions in a marriage. For this reason, the relationships between women in *Family* show coexistence and help, rather than competition presented in *The Great Gatsby*.

There are also shortcomings in this study. Firstly, this study only explored female relationships from the male narrator's perspective and did not examine the reliability of the narrator's narrative, ignoring whether their characters' personality will have an impact on the narrative of female relationships. Secondly, this study does not focus on whether readers' impressions of female relationships and female characters are affected by the male narrator under different sorts of focalization. Finally, the study also fails to explore the impact of female relationships on the plot advancement and different characterization from the novel itself. It is hoped that future research in this area will continue to be refined in

light of the above aspects.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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