Scott Fitzgerald, the Man and his Heroes:

The Lost Generation*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to present an area of investigation into the notion of the American Dream with regard to some fundamental bases upon which it was constructed. In this respect, the political, economical, moral, cultural conditions relevant to the issue of the American Dream are taken into account. Each of these elements has an organic and indispensable relation to the creation, flourish, and finally the subversion of an entity called the American Dream.

Fitzgerald's ideology revealed in his works is a serious criticism on the American Dream which is an important value system in the trait of American thinking. The real feature of this notion is disclosed by Fitzgerald who illuminates the real nature of American life and reveals the truth of the American identity.

Key words: American Dream, Lost Generation, Illusion, ideology, economical and political situations, social criticism, individual identity.
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Enchanted by the glorious world of the rich and bewildered by the significance and power which could spring out of their wealth and finally the lustrous illusion it could create, Scott Fitzgerald, the renowned American writer, writes somehow resentfully about this unattainable magnificence he could never thoroughly be part of.

Documented by Fitzgerald's own notes and writings, it's widely believed that his most significant preoccupation was his regret for not belonging to the world of the rich, the obsession based upon which almost all his novels and short stories were planted. As he once said, "the rich are different from the rest of us," and Hemingway gave him a witty reply that "yes, they have more money" (E. Arnold 36).

"No doubt there was a certain ambiguity in Fitzgerald's attitude toward the 'very rich',' Trilling suggests, conforming the idea discussed above. "No doubt they were for him something more than the mere object of his social observation. They seem to have been the nearest thing to an aristocracy that America could offer him" (252).

It's a pity his restless imagination was invested only in such a seemingly limited scope. Wrapped up in his own dreams and illusions, he seems to have ignored to write about impersonal subjects and other social issues which had nothing to do with his internal dilemmas and personal conflicts. He lived in the realm of the heroes he created and called them his brothers, sharing their fantasies and sensing the corruptibility and falsehood of their idealities. The sort of ideality he presented in his novels was established on the basis of the impact of the disillusionment which was imposed on the man of the twenties and especially that felt by the intellectuals of the period who were ceaselessly challenging to dissect it to identify its true existence.

Scott Fitzgerald had a profound insight into the actualities of the period he was living in out of which emerged the greatness of his The Great Gatsby (1925) and the unspoiled tenderness of Tender is the Night (1934). Fitzgerald never felt at ease with the stories he wrote for the high-priced magazines. He once wrote, "there was one little drop of something-not blood, not tear, not my seed, but me more intimately than these in every story, it was the extra I had" (Crack-up 92). However, he would constantly be over-whelmed by the joy of writing out of his full understanding of life and with a concentration on the actualities of his world with no regard for the need of
magazines. "It keeps fresh," as Lionel Trilling's observation of *The Great Gatsby* declares, "because it is so specifically conscious of its time . . . . Its continuing power comes from the courage with which it grasps a moment in history as a great moral fact." But to understand this "great moral fact" manifested in "a moment in history," one has to have a clear notion of the social history of Fitzgerald's time (35).

Belonging to a generation which was unwittingly called Lost Generation (lost in the sense of being in uncertainty or doubt) and a period which embodied the revolutionary changes in manner and culture, Fitzgerald created Gatsby to stand for the wonder the Americans of the twenties were agonized by, to be the genuine representation of the very wondering Americans of the New World who had come a long way from the old world through history to establish their insatiable illusions on the virgin land. Gatsby was "Fitzgerald's maturest vision of the United States of America", as Fussell describes him, "the most magnificent statement of the cruel modernity of the New World, its coldness, mass neurosis known as 'the American Dream'", as at once he was the true instance of Fitzgerald the man who was always bewildered by the same fake idealism which he was always pursuing in his life. Gatsby could also represent faith in culture, "historical necessity, moral accountability and contemptuous repudiation of tradition" in Fussell's words (22).

Therefore, Fitzgerald's Gatsby alludes both the man of the age, "the personal equation" as well as a nation as he also goes further, in the universal scope, to refer to the man of the ages. The tragedy of Gatsby as that of an individual and of a civilization would clearly depict the devastation of the dream (or shall we say the fantasy?) the American man was carrying along since he started building up the New World; the shattered image of success, idealism, and glory in a meretricious life symbolized in the image of Daisy's dubious and again meretricious beauty which Gatsby had nurtured in his illusions for years.

Almost near the end of Gatsby's falsifying illusive tragedy, Fitzgerald intensifies the idea of Gatsby's disillusionment, his desperate agony for losing hope in his idealistic visions by losing "the old warm world", and his shivering as he comes face to face with the "grotesque" realities of his old dreams:
He must have felt that he had lost the warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dream like air, drifted fortuitously about . . . . (The Great Gatsby 79)

Gatsby and Fitzgerald both simultaneously come to the recognition that dreams can't be bought back "which is", in fussell's words, "to recapture the past" (53).

Fitzgerald's is the so-often repeated story of the failure of the ambitious fallen Adam who loses greatly in the light of the hope to gain that vast, vulgar, meretricious beauty which proves to be as intangible as air. To Fitzgerald living without believing in some romantic dream of a meaningful existence was impossible. He expressed this attitude in a letter to his friend about Gatsby:

The whole burden of this novel is the loss of those illusions that give such color to the world so that you don't care whether things are true or false so long as they partake of the magical glory. (Letter 14)

Therefore, disillusioned by Daisy and realizing the futility of the dream he had nourished with his imagination for so long, Gatsby finds himself in "a new world, material without being real," and is consequently led to death.

Looking deep into the life of Fitzgerald one can perceive the impact of his early experience with Zelda. It accentuated the disparity between the man and the artist through confirming the belief in him that wealth has an undeniable power which at the same time, and as its natural consequence, created in him a moral revulsion against that very power.

Of his early achievement which brought him wealth and along with it gave him back his girl, he says,

The man with the jingle of money in his pocket who married the girl a year later would always cherish an abiding distrust, an animosity toward the leisure class --- since then I have never been able to stop wondering where my friends' money came from, nor to stop thinking that one time a sort of droit de seigneur might have been exercised to give one of them my girl. (Letter 25)
That early experience is manifested in Gatsby's relations to Daisy in \textit{The Great Gatsby} whereas the following results are depicted in the relations of Dick and Nicole in \textit{Tender is the Night}. In both of these novels, Fitzgerald tries to portray the lustrous world of the rich. He also opposingly draws on the corruptibility of this world and the destructive influence money could have on human values.

Fitzgerald was acclaimed as a popular and successful writer since he started his professional career which took about 20 years. During this period, he wrote about 160 short stories. He also published four novels, two of which, that is, \textit{The Great Gatsby} (1925) and \textit{Tender is the Night} (1934) were considered his most successful ones and the other two, \textit{This Side of Paradise} (1920) and \textit{The Beautiful and Damned} (1922) were best sellers.

Fitzgerald was psychologically and financially dependent on his great achievements which decided for his reputation as a writer. It also highly affected the quality of his work. He was torn between the two forceful impulses, his own standards as a writer and those of the magazine audience. The effect of this tension was, on the one hand, a prolific writer whose great many writings were the outcome of "the expansion of a carefully limited range of his understanding," (88) as Mizener states. On the other hand, his work was the intimate illustration of the concept of life in its actual and normal sense; the normality which distinguished his work strikingly from the works of most of his contemporary fellow intellectuals, and finally, it created "the sense of intimacy in his readers."

To Fitzgerald the twenties were not any different from other periods since again you would encounter a world crowded with foolish people, "people you didn't want to know, who said 'yes, we have no bananas'" (61). Thus, he would isolate himself from the time and the world he belonged to, he understood so well, and he always wrote about.

Fitzgerald always felt a constant pressure from both his audience who wanted him to write less honestly and the critics who rarely regarded his work seriously and treated his stories and novels with a certain doubt. H.L. Menchen believed \textit{The Great Gatsby} to be "no more than a glorified anecdote," (45) and Isabel Paterson defined it as "a book for the season only" (36). Peter Quennell described \textit{Tender is the Night} as "a rather irritating type of chic." Only a few critics and
some of his very intimate friends considered his work as great and blamed him for not employing his talent where it deserved. *The Great Gatsby* failed to sell well. But between Fitzgerald's death and the publication of *The Crack-Up* in 1945, the reputation of *The Great Gatsby* and along with it, of Fitzgerald's work in general gradually, increased; by 1945, Lionel Trilling could fairly say in his introduction to New Directions' reissue of *Gatsby* that "Fitzgerald is now beginning to take his place in our literary tradition" (173). Thus, since the appearance of *The Crack-Up* that same year, Fitzgerald has received the kind of thoughtful and perceptive attention from the critics that the work of the other important writers of the twenties has.

So far many essays and articles have been written on Fitzgerald and his work and so many critics and scholars have tried their hands most specifically on *The Great Gatsby* to reflect its endurability. It engages high amazement that such a short work should evoke so much and have its impact remain so fresh for such a long time. D. E. Dyson expresses his wonder in this respect:

Thirty-six years after its appearance I would say with confidence, then, *Gatsby* has not only outlived its period and its author, but that it is one of the books that will endure." (112)

Later he goes on to attach this endurance to the concept of universality the book embeds:

Any new consideration must now, if this so, be concerned with it as a work which belongs not only to America but to world literature, not only to the immediate soil from which it sprang (prohibition, big business, gangsters, jazz, uprootedness, and the rest) but to the tragic predicament of humanity as a whole. (117)

Accordingly, Tom Burnam declares:

The squalor and splendour of Gatsby’s dreams belong, I shall suggest to the story of humanity itself; as also does the irony and judgment of his awakening. (48)

To confirm the issue, John Henry Raleigh claims in an essay that “... at its highest level *The Great Gatsby* does not deal with local customs or even national and international legends but with the permanent realities of existence” (102).

Noticing only chaos around him while possessing a strong sense of pattern, Fitzgerald tried hard to set order on his cosmos. “Fitzgerald seemed to think,” as Burnam states, “he could discover in that magic
world of the rich ‘safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor’ the sanctuary he seems always to have sought” (92).

Thus, Fitzgerald builds up dreams and illusions which fall short of the existing possibilities. He is exposed to the nothingness of the ideality he had such strong faith in. Broken down by this corruption in his real life, he gives life to the heroes of his stories to represent the disillusionment Everyman has always been forced to experience through the wreckage of his false vision about which Marius Bewley writes, “when Gatsby arrives with his ‘romantic readiness,’ his unqualified faith in Daisy’s ideal and absolute reality, he is broken against her sheer non-existence” (133). Andrew Wanning draws on the subject too: “The novel as a whole is another turn of the screw on this legend, with the impossible idealism trying to realize itself, to its utter destruction, in the gross materiality” (62).

What held of Gatsby and of Fitzgerald himself as went before, was the illusion of setting order on a chaotic world which in Gatsby’s case was to reunite with Daisy. When he confronted betrayal, his great dream disintegrated. Lionel Trilling believes Gatsby to be the genuine representation of America. As such “Gatsby can stand for America as conveniently as he can stand for himself” (12).

Paul Rosenfeld’s commentary follows the discussion closely:

*The Great Gatsby* embodies a criticism of American experience not of manners, but of a basic historic attitude to life more radical than anything in James’s own assessment of the deficiencies of his country. The theme of *Gatsby* is the withering of the American dream. (125)

Therefore, taking everyone for Everyman, in a sense, one can sympathize with Edwin Fussel “that Jay Gatsby was not the only one to pay a high price for living too long with a single dream” (16). In any case, Gatsby’s dream, whether he represents America, Everyman, or an individual, was doomed to failure and corruption because it demanded too much. The tension between the two sides of Fitzgerald’s dual nature, that is, Fitzgerald, the serious and then the popular writer, affected both the development of his reputation and the character of his work. All this led to his partial success in living as a writer.

After World War I the United States was considered as a provincial, even, at least culturally, a colonial nation that believed only Europeans were capable of creating significant books. By the
end of 1920’s, the society went under great cultural changes which affected the attitude of the general public and that of the talented and creative writers like Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, and the rest. “They were released,” according to Mizener, “from what seemed to them the stifling restrictions of the previous generations' narrow hypocritical attitudes, into a freedom that was heady with optimism” (120). Therefore, freed from the provinciality of the early twenties, they gave way to their imagination to build up a new world which was not established only on social and political bases, so that they could conceive the kind of literature which emerged out of American experience. Fitzgerald once wrote, “with Americans ordering suits by the gross in London, the Bond street tailors perforce agreed to modify their cut to the American long-waisted figure and loose-fitting taste, something subtle past to America, the style of man” (118).

Most of the intellectual people in the twenties had libertarian and individualistic rather than liberal attitudes regarding their political outlooks. “We didn't even remember anything about the Bill of Right,” Fitzgerald says of Mencken, the most distinguished political figure of the period, “until Mencken began plugging it” (92). Mencken had won the admiration and respect of a generation that had no trust for the democracy they had fought for. Yet, almost until the end of twenties, when the Sacco-Vanzetti case aroused them, they hardly cared for politics. Fitzgerald writes in 1931, “The events of 1919 left us cynical rather than revolutionary in spite of the fact that now we are all rummaging around in our trunks wondering where in hell we left the liberty cap —‘I know I had it on’— and the moujik blouse. It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all” (213).

Almost all criticism on Fitzgerald’s works and character is based on the widely approved presupposition of his obsession with money and that he was not borne to a rich family which gave him a desperate and tragic sense of life. We have all heard of his extravagances and debts, his famous remark to Hemingway, his marriage to a quite wealthy girl. Zelda Sayre, and his ravenous hunt for whatever that could be gained through money. Still it would be very superficial if we assumed he were a mere money-seeker, a pure materialist who just wanted money for money. It will be of conspicuous importance to see what was that in money that a resourceful man of Fitzgerald’s
personality and mentality was so earnestly after. The answer might be lying in the fact that Fitzgerald with his great sense of pattern was trying to find a way through which he could impose order on the chaotic world he was living in.

Therefore, he might have assumed in the “safe and proud” world of the rich “above the hot struggles of the poor” he could get what he had always been seeking. Accordingly, Gatsby was doomed to a bitter and poignant downfall since he had intended to set order on a disintegrated world; the meaning or order that he sought was embodied in Daisy, whose betraying him made his “old warm world” collapse. As a result, he had to pay “a high price for living too long with a single dream,” for the false recognition of his dream. It can be inferred then Fitzgerald, like Gatsby was forced to lose his old warm world and had to pay a high price for a single dream he had cherished so long.

Whether we consider *The Great Gatsby* as the story of America with Gatsby standing as America itself or believe it to be the representation of the tragic predicament of humanity in general while we have Gatsby playing the role of Everyman, it’s worth noticing that the story happens in “the waste land”, the “valley of ashes” where “ash-grey men” drift aimlessly, stirring up “an impenetrable cloud, which screens their obscure operations from your sight.” This is the vision that Scot Fitzgerald portrays to illustrate the human situation in an age of chaos.
References


