

Nice Guys

Masculinities in The Great Gatsby and (500) Days of Summer

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a definition and analysis of the “Nice Guy,” a fairly commonplace narrative and character trope often seen in literature and especially in film. By close reading F. Scott Fitzgerald’s classic novel, *The Great Gatsby*, and Marc Webb’s 2009 film (*500 Days of Summer*), a specific Nice Guy masculinity and gender identity can be traced. Utilizing Sara Ahmed’s theory on the politics of emotion sees the trope functioning in much of the same way in the two texts separated by almost a century. Nice Guy figures are effectively lacking in a solid masculinity for themselves, receiving instead from an object of idealization the gender identity they lack.

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1. Introduction

There is a certain kind of trope and narrative that has gained too much traction in Western media in the last four decades: that of the Nice Guy. The Nice Guy is usually presented as the protagonist and he seems to possess a certain type of alternative masculinity whose ultimate goal is “love.” However, upon further examination, the character trope reveals itself to be in possession of a great deal of hegemonic and toxic masculinity’s ideals; and his obsessive fixation on love makes the Nice Guy prone to idealizing potential mates and women in general. The normalization of Nice Guy narratives is therefore highly problematic, because they only impersonate an alternative masculinity in order to continue partaking in patriarchal ideas and behaviors. In addition to this, Nice Guy narratives also hinder the development of fully fleshed female characters and signals to both genders that resorting to dubious behaviors in order to persuade someone to love you is acceptable. The concept also hinders the development of complex *male* characters, because Nice Guys’ entire persona end up only centering around the idealized object. This thesis will explore the Nice Guy narrative in two texts produced 100 years apart: F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel *The Great Gatsby*, and Marc Webb’s 2009 film *(500) Days of Summer*. These texts, although contrasting in form and perspective, present the figure of the Nice Guy in much of the same way with the characters of Jay Gatsby and Tom Hansen.

The concept of the Nice Guy has mostly been discussed online, and it is fairly well-known in some feminist communities, although it has not been the focus of many, if any, academic studies. Defining the Nice Guy trope is a continuation and extension of the tradition of many feminist blogs and online communities, such as Heartless Bitches International, geekfeminism.wikia.org and Reddit. Although these communities usually discuss real life Nice Guys, this thesis proposes a definition and analysis of an overused and worn-out narrative and character trope. Nice Guy narratives prop women up on a pedestal and presents her as the ultimate and only goal, but the Nice Guy usually loves her from afar until he can muster up the courage to pursue her. More often than not, though, the Nice Guy hides his intentions and simply hopes that the idealized object will start feeling the same. If he is rejected, the Nice Guy typically becomes very upset and can start acting aggressively, even towards the object of idealization. The Nice Guy figure is usually one that could also be classified as a “geek” or “nerd,” or considered unsuccessful by conventional standards. The

Nice Guy usually has average or below average looks, and does not have a large group of friends, generally only a couple. He is quick to resort to essentializing others, and has a sort of “all-or-nothing” ideology, which results in idealization of women and hatred of certain men.

The Nice Guy narrative is arguably an attempt at a modern and “post-masculine” fairytale; that of heroes or knights rescuing maidens. In a world where women strive for equality, and are fairly close to it, the idea that women need men to rescue them has run its course, but this type of narrative is still widely used in Western media. As Mann states, “Even cognitive scientists say that the rescue narrative is deeply culturally entrenched. Recusing women is, in fact, a necessary part of the life-story a manly man imagines for himself in a masculinist culture” (28). The similarity between fairytales involving rescue and Nice Guy narratives is striking; the villains of both are creatures or people who dare taint the innocence of virtuous women. In fairytales, these come in the form of monsters or evil kings; in Nice Guy narratives they come in the form of sexually active men. The main antagonist of Nice Guy narratives is therefore a man who possesses traditionally masculine qualities and behaviors and is direct about his sexuality. He will be referred to as “Chad” as per the manosphere. Chad threatens the Nice Guy’s claim to the object of idealization by usually being more handsome, aggressive and direct than the Nice Guy. By possessing traditionally masculine qualities, at least in the eyes of the Nice Guy, Chad becomes inherently “bad” because he signals seduction (possibly even rape!) of the object of idealization. Chad therefore becomes the main evil that must be defeated in order for the Nice Guy to have a happy ending.

1.1. Cases of Nice Guys

Examples of Nice Guy narratives are everywhere, but they are most common in films from the 1980s up until today. Some films which incorporate the Nice Guy narrative include: *Say Anything*; *Taxi Driver*; *Life is Beautiful*; *The Mask*; *Chasing Amy*; *Disturbia*; *Carnal Knowledge*; *Pretty in Pink*; *Bedazzled*; *Dumb and Dumber*; and *Zombieland*. These are just a few examples of the plethora of Nice Guy narratives that are out there, but they nevertheless illustrate the range and extent of the trope. The examples listed are all either blockbusters or critically acclaimed films, and they represent different genres, although with a predominance of romantic comedies. This is also telling for the narrative; it usually emerges within the romantic comedy genre, which is known for “happy endings,” which typically works out well

for the Nice Guy figure. This is of course problematic, because Nice Guys are not actually that nice. Consider the 1986 classic *Pretty in Pink*; Molly Ringwald's character's best friend, "Duckie," is in love with her but cannot muster up the courage to tell her. When he finally does ask her out, it is at an inappropriate time because she is in fact waiting for Blane, her date. Duckie then becomes upset and berates her. He does change by the end of the movie, though, understanding that he did not handle the situation correctly. In the 1994 film *Dumb and Dumber*, Jim Carry's character, Lloyd, drives across the country in order to deliver a briefcase to a woman he is in love with after seeing her once. In the critically acclaimed Italian film, *Life is Beautiful*, the main character Guido falls in love with Dora from afar and sets up "accidental" meetings in order to win her over.

Although the Nice Guy narrative is more usual in film, there are instances of it in classic literature as well. Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* arguably has a Nice Guy in Bradley Headstone, who, when rejected by the object of idealization, develops a deep hatred for Chad (Eugene Wrayburn). Another Dickens novel, *Great Expectations*, shows Nice Guy Pip who is sure that him and Estella are "meant to be," so much so that he convinces himself that his unknown benefactor is grooming him to become her husband. Other examples of the Nice Guy trope in literature includes Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*; Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*; Harold Lauder in *The Stand*; and Bernard in *Brave New World*. Although these examples all have some form of the Nice Guy narrative in common, there are still major differences in how the narrative develops; some of the characters grow out of being Nice Guys; some of the characters have happy endings and some do not; and sometimes the Nice Guy is the antagonist or is directly critiqued in the narrative. But all too often, the Nice Guy goes relatively unpunished for his behaviors.

What becomes clear when listing various Nice Guy narratives, though, is how extremely "white" the trope is. All of the examples are, without exception, of white men latching onto the idea that he somehow feels entitled to the affections and devotion of the idealized object. In this regard, especially considering the film examples, there is also a predominance of American Nice Guy narratives, which is possibly not a coincidence. Nice Guys latch onto love narratives and myths like "true love" and "soul mates" to justify their consequent behaviors towards the idealized object, which reveals an inherent entitlement in Nice Guy ideology. American exceptionalism and concepts like the "American Dream" fit well into this ideology. Nice Guy narratives display a form of white male "love extremism" that is inherently selfish and disregards women's autonomy and individuality, uncovering an ingrained entitlement and egoism. The subsequent anger Nice Guy figures usually display at

a rejection ties in nicely with Kimmel suggestion that “White men’s anger comes from the potent fusion of two sentiments: entitlement and a sense of victimization” (“Trump” 15).

1.2. Theory

When coming up with a theory on Nice Guy narratives, Sara Ahmed and her theory on the politics of emotion and Michael Kimmel’s work on American masculinities has been invaluable. By tracing and interpreting the history of American masculinities, Kimmel’s project has been crucial in understanding hegemonic masculinity and how it functions. It has allowed for a definition and analysis of the Nice Guy figure’s alternative masculinity; he does not conform to traditionally masculine or “manly” behaviors, instead he displays other, historically more “feminine,” qualities; but behind this façade of alternative masculinity lies a deeply rooted patriarchal ideology. Also, with the help of Ahmed’s theory, by tracing the male emotional displays in the texts, a pattern emerges which signify a certain type of masculinity. Although Nice Guys seemingly possess an alternative masculinity, they conform to conventional standards by not displaying an abundance of emotions. Emotional displays are often assigned to women, while men are meant to be stoic and “rational.” Arguably, the only displays of emotion that are accepted for men is anger. Traditionally, to be emotional is to be “acted upon,” or as Ahmed suggests, “To be emotional is to have one’s judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous” (3). This thought process is part of the reason why women have been and still are viewed as emotional, and thereby passive, submissive, and illogical. Nice Guys, in spite of seemingly possessing a more feminine or alternative masculinity, have difficulty displaying emotions. As a matter of fact, there is reason to believe they actually have *fewer* displays of emotion than male characters possessing more of hegemonic masculinity’s ideals. Nice Guys, more so than other male character tropes, have a tendency to hide and conceal parts of themselves or their intentions, and this tendency is also reflected in their emotional displays, or lack thereof.

When they first do have emotional displays, Nice Guys most commonly display anger and shame. Ahmed’s theory argues that emotion is not a reactive and irrational aspect of human existence; it is instead a process that involves thoughts and perceptions. As Ahmed suggests, “whether something is beneficial or harmful involves thought and evaluation, at the same time that it is ‘felt’ by the body. The process of attributing an object as being or not being beneficial or harmful, which may become translated into good or bad, clearly involves reading the contact we have with objects in a certain way” (6). Nice Guys display anger when

the object of idealization is or has the potential to be taken away from him, and the anger is usually directed at Chad. Thus, when a Nice Guy becomes angry at Chad for “stealing” the object of idealization, it reveals a sexist ideology which views women as objects to be “taken” or “had” at all. As Ahmed observes, emotions are always “about” something: “The ‘aboutness’ of emotions means they involve a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world” (7). Nice Guys are not angry without reason; they perceive Chad to be the result of their anger, when in reality, Nice Guy’s anger springs out of their own entitlement when they are not granted the object of idealization. They place their anger on Chad in order to hold onto and justify their sexist and entitled ideology. As Ahmed notes, “If emotions are shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by objects, then emotions are not simply ‘in’ the subject or object. This does not mean that emotions are not read as being ‘resident’ in subject objects” (6).

Besides anger, the other emotion that is often connected to the Nice Guy is shame. According to Ahmed’s theory, shame is a painful emotion that “is bound up with how the self feels about itself, a self-feeling that is felt by and on the body” (103). Therefore, when we feel shame, we feel exposed because someone has witnessed a bad thing we have done. This makes the subject “turn away from the other and towards itself” (Ahmed 103). The Nice Guy is notoriously lonely and somewhat isolated. He has turned away from many others, perhaps out of shame, because he does not feel as though he is good enough for the object of idealization. Ahmed continues, “The subject, in turning away from another and back into himself, is consumed by a feeling of badness that cannot simply be given away or attributed to another” (104). Where the Nice Guy lays his anger on Chad, his shame is attributed to himself, and this actually makes him attempt to remove that shame by improving himself in the ways he considers necessary in order to be good enough for the object of idealization.

By tracing the displays of emotion and comparing Nice Guy masculinity with dominant forms of masculinity in *The Great Gatsby* and *(500) Days of Summer*, a spectrum of masculinity emerges; where Nice Guy masculinity fluctuates on a spectrum of “manliness” where in some instances they seem to reject hegemonic masculinities, while in other instances they welcome or accept traditional masculine qualities or behaviors. This is what makes the character trope so dangerous; they seem to promote a feminist rendering of a male character, but they are in actuality just as threatening, if not more, than the typical Chad character. Nice Guys hide and put on a mask to get what they want, while Chad is explicit in his wishes. With Nice Guys, you never know what you are going to get, and this is reflected in the many Nice Guy narratives with their different outcomes. Some Nice Guys end up

doing unquestionably and unambiguously immoral things, which are neither punished in the plot nor criticized by the narrative. By looking at the masculinities in *The Great Gatsby* and *(500) Days of Summer*, we come to the conclusion that Nice Guy narratives have effectively remained unchanged for a century. *The Great Gatsby* as a literary classic provides the ultimate Nice Guy in Jay Gatsby, who idealizes Daisy to the point of not being able to perceive any other thing; and makes it his life mission to be good enough to acquire her. *(500) Days of Summer* subverts the trope in many ways by highlighting the ridiculousness of its main character Tom's idealization, which makes him blind to all the negative aspects of his relationship with Summer. Although they meet different fates in different centuries, both Jay Gatsby and Tom Hansen prove to possess the same kind of Nice Guy masculinity.

2. The Nice Gatsby

This chapter will, by close reading, outline the ways in which *The Great Gatsby* and the titular character, along with the other main characters, perpetuate the Nice Guy trope. It will therefore mostly be a character study, but it will also look at the implications of Fitzgerald's narrative by its treatment of its main characters. *The Great Gatsby* has been read and analyzed by countless critics since its publication, but most research has been focused on the detrimental effects of the American Dream and the social discrepancy between old and new money in early twentieth century America. There has never been a critical study of Jay Gatsby as a Nice Guy, and although Gatsby is by no means a universally beloved character, critics have been in dispute on whether he is to be read as a hero or a villain. As Zeven and Dorst remark, "It is easy to see why some may regard Gatsby as a wonderful romantic living the American Dream. Yet one could also argue that Gatsby is more in love with what Daisy represents, i.e., the world of wealthy socialites that she inhabits, than with Daisy as a person" (2). Fitzgerald's own musings about his writing at the time of *The Great Gatsby*'s conception further complicates how the character of Gatsby has been received. According to Forter, Fitzgerald "combines economic self-making with lyrical expressivity, ruthless business sense with romantic responsiveness, because he is an expression of Fitzgerald's effort to preserve a residual 'softness' toward which modernity and the cult of virility had rendered him deeply ambivalent" (146). "Softness" can, of course, be a positive trait in male characters, but in the case of Gatsby, he ends up being "too soft"; that is, he fails to cultivate a personality of his own, too scared to do anything "wrong" or "out of the way," and is blind to the nuances existent in the people around him. When identifying Jay Gatsby as a Nice Guy, it is crucial that we look at the treatment of other characters as well, and in comparing Gatsby's Nice Guy masculinity with Tom and Nick's respective masculinities, we find three opposing masculinities and gender identities. These gender identities are what decides the characters' behaviors and ultimate fates.

2.1. Gatsby

In the novel, and in standard Nice Guy fashion, Jay Gatsby is early characterized as an outsider and a lone wolf; he does not seem to have a lot of friends, and this is confirmed by Nick in the end of the novel when he scrambles in an attempt to have people show up to the funeral, remarking "They were hard to find" (Fitzgerald 160). The multiple portrayals of Gatsby literally standing alone further implies his lack of friends, especially at the party

where Nick observes “no one swooned backward on Gatsby, and no French bob touched Gatsby’s shoulder, and no singing quartets were formed with Gatsby’s head for one link” (51). Not only is Gatsby effectively friendless, but he is also date-less; strange when considering Nick’s remarks on both his youth and good looks (not to mention his wealth). Although Gatsby probably would not want to date anyone but Daisy, he should still be getting other offers, but it does not seem as though he does. Either Gatsby is remarkably successful in intentionally keeping other women away, or other women keep away naturally because Gatsby is not the catch Nick thinks he is.

If we were to ask Nick what kind of man Gatsby is, he would perhaps suggest him as an eccentric loner who, despite his great wealth, has stayed polite, humble, and kind. When Nick overhears Gatsby with a reporter investigating Gatsby’s questionable business deals, Gatsby remains polite as ever (94). But even Nick cannot deny that Gatsby has socially awkward tendencies, and at times he even comes off as a bit of a creep. His formal way of speech just misses being absurd, and this is perhaps due to his wealth; while Myrtle speaks in a similar fashion, she is not received by Nick in the same way. Gatsby seems more believable than Myrtle because he is not looking to “impress” anyone (but Daisy), he speaks and acts the way he does because he believes it to be “right” or “correct.” Gatsby is still putting on a show, but for other reasons and with different intentions than Myrtle. Gatsby’s way of speaking and acting is not received well by everybody, however, and it shows that he does not have the same natural social skills as for example Tom or Jordan. Even though Gatsby is careful to behave politely and kindly, this is a result of his fear to do anything “wrong,” and therefore he goes to great lengths to avoid getting on anyone’s bad side and that his reputation remains spotless. This includes excusing “himself with a small bow that included each of us in turn” (49), an action which reveals Gatsby’s urge to always do the “correct” thing, even though it comes off as needless and redundant, uncovering his inherent social awkwardness.

This awkwardness is especially clear in his first meeting with Daisy; Nick remarks that Gatsby’s behavior “wasn’t a bit funny” and that “a pause” in their conversation “endured horribly” (83). His need for reassurance and acceptance – an indication of low self-esteem – is also suggested at when he asks Nick, “what’s your opinion of me, anyhow?” (63) before assuring him that he is “the real deal.” Nick relates Gatsby to “one of those intricate machines” (8), and Forter has noticed that in this comparison there is a suggestion of “a mechanical rigor and precision by which Gatsby controls what he takes in, recording it accurately as an *external* force before attempting to capitalize on it in the name of his self-

making” (151). Everything Gatsby does has meticulous thought behind it; an incentive to do whatever it takes to get what he wants. Gatsby has one goal and one goal only, to the detriment of his personality, which makes him almost like a machine-like robot without any feeling or emotion beyond his obsession with Daisy.

But more sinister than this, we witness Gatsby multiple times engaging in behavior that could more or less be classified as stalking. The first time Nick sees Gatsby is at night and standing outside “fifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbour’s mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars” (25). Gatsby’s figure is seen by Nick only as “a shadow” – unilluminated and anonymous – a fitting picture of Gatsby as a character throughout the novel, and a convenient camouflage for a potential stalker. He is standing alone, and Nick concludes that he “was content to be alone” (25). When Daisy and Gatsby reunite for the first time in five years, he shows her a collection of clippings he has saved of her; also typical stalker behavior. Gatsby’s stalker inclinations become readily apparent the night of Myrtle’s murder, when he feels the need to stand watch over Daisy’s house in order to “protect” and ensure her safety (and reminiscent of the tales of knights in shining armor). Gatsby appears suddenly from “between two bushes,” and even Nick wonders at the impression it gives and remarks how “that seemed a despicable occupation. For all I knew he was going to rob the house in a moment; I wouldn’t have been surprised to see sinister faces, the faces of ‘Wolfshiem’s people’, behind him in the dark shrubbery” (136). Even Nick, who often times idealizes Gatsby and excuses his flaws and faults, notices the criminal overtones to his lurking in the bushes. Many stalkers do not “know” they are actually stalking someone; in their view they are protecting or showing their love to the stalkee (Kelly 15). This does not make it any more justifiable or less criminal; it simply reveals the stalker’s delusion. Nice Guys also do not typically recognize when their behavior is inappropriate, because they believe they have a good reason for it. In addition, in Nice Guy narratives where the Nice Guy is to be considered the protagonist, his antics are usually glossed over, and realistic outrage from other characters is often absent. Nick is horrified at first, but before long he is again caught in Gatsby’s web and glosses over what his stalking implies about his character.

Gatsby’s need to “control the narrative” by always doing the “right” thing and both literally and figuratively hiding by keeping his background relatively unknown, is connected to his shame. Gatsby is ashamed of his humble background because he knows it is not good enough for Daisy. He does everything in his power to be rid of his shame; by going into some shady business and acquiring as much wealth as he can, to then literally move into Daisy’s

space when his shame has decreased (when he has “enough” money for Daisy). According to Ahmed, shame “also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject to turn away from the other and towards itself” (103). Gatsby hides quite a bit, and his journey towards wealth is more or less kept a secret, and even at his own parties he is a hard man to find. It is only when Daisy comes back into the picture that we see Gatsby come out of his hiding, as he goes around and introduces her (and effectively himself) to other guests. Gatsby’s shame is therefore directly tied into his idea of his own masculinity; he is in fact ashamed of his own masculinity, or lack thereof. But Daisy is the object that grants him his masculinity; without her he lacks a masculinity of his own and is ashamed and in hiding. Perhaps if Gatsby had never met Daisy, he would have developed a masculinity for himself, but because he spends his most formative years obsessing over her, she becomes directly responsible for cultivating his masculinity. Gatsby is ashamed when he does not have Daisy (hence his reprehension to talk about his past without her), but he is secure and happy when he does (his masculinity is safe and intact).

2.2. Daisy

The most interesting and revealing Nice Guy tendencies in Gatsby are displayed in his thoughts on and actions towards his idealized object: Daisy. He is overly “romantic”; so much so that it becomes idealization: as Nick remarks in the opening pages, Gatsby has “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again” (8). Gatsby is also a master complainer. His attempts to gain sympathy for his heartbreak borders on pathetic at times, for example with Nick when he claims he has been “trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago” (64). Gatsby spends years accumulating wealth because he believes it will make Daisy his. As Jordan Baker remarks, “it wasn’t a coincidence at all” (76) that Gatsby finds himself across the bay from Daisy’s house. Everything Gatsby does is part of a bigger scheme to win Daisy’s heart. His extravagant parties are thrown only in the hopes of Daisy showing up one night.

When Daisy and Gatsby finally do reunite, he cannot concentrate on anything but Daisy – he literally fixates on her – and at one point he hovers over her and “from this position his distraught eyes stared down at Daisy” (84). The way in which Gatsby obsesses over Daisy is anything but healthy, and Gatsby is acting as awkward as can be. His awkwardness is intensified when in contact with Daisy, and while she is composed and

matter of fact in her speech, Gatsby reveals himself easily. He blurts out ““Five years next November”” (84) as if he has been literally counting the days and not thinking of anything else since then, and it makes both Daisy and Nick uncomfortable. The utterly cringeworthy encounter is almost hard to believe, seeing that Gatsby “knew women early” (95), and as Hays asks, how could he “be so intimidated by Daisy, especially since he’s already slept with her? Could someone so ruthless in both the army and business be so timid in dating?” (318). This is a question simply answered by the fact that Gatsby is the typical Nice Guy who becomes obsessed with a woman he hardly knows because he believes himself to be special without any of the self-confidence that would typically accompany such a belief. Or, as Hays puts it, “What constrains Gatsby is his extreme romanticism, his belief in the American myth that one, through hard work, can achieve anything” (319). And the Nice Guy trope is a typically American one; one to easily be confused with or *fused with* the idea of the American Dream. The idea that one can be anyone and become anything is perhaps the basis that Nice Guy narratives spring out of. Nothing is too good for him, and if he only works hard enough, his wildest dreams will come true. By believing himself to be in possession of an inherent entitlement to happiness, as many Americans in general do, the Nice Guy props the idealized object up as the ultimate goal (the Dream), and he will work hard and do whatever necessary in order to get it (which may or may not include acts such as stalking). It is not a coincidence that the ultimate goal is also the Dream; it is essentially a fantasy, and completely unobtainable. Morgan touches upon something of the same when she argues that Daisy “On the human level ... scarcely exists for Gatsby (or Tom, or even Nick), and much of the pathos of the novel stems from the inability of these characters to experience one another as anything but dream figures” (172). The myth of the American Dream remains alive and well in Nice Guy narratives.

Another interesting inclination which the Nice Guy narratives suffer from is the tendency of the Nice Guy to “white knight” his object of love. That is, to protect her in the assumption that she cannot protect herself and needs a man to do this. Gatsby does this to Daisy from the moment he tells Tom to “let her alone” (121) until he dies keeping her secret. The dating process of Gatsby and Daisy has, interestingly enough, been compared to the concept of courtly love from medieval times and literature. Morgan suggests that Gatsby displays all the typical tendencies of courtly love stories, remarking “he shows every sign of the self-doubting, but ever-hopeful lover. He dresses for the rendezvous in a seeming semblance of shining armor” and “fusses so over the preparations – all must be right for his love – that Nick begins to doubt his sanity” (167). Thornton also recognizes the white-knight

tendencies in Gatsby, but, moreover, she also acknowledges his Nice Guy tendencies (without using the exact term) in suggesting: “He is, in fact, so determined in his hunt and capture that he is not beneath criminal acts to lure his prey. Gatsby seems quite capable of divorcing his “gorgeous” imagination from his daily morality” (461). Literally describing Gatsby as a hunter catching his prey, Thornton pokes at the possibility of Gatsby’s “love” being nothing other than an obsessive game in which there are no winners.

After Daisy and Gatsby have warmed up a bit towards one another, the change Nick sees in Gatsby is profound and all-consuming: “He literally glowed; without a word or a gesture of exultation a new well-being radiated from him and filled the little room” (86). This further exemplifies the idea that Gatsby obtains a secure masculinity from Daisy. He is completely changed and “literally glowing” from being close to Daisy, and this is not simply from happiness or love; it is Gatsby finally being comfortable and assured *as a man*. Without Daisy, Gatsby is hardly even a person. When Nick first meets Gatsby, he muses: “I would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York” (50), and that he has “little to say” (63). In other words, Gatsby could be anyone; nothing about his person tells you anything specific *or* general about him, and he does not disclose much information either. The only personal aspect of Gatsby that is revealed is his love for Daisy, and when she finally comes back into his life, he slowly begins to reveal things to Nick about his background (letting go of his shame) and becomes more direct and aggressive (declaring to Tom his love for Daisy). Daisy effectively grants Gatsby his masculinity, and this is why he “has to die” in the end; without Daisy, he is not a man.

2.3. Tom

Although Daisy and Gatsby’s treatment of her provides more than enough evidence for categorizing Gatsby as the roaring twenties’ ultimate Nice Guy, this becomes even further cemented when we look to the other character needed in order to truly label Gatsby as a Nice Guy: Tom Buchanan. Tom Buchanan is the quintessential Chad; he is an aggressively masculine jock who takes his girl for granted. Tom is the epitome of the Nice Guy antagonist – the opposite of Gatsby. Although Tom does possess many Chad qualities, several critics have pointed out the fact that Gatsby wears a mask while Tom does not. Batchelar suggests that Gatsby’s mask “enables him to get closer to his dream, while at other junctures it covers his fraudulent life and dubious focus on wealth. In contrast to Gatsby, Tom Buchanan wears

no mask. As a result, he seems a more “real” figure” but that “Gatsby’s lies all seem to have meaning, while Tom’s lies just make him sinister” (123). But if we look a little closer at Gatsby’s lies and manipulation, he emerges as a much more cunning and scheming character than the open book that is Tom. Gatsby hides who he really is while also hiding his true intentions. He does not really give much away when he talks to people, only opens up a little to Nick and Jordan, but this is only because he wants something in return. Tom, on the other hand, seems content with who he is and does not deem it necessary to be overly polite or kind in order to keep his reputation clean or as a strategy to get what he wants. Although Nick as the narrator tries his hardest to paint Tom as a Chad, if we compare Tom and Gatsby, we find that Tom is the most authentic character, while Gatsby is a fraud (in every way).

Throughout the novel, Gatsby has trouble acting normally around Tom. The first time they meet, Gatsby’s face has “a strained, unfamiliar look of embarrassment” (72), and he literally flees the scene. The second time they are together Gatsby is “profoundly affected by the fact that Tom was there” (98). Gatsby’s hatred of Tom is contingent on his love for Daisy and vice versa; or, in other words, for Gatsby’s love of Daisy to be at all possible, hating Tom is a necessary part of this love. And as Ahmed observes, for hatred to be conserved or continuing, the subject is dependent on the presence and maintaining of the object of hate. Therefore, the Nice Guy subject must have a relationship or closeness to Chad to be able to sustain his hatred for him. The manner in which Nice Guys love makes hating Chad a necessary part of this love, so in this way Gatsby *needs* Tom Buchanan in order to continue his fixation on Daisy. This is demonstrated in Tom and Gatsby’s second meeting where “Moved by an irresistible impulse, Gatsby turned to Tom” (98), and when, subsequently, Gatsby urges Tom (and Mr. Sloane and the woman) to stay: “He had control of himself now, and he wanted to see more of Tom” (99). Tom has to be kept close in order to remain as the hated object and Daisy to remain the idealized object. This sheds new light on the passage “It excited him, too, that many men had already loved Daisy – it increased her value in his eyes” (141). For Gatsby to love Daisy the way he does, the ghosts of former lovers – all of them Chads of course – must be kept close in mind, because it will make Daisy all the more lovable because there are so many enemies to hate.

This is also typical of Nice Guy narratives; when fixating on the idealized object, they also fixate on its potential threats. According to Ahmed, this is also typical of racist hate narratives, which often take the form of threats to the subject; that is, the subject is “endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject” (43). This is

why hate narratives work; by eliciting fear in the subject, which is then transformed into hatred of an object. Certainly, this is true for Gatsby, although, technically, he has already been replaced. By hating Tom, Gatsby is effectively announcing his love for what is threatened: Daisy and his relationship with her. What is more interesting is the uncanny parallels between racist hate and Nice Guy hate; seeing as most Nice Guy narratives are also *white* narratives, it is not a coincidence that they opt to similar mindsets when considering objects they deem as threats. Gatsby's behavior towards Tom changes through the course of the narrative. As exemplified above, Gatsby first flees from an encounter with Tom, but when Daisy is closer and Gatsby feels more secure in his masculinity, he is also more secure with Tom. He wants to see more of Tom because his newfound masculinity makes him able to manage an encounter. Gatsby begins to show other, more "manly," sides to him when he announces to Tom that "I know your wife," which Nick describes him doing "almost aggressively" (99). When both Daisy and Tom show up to Gatsby's party, Tom objects to being introduced as "the polo player"; "But evidently the sound of it pleased Gatsby for Tom remained 'the polo player' for the rest of the evening" (101). Gatsby tries to reduce Tom to the mindless jock he believes him to be by introducing him as such, but he is only brave enough to do this after Daisy, and thereby his masculinity, is secure.

It is especially important to Gatsby that Daisy tells Tom she *never* loved him (105), to really knock him down and hit him where it hurts. It is not necessary for Daisy to relay this to Tom in order for them to get divorced; she can leave him without using those exact words. But for Gatsby it is paramount that Tom gets what he "deserves" which is the knowledge that he never had Daisy, and it was Gatsby all along. The ultimate "win" for Gatsby is not simply to marry Daisy; it is to annihilate Tom in the process. This reveals the unhealthy and perverted nature of Gatsby's "love" for Daisy, because it comes with strings attached that Daisy will never be able to fulfill. In Gatsby's low self-esteem and lack in confidence, Daisy will never be able to completely reassure him of her love for him, because what Gatsby is asking is impossible. Tom is the one who really exposes Gatsby for the fraud he is. Gatsby may be able to manipulate Daisy, but Tom sees his true colors. This is the main reason for why Tom is so "bad"; he represents a threat to Gatsby in more ways than one: he threatens to make Daisy unavailable to Gatsby by physically taking her away, but he also threatens to unmask Gatsby. Tom recognizes Gatsby's lack of a personal masculinity, and this is why he does not view him as a threat and why he suggests Daisy ride with him home. For Tom to no longer be a threat to Gatsby, Daisy has to completely detach herself and revoke her love for him so that Gatsby's masculinity will be properly cemented, but this is impossible.

2.4. Nick

The ways in which Nick idealizes Gatsby certainly makes his narration open for doubt in regard to its accuracy or authenticity. Many critics have noted Nick as the ultimate unreliable narrator, because of the inconsistencies with what he *says* opposed to what he *does* (Kerr 418; Zeven & Dorst 4). Nick is also not simply an observer of the story; he is also a participant. As Tanner suggests, “Nick has a lot – a *lot* – invested in Gatsby and in his own written attempts at the retrieval and, indeed, elegiac celebration of the man” (xx). This makes Nick’s narration worthy of scrutiny, because Nick is unquestionably painting himself and those he deems fit in the most positive light. This is why it is important to examine Nick as a Nice Guy in his own right. Even though Nick claims to not judge people, this is exactly what he does throughout the novel. He strangely idealizes Gatsby for no clear reason, and Gatsby can essentially do no wrong in Nick’s eyes. Nick therefore essentializes those around him also, and in true Nice Guy fashion. It is precisely Nick who paints Tom as a Chad with no redeeming qualities; Tom is an extremely one-dimensional character whom Nick is particularly harsh on in the narrative. Tanner suggests that there is “a strong tendency on Nick’s part to identify with Gatsby as well as to make him a hero” (xxii), and he even refers to “Nick Gatsby” (xxxv). Gatsby perceives Tom as a Chad, and Nick does the same even though he has no real skin in the game.

There are a multitude of instances where Gatsby is clearly taking advantage of and manipulating Nick throughout the novel. The first time Nick attends one of Gatsby’s parties, he is one of the last to leave, and when saying goodbye, “He smiled – and suddenly there seemed to be a pleasant significance in having been among the last to go, *as if he had desired it all the time*” (54; emphasis added). Gatsby wishes to get close to Nick in order to execute his plan of finally being reunited with Daisy; Gatsby needs Nick at the beginning of the novel but it soon becomes clear that he does not truly care about him and only wants to become “friends” so he can get what he wants. And Gatsby himself does not ask Nick if he will arrange a meeting between Daisy and himself but sends Jordan on this mission instead. Gatsby knows Nick likes Jordan and would perhaps be more inclined to agree if she is the one that asks. Gatsby “wants her to see his house” so it is only convenient since Nick lives “right next door” (77). In this regard, it would not be surprising if Gatsby had something to do with Nick moving in next door in the first place, though there is no evidence of this in the novel. But whenever Gatsby offers his friendship to Nick, it is because he wishes for something in return: he really tries to reel the deal in when he offers Nick a “job” of some

sort. Gatsby is literally offering Nick money to be his “friend” and help him get closer to Daisy. Thankfully, Nick declines. When Nick chaperones Daisy and Gatsby’s first date, he remarks “They had forgotten me, but Daisy glanced up and held out her hand; Gatsby didn’t know me now at all” (93), which reveals Gatsby’s general indifference to Nick after he has gotten what he wants from him. After this meeting, Nick does not hear from Gatsby “For several weeks” (98) and when he finally does call, it is at “Daisy’s request” (109). In spite of this, Nick still likes and respects Gatsby, signaling his belief in a certain kind of shared identity.

The true feelings of Gatsby become even more clear if looked at in context with Ahmed’s theory when she argues that “Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects” (8). Daisy elicits “good feelings” and a wish of “towardness” for Gatsby, while Tom elicits “bad feelings” and a wish of “awayness” because he threatens Gatsby’s good feelings. But Gatsby moves towards Nick only *until* he is close enough towards Daisy; he then moves away. Interestingly, Gatsby also tries to impossibly move away from Tom, but only does this also *until* Daisy is close enough; he then moves towards Tom. Gatsby’s initial feelings of towardness to Nick and awayness from Tom is effectively reversed by the end of the novel because they are wholly contingent on Gatsby’s needs in the moment. When Daisy is close, Gatsby does not need Nick, but to get Daisy even closer he has to confront Tom. In addition to this, Daisy being near means that Gatsby’s own self-esteem and impression of himself ascends as his masculinity becomes assured, and he is able to face the threat to his good feelings more easily.

Like other Nice Guys, Nick also conceals or hides who he really is. He claims he is “full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires” (59), and Kerr suggests that “What Nick does publicly (writes responsible letters to his girlfriend) does not match what he feels privately” (418). Nick also considers himself superior to others, and especially other men; he judges Tom throughout the narrative; he is condescending to Mr. Wilson; and his thoughts on Mr. Wolfshiem are less than favorable. Kerr argues that ““Nick is thoroughly upper middle class – economically, socially, intellectually, psychologically – but, like other members of his family, he thinks of himself as somewhat and somehow beyond the confines of his social rank” (410). Nick is careful to not judge anyone to their face though, because for him it is more important to be polite not upset anyone or anything – just like Gatsby. Nick’s perception that he is superior to others aligns with other Nice Guy narratives, even though he has no clear reason as to feeling this way. Nick borders on an everyman; only showing somewhat of a personality when displaying his anxiousness at messes or potential “immoral”

situations. As Tanner suggests, “When Nick is not enchanted, he is likely to be starting to feel disgusted. For all the seeming reasonableness and the proffered impartiality of his tone, his Gatsby book is generated by a tendency to move between these extremes” (xxiv). What Nick perceives as “immoral” is also highly questionable; while having no problem with Gatsby and Daisy’s relationship, he condemns Tom and Myrtle for theirs, showing an impressive display of compartmentalization.

In conclusion, Nick is a bit of a Nice Guy in his own right, but instead of the typical woman being the object of idealization, Nick instead idealizes a man. He does not attempt to act on any possible urges, though, and does not want Gatsby “for himself” as a way to boost his masculinity. Nick is more concerned with Gatsby and Daisy getting together and this is especially clear in the way in views Tom as a threat. Nick therefore displays an alternative form of masculinity from the typical Nice Guy, although he does share many similar qualities, he cannot be said to truly be a Nice Guy simply because he identifies with one. If Nick were a Nice Guy, he would hate Daisy, but he instead imitates Gatsby’s own idealization of her throughout the narrative.

2.5. Nice Guy and Other Masculinities

Ideas of masculinity really became a hot topic in the early 1900s, and according to Kerr, Fitzgerald was personally “worried that other men might consider him a ‘fairy’” (417). This certainly had consequences for Fitzgerald and the representations of masculinity in his most famous novel. Kimmel contends that there was “a powerful current of malaise and resentment felt by turn-of-the-century American men, railing against what they perceived as the feminization of American culture” (*Manhood* 87). This no doubt affected Fitzgerald, and reviews of his two previous novels suggested that his writing was overly feminine, and Kerr argues that “Fitzgerald’s goals for his third novel, then, took shape in the context of a discourse in which ideas about the appropriate kind and degree of emotion in art were inflected with concerns about manly detachment, discipline, and craftsmanship” (409). The degree of sentimentality in Fitzgerald’s writing was an especially big concern and given the overarching storyline of *The Great Gatsby* – Gatsby’s unending love for Daisy – it is no wonder that, according to Tanner, Fitzgerald chose to significantly reduce “the amount of direct speech given to Gatsby” (xxi) from the draft to the final product.

Even though Fitzgerald was concerned with not appearing too feminine, the contrasting masculinities in *The Great Gatsby* and the narrator’s apparent disdain for “manly”

masculinity; not to mention the abundance of critics who believe Nick to be gay; makes the novel's ideas of masculinity and gender especially worthy of analysis in relation to the Nice Guy trope. Nice Guy masculinities are inherently ambiguous, because they seem to fluctuate on a spectrum of "manliness" and "femininity/queerness," without a clear logic or reasoning. They seemingly reject traditional or dominant forms of masculinity, while also welcoming and accepting the patriarchal ideas that these masculinities spring out of. Nice Guys therefore exhibit a type of masculinity and gender identity that stands on the edge of hegemonic masculinity but without threatening it whatsoever; essentially being complicit in hegemonic masculinity. This is true for Gatsby also, who exudes a type of refined gentlemanly masculinity – a stark contrast to 1920s America's masculine ideals – while simultaneously being a conniving businessman. Therefore, when discussing Nice Guy masculinities, it is necessary to compare them to the dominating form of masculinity, because, as Kimmel suggests, "all American men must also contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which we all measure ourselves" (*Manhood* 5). The three main male characters, Gatsby, Tom and Nick, find themselves placed on a spectrum of masculinities; with Nick, and Tom in particular, being very consistent in the type of masculinities they display, while Gatsby fluctuates between alternative and hegemonic masculinities.

Kimmel suggests that "By the turn of the century, a massive, nationwide health and athletics craze was in full swing as men compulsively attempted to develop manly physiques as a way of demonstrating that they possessed the interior virtues of manhood" (*Manhood* 89). Of course, Tom's "cruel body" (12) is an example of this trend, and the way Nick describes it (his physical descriptions of Tom overshadow the physical descriptions of any other character), we can assume that Nick does not possess the same qualities. In fact, Nick's descriptions of Tom's body are almost entirely negative in nature, even though they adhere to contemporary masculine ideals. Tom is firmly placed on the far end of the spectrum of masculinities, while Nick is on the other. Gatsby falls somewhere in the middle; not entirely preoccupied with the appearance of his body, but still in good physical condition. Nick describes him fittingly as "an elegant young rough-neck" (49), relaying to the reader that Gatsby is a man who possesses some of hegemonic masculinity's ideals (rough-neck) while rejecting others (elegant).

According to Kimmel, in the beginning of the twentieth century, "in the culture of consumption, identity was based less on what one did and who one was and more upon how one appeared and lived" (*Manhood* 88). This idea speaks to Tom's situation in particular, and

again shows how he follows the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. Tom is extremely concerned with appearances and goes to great lengths to prove his masculinity every chance he gets. Nick, on the other hand, does not care about appearances and through the narrative he chastises Tom for this trait in particular. Gatsby falls somewhere in the middle; he does not care *for himself* about appearances, but he is in Daisy's world, and (to him) the only way he will be able to win her back is by displaying his wealth. The extravagant parties are for appearance; Gatsby himself does not necessarily enjoy them. But the parties have another function, which is to draw Daisy closer. In this way, Gatsby cares about appearances *insofar* that it impresses and attracts Daisy. In turn-of-the-century America, drinking alcohol was also a sign of manliness and masculinity (Kimmel *Manhood* 92-93). As we know, Tom drinks and Gatsby does not, in another example of their differing masculinities. Nick does not usually drink either, so Gatsby aligns himself more closely to Nick in this regard. But Gatsby's adherence to hegemonic masculinity comes through when for example Gatsby's father, Mr. Gatz, shows Nick an old copy of *Hopalong Cassidy*, a cowboy narrative, that Gatsby read as a boy. Kimmel contends that "nowhere could American men find a better example of rugged outdoor masculinity than out west with the cowboy, that noble denizen of the untamed frontier" (*Manhood* 109). We can now see a pattern starting to emerge, where Nick consistently falls on one side of the masculinity spectrum and Tom on the other, while Gatsby's masculinity is not as clear cut, although it appears to be more similar to Nick's alternative masculinity.

The utterly American masculine ideal of the Self-Made Man was obviously still very relevant at the time of Gatsby's conception, but it had gradually changed its meaning from its coinage to the beginning of the twentieth century. The original idea of the Self-Made Man was someone with humble beginnings who found success in his work life, but because of the rise of capitalism by the beginning of the twentieth century, Kimmel argues, "His working life became too precarious to provide a firm footing, so the Self-Made Man turned to leisure activities, like sports, to give his manhood the boost he needed and strove to develop some all-male preserves where he could both be alone with other men and teach his sons to become Self-Made Men themselves" (*Manhood* 9-10). Gatsby is the epitome of the original Self-Made Man; born into an undistinguished family and life, he builds status and wealth for himself through hard work and dedication. But by the time Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby*, the rules for masculinity had changed slightly, and simply having a job and wealth was not enough to prove one's masculinity. While both Tom and Nick have their university clubs and Tom in particular engages in endless sporting activities; Gatsby does not appear to

have any considerable or meaningful pastimes where he engages with other men (except Nick), and he spends most of his time with “business” and Daisy. This demonstrates Tom and Gatsby’s dueling masculinities: even though he comes from “old money,” Tom represents the “new” Self-Made Man, while Gatsby represents the “old.” Nick finds himself somewhere in the middle of the two; his upper middle class and university background has made him more prone to homosociality, but he is not concerned with appearing “manly” by engaging in sports and other activities.

Concerning homosociality, Kimmel states that “From the early nineteenth century until the present day, much of men’s relentless effort to prove their manhood contains this core element of homosociality” (*Manhood* 7). All three of the main male characters engage in homosociality, but the most considerable homosocial relationship is that between Gatsby and Nick. Although Nick has a relationship with Tom, in the narrative he scolds him for his brutality and sexual promiscuity. It is interesting that the two characters who display more alternative forms of masculinity have such a close relationship with each other; one would think that Fitzgerald would not want to even hint at the potential for queerness. But this does become even more of a reason to suggest that Nick is in fact gay, especially when we consider that: he enjoys socializing and spending time with women in non-sexual ways (unlike Tom); he is not engaged in “policing” other men’s masculinity (unlike Tom); and he does not care to engage in “manly” behaviors such as sports (also, unlike Tom). The only truly heteronormative behavior Nick engages in is homosociality, and when we put it like this, it begins to look more like homosexuality. Notwithstanding Nick’s idealization of Gatsby and his encounter with Mr. McKee; by simply looking at how consistent Nick’s alternative masculinity is, we can plausibly come to the conclusion that he is a queer character. When propped up against Tom and his excessive straightness, Nick gives the utmost impression of queerness.

Nick and Gatsby’s camaraderie displays what Kimmel would call “Masculinity defined through homosocial interaction” (*Manhood* 8) and is typical in American masculinities. Nick feels an affinity for Gatsby because of their shared masculinities. Tom, on the other hand, is left out of a camaraderie with Nick because of his differing masculinity. One could then come to the conclusion that Gatsby’s masculinity is more “queer” like Nick’s than it is heteronormative like Tom’s. In this way, the characters could also be said to lie on a spectrum of queerness; where Nick is on the one end (most queer), and Tom on the other (least queer), with Gatsby somewhere in the middle. Gatsby is polite, respectful, and exudes a refined demeanor; qualities not traditionally associated with 1920s (or 2020s) hegemonic

masculinity. But he plays by hegemonic masculinity's rules in order to win back Daisy (by accumulating wealth), simultaneously boosting his status (going into "manly" business); and he uses manly aggression to demonstrate his masculinity (going head-to-head with Tom). By both rejecting and embracing hegemonic masculinity, Gatsby places himself firmly in the realm of Nice Guy narratives.

Although they represent different types of masculinities, none of the three main male characters show large displays of emotion. Kimmel notes that by the beginning of the twentieth century, "emotional outbursts of passion or jealousy, which had been associated with manhood in the eighteenth century, were now associated with lack of manhood; it was women, not men, who were now said to feel these emotions most acutely. Real men held their emotions in check" (*Manhood* 95). Nick does not really show any emotion; when Jordan hangs up on him, he is genuinely indifferent. Tom shows the only acceptable manly emotion of anger and aggression, while Gatsby compares more to Nick with a lack of emotional display, except in regard to Daisy. This is interesting to consider because, although emotional displays were and still are mostly reserved for women, in *The Great Gatsby* it is the "manliest" man who exhibits emotions most frequently and acutely, while the most alternative or feminine man has the least number of emotional displays. It could be argued that this points to how comfortable the different men are in their own masculinity; Tom is the most comfortable, while Nick is the least. Gatsby displays more emotion than Nick, but this only happens when he is at his most comfortable as well (with Daisy). When being secure in their masculinity, men often allow themselves more broad understandings of masculinity and what is acceptable behavior, and this seems plausible in regard to the men in *The Great Gatsby* as well.

Therefore, another interesting aspect to three main male characters' masculinity is to consider what their fears are. Tom's fear is that others will not see him as "manly": he stands with his legs far apart with clothes that accentuate his muscles; he has an interest in automobiles; and he likes to drink and have sex. Tom is in fact not too concerned with keeping Myrtle a secret, and it seems like he wants to show her off. All of these behaviors signal that Tom's most important possession is his manly masculine gender identity, and he is deathly afraid of others not recognizing it. If we are to accept the homosexuality of Nick, it is reasonable to believe that his fear is that his queerness is exposed: he generally does not drink, perhaps not to reveal himself (when he does get drunk, he follows Mr. McKee home); he arguably uses Jordan as a "beard"; and he idealizes another man. Therefore, both Nick and Tom's fears come from their masculinities somehow being "found out" or exposed by others,

while Gatsby's fear is seemingly about losing *someone else*. But I would argue that Gatsby's fear is much in the same category as Tom and Nick's, because as Ahmed suggests, the subject raises its own worth because "the 'object' stands in for the subject," or, in other words, "what one 'has' elevates what one is" (128). Gatsby measures his masculinity by if he "has" Daisy or not, and this is seen in the way his personality changes from the first time Nick meets him to the scene at the Plaza when his and Daisy's relationship is discovered. Gatsby is more assertive and aggressive when it is found out that he and Daisy are having an affair, because his confidence has increased. In other words, Gatsby measures his masculinity according to how close Daisy is; when he thinks he "has" her, he can act aggressively towards other men because he feels comfortable with his masculinity. Before he and Daisy start seeing each other again, Gatsby socializes quite a bit with Nick, but after Daisy is back in his life, their homosocial bond is useless to Gatsby because he only needs Daisy to prove his masculinity. Therefore, all three main male characters' fears boil down to feelings about their own masculinity, but their similarities end there. Though both Tom and Nick are consistent about the masculinities they exhibit; if 1920s masculinities were a spectrum, Tom would be on one end (hegemonic), while Nick would be on the other (alternative). Gatsby is found somewhere in the middle, or, more accurately, he fluctuates between the two extremes: exhibiting truly alternative masculinity in some instances while displaying extremely hegemonic masculinity in others. This is true for most, if not all, Nice Guy narratives.

2.6. Concluding statements

Nick (and presumably Fitzgerald himself), is a proponent of and identifies with an older type of masculinity which by the 1920s had gone out of fashion. Nick paints Tom as an evil brute, while Gatsby is an elegant martyr. But why does Daisy then choose Tom? And why does Gatsby die for his efforts? Nick is undoubtedly biased in his judgements, and somewhat of a Nice Guy himself. It is indeed the aggressive Tom who "wins" in the end, in either an ironic outcome or, as I would argue, an utterly just one. Gatsby's lack of a solid masculinity without Daisy makes his character destined for failure, and even more pathetic than Tom's smug and condescending masculinity. Nick's consistent but alternative masculinity is, like Tom's, kept intact throughout the narrative. Therefore, even though none of them could be said to come out unscathed, Gatsby is the only one who is really punished for his lack of a consistent and authentic masculinity. Gatsby is, in effect, without an identity at all outside of Daisy. His past before meeting her is kept hidden, only revealed by his father after his death. When Daisy

and Tom disappear out of his life, Gatsby is again without an identity and his only option is death.

In *(500) Days of Summer*, we find a similar type of Nice Guy figure in Tom Hansen, but the narrative differs from *The Great Gatsby* in that it directly subverts the trope and makes it abundantly clear to the viewer that its main character is a Nice Guy whose misconceptions about love and dating makes him the one to blame for its failure. Although the film explicitly subverts the Nice Guy trope, on closer examination, the film still perpetuates sexist stereotypes and toxic masculinity, which puts it firmly in line with other Nice Guy narratives. The next chapter will put forth a close reading of *(500) Days of Summer* and its subversions and perpetuations, while also highlighting the similarities between Tom Hansen and Jay Gatsby.

3. (500) Days of Niceness

This chapter will give a close reading of *(500) Days of Summer*, a 2009 romantic comedy directed by Marc Webb that features a non-linear narrative. In more ways than one, this film actively subverts the Nice Guy trope in a kind of warning to viewers to not be like its main character Tom (played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt). Tom is a twenty-something year old white man who lives in Los Angeles and works at a greeting card company. He is a passive hipster who has but two close friends. One day (Day 1), a twenty-something year old white woman, Summer (played by Zooey Deschanel), starts working at the office as assistant to the boss. Tom is instantly drawn to her and eventually he falls in love, and for around six months they have a casual relationship. Summer is not interested in anything serious and does not reciprocate Tom's feelings. The film's title thus refers to the number of days in which Tom is in love with Summer, and the non-linear narrative gradually reveals to the viewer the true extent of their relationship.

Before the film's narrative even begins, we see an "author's note" displayed on a black background, reading: "The following is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental." The text disappears and is thus replaced with the following: "Especially you Jenny Beckman. Bitch" (00:00:25-00:00:36). It is therefore made clear from the very beginning that the film satirizes the Nice Guy trope, relying heavily on humor to relay this. The beginning author's note reveals the absurd and pointless mindset of characters like Tom, who hold onto the resentment of being dumped by a woman, perhaps years after the fact. Tom himself is right away introduced by an unknown omniscient narrator, as a Nice Guy: "The boy, Tom Hansen of Margate, New Jersey, grew up believing that he'd never truly be happy, until the day he met *the one*" (00:01:13-00:01:21). The romantic ideas of "the one," "love at first sight," and "true love," are all familiar concepts to Nice Guy characters; but they are, as we know, myths. Already in an article from *The Science News-Letter* in 1949, it was confidently declared that "The tendency of men and women to think of themselves as passive "pawns" controlled by mysterious forces called "luck," is due, Dr. Bowman believes, to prevailing ignorance of the processes of 'falling in love,'" and that studies on human sexuality "tend to explode the romantic illusion that there is a single "soul mate" to whom one is attracted by a cosmic affinity that is powerful and not to be denied" ("One and Only" 263). But Tom, as is the case with many others, believes in these myths, and it is stated by the narrator: "Tom meets Summer on January 8th. He knows almost immediately she is who he's been searching for" (00:01:52-00:02:01). This effectively

implies a love-at-first-sight situation, but Summer is unaffected by this first encounter; therefore, it cannot be love at first sight. As Ahmed notes, the idea of love requires a level of reciprocity, and in Tom's case there is no reciprocation to his affections; suffering from many of the same delusions as his 100-year predecessor, Gatsby, Tom cannot see past his idealization to perceive that the object of desire has other objectives for herself, and she is ultimately unmoved by the situation. Tom believes their meeting is "meant to be" because "in a city of 400,000 offices, 91,000 commercial buildings, and 3.8 million people," finding Summer "could only be explained by one thing: fate" (00:09:04-00:09:18). Tom ascribes cosmic significance to Summer starting to work at the same office as him, and from there on out puts all his energy into getting closer to her. He cannot see past the fog of idealization to ask himself if Summer has even shown any interest in him; instead, he is sure that, if she is not interested now, she will be because of the laws of familiarity. Tom presumes and expects reciprocity because that is what "love" means, and by perceiving his idealization as love and adhering to cultural myths, he cannot fathom failure. Ahmed suggests that "The idealisation of the object is not 'about' the object, or even directed to the object, but is an effect of the ego. That is, the ideal object, as with the ego ideal, is an effect of the ideal image that the subject has of itself" (127). Therefore, Tom and other Nice Guys are prone to value "love" and a relationship above everything else because this will, in their minds, increase their own worth, and because they do not have the highest self-esteem this is an easy way to put the burden on someone else to "fix" it.

On Day 4, Tom and Summer have their first one-on-one encounter in the elevator to their workplace. Summer runs in after him, and Tom's gaze follows her until she turns towards him. Tom then does everything in his power to not look Summer's way, and stares blankly ahead with music blasting from his headphones. Summer recognizes the music and attempts to strike up a conversation with Tom, but he misunderstands her because he is trying to avoid looking in her direction and does not take his headphones off. This reluctance or inability to face the object of idealization uncovers Tom's low self-esteem, which makes him afraid to do anything wrong and therefore renders him immobilized. Similarly to Tom; when Gatsby finally reunites with Daisy, he does everything in his power to avoid her, including leaving the house for a moment right before she arrives. Tom would perhaps have done something similar had he not been literally stuck in the elevator; but he avoids Summer as best he can by leaving his headphones on for as long as he can until he is more or less forced to interact with Summer, lest he should be deemed a complete imbecile. Tom and Gatsby's avoidance of the object of idealization also exemplifies Ahmed's theory that idealized love is

not even directed towards the object, but inwards towards the subject. The reason Nice Guys withdraw and close themselves off from others, and particularly from the idealized object, is because their “love” is unable to be reciprocated and ultimately concerns only themselves.

When Tom finally takes his headphones off, he is surprised and amazed to find that Summer knows and likes The Smiths. He is unable to properly garner a response, but a smile becomes permanently engraved on his face. When Tom is finally forced to engage with the object of idealization, he then becomes incapable of moving away from it; Tom’s eyes are permanently fixed on Summer, while Summer’s eyes fluctuate between Tom, the ceiling, the ground, and the elevator doors. When Gatsby shows off his house to Daisy, he similarly does not take his eyes off her; being completely absorbed and amazed at her presence. When the elevator stops and the doors open, Summer casually but determinately walks out, while Tom stands frozen and utters “Holy shit” before the doors close on him (00:09:53-00:10:47). This encounter is so significant to Tom, and the nearness of the object of idealization so debilitating, that he is literally frozen in place, unable to take action of the most mundane type (using his legs). Tom does not seem to register anything going on around him except for Summer, and this also reminds us of Gatsby who “had forgotten [Nick]” and “didn’t know [him] now at all” (Fitzgerald 93) and similarly tunes out everything but the idealized object. It seems as though when the Nice Guy is finally able to properly face the idealized object, the rest of the world fades away; signaling how deep and unhealthy their idea of love is. It also reveals a kind of “all or nothing” mindset, which is linked to Nice Guys’ essentialist worldview, that will be discussed more further into the chapter.

Tom’s wise-beyond-her-years little sister, Rachel, recognizes that Tom’s relationship with Summer is unhealthy, and she consistently urges him to make the right choices. On Day 11, Tom tells Rachel that he and Summer “talked about banana fish for like twenty minutes,” among other things, to convince her how “meant to be” they are, but Rachel refutes this by telling him, “Just cause some cute girl likes the same bizarro crap you do, that doesn’t make her your soul mate, Tom” (00:14:23-00:14:47). Tom is a product of Western media consumption; as Lindholm suggests, “The songs, movies, and stories of our shared culture endlessly describe variations in the pain and ecstasy of love as it is found, challenged, lost, denied or thwarted, only to flare up again, carrying all before it, or else destroying the lovers in a conflagration of desire” (5). Because of this cultural tradition of stories where love conquers all, Tom, even after he has unquestionably “lost” Summer, cannot or refuses to accept that their love story is over. Although, according to Ahmed, idealized love is only strengthened with the rejection of the object of idealization; she claims, “Even though love is

a demand for reciprocity, it is also an emotion that lives with the failure of that demand often through an intensification of its affect (so, if you do not love me back, I may love you more as the pain of that non-loving is a sign of what it means not to have this love)” (130). This is the reason Tom spends the better part of a year still obsessing over Summer even after she is gone from his life, and the same goes for Gatsby. They both continue to cling to their love for the idealized object because of the pain they experienced losing it, which, according to Nice Guy logic, must mean that the love is “true.”

This moves Tom and other Nice Guys into the realm of issues of consent and entitlement. Even though Summer makes it clear from the beginning that she does not want a relationship with Tom and that she does not believe in love, Tom firmly declares on Day 259 that “You’re not the only one who gets a say in this! I do too! And I say we’re a couple dammit” (00:47:05-00:47:11). Shortly after, on Day 290, they are officially broken up, and Tom claims, “I don’t wanna get over her. I wanna get her back” (00:06:59-00:07:05). Tom shows a total disregard for Summer’s wishes because he believes so completely in the myths of Western love stories. He believes that his love for her will change Summer’s mind; Lindholm describes Tom’s ideology perfectly: “According to the romantic clichés, love is blind, love overwhelms, a life without love is not worth living, marriage should be for love alone, and anything less is worthless and a sham. Romantic love cannot be bought and sold, love cannot be calculated, it is mysterious, true and deep, spontaneous and compelling, it can strike anyone – even the most hardened cynic can be laid low by Cupid” (5). Tom has ingrained all of these myths, along with most other Nice Guys, perhaps because they feel like they have little control over their lives and holding onto these ideas makes them feel as though their life has meaning and they are destined for something greater. That it is a woman who will “save” them from their dreary lives could come from the fact that they are typically lonely and isolated figures and believe many of their problems could be solved by having a partner to constantly be available to them.

Hefner & Wilson observe that there are certain love scripts and messages that romantic comedies continually perpetrate, which makes the narrative ingrained in viewers’ consciousness. (500) *Days of Summer* determinedly subverts and examines these myths, focusing on media as the main reason for Tom’s Nice Guy tendencies. The narrator claims that Tom’s belief that he will not be truly happy until he meets “the one”: “stemmed from an early exposure to sad British pop music and a total misreading of the movie *The Graduate*” (00:01:17-00:01:30). After Tom has been depressed and debilitated for a while, he regains some of his confidence when he realizes the effect media has on people and goes on a tirade

at work: “It’s these cards. And the movies and the pop songs. They’re to blame for all the lies. And the heartache. Everything. And we’re responsible. I’m responsible” (01:14:08-01:14:22). Tom finally starts to realize that “love” is not what he thought it was. After this realization, Tom slowly regains his drive and his mental health improves, and he starts pursuing an architectural career. Summer slowly begins to fade, also, after this realization.

Tom also suffers from essentialization and black and white thinking. When Tom first meets Summer, the narrator declares, “There’s only two kinds of people in the world. There’s women, and there’s men” (00:07:52-00:07:58). In other words, men and women are binaries who complete each other, and between a man and a woman, the potential of sex is always implied. When Tom first meets Summer, to him she is first and foremost a woman (especially so since she is attractive), and that is all he sees. Therefore, idealizing her becomes easy and immediate; Tom is not interested in Summer as her own person but as an attractive woman, and is therefore free to apply to her the qualities he wants to see. Tom asks his friend at work, without complete dispassionateness; “Why is it that pretty girls think they can treat people like crap and get away with it?” (00:09:40-00:09:45). Tom has likely been hurt by women before, but because of his *modus operandi* of dating; which includes hiding his feelings; not being explicit about his wants and needs; and easily idealizing a woman; he has probably been overlooking a lot of the negative aspects of these relationships. Tom does not love himself enough to be able to see the ways in which he and Summer are *not* compatible; he needs her to increase his self-worth, so he focuses only on the good sides to the relationship in order to keep her in his life. By doing this, it comes as a “surprise” when Summer wants to stop seeing Tom, when, in reality, he should have seen it coming. On their last meeting, Tom asks Summer why she danced and flirted with him at a wedding they both attended some weeks ago, when Summer was in fact in a new relationship at the time. She answers, “Cause I wanted to,” and Tom replies that “You just do what you want, don’t you?” grinding his teeth and clearly resentful (01:23:30-01:23:42). Tom is painting Summer as the bad guy by insinuating that she is egotistical and indifferent to other people’s feelings. Tom is, in fact, more selfish than Summer, because while she is clear from the start that she does not love him, Tom still hopes that she will, and he pursues the relationship with false pretenses. Tom, like *Gatsby*, projects his insecurities onto others so as to not look like the bad guy; *Gatsby* attempts to rewrite history by suggesting that Daisy never loved Tom Buchanan, when it most likely was the other way around. Some of Tom’s utterances border on misogynistic and reveals the patriarchal ideology Tom follows; he believes himself to be entitled to Summer and love in general, whilst Summer (and other women, for that matter) must spare his

feelings and give him what he wants, lest they be labeled a “bitch.” Because love is the highest and ultimate goal for Tom and other Nice Guys, when the relationship fails, they are unable to see their own faults because the fog of idealization leaves them unable to perceive anything other than the object of idealization. Therefore, and understandably, they instead put the blame on the idealized object because she is the only thing they are able to focus their attention on.

On Day 154, Tom finally admits to his friend that he is in love with Summer. He lists all of the features he loves about her, including her smile, hair, knees, a birth mark, her laugh, and “the way she looks when she’s sleeping,” and ending his speech by claiming “I love how she makes me feel. Like anything’s possible. Like... I dunno... like life is worth it” (which makes Tom’s friend remark, “This is not good.”) (00:13:35-00:14:21). This list is inverted on Day 322, where Tom instead claims, “I hate Summer. I hate her crooked teeth. I hate her 1960s haircut. I hate her knobby knees. And I hate her cockroach-shaped splotch on her neck. I hate the way she smacks her lips before she talks. And I hate the way she sounds when she laughs” (00:57:39-00:57:56). Miller suggests that, Tom, by saying this, is effectively announcing: “I am not hurt by your rejection, I never loved anything about you” (104), which is typical in adolescents or emotionally underdeveloped people. Lamy observes that “People usually claim they were attracted due to the other person’s physical attractiveness, or success, or sense of humor, but such attributes are also, typically, those that the same people would later invoke to justify a break-up” (103), and this reveals how Tom is not in love with anything *about Summer*, only the way she makes *him* feel when they are together. Therefore, in claiming to hate her, Tom is in actuality declaring that he hates *himself* without her. The reason Tom becomes so devastated when Summer dumps him is precisely because he does not truly know her; he only knows the idealized object. As Lamy suggests, “the closer love is to imagination and idealization, the deeper and more enduring it would be” (102). Therefore, if we follow Ahmed’s theory, we come to the conclusion that Tom’s feelings about Summer ultimately ricochets back to himself; he is not content with being only who he is, and he needs his idea of Summer to feel worthy. Lamy describes it well when he suggests “that love relies on a need for change and self-improvement. The impulse for love is aimed at escaping the despair of being only what we are; this is the reason why love goes together with idealization” (102). Therefore, when Tom claims that he hates Summer, it is not anything about *her* he hates; in actuality, Tom’s self-worth is debilitated when he does not “have” Summer anymore, hence when he claims to hate her, he is actually saying that he hates himself (without her). Tom has become completely dependent on Summer in order to feel

any happiness; a symptom of toxic masculinity which puts the burden of men's emotional fulfillment on women. Gatsby is similarly dependent on Daisy, or the possibility of Daisy, for his happiness. When that possibility is gone (Daisy chooses Tom and Gatsby's car is bound to be found), and Gatsby is unable to direct his attention elsewhere; he has to die in the end. Tom, on his side, does ultimately change, and one of the differences between the two can be boiled down to this: Gatsby has never loved anyone but Daisy, and has worked tirelessly for five years in order to acquire her. Tom, on the other hand, encounters Summer by coincidence and has previously loved at least one woman the same way he loves Summer. After their breakup, Tom's friends inform Rachel that "It's Amanda Heller all over again" (00:04:20-00:04:24), suggesting that a similar event has happened before. Because Tom has already gone through a comparable situation, he is more prone to being able to get over Summer, while Gatsby has never had eyes for anyone or anything other than Daisy. Gatsby knows he is "worthless" without Daisy and has no real reason to live without her.

Summer as a character is also dangerously close to becoming another stock character: The Manic Pixie Dream Girl, a term coined by film critic Nathan Rabin. Rodríguez suggests that, "the MPDG often lacks any depth and aspirations of her own, acting more as a plot device rather than a fully fleshed character, and being defined in terms of these superficial personality markers such as music taste or thrift-shop clothing" (169-170). Solomon also notes that "Her male consort is usually a failure by conventional standards" (3). Several online lists of Manic Pixie Dream Girls include Summer as an example, but the crucial difference between Summer and a character like Sam (played by Natalie Portman) in *Garden State*, is that Summer subverts the trope by existing for *herself* and not Tom. Tom *wishes* Summer was a Manic Pixie Dream Girl, and this is what the film ultimately criticizes. The viewer sees Summer as Tom sees her, and this is why people have been confused as to whether she is a MPDG or not. Many also believe Summer to be the villain of the film because she breaks Tom's heart, but Joseph Gordon-Levitt himself has, on several occasions, re-tweeted proponents of this reading of the film in order to dispel these beliefs, saying: "Watch it again. It's mostly Tom's fault. He's projecting. He's not listening. He's selfish. Luckily he grows by the end" (@hitRECORDjoe). Summer has been accused of being "a bitch" because she does not want to date Tom, but she is a person with her own dreams and desires which are not made clear because of Tom's narration. The concept of the MPDG ties itself nicely in with the concept of the Nice Guy, and in many aspects, they are dependent on each other if they are both to be "successful" in their respective narratives. A MPDG's only goal is to provide emotional aid to a conventionally unsuccessful character; while a Nice Guy

relies on a woman to help him become more confident. Both of these characters are born out of a male fantasy where a beautiful, charismatic woman is completely available for a man whose attractiveness and achievements in life are underwhelming by conventional standards; ultimately pointing to male entitlement coupled with the unrealistic standards established by Hollywood persistently casting heterosexual couples with clear discrepancies in attractiveness; producing a self-perpetuating cycle. The MPDG, alongside the Nice Guy, hinders the development of fully fleshed female characters whose worth is not measured by her attractiveness, and whose only job is to help men on their respective journeys.

3.1. Nice Guy Masculinity

The beautiful beer-drinking, casual sex and obscure music-loving Summer is “not like other girls” and is effectively masculinized while Tom is feminized. When justifying why she wants to break up, Summer remarks that her and Tom have “been like Sid and Nancy for months now,” with Tom being Nancy (00:05:52-00:06:10). Summer is not interested in dating, claiming she does not “feel comfortable being anyone’s girlfriend” or “anyone’s anything” (00:19:21-00:19:42); an attitude traditionally associated with men and masculinity. Tom is a hopeless romantic hoping to settle down, which is a traditionally more feminine quality. Notwithstanding Tom’s total disregard for the ways in which he and Summer are incompatible, the film successfully plays with gender stereotypes and opens up the possibility of men wanting serious relationships and women wanting to be alone as legitimate choices. Perhaps Nice Guys are in need of a woman who displays traditionally masculine qualities in order to preserve their own masculinity. Making use of Ahmed’s theory; if Nice Guys’ idealization of women is actually a way for them to boost their own ego, and the qualities they value are ones they feel they are lacking in themselves, it would be plausible that the choice of a masculine woman is, in fact, a way to further demonstrate and increase Nice Guys’ own masculinity.

Throughout the movie, Tom’s femininity is signaled by his inactivity and unassertiveness. After giving examples to his friend of the ways he has hinted and made innuendoes to Summer without any success, his friend suggests that “You could just ask her out,” and Tom replies, “Don’t be stupid” and does not even consider it as a possibility (00:16:48-00:16:53). The film consistently depicts Tom being physically idle and left standing still, watching Summer walk away. Tom does not inhabit the confidence or “masculinity” needed to be proactive and go for what he wants. Summer is the one who

“makes the first move” in the copy room at work. She simply walks up to Tom and kisses him, then leaves again: casual, unfeeling and assertive. Tom stands there, unable to act: uncertain, submissive, and passive (00:24:31-00:25:42). This carries over to his verbliness as well; Tom effectively lies in order to keep Summer close by concealing his true feelings. He does not say what he really wants and just does what he thinks will appease her. It is not until Tom is faced with losing Summer that he finally stands up for himself and says what he is really thinking. This typical Nice Guy behavior of beating around the bush and not facing things head on is one of the key factors that leads to Tom’s heartache. But Tom would rather live in a world where there is a possibility of Summer, of the idealized object, than to be rejected and have to be alone.

Tom, as with most Nice Guys, seemingly does not care to be seen as “manly” in the traditional sense; perhaps realizing that this is an unrealistic goal. Kimmel would contend that Tom’s hipster style and unaggressive demeanor is the product of the “liberated man” of the 1970s because of his rejection of traditional masculine norms. Tom has nevertheless internalized many elements of patriarchal ideology, most notably through his inherent entitlement. On men’s sexual entitlement, Kimmel suggests that “though both men and women feel entitled to pleasure, and both have their first sexual experience because they wanted to, men still seem to believe that that entitlement also covers acting on it – even when the woman doesn’t want to” (*Gender* 14). Although this is mostly about sexual entitlement, it certainly seeps over into other aspects of men’s lives, and Tom’s entitlement comes through in his insistence of having Summer (“I say we’re a couple, dammit!”), and his excessive anger and self-victimization when he cannot have her (“I don’t wanna get over her. I wanna get her back”). Tom then fits well into Kimmel’s theory on angry white men: “White men’s anger comes from the potent fusion of two sentiments: entitlement and a sense of victimization” (“Trump” 15). Tom’s incessant whining is enough to not make anyone want to date him, sentiments like “You know what sucks? Realizing that everything you believe in is complete and utter bullshit” (01:24:32-01:24:39), and that Summer could be his “in a world where good things happen to me” (00:14:53-00:14:57). Completely cementing Tom’s proneness to self-victimization is the scene when he attempts to get Summer’s attention at work, so he plays The Smiths’ song “Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want” (00:16:06-00:16:33).

Tom has also internalized the idea that women cannot have a sexual relationship with a man without eventually falling in love. On Day 34, Summer tells Tom that she is “not really looking for anything serious” and Tom feigns acceptance but is hoping that she will change

her mind (00:29:40-00:30:20). Tom does not take Summer's wants and desires seriously, and he is assuming that she (as a woman) will grow to love him. Tom's "feminine masculinity" is therefore firmly in line with other Nice Guy masculinities; it is a step away from traditional masculine ideals, but with the same underlying patriarchal entitlement. Tom also has no ambitions to further a new type of masculinity in the name of men's liberation, therefore, and as Griffin suggests, when alternative masculinities "posed no threat to patriarchal manhood then they can accurately be described as complicit in the gender order" (382). Although Tom's masculinity is alternative in many respects, he is still following traditional gender norms and beliefs and does not pose a threat to patriarchal ideology. On the contrary, the character of Tom is dangerously close to devolving into anti-woman sentiments, and it is only on chance that he is able to overcome his toxic way of thinking.

Tom seeks to affirm his masculinity by securing a female partner and his status as a "man" will be cemented, and threats to this masculinity have to be defeated. Tom therefore props up Chad as the "bad guy," and displays "anti-Chad" qualities and behaviors, hoping that this signals him being better than or more evolved than Chad. Ahmed suggests that hate "does its work by 'reading' the object: for example, others might get read as the 'reason' for the loss of the object of love, a reading which easily converts feelings of grief into feelings of hate" (13). Nice Guys thus deem Chad as the reason for them losing the object of idealization, redirecting their sadness for the loss into hatred for the perceived reason for this loss. This evolves into considering any aggressive and sexually successful man as a potential threat to the Nice Guy's happiness. In spite of this, Tom, along with other Nice Guys, still cares about what Chad thinks and therefore places himself firmly in the same category as most traditional American masculinities. As Kimmel suggests, "American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other. Masculinity is largely a homosocial enactment" (*Manhood* 7). On Day 22, Tom meets Summer in the elevator, and they have a brief, impersonal conversation. Tom overthinks Summer's claim that her weekend was "good" and declares to his friends that this must mean she was spending "the weekend having sex with some guy she met at the gym. Skank" (00:15:08-00:15:30). Tom becomes irrationally angry about the prospect of Summer having sex with someone else (note that, at this point, they have only had a few conversations at work). Simply the potential presence of Chad flips a switch in the usually timid and unaggressive Tom, who measures his own masculinity against Chad. Tom therefore has to display more traditional signs of masculinity in order to secure it when threatened with possibly being bested by Chad. This is true for Gatsby as well; a usually unaggressive and calm character

who suddenly becomes overly hostile and combative when it concerns the potential of Chad separating him and Daisy.

On Day 109, Summer tells Tom about a recurring dream she has, and claims to have “never told anyone that before” and the narrator claims that these “six words changed everything” (00:40:03-00:40:32). Tom is completely satisfied and feels triumphant in hearing that he (presumably) stands out among the Chads that Summer has formerly dated. In Tom’s mind, he was “won” over Chad, and therefore, implicitly, “won over” Summer. Tom is therefore particularly interested in hearing about Summer’s ex-boyfriends. After some hesitation, she tells him about some of them and Tom imagines a “Quarterback slash homecoming king,” a punk-rocker, and an exotic, muscular man (with a disproportionately large penis) (00:49:50-00:51:10). The men Tom imagines are all Chads; “alpha men,” or men with high masculine statuses; but most of his predictions turn out to be wrong, which visibly distresses Tom. Chad is an enemy Tom “knows” and has a chance of defeating, so when it is revealed that Summer’s exes – potential threats – are unknown and perhaps even Nice Guys like himself, his entire ideology and ideas about masculinity are threatened. Rachel, Tom’s sister, uses the image of Chad to scare Tom into defining his relationship with Summer. She threatens that, if he does not ask her, he risks walking in on her “in bed with Lars from Norway,” who has “Brad Pitt’s face and Jesus’s abs” (00:42:00-00:42:20). This propels Tom, who previously did not want to “rock the boat” and ruin a good thing, to address the issue.

On Day 259, Tom and Summer are at a bar, and their relationship is visibly disintegrating. An undoubtedly rude and aggressive man (credited on IMDB as: “Douche”), comes up to them and starts hitting on Summer. She makes it clear she is not interested, and Tom passively sits there. After insulting Tom a few times, the Douche walks away, but not before saying “I can’t believe *this* is your boyfriend” (00:43:50-00:45:24). This moves Tom to get up and punch him in the face (he is almost immediately returned the favor) and Summer is thoroughly unimpressed at Tom’s uncharacteristic physical aggression. When they get home, Tom claims “I just got my ass kicked for you,” which Summer does not accept and she answers, “Oh really, was that for me? Was that for my benefit?” highlighting Tom’s true motivations (00:45:50-00:46:03). Tom punches another man for himself, in order to secure his own masculinity; not to protect Summer. The Chad was threatening Tom’s relationship and therefore implicitly his status as a man when he was flirting with Summer and demeaning Tom in front of her. Tom (as with Gatsby) only acts aggressively when his status as Summer’s beau, i.e., his definition of masculinity, is threatened.

3.2. Perpetuating Toxic Masculinity

Although *(500) Days of Summer* does a good job in subverting the Nice Guy trope and critiquing patriarchal ideas of love and dating, there are still portions of the film that perpetuate elements of toxic masculinity. One of the most obvious examples of this is the subtle homophobia that is present throughout. On Day 109, Tom is defending his relationship with Summer (or lack thereof), and says, “What? Like are we going steady? Come on guys, we’re adults. We know how we feel, we don’t need to put labels on it. I mean... “boyfriend/girlfriend...” it’s really juvenile” (00:40:34-00:40:52). Then his friend remarks, “You sound gay” while the other concurs, “You really do” (00:40:52-00:40:55). In proper heteronormative fashion, Tom and his friends are engaging in gay jokes in order to prove their own masculinity, as McCann et al. found that “humour can create a sense of cohesion by creating a gendered ‘other’ that becomes the antithesis of the masculinity that men are expected to embody, and against which each man can measure how successful his embodiment is” (15). Oransky & Marecek found something similar with high school boys who “described interactions with boys as centering on taunting, mocking, and “shoving around.” Although these practices were hurtful, boys valued them as means of bolstering one another’s masculinity” (218). In other words, straight men often opt for gay insults and jokes towards other straight men to keep them in line. Therefore, the “jokes” in *(500) Days of Summer* show the typical male heteronormative behavior, including its implicit homophobia. Kimmel suggests that “Homophobia is more than the irrational fear of homosexuals, more than the fear that we might (mistakenly) be perceived as gay. It is these, of course, but it is also something deeper. Homophobia is the fear of other men – that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveals to us and the world that we do not measure up, are not real men” (*Manhood* 8). Tom, participating in this straight male game of chicken, therefore goes on to point out how little “action” his two friends are getting compared to him, effectively neutralizing them and defending himself against the suggestion that he is gay (00:40:55-00:41:12). The film, therefore, leaves little room for queerness; it is only mentioned in passing or as a “joke.” Summer actually reveals to Tom that she was in a relationship with a woman (the one Tom mistakes for the punk-rocker), and this comes as a big surprise to Tom. However, Tom does not seem as affected by the prospect of a Summer’s female ex contra Summer’s male exes (whom he imagines as alpha male Chads, while the ex-girlfriend is imagined as average and nonthreatening); the point of this scene is to show how little Tom actually knows about Summer, but it also reveals a certain erasure of queer existence because

it is not as “legitimate” as the heterosexual relationships. There are no representations of queer relationships in the film, and “gay” is played off as a joke between straight men. What could have been a revelation and queerification of Summer’s character becomes instead a further illustration of her elusive, eccentric and MPDG nature. Instead of being a legitimate relationship, it is further evidence of Summer’s “quirky” personality.

Even though Tom is not afraid to show emotion (though mostly anger and sadness) to his male friends, and they, with varying success, give him advice; they have to call on Tom’s little sister to help build him up as a kind of substitute Summer. Rachel gives Tom the best advice and can clearly see where he is messing up; she is in essence put forward as the only one who can help him. Tom also leans on and discloses more of his problems to Rachel than with his male friends. Although Tom inhabits many feminine traits and could be seen as a “post-masculine” character, he still relies on women to help him emotionally; and this uncovers Tom’s inherent assimilation of patriarchal and heteronormative gender norms. Because this is also done without irony the film itself perpetuates these ideas and fails to offer any alternative to men’s emotional guidance.

(500) *Days of Summer* also perpetuates the masculine ideals of career ambitions and workplace gender roles. The scenes at Tom’s office show mostly male workers, with a male boss, and Summer as the boss’s assistant/secretary. After Summer quits, she is replaced by another woman, perpetuating patriarchal ideas of gender roles in the workplace. Tom’s feeling of shame is directly linked to his dissatisfaction in his career; he gets a look of embarrassment and defeat on his face when he has to reveal to Summer on Day 402 that he is still working at the greeting card company (01:02:20-01:02:26). It is almost implied that Summer would have more interest in Tom if he had a better job when she remarks that “Tom could be a really great architect if he wanted to be” looking disappointed (01:08:56-01:09:05). Tom is also visibly hurt by this, and it becomes clear that Summer is the one who brings out Tom’s shame; as Ahmed notes: “the other can only elicit a response of shame if another has already elicited desire or even love. I may be shamed by somebody I am interested in, somebody whose view ‘matters’ to me. As a result, shame is not a purely negative relation to another: shame is ambivalent” (105). Therefore, it is Summer who in actuality propels Tom into focusing on his career, because he believes it will please her and he wants to stop the feeling of shame. Tom only starts to regain some of his confidence when he quits his “dead end job” at the greeting card company and is very happy to tell Summer this on their last meeting, taking a form of masculine pride over it. Tom’s masculinity is upped when he quits his unambitious job and goes the more ambitious and high-status career

route. Similarly with Tom, Gatsby's wealth is the measure of his success. By the end of the film, Tom's feminine qualities are virtually erased, and Summer's most obvious masculine qualities disappear as well; she (quite abruptly) marries another man and settles down, finally being happy herself, signaling that when Summer adheres to her womanly "duty," she will be fulfilled.

Likewise, the only way for Tom to be happy is to possess more traditionally masculine traits; Rachel recommends "Just don't be a pussy," effectively suggesting that he "man up"; and when he starts wearing a suit, he also starts to get what he wants. Tom is more or less appropriating what Kimmel calls the "four basic rules of manhood" (186) as seen in Robert Brannon's book *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority*. Kimmel asserts that the "first and perhaps most important rule is 'No Sissy Stuff'" (*Manhood* 186) and Tom adheres to this by, for example, starting to dress more masculine. As stated by Kimmel, "The second rule, 'Be a Big Wheel,' indicates that masculinity is measured by power, wealth, and success" (*Manhood* 186), and, as we have seen, Tom does all in his power to acquire this as well. The third rule of masculinity is "'Be a Sturdy Oak,' since real men show no emotions, are emotionally reliable by being emotionally inexpressive" (Kimmel *Manhood* 186), and Tom completely ceases his emotional displays. The final rule, according to Kimmel is "'Give 'em Hell' meant to exude an aura of manly daring and aggression. Always take the risks, go for it" (*Manhood* 186) and Tom absolutely takes a risk by quitting his job with no future prospects in line. All of these traditional masculine gender norms have been subject to decades of scrutiny with attempts to reduce its hegemony; but *(500) Days of Summer* practically enforces and promotes these qualities because they signal Tom's eventual happiness and emotional detachment from Summer. Tom can also only "get the girl" if he acts in these traditionally masculine ways; by the end of the movie, he has successfully acquired a date from a new, attractive woman. And by the end of the film, Tom is not a Nice Guy or even a nice guy. In the end, he is a masculine man, more reminiscent of Chad than himself. *(500) Days of Summer* only presents us with two options for masculinity: either a Nice Guy or a Chad. If Tom would only remove his masculine entitlement and misogyny, he would no longer be a Nice Guy, but instead he doubles down in masculinity and this is proposed as the right choice. There are more alternatives to being a man, and the turn-around Tom does has many positive sides to it, but adhering to traditionally masculine qualities in order to be happy (including not letting out emotions and placing work over everything), is not always, if ever, the correct way to go about it.

3.3. Concluding statements

As with Gatsby and other Nice Guys, Tom Hansen is in effect without a solid masculine identity for himself; he fluctuates between the extremes on a spectrum of “manliness,” and puts the burden on Summer to be the one to secure him a firm and comfortable gender identity. Moreover, Tom, like Gatsby, is essentially without an identity at all without the object of idealization. When Gatsby has properly lost Daisy, he is basically “no one” because he possesses no identity at all without her, and he is practically dead already. When Tom Hansen finally moves on from Summer – when the 500 days are up – the film abruptly ends. The viewer never sees Tom without his idealization of Summer; consequently, this becomes his principal mode of identification. The opening credits do indeed present footage of Tom and Summer as children, but they are juxtaposed side by side in a split screen so that the viewer always sees Tom in reference to Summer (00:02:16-00:03:56). There are some allusions and references to Tom’s past before he met Summer, but these only serve to illustrate his Nice Guy masculinity and are always in reference to Summer and his idealization of her. For all intents and purposes, Tom is lacking an identity at all without Summer.

Tom and characters like him narrow the ways in which men are portrayed and represented in media. According to *(500) Days of Summer*, a man is either a Chad or a Nice Guy who got dealt a bad hand. Representations of masculinity have improved, but this stock character is over-represented and therefore poses a threat to both other representations of masculinity and the development of fully fleshed female characters. Tom is just as bad, if not worse than Chad, because he exercises his concealed sexism and entitlement under the guise of a “nice guy” persona. It may seem as though Tom and other Nice Guys are in need of our sympathy and pity, but in reality, they are just entitled man-children who are in need of serious literary revision. These characters, in their essence, reduce their female love interests to restricted and limited representations of women, only ascribing to her the things they wish to see. The discrepancies in *(500) Days of Summer*’s narrative makes it hard to justify its main character as a positive alternative to masculinity. In addition, many viewers of the film have unfortunately failed to see its satirizing, and view Tom as a hero and Summer as the villain, so the tendency to use the trope continues. Nice Guys seemingly manifest a feminist rejection of toxic masculinity, but in reality, they perpetuate male entitlement and patriarchal ideology. This tendency has two consequences: the first being that it severely hinders the development of complex female characters; the second being that when a Nice Guy character

is thrown at the audience as the protagonist (“he is a weirdo, but he is a lovable weirdo”), without considering the ways in which he displays highly problematic and entitled views, this character then becomes an ideal or an acceptable way of being. Tom is in this regard the ultimate example of the Nice Guy produced by modern Western general media consumption; saying himself that movies and songs are to blame for his fixation on “love” and “the one.”

4. Conclusion

In close reading *The Great Gatsby* and *(500) Days of Summer*, and with the help of Ahmed's theory, it is revealed that both Jay Gatsby and Tom Hansen, although separated by a century, have the same issues with masculinity and gender. By using Sara Ahmed's theory on the politics of emotion, the Nice Guy figure's sexist ideology is unveiled; at the same time that his lack of emotions, or, more fittingly, his *concealment* of his emotions, puts him more in line with hegemonic masculinities than forms of alternative masculinities. Both Jay Gatsby and Tom Hansen encompass many, if not all, Nice Guy qualities in that they are both lonely figures with a handful of friends at best; they fixate on a woman and hope she will be the one to restore their happiness; they hide and conceal themselves and their intentions in order to have a greater chance at winning over the object of idealization; they believe wealth and work status will help them acquire the object of idealization; and they view Chad as being in the way of this acquirement.

Both Gatsby and Tom fluctuate on a spectrum of manliness without possessing a fixed masculinity. They are, in effect, without a gender identity or an identity in general. Gatsby dies when Daisy leaves, while Tom presumably ends up going through the same cycle again with a new woman (Autumn), but the film nevertheless ends without the viewer ever seeing Tom not be in love with Summer. In this way, both Nice Guys' entire personas are centered around the object of idealization, and their respective narratives fail to provide us any more details or facts about the men than that of their love for a woman. In this way, both Gatsby and Tom could be argued to be a feminized male character, because they take on the role usually reserved for women in fiction: with no identity beyond the actions of the main male character(s). Nice Guys do not propel the plot into action. Gatsby is very seldom an active participant in the plot, he goes through other people and needs their assistance in order to get things done, and he often stays in the background and is unengaging. It is mostly Tom Buchanan, Jordan, and even Daisy to a certain degree, who are active and often literally pull the other characters with them. Tom also mostly just goes along for the Summer-ride and does not steer the plot in any particular direction. Summer is the one who decides where their relationship is going, and Tom is the one who reacts to whatever Summer's desires are. Tom hides and conceals his wishes and intentions so well that he effectively removes himself from being able to influence the plot at all.

Therefore, in both Gatsby and Tom being mostly reactive characters instead of active, they fall into the part mostly reserved for women. This could be the result of their failure to

uphold a firm masculinity, but it could just as likely signal the reverse: that their Nice Guy masculinity (or lack of masculinity) forces them into playing a “woman’s” part, and this is why their masculinity ultimately fails. Nice Guys could be argued to be “unwilling” man-woman hybrids, whereas Nick Carraway, Jordan Baker, and Summer Finn are “willing” hybrids who do not have any issues with their gender identity even though they possess similar amounts of feminine and masculine qualities. Nice Guys are “unwilling” because they struggle with their masculinity and end up relinquishing their entire identity by idealizing someone else, in the hope of coming to terms with their gender identity.

The main difference between Tom Hansen and Jay Gatsby is the degree of homosociality they engage in. *The Great Gatsby* does not actually concern women or the object of idealization at all; instead, it mostly concerns male relations and homosociality. For Jay Gatsby (conveyed and adopted by Nick Carraway), his obsession with the object of idealization also involves an obsession with Chad and masculine men; and while the object of idealization is a much more elusive figure – bordering on a dream object – Chad and other masculinities are arguably presented as more “real” in the narrative. Conversely, this is not necessarily true for Tom Hansen; although Chad is a prominent figure in *(500) Days of Summer* as well, Tom does not engage with him to the degree Gatsby does. Tom’s two male friends are an important aspect to the narrative, but his relationship with his sister is as, if not more, important. Nice Guy narratives can therefore differ slightly, but what is true for both Gatsby and Tom is that while they often hide and conceal their intentions and emotions – especially around the object of idealization – Chad brings out more genuine displays of emotion. Therefore, it could be said that most Nice Guy narratives will be as much about male relations as they are about women as idealized objects.

Jay Gatsby and Tom Hansen are two prime examples of the Nice Guy figure, and even though they see different fates, they function in much of the same way. But there is a plethora of other texts with the trope, which has become especially common in adolescent and young adult entertainment. This is a particularly disheartening issue, because, beyond simply hindering the development of complex characters, it signals that idealization and being without an identity beyond that idealization is acceptable or even admirable (as is the case for many readers of *The Great Gatsby*). Like Tom Hansen declares: “It’s these cards. And the movies and the pop songs. They’re to blame for all the lies. And the heartache.” The kind of “love extremism” displayed in not only Nice Guy narratives, but all kinds of different media, sends a potentially harmful message to impressionable minds. I hope this thesis invites for a critical discussion of the Nice Guy trope and narrative, which is long overdue,

and that it can potentially encourage a reconstruction in how love and dating is represented from a masculine perspective.

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