

Jordan Baker and Beneatha Younger:
An Exploration of Gender Roles and Representation in American Literature

Simone de Beauvoir famously declared, “My life is my work.” For the French writer who spent much of her career connecting existentialist ideas to feminist reflection, life and thought were inextricably linked. In her groundbreaking book *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir contends that women are men’s Other—the beings against which men ultimately define themselves—and that those definitions form the basis of gender as a social construct. Broadly defined, existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the twentieth century, following World War II. Distinguished by freedom of choice, personal sincerity, and absolute autonomy that liberates human life from determinism, existentialism was a male-dominated movement that gave little to no consideration to women who, too, forged their own authentic paths at great personal sacrifice and in the face of stifling cultural constraints and scathing social criticism. *The Great Gatsby*’s Jordan Baker and *A Raisin in the Sun*’s Beneatha Younger are two such woman. Both female figures ahead of their respective times, they remain staunchly true to themselves and to their ideals, disregarding social conventions, cultural propriety, and others’ expectations, while navigating a world that lacks meaning, order, or rational structure and from which they often seem disconnected. A close examination of each character’s stories as well as the social, cultural, and political climates of the historical eras in which they occur will prove that both women have earned a place among the great existential literary characters and should be considered female manifestations of the quintessential Existential modern man.

In order to appreciate Jordan Baker and Beneatha younger as existential characters, we must first understand the historical backgrounds against which each of their stories take place. The 1920s was the Gilded Age in America—a time of economic prosperity that followed the First World War. The rise of the stock market made it possible for virtually anyone, regardless of

class or creed, to chart his own course and make his own fortune, and the only constant was change. Urban factories replaced rural farms, technological advancements meant industrial growth as well as the birth of mass production and mass consumption, and popular forms of leisure and entertainment, particularly jazz music, accompanied the illegal sale and use of alcohol, further perpetuating a prevailing culture of social resistance and civil unrest. The decade was “an era of business culture, hedonism and political retreat . . . an era of cultural renaissance that rejected tradition and celebrated the new” (Currell 2). F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, heralded by many as the great American novel, offers a revealing window into this epochal period of American history. Through its characters, readers witness the transformative power of the country’s economic boom as well as the capitalism, materialism, and moral ambiguity engendered by such unbridled wealth. Gatsby’s mansion and extravagant parties, Tom and Daisy’s adulterous affairs, and Nick’s corruptible naïveté underscore a society that values pleasure over propriety, excess over equanimity, and clout over candor.

Perhaps the most iconic byproduct of this regenerative era was the “New Woman.” Having evolved beyond the domestic spheres of marriage and motherhood, she won the right to vote; traded her apron for a punch card and a paycheck; wore bobbed hair, makeup, and short skirts; drank and smoked; and dismissed the notions of decorous femininity and ladylike submission. Like the 20s as a whole, she represented a cultural shift, one in which women valued independence, autonomy and equality; society believed in excess, extravagance, and consumerism; and cultural ideals centered on modernity and progress that eschewed the previous stalwarts of religion and nationalistic dogma in favor of “a vibrant culture of ideas and perceptions that . . .[liberated] society from outmoded and outworn beliefs and behaviors” (8). *The Great Gatsby*’s Jordan Baker is emblematic of this shift in gender roles and identities. A

mixed-race lesbian passing as a Caucasian heterosexual, she is financially independent and sexually liberated. Neither a wife nor a mother, she makes a name and a fortune for herself as a golf pro. And like her profession, her attitude and physique more closely align with her male contemporaries than with the stifling Victorian dictums of old. She is “literally and metaphorically, a woman successfully playing a man’s game” (Froehlich 87).

In *Jordan*, readers encounter a cunning woman who has masterminded a way to navigate her patriarchal setting as well as, if not better than, the men for which and by which it was designed. She is described by Nick Carraway as:

... [a woman who] instinctively avoided clever shrewd men ... because she felt safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible. She was incurably dishonest. She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage and given this unwillingness I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young in order to keep that cool insolent smile turned to the world and yet satisfy the demands of her hard jaunty body. (63)

The embodiment of a quintessentially existential character, Jordan carefully and intentionally crafts every detail of her persona. From the company she keeps to the affect she displays in public to circumstances she manipulates to ensure she is never at a disadvantage, Jordan wields complete control over her own destiny, leaving nothing to chance. The reader learns that she began employing artifice to control her surroundings at a young age. “This begs the question of what disadvantages she felt so early in life” (153). Certainly, some scholars contend that it is her race. It’s interesting to note that Fitzgerald touches on Jordan’s complexion in at least eight passages throughout the novel. Few other characters’ skin tones are mentioned in *The Great Gatsby*. Yet the author points out that Jordan’s “hands are brown or tan, ‘powdered

white.’ Her arms and shoulder are ‘golden,’ her face ‘the same brown tint as the fingerless glove on her knee.’ In a novel of spectroscopic gayety, she occupies an arc of color from yellow to brown” (150). Race is mentioned early and often in *The Great Gatsby*, and Jordan is always present. One can only surmise that as a Black woman, her race would have determined her circumstances; she would have been saddled with every disadvantage that comes with being a minority. To circumvent a predetermined fate, she chooses a different course, one that places her in control of her own existence and affords her privileges that were inaccessible to Blacks.

As an existentialist character, Jordan also flouts social and cultural conventions, most notably by occupying a masculine space in the novel. “Fitzgerald’s representation of Jordan draws from the common discourse of sexual inversion—including that of the ‘mannish woman,’ the ‘invert,’ and the ‘third sex’” (90). She fits to a T the character of the lesbian figure made popular in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, who is described thusly:

The mannish woman sought various male prerogatives. Through "masculine" clothing she increased her public mobility; through professional or artistic aspirations she sought economic independence; through her romantic escapades she placed herself in courtship or domesticity in the masculine position. She was a presumptively white and prosperous woman who set out to claim an elite masculine life plan for herself. (Duggan 28-29)

Jordan’s choice of career—a golf professional—is decidedly masculine and phallic. It is an odd choice for a woman, but one that nonetheless brings her independence, fame and fortune, and allows her “the public mobility and economic independence to travel to all of the same leisure destinations frequented by Tom and Daisy” (92). Though she does not dress in manly attire, her physique is described in masculine terms as hard and muscular, and she is characterized by Nick as the sexual aggressor in her relationships with men, none of whom she

expresses any interest in marrying. She is described as rude and arrogant and she proves to be as unscrupulous in her personal life as she is in her professional one. When Nick becomes reacquainted with Jordan over the summer, he admits to being flattered by her company. He is so starstruck by the famous golf champion that he all but forgets the scandal attached to her name until he recalls how she left a borrowed car out in the rain with the top down and then lied about it. That untruth reminds him of her first major golf win. In the semi-final round of the tournament, she was accused of moving her ball by a caddy and another witness. Before the story gained enough traction to reach the papers, the caddy retracted his statement, and the second witness conceded that he could have been mistaken. The two incidents plant a seed of doubt in Nick's mind, reinforcing his perception of Jordan as careless, hypocritical, and incurably dishonest. In truth, Jordan's persona "is tailored to get away with selfish behavior: rude remarks, contemptuous looks, careless driving, cheating on the golf course, lying about the damage she caused to a borrowed car, and more" (Phillips 152). Jordan so transgresses society's gender expectations of women that Tom Buchanan, who represents traditional patriarchal values, beliefs, and ideals bemoans Jordan's way of life. He tells Daisy, his wife, "They oughtn't to let her run around the country this way" (23). In the end, however, Jordan remains true to herself, exercising the hallmark right of any existential character—the freedom to choose. She refused to be stifled by gender expectations, controlled by cultural convention, or limited by others' definitions of right and wrong.

Like the Twenties, 1950s-American was a time of economic prosperity ushered in by a post-war boom. Labeled the Golden Age of Capitalism, the decade was one from which the country emerged an industrial and military powerhouse. The mass production of consumer goods and a rise in discretionary income coupled with technological advancements, suburbanization,

and automobile culture doubled the country's gross national product. (Stanley 12) During this time, there was also a cultural shift that prioritized peace and normalcy and idealized the concept of the nuclear family or "a unit built around the nucleus of the father and mother" (14). This shift ultimately resulted in the "Baby Boom—the largest population explosion of its kind in history—and created a huge demand for new homes, schools, and more consumer goods than the world had ever seen" (Link and Nelson 158). In just one decade, "the economy grew by 37 percent with low rates of inflation and unemployment, ...[and] the nuclear unit was the engine of America's growth and the main beneficiary of its economic greatness" (15).

Women's roles and gender norms likewise shifted during this period of American history. Whereas World War II had necessitated women to work outside of the home, stepping into civilian jobs previously closed to them or volunteering for military service as part of the war effort, peacetime social mores reemphasized the importance of the domesticated woman. As a result, in the 1950s, "only 16 percent [of women] got a job outside the home" (16). Instead, the average woman wed at the age of 20, was pregnant within seven months of getting married, and made a point of having more than one child. (16) This shift in function was accompanied by a shift in mindset. Men were the exclusive breadwinners, while women were solely responsible for maintaining the house and rearing the children. Furthermore, as wives, women were expected to adopt a submissive role, deferring to their husbands in reverence and respect. A famous advertisement in a 1955 issue of *Housekeeping Monthly* detailed the consummate "Good Wife" as the following:

Your goal: To try and make sure your home is a place of peace, order, and tranquility where your husband can renew himself in body and spirit. Make him comfortable. Have him lean back in a comfortable chair or have him lie down in the bedroom. Arrange his

pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soothing and pleasant voice.

Remember, he is the master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him. A good wife always knows her place. (16)

The ideal of domesticity, however, was primarily aimed at middle-class white women.

An influx of nearly 4 million African Americans to urban industrial centers in the North and the Midwest, precipitated by both “the increase in wartime demand for black labor” (58) and “the *push* factors from Jim Crow South,” meant that Blacks were an integral part of American society. Furthermore, the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement placed them at the forefront of popular American culture. Yet Blacks, as a whole, were conspicuously absent from the national conscience—whitewashed from mainstream media, relegated to impoverished ghettos, and stymied by systemic racism. More often than not, the Black community struggled. Black women were forced to work outside the home by economic necessity, and Black men were limited to menial, blue-collar work for which they were underpaid. While some Blacks managed to escape the slums and join “the rising black middle class who sought to buy property in a ‘nice’ neighborhood with good schools and efficient services” (Kelley and Lewis 169), they were victimized by discriminatory laws, inequitable policies, and resistant white communities.

Like the “New Woman” of the 1920s, the resilient African American woman emerged as one of the most iconic and influential consequences of the 1950s. Whether the Black matriarchy, a “domineering black female placed in a superordinate position in the family by the historical vicissitudes of slavery” (Staples 8), or part of the new wave of freedom fighters and defiant activists who joined the protest for equality and widespread change, Black women played an integral role in shaping their families, their communities, and the world to which both belonged.

A Raisin in the Sun offers a frank, honest portrayal of the African American plight in 1950s-America like few works before it had done. Using sensitivity and skill, Lorraine Hansberry “captured the complexities of the changes that millions of black women, men, and children were experiencing and explained them to the world” (170). In Hansberry’s play, life is exceptionally difficult for the Youngers, a working-class Black family living in Chicago’s slums. In many ways, the family members are divided along generational lines. Lena Younger, the family matriarch, is a product of a prewar era founded on Christian principles and hard work. She attempts to pass on her old-school, core values to her children but to little avail. Both her son and daughter are ashamed and profoundly dissatisfied with the family’s lot in life. Beneatha, in particular, is on a perpetual search for ways to transgress the stereotypes of Blacks and women. An ambitious college student, her worldview conflicts with her less-educated, working class family’s. As a result, she dabbles in “high-brow” hobbies like guitar, photography, and horseback riding, rejects the notion of God, pursues a college degree in lieu of a husband, keeps abreast of current politics, joins the fight for civil rights, wears her natural hair, dons traditional Nigerian garments, dances to African music, and rejects assimilated Blacks like George, all in hopes of finding both an authentic identity and a deeper understanding of herself in context of a greater whole. Beneatha’s self-exploration and self-expression are mocked by her family who misinterpret her subversive nature as capriciousness, a luxury afforded to middle class whites. For struggling Black families, surviving paycheck to paycheck, practicality outweighs self-fulfillment, and keeping food on the table, clothes on backs, and roofs over heads is prioritized over discovering individual authenticity or obeying personal convictions and ideals. But the disconnect between Beneatha and her family runs deeper than a gap between dreamer and realist, it is the hallmark of an existential character.

Sartre's claim that existence precedes essence is simultaneously an assertion that one is what one does and "an attack on the notion that people come ready-made ... with predetermined personalities or fates. In Existentialism [one] chooses [her] own fate" (Gravil 8). Even when a person avoids decisive choices or acts as we see with Beneatha, within existential thought, that person is the responsible for the avoidance. Individuals also create their own values. "There is no authoritative tablet of stone bearing God's unambiguous commandment for the good life" (8). Beneatha embodies all of these traits.

First, Beneatha equates what she does with who she is. Her role as a college student and her ambition to become a doctor are the heart and soul her existence. In Act One, Scene One, her brother Walter challenges her lofty goal. "Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing 'round with sick people—then go be a nurse like other women—or just get married and be quiet..." (Hansberry 43). His statement is revealing, because it offers insight into the roles reserved for women by 1950s society and the attitude of the ruling patriarchy toward women who dare to subvert the status quo by aspiring beyond their culturally accepted place in society. Both inside and outside of the domestic sphere, women were relegated to the position of caretakers and helpmeets. As wives, they took care of the home and the children. In a professional capacity, they assisted male authorities. Women as the family breadwinner or as the governing figure in any occupation was a rarity. In fact, by 1950—more than a century after Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman to earn a medical degree—the percentage of female doctors still hovered at only six percent. The male-dominated medical field was wholly unwelcoming. In some states, "women doctors were outlawed by male colleagues, ... druggists refused to fill their prescriptions, [and] when their patients died, a few were mobbed" (Hill 54). Also, as a practice, male colleagues banned female physicians from attending their clinical

trainings, refused their admittance into medical societies, and even blacklisted nurses that had been trained by female doctors. Therefore, Walter's contempt for Beneatha and his derision of her ambition are merely a reflection of the mainstream belief system. But the existential character refuses to be stifled by cultural constraints or moved by social criticism. Beneatha is impervious to his disapproval, in part because her decision to become a doctor is an extension of her identity. The two are inseparable. She cannot change her goal any more than she can change her gender or the color of her skin. This inextricable link between life and work is made evident by Beneatha's response. She asks Walter, "What do you want from me, Brother—that I quit school or just drop dead, which" (42)! In other words, for Beneatha, becoming a doctor is life itself, making death the only alternative.

Second, Beneatha exercises the autonomous free will characteristic of the existential modern man. In the 1950s, the nuclear family was considered the building block of a strong and healthy society. Foundational to this idealized family unit was a husband and father who worked outside of the home and a wife and mother who eschewed a professional career in favor of caring for the house and the children. A renewed focus on family was accompanied by the rapid decline of women in the workforce following WWII:

After the war manufacturers laid off workers in order to convert their plants back to peacetime production. When the plants reopened, only men were called back. Despite four or five years of seniority, ... despite years of experience, the women who had held the highest paying jobs during the war found themselves classified as women workers and ineligible for similar jobs after the war. (Schweitzer 91)

Women who did manage to secure employment were forced to contend with low pay and discriminatory work environments. Therefore, marriage to a solvent man provided financial

security while reinforcing the family as the building block of American society. This held true even within minority households like the Youngers' that saw a disproportionate number of women work outside of the home due to economic necessity. Early in the play, we learn that Beneatha has captured the affection of George, a young man from an upper-middle class Black family. He is everything society dictates Beneatha should desire in a husband—handsome, well-to-do, educated. “As for George. Well. George looks good—he’s got a beautiful car and he takes me to nice places and, as my sister-in-law says, he is probably the richest boy I will ever get to know...” (56). While Beneatha admits to liking him sometimes, her overall opinion of him is lukewarm, and she refuses to settle for a man she does not love simply because he can offer her security. As an existential character, her first and highest allegiance is to her authentic self. As a result, she dismisses her family’s wishes that she settle down, wed George, and have kids. A stunned Ruth asks, “You mean you wouldn’t marry George Murchison if he asked you someday? That pretty, rich thing” (56)? Beneatha’s response is an emphatic no. And she warns her family members not to waste their time waiting around for her to become a wife and mother. “I’m going to be a doctor,” she announces. “I’m not worried about who I’m going to marry yet—if I ever get married” (56). Beneatha is unmoved by social convention. Though women her age were flocking to the altar during this era, and marriage and motherhood were considered the pinnacle of womanhood, Beneatha is singularly focused on the course she has chosen for herself, and she is prepared to indefinitely forgo the life others insist she should have for the life she truly wants.

Third, as an existential character, Beneatha rejects the determinism imposed by a higher power by denouncing God. To understand just how contrary Beneatha’s stance is, it’s important to establish the country’s collective attitude toward God and religion during this stage in history. The Fifties in America was the heyday of organized religion. “On a typical Sunday morning in

the period from 1955-58, almost half of all Americans were attending church—the highest percentage in U.S. history. During the 1950s, nationwide church membership grew at a faster rate than the population, from 57 percent of the U.S. population in 1950 to 63.3 percent in 1960” (Batlan 664). A number of factors are credited with spurring Americans toward Christianity. One belief is that the migration to the suburbs created a new way of life, one that revolved around the perfect American home, family values, and The Church. Another belief is that a fear of Communism compelled Americans to distinguish the United States from the godless USSR through religion. “Americans tried several actions to demonstrate their allegiance to God. In 1954..., Congress added ‘under God’ to the Pledge of Allegiance, and ‘In God We Trust,’ which was minted on coins for years, was added to stamps, paper money, and became the US official motto in the mid-1950s” (660). Whatever catalyzed America’s identity as a Christian nation, Beneatha’s atheism stands in direct opposition to both her family and her country’s beliefs and ideals. When Beneatha’s mother replies to Beneatha’s insistence that she will become a doctor with a perfunctory, “God willing” (57), Beneatha asserts:

God hasn’t got a thing to do with it. I get sick of hearing about God. I mean it! I’m just tired of hearing about God all the time. What has He got to do with anything? Does he pay tuition? Mama, you don’t understand. It’s all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don’t accept. It’s not important. I am not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don’t believe in God. I don’t even think about it. It’s just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is he who makes miracles! (57-58)

In response to her daughter's diatribe, Lena, who points out that she and Beneatha's father went to great pains to ensure both of their children attended church every Sunday—slaps Beneatha across the face and forces her to repeat the phrase, "In my mother's house there is still God" (58). Beneatha does as she is told, but as soon as her mother leaves the room, she recants her confession, accuses her mother of being a tyrant, and insists that all the tyranny in the world will never put a God in the heavens. Beneatha's words echo the existentialist's sentiment that "God is dead, or absent from his creation, or simply unknowable, or a vanished illusion" (22). She does not detect God's helping hands in her day-to-day struggles. He does not pay her tuition. He has not rescued her family from their impoverished circumstances. He did not spare her father's life. He has not corrected the injustices faced by Blacks. As far as Beneatha is concerned, God is a nonfactor. As an existentialist character, she is not subject to anyone else moral barometer; instead, she determines her own code of ethics and establishes her own transcendental sanctions. She also takes sole responsibility for her failures and successes. While her mother depends on her faith to make sense of the world, Beneatha's "existence has no meaning, no purpose, no essentiality and no value, beyond what [she] gives it" (24).

While both Fitzgerald's novel and Hansberry's play depict the prevailing cultural and social beliefs and values of their respective historical times, they both ultimately reject those beliefs and values. A major belief at the center of both stories, for example, is the American dream, and hard work, meritocracy, and material wealth are just three values that feed that dream. While Jordan, like Gatsby, manages to achieve material wealth, it is not through hard work but through artifice and deceit, and material wealth does not afford either character the happiness they so desperately seek. In the end, Gatsby does not win Daisy—his American dream personified; he does not gain the acceptance or respect of the "old money" crowd; and he is

murdered by George for a crime Daisy commits. Similarly, happiness eludes Jordan Baker, whose privileged lifestyle is the result of her own deliberate choices but comes at the cost of living as her authentic self.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, every member of the Younger family pursues his or her own version of the American dream. Lena (Mama) wants to buy her family a house and leave their crowded apartment behind. Ruth, too, wants to move her family, including her unborn child, out of the ghetto. Walter wants to buy a liquor store that will generate the independence and wealth he feels necessary to be happy and to support his family. Beneatha wants to become a doctor, a path that will give her financial independence and purpose beyond marriage and motherhood. Only Lena and Ruth achieve their dream of moving out of the ghetto but, considering the historical climate and the white homeowners' association's attempt to keep the family from moving into the neighborhood by offering Walter a bribe, it's clear that the family's "happy ending" will be fraught with its own set of challenges. Meanwhile, neither Walter nor Beneatha, by the play's end, are in reach of their respective goals, debunking the notion of an achievable American dream.

Regardless of their flaws and shortcomings, *The Great Gatsby's* Jordan Baker and *A Raisin in the Sun's* Beneatha Younger are both female figures ahead of their respective times. They remain staunchly true to themselves and to their ideals, disregarding social conventions, cultural propriety, and others' expectations, while navigating a world that attempts to impose meaning and order where none exists. When each character's story is considered alongside its respective historical period and the social, cultural, and political climates that drove the values, ideals, and beliefs of the time, it is abundantly clear that both women have earned a place among

the great existential literary characters and should be considered female manifestations of the quintessential existential modern man.

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