

SCOTT FITZGERALD AND THE JAZZ AGE

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Abstract

Jazz Age is a name given to an age in America in the early 20th century. This age is characterized by improvisation and strong rhythms of popular music which was first played by Negro groups southern U.S.A.

Fitzgerald portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed and empty pursuit of pleasure.

The reckless jubilation that led to decadent parties and wild Jazz music resulted ultimately in the corruption of the American dream, as the unrestrained desire for money and pleasure surpassed more noble goals.

Fitzgerald's methods of narration illustrate the importance of form. In most of his novels like *The side of paradise*, he introduces the theme of the search for paradise which characterized all of Fitzgerald's works. The rejection of old standards appeared forcibly in *The Beautiful and Damned*, and finally the decline of the dream appeared in *The Great Gatsby*.

The paper tries to show how does Scott Fitzgerald through his own personal behaviors not through the protagonists of his major novels reflect the material spirit of the jazz Age and the bewilderment of the lost generation between the first and the second world wars including Fitzgerald himself. The major characters of those novels are allegorical manifestations of the novelist himself in relation to his age.

America, emerging victorious from the "war to end all wars", was in a period of severe growing pains from 1919 to 1929. Her industries were booming; prosperity had reached an all-time high. Yet the idealism which had surrounded World War I and the belief in the Horatio Alger success story began to wane.

The era began with a feeling of relief from old bonds, heightened into orgiastic revelry in new-found freedom, soured into boredom, and finally collapsed with the stock market crash. At the end of World War I the American people were eager to enjoy themselves and forget about the rest of the world.

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The nation was prosperous, and new industries boomed (James Edmund, 1956). Material wealth gave the younger generation a chance to display a disillusionment it had gained from the war. Young Americans had marched off to war with patriotic phrases ringing in their ears, searching for adventure; when they returned, the pretty phrases had been replaced by realities.

In speaking of their futile search for the promised golden era, John W. Aldridge says in the preface to his book, *After the Lost Generation*, "Not only had the new age not arrived but there seemed little likelihood that it was going to; ... we concluded...that we had been keeping alive and making love to an illusion"(Aldridge: 1951, xii).

Many Americans had volunteered with the Norton – Harjes motor unit in Paris rather than going into combat service. In this way they became observers whose loyalties were not directly involved. From the sidelines they could search for the adventure and romance of the foreign countries. Those who actually fought found the harsher truths of War's false glory. This combination of attitudes was later reflected in the postwar literature; as Aldridge states, it was a "...blend of tenderness and violence, innocence and numbness...all...sad and forsaken, beautiful and damned"(p.6). Above all, the war made the younger generation think and live under the tension of war.

Prewar life seemed dull and they began to live intensely to keep up the excitement of the war years. More important, this generation could not accept the moral admonitions of parents who had promised them an ideal world, and instead had subjected them to the filth of a war without glory (Allen: 1952, 134).

Perhaps the most notable change in the social scene was the change in the feminine ideal. In 1920 woman received the franchise, which came to stand more as a symbol of equality than as a sign of an interest in politics (Allen: 1952, 133).

The emancipated woman began to bob her hair, shorten her skirts, work of a living, drink and smoke in public, and discuss freely subjects formerly taboo. Women worshipped unripened youth; strove to be playmates of men; searches for sex, not romantic love; and snubbed the traditional role of devoted mother and housewife.

The fate of the prohibition Amendment showed clearly the swift changes in social tides. In 1920 prohibition had been instituted with amazing speed, but by 1923 the hip flask had become a sign of freedom. During this time the cocktail party became an American institution, as women joined men in social drinking, speakeasies and bootleggers had a growing business and became monuments to the rebellion against old standards.

Frankness and bored experience became the order of the day. Not only did divorces become more common, but the divorce had a sophistication and scandal about her that was appealing to the age. Beneath the whole sophisticated

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veneer was disillusionment. The new generation was groping for a code to replace the one they had destroyed (Allen, Fredrick: 1957, 71).

The main command in this new society was that one enjoys oneself. The abandonment of puritanical and Victorian restraints left people free to become lost in the pursuit of happiness. The philosophy of lost ideals could easily become a religion in itself. John w. Aldridge says of this religion of lostness, "...if one believed in nothing one was obliged to practice the rituals of nothingness, and these were good and pleasurable (Aldridge: 1951, 19).

The new philosophy was not accepted by everyone, but the spokesmen for the era did. The young authors, disillusioned by the breakdown of traditional values demonstrated by World War I and the years following, became known as the "lost generation". Rejecting post war America and its seemingly deadly normalcy, they turned with some hope to exile. Accordingly to them, life in America was not worth living; therefore, the young artist had to leave the United States to preserve his talent (Aldridge, 12).

Lawrence Stearns himself went to France soon after his book was published, and most of the young American authors followed him. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, and e.e.Cummings were among those who went into exile to drink, play and write. The protests they made were not against any particular situation, but were a cry against life itself. However, negative as they were, their attitudes were stimulating to literature. Aldridge contends that their values "were at least good values for the literature of the time, and they were better than no values at all"; and Allen claims that without the old restraints on art, "[one] could tell the truth" (p.138).

The frank type of literature these authors produced even forced a change in the wording of the Pulitzer Prize. Being unable to find books which "present the wholesome atmosphere of American life and the highest standard of American manners and manhood", the judges substituted "whole" for "wholesome" and omitted reference to "highest standards" (Allen, *only yesterday*, 84).

Into the midst of this new society came F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose rise to and fortune followed closely the rise of the new order. From St.Paul, Minnesota, where he had been born in 1896, he followed his dream to the east, to Europe, and finally to the west coast. As early as his years at Princeton, he strove to be accepted as a social success. Although he had served in the army without seeing combat, he was convinced that the war had robbed his generation; as he asserted in a letter to a cousin: "...it looks as if the youth of me and my generation ends sometime during the present year;...every man I've met who's been to war, that is this war, seems to have lost youth and faith in man.... (Mizener, 1951:69).

While stationed at an army camp in Montgomery, Alabama, Fitzgerald met and fell in love with Zelda sayre. Zelda was a perfect example of the sophisticated young flapper who abounds in Fitzgerald's works. But she was

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unattainable to him because he didn't have the money to give her everything she wanted. Although she said she loved him, Zelda continued to date others, and Fitzgerald knew that he must raise money and win her quickly. During the summer of 1919 he went back to St. Paul and revised an old manuscript; it became *This Side of Paradise*.

When Scribner's accepted the book for publication, he had Zelda become engaged, and as soon as it came out they were married. This incentive to produce for Zelda continued throughout his life and led him to write volumes of second class short stories to pay the bills for their extravagant living.*

This side of paradise introduces the theme of the search for paradise which characterized all of Fitzgerald's works. The rejection of old standards and the acceptance of happiness as the primary goal first appear here, grow in *The Beautiful and Damned*, reach a peak in *The Great Gatsby*, and fall in utter disillusionment in *Tender is the Night*. Although each new book stretches further for paradise in Fitzgerald's novels, his judgment of the age becomes highly critical. Maxwell Geismar explains this search for paradise in Fitzgerald's major novels as "one which springs from the hero's consciousness of guilt and his need for expiation". (292).

Arthur Mizener attributes the reality of Fitzgerald's books to the fact that "The myths of his fiction were made out of the concrete experiences and the social ideals of his world..."(p.90).

This side of paradise described for the first time the frank attitude of young Americans trying to live according to their new standards. The book became a proclamation for the younger generation. As it defines its own plight:

Here was a new generation, shouting the old
cries, learning the old creeds...destined finally
to go out into that dirty gray turmoil ...grown up to
find all gods dead all wars fought, all
faiths in man shaken.

(Francis, 1920, 304)

The Beautiful and Damned, which was published in 1922, definitely reflected the Fitzgerald's own relationships. In the book the search for paradise takes the form of Anthony and Gloria's search for love. The crumbling of their love after marriage represents the crumbling of paradise. Anthony's chief frustration begins with Gloria because she is both his ideal and his jailor. (Goismar, 304).

In a letter to his daughter in 1938 Fitzgerald told of ambivalent feelings toward Zelda:

When I was your age I lived with a great dream, ...
then the dream divided one day when I decided to
marry your mother after all, even though I knew she
was spoiled and meant no good to me ... you came
along and for a long time we made quite a lot of

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happiness out of our lives. But I was a man divided –
she wanted me to work too much for her and not
enough for my dream. (Miezner,122).

The Great Gatsby, generally acknowledged as Fitzgerald's best novel, brings to a high point the idea of paradise lost and corrupted. In *Gatsby* is found the final failure of the American dream. From obscure beginnings in the Midwest, *Gatsby*, like Fitzgerald himself, climbs the financial ladder to social prominence. His great empire centers on his week – end parties, to which most people come uninvited. These are seen through the eyes of Nick Carraway, who serves as judge of all the participants.

Gatsby's dream of Daisy is corrupted in itself, and he spends all his time striving for a moment past. He tries to manufacture and buy happiness. The tragedy is not *Gatsby* to separate these two elements of his own person. He was seeking to express the consequences of such a abandonment and belief in bought pleasure.

Fitzgerald's own life had become one of increased drunkenness and thrills. He found that to satisfy Zelda he had to give endless parties, and to pay for these he had to write second – class literature. He was constantly in debt, more from an unconcern about money than anything else. Mizener expresses his dilemma clearly:

So, distrusting the methods by which money is
acquired and disliking the money these methods
produced..., he slaved his conscience by noticing the
money itself as little as possible and refusing to live
in awe of it.(p.23)

Tied up with his carelessness about money was the fact that Fitzgerald always believed that he could make himself famous. More than this, he believed that he deserved to make money for his effort. His cardinal belief in this manufactured paradise is stated in *The Crack up*: "Life was something you dominated if you were any good. Life yielded easily to intelligence and effort..." (Fitzgerald, 1945,69).

In 1925 he went to France to work on a new book and save money. Instead, he partied on, sometimes being drunk for weeks at a time. Two trends in his life became apparent at this time. First, his drinking developed into alcoholism; and second, much of his practical joking became less funny and more destructive. (Mizner, 26-36). He returned to America in two years, and after having done almost no work, he was worn out by the gay life.

Fitzgerald later wrote that it was at this time that crack – up in the search for paradise became evident. His later years evolved his view of his own personal crack – up, as well as that of his society. His wife became insane and spent many years in an institution, while Fitzgerald himself sought to express his

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own emotional numbness. It seemed that their intense living had sucked all feeling for life from the Fitzgerald's.

Near the end of his life he withdrew from society to write in solitude. Of his own personality he said, "I have now become a writer only. The man I had persistently tried to be become such a burden that I cut him loose..." (Fitzgerald, 83)

At this time he spoke of his youthful happiness as a parallel to the boom:

and I think that my happiness, or talent for
self – delusion or what you will, was an exception. It
was not the natural thing that the unnatural.
Unnatural as the Boom and my recent experience
parallels the waves of despair that swept the nation
when the Boom was over. (Fitzgerald, 84).

Tender is the Night, which was published in 1934, shows this utter deterioration of paradise. Perhaps most significant is the setting of Europe, symbolizing the "exile's" last hope. In the end, Doctor Diver turns his back on Europe as a final repudiation of the corrupted paradise. (Alderidge, 46-48).

In 1940 Fitzgerald died of a second heart attack, leaving the unfinished manuscript for *The Last Tyoon*. He died while working feverishly to complete it, and thus was thwarted in his final attempt at greatness. Many critics feel that it might have indeed been a great book. "That this harvest was denied him", contend Leo and Miriam Gurko, "seems the ...ironic frustration...of a man whose reputation will...rest upon his several studies of irony and frustration". (P.372-376).

Stahr, the main character in *The Last Tyoon*, was the builder of an industry, who possessed qualities of brilliance and organization. But Fitzgerald saw this type of capitalist, the highly personal creator and manager of a large enterprise, acting an impossible role in the society that followed the twenties. Although Fitzgerald admired much about his type, Stahr was doomed, Fitzgerald was now attacking what he had always considered dull – the business world. This attack was part of the writers' protest against the capitalism which was maturing and changing in the thirties. (Goismar, p.370).

The pilgrimage to paradise had almost reached its conclusion, and Aldridge explained it as a cycle of frustration:

Amory Blaine's infatuation with wealth set the
Key for Anthony Patch's corruption by wealth
In *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald sounded the futility of
his dream only to re – embrace the rich in Dick
Diver and discover the real futility of the
Spiritually bankrupt; and as Anthony, *Gatsby*,
and Dick were destroyed, so Stahr prepares us
for the final destruction, that ultimate collapse
of self which comes after all dreams have died. (p.56)

Most critics agree that the real significance of F. Scott Fitzgerald lies in his accurate reflection of the nineteen twenties. Mark Schorer draws a parallel between his life and the life of the twenties: "His life was an allegory of life between two wars, and his gift lay in the ability to discover figures which could enact the allegory to the full"(p.188). One could almost make a graphic of his life, the social life of the twenties, and his book to show the same feverish searching for new values. The innovators of the twenties had produced a revolution in social standards which brought only destruction to themselves. They had learned that the roads of extreme lead to ruin. Their search for adventure and romance, for escape from sterility, led in the end to that very sterility. (Alderidge, p.22).

What matters and will continue to matter is
That we have before us the work of a man who gave
us better than anyone else the true
substance of an age, the dazzle and fever and ruin.
(p.58).

Conclusion

When World War 1 ended in 1918, the generation of young Americans who had fought the war became intensely disillusioned, as the brutal carnage that they had just faced made the Victorian social morality of early twentieth century America seem like stuffy, empty hypocrisy. The dizzying rise of the stock market in the aftermath of the war led to a sudden, sustained increase in the national wealth and a newfound materialism, as people began to spend and consume at unprecedented levels. A person from any social background could, potentially, make a fortune, but the American aristocracy families scorned the newly rich industrialists and speculators. Additionally, the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919, which banned the sale of alcohol, created a thriving underworld designed to satisfy the massive demand for bootleg liquor among rich and poor alike.

As Fitzgerald saw it, the American dream was originally about discovery, individualism, and the pursuit of false happiness. In the 1920s, as depicted in his novel, easy money and relaxed social values have corrupted this dream, especially on the East Coast. The main plotlines of his novels reflect this assessment.

This theme of the search for material happiness and the rejection of traditional values appear in *This side of Paradise*. The novel that was intended to satisfy the novel own ambition of wealth and fame to marry his sweet heart Zelda. The failure of the main characters in *The Beautiful and the Damned*, Antony and Gloria is another father manifestation of the decline of the American Dream.

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In *The Great Gatsby*, the most popular and successful novel of Fitzgerald, the protagonist represents in a more tragic tone the rise and fall of that dream of paradise. He seeks to buy happiness in terms of spending money and giving weekend parties. Similarly, in *Tender is the Night*, Doctor Diver decides eventually to turn his back on Europe as a reputation of that corrupted paradise.

Fitzgerald's last and unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon* is his bitterest attack for the dull world of business which he admired at the beginning of his life. The novel tells of Stahr, the capitalist who has all the privileges of material success. But here is doomed as the embodiment of the inhumane capitalism of the thirties.

Fitzgerald's life and work were then a manifestation of the material spirit of the jazz age. His characters and personal experiences are inseparable in this respect. They show a pilgrimage to false happiness ending in loss and frustration.

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