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FRANCIS SCOTT FITZGERALD: VOICE OF THE TWENTIES

A Research Paper

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Mrs. Martha Black

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FRANCIS SCOTT FITZGERALD: VOICE OF THE TWENTIES

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FRANCIS SCOTT FITZGERALD: VOICE OF THE TWENTIES

With all the flamboyant, glitter, and riotous excitement one can muster up, the age of the Twenties brought to America an era not to be forgotten. Gangsters, flappers, and two-bit saloons were all encompassed in this "Jazz-Age" which spread its influence from shore to shore. Americans became, in a sense, optimists and as optimists looked toward their social and financial situation as fundamentally sound and triumphant over its predecessors. They identified themselves with their century. Its teens were their teens, its world war was their war, and its Twenties were their Twenties. Launching forward they looked about for a spokesman, and the first to be found was in the person of Francis Scott Fitzgerald.

At the age of twenty-three after the publication of his first novel, this spokesman had the sort of background that his generation regarded as representative. Born in St. Paul on September 24, 1896, Fitzgerald was an average Mid-Western boy of rather small social standing and a very slim fortune inherited by his mother. Help from a maiden aunt helped Scott to realize his early dream, that of attending Princeton. There he liked to imagine himself the romantic hero and had to do much to find a place for himself among his classmates. During his college career he wrote a large part of two musical comedies; these contained

the first of the Fitzgerald flappers. After joining the army in 1917 he fell in love with a judge's daughter, Zelda Sayre. They weren't married, however, until financial matters looked brighter for Scott in 1920. It was about this time that Fitzgerald launched his career in writing and that his contemporaries began to recognize him as the voice of their generation.

The point has to be made, however, that Fitzgerald was not "typical" of his own age or any other. "He lived harder than most people have ever lived and acted out his dreams with an extraordinary intensity of emotion."¹ It was this emotion teamed with an honesty with which he expressed it that made Fitzgerald's work distinguished from that of others. He continued to feel grateful to the "Jazz-Age", because he claimed that it gave him more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did. Magazines began to become eager to print his stories and were willing to pay high prices for them. Others began to recognize themselves in Fitzgerald's own hopes, dreams, misadventures, and discoveries.

"In short Fitzgerald was part of a second great wave of romanticism in the world within a century."² The masculine ideal of the Twenties came to be what Fitzgerald called the old dream of being an entire man

¹Malcolm Cowley, The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), p. 9.

²Milton Hinders, F. Scott Fitzgerald: In Introduction and Interpretation (Chicago: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968), p. 3.

in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition with an American touch. This romantic idea was even apparent to Fitzgerald as he often related his and Zelda's life to those characters he created in his novels.

The thing which most enchanted the followers of this "laurete of the Jazz-Age", however, was that he lived a life much in keeping with what he wrote and for whom he wrote. In Arthur Mizener's The Far Side of Paradise, a complete and most captivating biography of the life of Francis Scott Fitzgerald, one readily sees how the spirit of the Twenties was embodied in Fitzgerald. He and Zelda, it is said, would have been difficult enough apart; together they were impossible. Each seemed to have brought out the worst weaknesses of the other, but at the same time they created for themselves an illusion of what some call social acceptance. In a sense, then, they complemented each other. Zelda and Scott were exemplary of the riotous type of individual so common to the age. Going to a party one on the roof and the other on the hood of a car was typical of the pair. Running like two careless school children in and out of traffic on crowded 57th Street was only one of their tamer adventures. Scott once said that "America was going on the greatest, guadiest spree in history and there was going to be plenty to tell about".³ It was a gay age, indeed, to tell about - as well as to live as far as Fitzgerald was concerned.

³Cowley, op. cit., p. 10.

If one could say what the heart of Fitzgerald's appeal is, it would be that in a time of general rebelliousness and breakdown of traditions and a worship of youth by America, he became himself the greatest worshiper of youth and the defender of its standards. Fitzgerald lived in his great moments and then relived them in his work, but he also had the insight to stand apart from them and foresee their causes and consequences. By living in the story he seemed to become wiser than he was in ordinary life. He even said himself that sometimes he went back and read his own books for advice on his own problems. He was faithful to his own vision of the world and his own way of expressing it. In a sense, he wrote a living history of his time in which manners and morals were constantly changing. His generation in the end, however, was defeated by life but still Fitzgerald was its representative figure.

For a complete study of Fitzgerald's works, one must recognize that his life as a writer was divided into three parts. The first began shortly after publication of This Side of Paradise, his first novel which was very typical of his early years in college. After this first book, which is claimed to be good only as a record of the time, Fitzgerald wrote of his dreams of success and happiness. In this group is included what is perhaps considered Fitzgerald's greatest novel, The Great Gatsby. Defining in the book his own personality as "an unbroken series of successful gestures,"⁴ F. Scott Fitzgerald has rejected wisdom, moderation, and restraint as ideals of human conduct. It has been said that this particular novel is one of the few important works

⁴Hinders, op. cit., p. 5.

to come out of contemporary American literature. It is seemingly a work of art that encompasses human emotion with life in the great era of the Twenties. Some have compared it with Turgenev's Fathers and Sons due to the representation of each of a whole civilization at a critical point in its history.

With carefully chosen words, phrases, and symbols each used as a contribution to the feeling of unity, Fitzgerald has written a novel designed to leave a firm impression. He mixes a dash of romance with portions of what might be called "brutal" realism and then immerses the entire work in irony. Alluding to this impression which Fitzgerald hoped to create he said, "It must be conveyed, but carefully once, and not rubbed in. If the reader misses it, let it go - don't repeat." ⁵

The heroes which Fitzgerald creates in The Great Gatsby start out as different persons but then are transformed as he worked them over into the image of the author. Fitzgerald himself admits that the image of Jay Gatsby himself is blurred and patchy, but this blurry effect actually adds what might be called a sense of mystery to the novel. Nick Carraway, the narrator of the story, becomes as a voice for Fitzgerald especially in instances such as when he says, "When I was a young man, my own happiness ... often approached such ecstasy that I could not share it even with the person dearest to me but had to walk it away in quiet streets and lanes with only fragments of it to distill into little lines in books." ⁶

⁵Ibid., p. 38.

⁶Arthur Mizener, The Fitzgerald Reader (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 18.

Fitzgerald seems to be dreaming of a world in which one is not always aware of how persistent and powerful the unmagical, habit-forming routine of everyday life can be. In The Great Gatsby, thus, the novelist lets ordinary life prevent the realization of this dream as in Gatsby's life. The voice, however, which Fitzgerald presents is most persuasive and is given to the most coherent character with a defined point of view - Nick Carraway. Carraway is one of the happier inventions of the author and sets the moral tone of the story. He is extremely conscious of ethical standards and the morality of yesterday. Through his eyes are seen the realization of new and up-coming tendencies, and through his thoughts and speeches are evidenced Fitzgerald's own ideas.

It is Gatsby, however, who seems to be the most complex character in the novel. He regards life itself as a stage and the people thereon as players much as did Shakespeare. The individual this time, however, is stuck with only one part instead of many. That part is one created by his adolescent imagination. Gatsby has virtually no language of his own but communicates more effectively with his "silences". Gatsby represents the ordinary American, the aristocrat, and the realization of the romantic dream. To succeed in capturing a bit of American life of the time seems to be the main object not only of Jay Gatsby's presence in the novel but of the theme of the book itself. Again comparing The Great Gatsby to Fathers and Sons one can see that Gatsby's role is much like that of the nineteenth-century nihilist Bazarov. Both heroes, however, arrive at equally destructive and materialistic ends.

"The triumph of Fitzgerald is to make the reader feel the attraction and force of all those old-fashioned rules of moral behavior of which his characters are unaware." ⁷ The story has something as compelling as a Greek tragedy. Irony runs entirely throughout the book with circumstances of unusual odds evidencing themselves. Each person is shown as receiving in the strictest measure exactly what he deserves, not escaping what might be termed a higher law. The superiority of The Great Gatsby depends on a real extension of the range of Fitzgerald's voice and not merely by using it as a narrative device in the form of Nick Carraway.

The second period of Fitzgerald's work perhaps reached its height with the publication of Tender Is The Night, exemplifying the sensual fatigue and grief of his gradual withdrawal from dreams. The critical shift from hope to a note of despair in the balance of Fitzgerald's feelings came in the middle Twenties when he gave up all hope of Zelda, his wife, recovering from an emotional breakdown. During the rest of his career all one can hear in his voice is an acceptance of everyday actuality. "The recollection of delight, the pride of achievement, is there only as irony, as an implicit awareness of the loss this acceptance entails." ⁸ The voice soon becomes one of a man who has measured the reality of his situation with complete objectivity and accepted it. With the coming of Tender Is The Night some critics have said the decline of Fitzgerald's powers began. The defects of the book seem insignificant compared to

⁷Cowley, op. cit., p. 48.

⁸Mizener, op. cit., p. 25.

its rich texture, sureness of language, and depth of understanding. Compared to it The Great Gatsby in structure appears rather neat and simple.

Fitzgerald worked perhaps longer and harder on Tender Is The Night than any of his other works. The novel underwent somewhat of a "metamorphosis" between its conception in 1925 and publication in 1934. "The truth is that the idea of the novel never really jellied in it's creator's mind; it emerged as a mass of literary protoplasm containing unfinished suggestions of possible forms."⁹ Although read in the thirties, it dealt with fashionable life in the twenties at a time when most readers wanted to forget that they had ever been concerned with such a riotous way of life. The new fashion at that time was for novels of destitution and revolt. They, thus, dismissed Fitzgerald's work as having a clever and brilliant surface without being wise and mature. The author could not bring himself to the realization that the trouble with his work was he himself and how he related to the public rather than a flaw in style or language.

Fitzgerald's own conception of the theme of Tender Is The Night was given when he said,

"The novel should do this. Show a man who is a natural idealist, a spoiled priest, giving in for various causes to the ideas of the haute bourgeoisie, and in his rise to the top of the social world losing his idealism, his talent and turning to drink and dissipation. Background one in which the leisure class is at their truly most brilliant and glamorous."¹⁰

Even though Fitzgerald did have a direct purpose in mind, the inadequate public response to his novel may have been due to the public's

⁹ Hinders, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 55.

awareness of the author's confused sense of values. The best way to illustrate this confusion would be to examine the development of one of the main characters, Dick Diver.

Diver was a brilliant and promising young psychiatrist and one of attention to the most fashionable society on the Mediterranean Coast of France. At the end of the story, however, he degenerates into an obscure, wandering country doctor in the small towns of upper New York State. The world for him ended in the final portion of the novel "not with a bang but a wimper." Therefore, the reader is quite likely to be depressed by this mournful ending.

It is somewhat sad to watch this fate overtake such a charming character as Dick Diver whose only fault could be said to be attributed to an exaggeration of good nature than some glaring bad trait. "In portraying Dick Diver, Fitzgerald, contrary to his intention, both began and ended with an individual, missing completely the 'type' which the individual may have represented."¹¹ Nor does he succeed in fulfilling his aim of making the novel's background one in which the leisure class is the most glamorous. There is little glamor in Fitzgerald's characters as they live their superficial lives on the shores of the Mediterranean.

Although failing to communicate in the story any broadly conceived social evil or purpose, Fitzgerald may have had in mind the relating of shortcomings as he saw them in American civilization. The America as he saw it is the home of eternal optimism based mainly on illusion. The prevailing attitude on material things as evidenced in Dick's personality

¹¹ Cowley, op. cit., p. 34.

can be paralleled to the American man at least in Fitzgerald's conception of him. There is also a noticeable contrast between inherited wealth and earned income - just as in what the author termed "modern America."

America, however, is not the only target of satire in Tender Is The Night. The English and French alike are both alluded to time after time. "The Europeans in the story are sponges at the feast prepared for them by Americans, and they show not the slightest gratitude to their benefactors once their usefulness is ended." ¹² The weakness of the novel as a whole cannot be detected readily because they are disguised by the use of some quite effective writing. The failure, if it can be pin-pointed is an over-all failure of form. Fitzgerald did not clearly define his purpose, thus leading to an incontestable fault of style. Still, however, Tender Is The Night is now ranked second best among Fitzgerald's works.

Due to a serious breakdown both physically and mentally, the third phase of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's literary career is marked by small production of below average works. In his novel The Crack Up Fitzgerald himself exposed his own personal problems to the world in an honest effort to achieve a stance of literary truth. He revealed his intimate worries and defined his position as one of a "cracked plate, the kind that one wonders whether it is worth preserving." ¹³ The causes of the breakdown were not mysterious, and Arthur Mizener has described them with great understanding in The Far Side of Paradise. He revealed everything, that

¹² Hinders, op. cit., p. 69.

¹³ Cowley, op. cit., p. 21.

is, all but his acute state of alcoholism. Doing so he tried hard not to hurt others but only himself. Fitzgerald often explained that he exposed himself in such a manner so as to tell the essential truth about the world and himself. He simply tried to tell his own story in his own style.

This third period of temporary silence soon gave way, however, to the intensely moving stories of Fitzgerald's last literary period. His quiet stories written somewhat in a different vein much as if another person were responsible for them were characteristic of this final expounding of ideas. He was hard at work on The Last Tycoon when on December 21, 1940, Francis Scott Fitzgerald's heart literally "cracked up". He died before completing this last work.

Thus ended the career and thus hushed the voice of one of America's most characteristic and yet most criticized authors. Fitzgerald lives on, however, in his own age of his own people in the pages of his novels and short stories. To study his life and works is a great challenge, but that challenge is met with a great awareness of having discovered an individualism unique to only a few. For to study Fitzgerald one must delve into the heart of his work remembering that it was he who was trapped in a disastrous end which was much of his own making. One must not, however, forget the influence of time and place of his work. Fitzgerald became close to his readers if for no other reason than he wrote directly to and for them. He was their spokesman - he was their voice. A trumpeteer of an age of individualism, excitement, crime, and final disaster was this "laureate of the Jazz-Age".

"Perhaps the strongest mark of the early Twenties is the widespread conviction - so much stronger than their superficial cynicism - that

anyone could do anything; it was a wonderful and inspiring conviction and encouraged all sorts of people to achievements they might never otherwise have attempted." ¹⁴ Maybe it was this strange incentive that placed itself in the innermost folds of Fitzgerald's brain and spurred him on to the writing of novels unlike any previously evidenced. The struggle against defeat of the times is seen in Fitzgerald's own struggle with life itself. Ideas, morals, and attitudes of his age were all encompassed in what he had to say and directly influenced how he said it. No, Francis Scott Fitzgerald may not be remembered for his fluid lines or his picturesque and flowery phrases, but he, indeed, will not be forgotten for making an age of America so distinct in the minds of each coming generation that they shall never need ask what happened in that rebellious but glamorous era of the Twenties.

¹⁴ Arthur Mizener, The Far Side of Paradise (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951), p. 13.

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