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**PENELOPE FITZGERALD'S FICTION  
AND LITERARY CAREER:  
FORM AND CONTEXT**

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to examine Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction and literary career in relation to the development of contemporary English writing. Although Fitzgerald is recognized as an English writer of some significance, her fiction is less familiar than that of many of her contemporaries, a fact that relates to the way in which new fiction is read, recognized, rewarded and written about.

Through investigating the issues of form and context, the thesis contends that the novelist's paradoxical standing in contemporary British literature not only suggests a focal shift of Britain's literary culture during the past three decades, it also points to the existence of a complex set of categories that can lead to the exclusion of some authors. The central argument of this thesis is that Fitzgerald's versatile literary career provides evidence of a closed literary Establishment whose values are being perpetuated through its intricate interrelations with the culture industry.

The investigation of Fitzgerald's equivocal success, of the decisive change in Britain's recent cultural perspective, involves raising questions around canon-formation, the consolidation of a national identity, strategies of writing, and the politics of reading. I have found it necessary to examine aspects of theme, form, genre and context in Fitzgerald's writing, focusing successively on convention and subversion in her work. This 'doubleness' has generated the two-part structure of the present thesis, the first book-length study of Fitzgerald's work.

Part One examines the canonical literariness of Fitzgerald's novels through studying literary conventions and thematic preoccupations. It aims to elucidate Fitzgerald's fiction through the tradition of liberal humanism. The canon of English literature is more than a settled corpus, it involves a set of prescribed criteria which, I argue, is the cornerstone of Fitzgerald's literary success as a novelist, biographer, and literary critic.

Contemporary British fiction has undergone a focal sea-change seen in its preoccupation with linguistic experimentation, typographical innovation, and topical engagement with current issues. Fitzgerald's fiction is out of step with current critical paradigms, and thus tends to get caught between the canonical and the contemporary. Part Two explores the impact of postmodern approaches on Fitzgerald's fiction, and examines the ways in which age, race, gender, identity and the nation have impinged on her writing.

The scope of this study, therefore, comprises gender, writing, and the culture industry. In view of the scarcity of criticism on Fitzgerald's work, and apart from the more obvious critical concerns regarding authorship and periodisation, this thesis draws on a variety of critical perspectives in order to achieve a historical and contextual understanding of Fitzgerald's fiction and literary career in relation to contemporary British fiction.



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I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, Dr Chien-Chih Lu and Mrs Mei-Ying Lu-Chiang. There are different kinds of 'doctor', I have chosen the field of the mind and imagination. Be proud of me.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION: THE PARADOX

The Booker Prize notwithstanding, Fitzgerald has never achieved the ‘flavour of the month’ publicity of other winners. But compare her to some of our contemporary heavyweight women novelists, the politicians, the feminists, the sex-obsessed, the fairy-tale tellers, the working-class snapshotters, and she emerges with distinction.<sup>1</sup>

-- Gerda Charles

From virtually the outset of her career as a novelist, Penelope Fitzgerald’s work has attracted serious critical attention. Her second novel, *The Bookshop* (1978), was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, which is Britain’s most valuable literary award, worth £10,000 to the winner. She won the Booker Prize in 1980 with her third novel; *Offshore* (1979). Her writing couples a traditionally moral humanist approach with a supple, spare style; her novels are short, but not slight.<sup>2</sup>

-- Catherine Wells Cole

### 1.1) POINT OF DEPARTURE

#### **The Paradox of Penelope Fitzgerald’s Success**

The central concern of this thesis rests on the paradoxical reception of Fitzgerald’s literary writing. The objective of this study is to elucidate Fitzgerald’s fiction — including the novelist’s treatment of theme, form, and genre — by way of exploring the issues of literary canon formation, and the relationship between identity and strategies of writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerda Charles, ‘Penelope Fitzgerald’, in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. D. L. Kirkpatrick (London: St. James Press, 1986), pp. 294-296, p.296.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Wells Cole, ‘Penelope Fitzgerald’, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Novelists Since 1960*, vol. 14, ed. Jay L. Halio (Detroit: Gale Research, 1983), pp.302-308, p.302.



The paradox of Fitzgerald's literary achievement, I contend, rests on the fact that as a Booker winner and acclaimed significant literary voice in present-day English fiction, she is nonetheless under-read and under-criticised, in spite of the accessibility of her literary language. My thesis intends to make a virtue of this obscurity, and celebrate the achievement of Fitzgerald's literary writing. The two authoritative reference books cited above represent the different critical perspectives on Penelope Fitzgerald. These epigraphs indicate not only the novelist's equivocal standing in contemporary British fiction, but also the critical doubt and hesitancy associated with the novelist's position. Gerda Charles notes that the unpopularity of Fitzgerald's novels arises from the fact that her novels refuse to be easily accommodated within the currently recognized categories of contemporary literature. While Charles praises Fitzgerald's distinguished yet unrecognised achievement, Catherine Wells Cole considers that Fitzgerald has 'attracted serious critical attention' from the beginning of her career as a novelist.

Apart from winning the Booker Prize in 1979 — not 1980 — with *Offshore*, Fitzgerald has also been shortlisted for the same prize on three separate occasions: with *The Bookshop* in 1978, *The Beginning of Spring* in 1988, and *The Gate of Angels* in 1990. Not only is Fitzgerald a Booker Prize winner, she has also won other prizes, such as the 1985 British Academy Crawshay Prize for *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends*, and the 1998 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in the United States with *The Blue Flower*, the first year in which non-USA citizens were eligible for this award.

Fitzgerald's novels have all received favourable, even enthusiastic, reviews from well-known critics and academics like Anita Brookner, A. S. Byatt, and Frank Kermode, to name but three. There is little doubt that she is recognised as a significant novelist to date — a point suggestive of a highbrow elitism implied in both the epigraphs. Favourable reviews of her fiction and her success both in the Booker Prize and the USA attest to her success as a major English writer.



Nevertheless, in terms of critical studies, the novelist and her works have remained curiously disregarded.

In the light of this general unawareness of an apparently significant prize-winning novelist, I sent out exploratory questionnaires to 15 British academics in England, Wales, and Scotland, who specialise in contemporary English fiction, and whose institutions offer taught courses on contemporary literature in English, particularly at postgraduate level.<sup>3</sup> Ten out of fifteen selected institutions replied. The result of this small-scale survey confirms the perception that Fitzgerald is being reviewed with ebullience, read appreciatively but not widely, and neither taught nor written about critically.

Among all these English Literature departments, none teaches the works of Penelope Fitzgerald in any form. Moreover, only two out of ten academics indicated an awareness of the novelist's reputation and works: one is fully aware of all of Fitzgerald's four novels that have appeared in the Booker's shortlists, while the other is only aware of her winning title. The result of this exploratory survey suggests that a large percentage of academic fiction readers are not familiar with Fitzgerald's novels because they are rarely incorporated into teaching. Moreover, the degree of obscurity of Fitzgerald's fiction in an academic context might quite possibly suggest a similar degree of unfamiliarity among general readers.

The sales performance of Fitzgerald's novels would also serve as a sociological index of the general reception of her fiction. In this regard I have pursued various possibilities — writing to the Booker Prize Management Committee, Fitzgerald's publisher, and even the novelist herself — but all in vain.

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<sup>3</sup> The exploratory survey is included as Appendix A. The selection of these institutions and the respondents is not a random process, but one based on the strength and expertise of those English Departments in the field of contemporary literature. To decide the choice of institution, I went through the list of English Departments in Britain, and from those offering postgraduate taught courses in contemporary literature I selected fifteen. The selection of respondents was then made through resorting to the Internet for staff research interests at the website of these institutions. All the questionnaires were sent to specific academics who specialise in contemporary fiction in Britain. Since the questionnaire asks details of the teaching material selection, on a few occasions some of the questionnaires were passed on to other members in the departments to offer more helpful insight.



While HarperCollins refuses to reply, the novelist herself and Martyn Goff, the chairman of the Booker Prize Management Committee, could offer no detailed information on the sales of Fitzgerald's novels in Britain and abroad.

The fact that so far there has been very little academic interest in the novelist's works is curious. Currently, apart from a few review articles and introductory entries in major reference works, there are only two critical essays that deal with Fitzgerald's novels.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, in the official account of the history of Somerville College, Oxford, Pauline Adams observes that the college has a strong tradition in literature as shown in the so called 'Somerville School of Novelists' ranging from Dorothy Sayers, Vera Brittain, Margaret Kennedy in the 1920s, to the more contemporary Iris Murdoch, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Maggie Gee.<sup>5</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, herself a former member of that college, is omitted.

The present study is prompted by this mix of exposure and oversight with regard to Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction and, to my knowledge, is the only sustained account that seeks to examine Fitzgerald's literary writing extensively and in depth. Fiction writing has historically been a female occupation, and recent British fiction has seen a huge rise in women writers like Muriel Spark, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing and Anita Brookner, who are contemporaneous with Fitzgerald and have all appeared as either Booker Prize winners or shortlisted authors. But compared with Fitzgerald, they have all been widely received, read and studied with popular as well as critical interest. Given Fitzgerald's prize-winning career,

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<sup>4</sup> The only two academically critical essays on Fitzgerald's fiction are: Jean Sudrann, "Magic or Miracles": The Fallen World of Penelope Fitzgerald's Novels', in *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 105-127. Bruce Bawer, 'A still, small voice: the novels of Penelope Fitzgerald', in *The New Criterion*, Vol. 10, No. 7 (March 1992), pp.33-42. There is a brief mention, no more than a few lines, of Fitzgerald in Margaret Crosland's *Beyond the Lighthouse: English Women Novelists in the Twentieth Century* (London: Constable, 1981), p.216.

<sup>5</sup> Pauline Adams, *Somerville for Women: An Oxford College 1879-1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.360. In another official account, *The History of the University of Oxford: The Twentieth Century*, edited by Brian Harrison (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), Fitzgerald's connection with Oxford as an established novelist is briefly acknowledged along with that of other writers.



the fact that she remains less familiar begs the question as to how exactly a new author is received and perceived.

### **Penelope Fitzgerald**

Penelope Mary Fitzgerald, *née* Knox, was born in Lincoln, on the seventeenth of December 1916. The family she came from was distinguished by achievement in letters and religion. It was a family privileged in terms of culture and education, among whom writing and reading constituted an essential part of family life. Both her parents were from clerical families — both of Fitzgerald's grandfathers were bishops — and, as Fitzgerald says in her brief autobiographical piece on the family's cultural heritage, 'vicarages were the intellectual powerhouses of nineteenth-century England'.<sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald's family background was enviably elitist, in terms of education and cultural depth. Her father and three uncles all had scholarships to either Oxford or Cambridge and were respected Edwardian intellectuals. Being 'poor but clever', in Fitzgerald's own words, scholarship was the only way to education and subsequent success.<sup>7</sup> Fitzgerald followed in her family's footsteps and earned herself a scholarship, as her mother did before her, to read English at Somerville College, Oxford. She received a degree with first-class honours in 1939.

After her graduation from Oxford, Fitzgerald moved among a variety of jobs, including the BBC, the Ministry of Food, and various schools. It is only at the age of fifty-nine that her literary career officially takes off. Fitzgerald started as a biographer. Her first literary work, *Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography*

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<sup>6</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, 'Penelope Fitzgerald', in *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series*, Vol. 10, ed. Mark Zadrozny (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), pp.101-109, p.102. Reprint courtesy of the novelist.

<sup>7</sup> In a recent interview Penelope Fitzgerald talks of her own educational path: starting from the age of seven at a boarding school, then a scholarship to Wycombe Abbey, and another to Oxford. See Jonathan Sale, 'Passed/Failed: Penelope Fitzgerald', in *The Independent* (18 February 1999), Education, p.7.



(1975), was followed by another two: *The Knox Brothers* (1977), and *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends* (1984). She has also edited the incomplete work by William Morris, *The Novel on Blue Paper* (1983).

Fitzgerald started writing fiction with *The Golden Child* in 1977. Her novels are either set in the family milieu, or they are set in the work place, often within institutions. Some of them do cover both surroundings with varying degrees of emphasis. What most interests Penelope Fitzgerald as a novelist is how to focus on individuals as microcosms through which the characters' social or emotional experiences, no matter how inconsequential they may appear, are closely related to the impact of the fractured outer world.

To date, Fitzgerald has written nine novels. In my study I have divided them into two groups according to their setting: the England novels and the overseas novels. Fitzgerald's early works are set in the south-east of England. These novels of England, as can be imagined, deal with local events and individuals in English society. By contrast, her later works are set on foreign soil, such as Florence, Moscow, and German university towns like Jena and Leipzig. None of her stories deals with the present or the immediate future. Most of them are set in the first half of the twentieth century, with the exception of *The Golden Child*, set in the 1970s but strongly reminiscent of a Fifties milieu, and *The Blue Flower*, set in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

Fitzgerald's latest novel, *The Blue Flower*, was published in 1995. Since then, she has largely devoted herself to literary journalism and occasional short story writing. Fitzgerald starts her review career in 1980 and since then has been a frequent contributor to the *London Review of Books*, and more recently to the *Times Literary Supplement* and *New York Times Book Review*. Recently she has also been invited to sit on the Booker Prize judging-panel in 1991 and 1998. Given the fact that her literary criticism and short stories are scattered in various sources, uncollected, and in view of their relative inaccessibility, I shall draw on them only as secondary resources in relation to the study presented here.

Nonetheless, the thesis takes full account of all aspects of Fitzgerald's literary writing with the primary focus on her fiction, and — in view of the almost completed career of her fiction — aims at a full-length critical study of it.



## 1.2) INQUIRIES AND METHODOLOGIES

### Primary Concerns

What is the general perception of a contemporary work of fiction? In Britain at least, the mere mention of ‘contemporary’ fiction may suggest linguistic experimentation, typographical innovation, or cutting-edge subject-matter: drugs, sex, violence, or social deprivation. Periodized as contemporary, Fitzgerald’s novels by contrast painfully summon a sense of ‘silence’. Considered as an important, even one of the best, writers of contemporary fiction in England, Fitzgerald is nonetheless unfamiliar to the common and academic reader.<sup>8</sup> This is one aspect of her silence. A second lies in her withdrawal from engaging, directly, with the pressing concerns of her period as an author. The 1970s, 80s and 90s are decades exploding with cultural expressions of subversion and dissent in the face of the existing social and intellectual master narratives; nonetheless Fitzgerald’s novels register an apparent remoteness as regards the social significance of this contemporary period. This silence is curious: yet Pierre Macherey’s postulation — that literature says what it does not say — may help it ‘speak’:

Can we make this silence speak? What is the unspoken saying? What does it mean? To what extent is dissimulation a way of speaking? Can something that has hidden *itself* be recalled to our presence?<sup>9</sup>

To articulate the paradox of Fitzgerald’s literary standing, and her thematic disengagement from polemical topics, I shall investigate both form and context in Penelope Fitzgerald’s works: in particular, her developing stylistics and her implicitly political engagement with gender, class and cultural institutions,

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<sup>8</sup> Textual unfamiliarity results in two kinds of obscurity. One is the kind of text that benefits from its own obscurity. This text is difficult to read — such as *Ulysses* or *Lanark* — but very popular to teach. The text’s deliberate utilisation of a cryptic or coded style invites academic interest and critical discourses. The other kind of obscure text suffers from its unpretentiousness. This text, by contrast, is easy to read and, later on, to neglect. Such is the case with Fitzgerald’s novels. This text is noted for its smooth accessibility, unpretentious style, and down-to-earth matter-of-factness. The unfamiliarity of this text is suggested by the lack of critical attention.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.85-89, p.86.



together with the changing state of English culture, of literary production and reception, during the past three decades.

Given the paradox of prestige and recognition on one level, but absence of critical and academic attention on the other, my research intends to raise issues around, not only how authors respond to the political climate of their time, but also how authors — in the presence of influence — incorporate and resist stereotyping and literary convention within, and beyond, the dominant cultural paradigms. The objective of this thesis, then, is to explore Fitzgerald's fiction through aspects of form and context, taking into consideration issues of literary canon formation, the relationship between identity and strategies of writing. In doing so, I shall be arguing the following points.

First, I contend that Fitzgerald's literary success is indicative of an Establishment view that favours a transcription of 'Englishness'. Though much agitated by new trends of thought, the 1970s and 80s were characterised by a political conservatism which deemed the safeguarding of Britain's sovereign integrity and cultural heritage as absolutely necessary. Having much to do with the construction of a national identity that has historically conflated 'England' with 'Britain', this conservatism is reflected in circumscribed literary criteria and tastes seen in a preponderantly intellectual focus on Anglocentric liberal humanism.

However, if Fitzgerald writes in the Establishment language, in its self-perpetuating grammar, how are we to make sense of the general as well as academic unfamiliarity of her supposedly excellent fiction? It is easy enough to blame it on Fitzgerald's old-fashionedness, on her fiction's sense of social remoteness. But these are value laden conclusions. My suggestion is to see the literary taste of the Establishment as some form of currency with floating unfixed values. The 1970s and early-1980s may have preferred a perspective of liberal humanism, and thus saw the rise of Fitzgerald's supposedly successful career as a novelist and literary reviewer. But the 1990s is a decade that has less confidence in



maintaining an authoritative writing stance. The contradiction between Fitzgerald's literary perception and reception is connected not so much with whether Fitzgerald's writing is actually good or not, but with the fact that any prescribed literary taste is highly value related and in constant flux. Therefore, my contention is that Fitzgerald's literary success is constructed on the foundation of conservatism, which implies a sense of anachronism for a contemporary, largely younger readership. Her unpopularity arises from her literary anachronism. For a present-day audience Fitzgerald's novels enclose a frustrating silence by disengaging themselves from controversial issues and innovative stylistics.

Secondly, it is my contention that contemporary British fiction has come under a focal shift in terms of social, cultural and racial restructuring, to the degree that the canonical status of Fitzgerald's works is inadvertently and increasingly equated with conservative stylistic and thematic highbrow insularity. During the past three decades British fiction has become increasingly multicultural, a movement perhaps reflected in the broadening of setting of Fitzgerald's later, foreign novels. The England/foreign categorisation indicates a broadening cultural focus parallel with Britain's own acknowledgement of its multicultural make-up; secondly it also suggests an opening-up on Fitzgerald's part from a regional, England-based writer to one engaging in dialogues that make the last two decades of this century markedly different from the previous ones. It is exactly in such an enriched culture that Fitzgerald's fiction and literary career reveals the awkwardness of English literature in justifying and defining its place in contemporary literature in English.

Adding to the awkward position of Fitzgerald's fiction in the context of current taste is the simplicity of literary periodisation. The word 'contemporary', as in 'a contemporary work of art', conflates its sense of the temporal with connotations of artistic innovation. 'Contemporary' is fraught with an insinuation of anti-convention and anti-realism, and thus is suggestive of abstraction, innovation, and experimentation. To be contemporary in this sense is not simply



to be current, but to be experimental or ‘postmodern’. Critics, such as Brian McHale and Douwe Fokkema, agree with the assumption that postmodernism in literature stretches chronologically from the mid-1950s into the present and thus incorporates both literary realism and experimentation. Hence, in the *fin-de-siècle* decades of the twentieth century, the term ‘contemporary’ has become more often than not interchangeable with ‘postmodernist’ and ‘postmodern’, and as such it predisposes the reader to expect certain rhetorical and formal features.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the initial impression of Fitzgerald’s novels is likely to be anachronistic: writing and publishing most prolifically in the 1980s and 1990s, the novelist’s overt humanist themes and conventional language marks her out as a ‘quiet voice’ among her more politically explicit and much younger contemporaries.

I believe that Fitzgerald’s paradoxical success addresses not only the ‘devolution’ of England’s literary supremacy, but also its volatile yet resilient cultural dominance. That is to say, within the United Kingdom, while English literature is gradually, and reluctantly, acknowledging the literary Renaissance of writers from non-English cultures, its emphasis on literary ‘Englishness’ is nevertheless persevering. Fitzgerald’s career as a whole can be seen as having reflected Britain’s cultural sea-change, in the sense that the perception and reception of her fiction reveals an ongoing tension within the literary Establishment today. The tension is seen in the tug-of-war between university English and the culture industry such as the Booker Prize, between the academic and the popular. While English departments engage in theorising — and only cautiously widening — the canon, the bulk of contemporary fiction is introduced to the general reader through reviews, literary prize competitions, and biography. As a result, Fitzgerald’s fiction is seen to reflect the uncategorised gap between the canon and the contemporary.

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<sup>10</sup> Douwe Fokkema, ‘The Semantic and Syntactic Organisation of Postmodernist Text’, in *Approaching Postmodernism*, eds. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986), pp. 81-98.

That is to say, the perception of Fitzgerald's *literariness* — one renowned for 'Englishness' — creates a greater sense of restrictive anachronism than invitation to contemporary readers. In this regard I shall argue that, in spite of the overwhelming thematic remoteness of her works, Fitzgerald's fiction can nonetheless be read as contemporary in two aspects. First, in terms of the demarcation between mimetic realism and literary experimentalism, Fitzgerald's later fiction — I argue — gives evidence of the presence of postmodernist stylistic features. Also, instead of unequivocally endorsing the verdict on her works as defined by their serious/metaphysical scope — a conservatively 'highbrow' reading, I contend that Fitzgerald's fiction participates in the postmodern critique of power, centring on issues of institutional and personal power, class and gender.

### **Structure of the Thesis**

The central argument of this study — one that concerns itself with canon formation and cultural change — foregrounds the intersecting dimensions of literary writing and literary reception. The paradox of Fitzgerald's writing career can therefore be perceived as a case in point of how a new author responds to — and is assimilated by — dominant literary climate. Fitzgerald's literary career offers a manifestation of how a new, but already elderly, woman writer incorporates existing Establishment values in order to become established. Between the culture industry, the literary Establishment, and the writer there are manifold interactions and responses in the making of a literary career.

Having addressed my major postulation regarding Fitzgerald's paradoxical literary standing, I would now like to offer a structured summary of this study as it unfolds in each chapter. Apart from the Introduction and Conclusion, which are respectively Chapter One and Chapter Six, the main body of the thesis is divided into two parts, each consisting of two chapters.



Part One includes Chapters Two and Three, and deals largely with thematic, generic and stylistic conventions. Part One aims to reveal the literary conservatism in Fitzgerald's fiction, and the presence of a covert Establishment attitude.

Chapter Two deals with contexts and conventions that influence the textuality of Fitzgerald's novels. I shall suggest that, while conveniently labelled as contemporary, Fitzgerald as a novelist has more in common with the post-war novelists. The chapter therefore argues for a close connection between Fitzgerald and — instead of her publishing contemporaries in the 1970s, 80s and 90s — her immediate predecessors, the post-war novelists of the 1950s and 60s. Here I will explore the social and literary contexts in which Fitzgerald, as an intellectual, and her fictions are situated, and place the novelist firmly in the tradition of Christian liberal humanism — the source of the novelist's distinction, and difference, in contemporary writing.

Chapter Three connects the prominent intellectual conservatism of Fitzgerald's works with the presence of a canonical literary perspective. Widely praised for embodying the virtue of 'Englishness' and exported abroad as quintessential representations of the same quality, Fitzgerald's novels provide models for studying the controversial issue of English national identity in the form of literary discourses. A universalising humanist perspective, together with her use of conventional genres and affirmation of a literary nationhood, constitute Fitzgerald's literary conservatism. Sections One and Two explore the notion of 'Englishness' in Fitzgerald's earlier novels of England through examining the rhetoric features and notional bearings of 'Englishness'. They contend that such a perception of 'Englishness' is closely related to preferred criteria of judgement, a circumscribed imagining of what it means to be English.

In Chapter Three, Section Three, I will look into the implications arising from the issue of readership. Judging by length, theme and genre, I would like to



suggest that as literary fiction — in contrast to those of popular generic orientation — Fitzgerald's works aim to appeal to the moderately elite: the kind of 'common reader' both Dr Johnson and Virginia Woolf refer to.<sup>11</sup> Fitzgerald's literary success can be attributed to her focus on the genre of manners — a genre aiming at a middle-/highbrow readership when they are in a more relaxed mood. That is, the genre of manners, including the story of detection of Fitzgerald's first fiction, *The Golden Child*, is often favoured by a readership who want something which is not degradingly commercial nor sensational, something that comes with a hint of culture and taste.

Fitzgerald herself does not think she ought to be categorised as a novelist of manners.<sup>12</sup> Protesting that Jane Austen has to be read for more than her precise and faithful characterisation of social norms and details, Fitzgerald perhaps needlessly limits the novel of manners to 'light' social fiction, and thus evidently places much more emphasis on moral seriousness. Nevertheless, it is my contention that, in terms of using a kind of language commensurate with popular genre fiction, the literary conservatism in Fitzgerald's novels works as a writing strategy that enables even such a late twentieth-century writer to attract a general (middle and upper-middle class) readership and draw them to the moral humanism of her fiction. Fitzgerald's fiction steers clear of controversial, even oppositional, subject-matter, and her literary language shows her to be conversant with the discourses of 'Englishness'. This being the case, it seems possible that she fits in comfortably

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<sup>11</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'The Common Reader', in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth, 1951), pp.11-12, p.11. The common reader, as Woolf noted, is differentiated from the critic and the scholar because s/he reads for pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others. Saying that there is a difference between a literary fiction and a popular one, I am fully aware of the brittle divide between these two categories. Take my initial impression of the novelist's works for example. Fitzgerald is claimed as a successful literary writer; yet in the University of Glasgow library, among the novelist's nine works, only *Offshore* is available, apart from her biographies, *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends* and *The Knox Brothers*. In the nearby public library, Hillhead Library, almost all of Fitzgerald's novels are available in hardback, larger print format — supposedly more appealing to elderly readers.

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 13, and IV [3 June 1995].



with a conventional taste that favours an upper-middle-class (Anglo) English mindset.

Therefore, in the fourth section of Chapter Three, I shall call attention to the impact of the Booker McConnell Prize on contemporary British fiction and on Fitzgerald's literary career. I will broach the following questions. What do Fitzgerald's biographies say about her own literary taste and methodology? Under what criteria does she evaluate and introduce a new book to the public? By discussing Fitzgerald's literary reviews, I shall argue for the presence of a circumscribed Establishment critical taste — whose implication is the existence of a Booker patronage affecting literary journalism, the media, public reception of new fiction and its production by aspiring writers. I suggest not only that Fitzgerald's literary criticism — untheorised as it is — imparts canonical values, but also that this canonicity has been adroitly personalised by and perpetuated in the Booker Prize which can be seen as the foremost institution in the literary Establishment of British fiction.

It has been observed that not only do prize-giving bodies become powerful in creating best-sellers and promoting new writers to global recognition, they can also be seen to be orienting a prescribed literary fashion. I shall call attention to the formation of a contemporary literary Establishment based on the prestige the Booker has acquired through its connections with the media and literary journalism. I contend that the Booker McConnell Prize, with its matrices embedded in the culture industry, has had a significant part in creating certain authoritative literary values in Britain.

Part Two, comprising Chapters Four and Five, resorts to reading against Fitzgerald's anachronism. Contrary to my reading of Fitzgerald's fiction as conforming to a literary conventionalism and conservatism, I shall argue that her works are not disconnected from contemporary preoccupations of the postmodern era.

Chapter Four elucidates Fitzgerald's later works of fiction in relation to specific features of postmodernist writing. In drawing a map of contemporary English fiction, Malcolm Bradbury defines the post-war novel as having two strands: first, the revived social and liberal novel, second, fiction of a much more fabulous and speculative mode.<sup>13</sup> If established conventions are what Fitzgerald adheres to when she first starts novel-writing in the mode of the social and liberal novel, then her later works can be seen to manifest a more assertive, less conventional narrative voice which, at some points, anticipates ostensibly postmodernist features such as fragmentation and fictionality. The critical divide between realism and experimentalism is often ambiguous and value-laden. Although I have placed Fitzgerald in a post-war, realism centred literary tradition, I shall argue that the cultural dominant of the past few decades, heavily pregnant with the discourse of the postmodern era, has encroached upon the conventionalism of Fitzgerald's writing. However, my reading of postmodernist features in Fitzgerald's fiction are not to be taken as a labelling of her as a postmodernist novelist. Rather, it will be my contention that Fitzgerald's later works are indicative of her reflection upon the concerns — and tentative employment of the practices — often placed under the umbrella term 'postmodernism', although the degree of involvement is far from adequate to qualify the novelist as postmodernist.

Section Two of Chapter Four discusses the postmodern intellectual preoccupation with the problem of historicity in Fitzgerald's writing. It has been noted that historians and novelists have much in common. Both are concerned with originating and sustaining a narrative, with consistency of character, and with combining episodic immediacy with overall coherence. As regards this similarity, Linda Hutcheon adds that both history and fiction are discourses; both constitute

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<sup>13</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, 'Preface', in *The Contemporary English Novel*, eds. Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1980), pp. 7-16.



systems of signification by means of which we make sense of the past.<sup>14</sup> It is open to a novelist to treat the received texts of history as the raw material for literary fiction. By setting all her stories in the past, Fitzgerald has made heavy use of historical facts and personas. I shall suggest that her utilisation of history and historic characters — while rendering the divide between fabrication and truthfulness a problematic matter — registers yet another sceptical, postmodern intellectual perspective.

Chapter Five focuses on the interplay between conformity and dissent in Fitzgerald's fiction. Presented and marketed as a representative of contemporary English fiction, Fitzgerald and her novels appear to be in agreement with a prescribed image of nationhood, of 'Englishness'. Given the 'Englishness' of Fitzgerald's literary persona and language and the social remoteness of her subject-matter, this chapter, therefore, starts from a discussion of the issue of conformity. Written from a stance that aims to appease rather than dramatise the internal conflicts between people and society, Fitzgerald's works decidedly address the fundamental metaphysical questions of human nature. Although the novelist is considered to have subscribed to a conformist literary nationality, it is my contention that for a woman writer the identity issue, especially that between the cultural and the personal spheres, is never one of harmonious assimilation. On the contrary, it is marked with a doubleness, a dissident scepticism. Contemporary Western intellectualism registers a scepticism which takes nothing — neither gender, knowledge, nor language — for granted. Fitzgerald's writing endorses such a sceptical perspective, although at the same time it externalises a sense of conformity. I contend that issues of gender, class and power politics — rarely separable — have been equally dealt with in Fitzgerald's novels, in spite of her novels' decided disengagement, particularly when they are compared with works

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.89.



published in the same decades by other writers. I hold it that the matter of Fitzgerald's political stance has to be viewed in the light of her background. Born and brought up in a politically conservative era between two feminist movements, and at a time when women started to benefit — though partially — from socio-political reform, Fitzgerald is unlikely to share with women of the two feminist movements the same positionality, purposefulness, and passion. Nonetheless, her anti-dogmatic commitment, a tenet of liberal humanism, does not in actuality preclude her fiction from being read as a critique of contemporary political conditions.<sup>15</sup>

Section Two investigates Fitzgerald's textual treatment of power, and maintains that in this particular regard her early novels — such as *The Golden Child* and *The Bookshop* — are highly political and subversive as they incorporate a critique of power as both institutionalised and inter-personalised. Foucauldian notions of power highly politicises Fitzgerald's apparently politically apathetic works from two aspects: it will provide a theoretical framework to subvert the conservatism of her fiction, and argue for an anti-establishment scepticism in her ostensibly Establishment work.

Section Three deals with the issue of class. In this regard I shall call attention to Fitzgerald's preoccupation with Darwinian metaphors and the sense of victimisation. Although Fitzgerald's works are primarily noted for their metaphysical import, it is nonetheless possible to associate the novelist's humanitarian belief in emancipating the underprivileged *with* her emphasis on the tension between the landscapes and the characters. To do so, I propose to elucidate her fiction through a revisionist pastoral perspective and suggest that Fitzgerald's treatment of pastoral elements betrays an awareness of class powerlessness.

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<sup>15</sup> Fitzgerald's suspicion of any form of ideological dogmatism is shown in her resistance to being labelled either as a novelist of manners, as a feminist, or as a postmodernist. See Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 21; IV [3 June 1995]; and Sale, 'Passed/Failed: Penelope Fitzgerald'.



Most of Fitzgerald's novels of England are noted for their being based on the novelist's semi-autobiographical, personal experiences as a woman negotiating between private life and jobs. Fitzgerald does not intend her fiction to be read in an overtly feminist light, yet her textual characterisation of the sexes invites a feminist interpretation. Section Four of Chapter Five discusses Fitzgerald's treatment of gender politics and maintains that she shares with feminist writers a primary concern — the exposure and elimination of women's subjugation — by registering a protest against patriarchy, but in Fitzgerald's case from a far less pronounced or narrowly pro-female stance. Furthermore, this section returns to the discussion of identity and conformity in the hope of establishing the intersection of gender, writing, and identity.

The conclusion of this thesis is offered as Chapter Six. In the Conclusion I will sum up the previous chapters by way of offering a critique of Penelope Fitzgerald's literary career and of its correlation with contemporary literature in the postmodern era. I shall maintain that, while rooted in a traditional literary intellectualism, Fitzgerald's literary career discloses a series of intricate appropriations and transgressions of Establishment tastes and values. Her overall place in contemporary literature and letters is clearly complicated by her belated emergence. In answering the central inquiry of the study — Why does an acknowledged, prize-winning novelist like Fitzgerald remain under-read and under-criticised? — my study of Penelope Fitzgerald's literary writing and career will suggest that the boundary between majority and minority, between centre and margin, is artificial and political.

## Critical Methodology

This research aims to examine Fitzgerald's works of fiction in terms of form and context, and to explore the implications of gender, class, race and the nation on the novelist's writing. Roman Jakobson's notion of 'the dominant' is crucial to account for the focal change that 'English Literature' has undergone, as well as being a useful aid to the discussion of Fitzgerald's literary works in the context of contemporary literature in English. The notion of 'the dominant', not new to cultural materialism, can be aptly reformulated in the theorisation of Formalism and Structuralism:

The dominant may be defined as the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. [...] In the evolution of poetic form it is not so much a question of the disappearance of certain elements and the emergence of others as it is the question of shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system, in other words, a question of the shifting dominant.<sup>16</sup>

Literature, as a body of writing associated with moral and aesthetic qualities, is seen here as a site of struggle where meanings are contested, rather than possessing timeless and universal values and truths. My study is a response to the unbalanced perception and reception of Fitzgerald's novels and her position in contemporary literature; it is, unavoidably, also much affected by the lack of critical materials on the novelist and her works. Derek Attridge suggests that reading the unfamiliar is often accompanied by the reader's anticipation and apprehension which he calls 'expecting the unexpected':

[T]he book ... comes to me without the filter of commentary that so quickly surrounds a work when it enters the public domain; that filter

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<sup>16</sup> Roman Jakobson, 'The Dominant', in *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views*, eds. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1971), p.108. Cited from Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p.7-8.



through which almost everything we read is coloured and constrained. It is a work of *my time*, not yet a part of history.<sup>17</sup>

Fitzgerald's fictions are relatively new to the general reader, and are also relatively free of the filter of critical commentary. This critical vacuum therefore compels me to eclectically employ a range of critical theories to investigate questions of genre, period, intellectual movements and ideas of authorship. I hope to make a virtue of this necessity. My employment of divergent critical paradigms is meant to elicit an approach which seeks to understand Fitzgerald's fiction and her literary career in all their complexity. By exploring these questions, I also touch on grounds concerning the formation of a literary canon, the perpetuation of Establishment values, and the partnership between literary texts and critical theories.

By seeking an interpretative balance between author, text and context, this thesis identifies literature as a historical product, subject to the context of consumption and commodification. I recognise that texts change in relation to the circumstances in which they are situated and read. Throughout this research, the notion of anachronism and belatedness has been a helpful and primary crux of my study, and for two reasons. First, the notion is important because Fitzgerald's overall literary career shows a sense of rootedness and belief in the pre-1970s English literary mentality which, in view of her being active only since the early 1980s, appears awkwardly out of sorts, even irrelevant with regard to contemporary subject matter. This is not to suggest that I associate the worth of a literary text with its being contemporary or not. Taking into account the dominant thematic and stylistic change throughout Fitzgerald's career of fiction writing, the present thesis investigates the novelist's position within different boundaries created by literary periodisation, and finds that a rigid literary demarcation is hard

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<sup>17</sup> Derek Attridge, 'Expecting the Unexpected in Coetzee's *Master of Petersburg* and Derrida's Recent Writings', in *Applying: To Derrida*, eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 21- 40, p.21.



to maintain for a writer who crosses not only generations, but also boundaries of genre and intellectual predisposition.

Since this thesis is not only about Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction, but also about Fitzgerald as a woman of letters, there is inevitably a sense of biographical interpretation. Concerning biographical studies in present-day literature, Malcolm Bradbury opines:

We indeed live in two ages at once: the age of the author hyped and promoted, studied and celebrated; the age of the author denied and eliminated, desubjected and ambushed from writing ....<sup>18</sup>

Although there is a certain degree of autobiographical truth in Fitzgerald's early writing, I have refrained from elucidating the novelist's fiction through her personal life apart from what is offered in her novels and personal communications with myself.<sup>19</sup> The study of (auto)biographical writings raises the question of whether or not speculation about the relationship between an author and a work is a legitimate strategy for literary criticism. In a sense, my study of Fitzgerald's literary career questions the belief that literary value can be assessed purely from the biographical details of an author. Subjecting Fitzgerald's fiction and literary career to critical scrutiny, my thesis intends not to metaphorically eliminate the role of author for Fitzgerald, but to reaffirm and celebrate Fitzgerald's literary voice in contemporary British fiction.

Maintaining that '[e]very literary text is built out of a sense of its potential audience, includes an image of whom it is written *for*', Terry Eagleton suggests that for literature to happen, the reader is quite as vital as the author.<sup>20</sup> There can be no reading without a reader — but the term *reader* is slippery, not only because all individual readers read differently, but also because for almost all of them, there are several different ways of appropriating a text. In this study I situate myself as a

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<sup>18</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Telling Life: Thoughts on Literary Biography', in *No, Not Bloomsbury* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 309-15, p. 311.

<sup>19</sup> Typescripts of the correspondences are included in the Appendix C.

<sup>20</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 84.



reader of Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction and non-fiction; moreover, as a critical reader I also set out to read the author's works in a variety of contexts. Fitzgerald intentionally avoids any political debates. However, I shall maintain that, beneath the conservatism of Fitzgerald's thematic and stylistic conformity to 'Englishness', a readerly employment of critical perspectives expands the dimension of Fitzgerald's fiction in a way the novelist herself would not have consciously allowed. Peter Rabinowitz's *Before Reading* offers a very useful concept of 'the politics of interpretation'. The 'politics of interpretation', in Rabinowitz's own words,

refers to the systems of power relations among groups (genders, races, nationalities, social classes, among others) in any social situation – systems that may be in part formalised (for instance, through law), but that are always in part invisible.

Any act of interpretation, as he continues, is intertwined with politics, a fact that is caused

partially by (although not completely determined by) the political systems around it, and in turn it situates itself with respect to those systems (for instance, by reinforcing or by contesting them).<sup>21</sup>

Ideological pressures are present in fiction, not simply because novels are sometimes written to support certain positions, but also because they are produced, circulated and read within socio-economic structures which condition — though they may not necessarily determine — elements of theme and form and the process of interpretation. My study here explores the multivalent politics of interpretation in conjunction with the literary works of an author comparatively scantily criticised, and is also a reflection of my own politics of reading.

The politics of reading is much exploited and explored in relation to the social character of a cultural study. Conventional literary approaches respond

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998; first pub., Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp.5-6.



primarily to the issue of authority and textuality, embodying forces striving to obtain a singular, fixed meaning. Such forces, in Mikhail Bakhtin's theorisation of language, are called 'centripetal', or *monologic* — in contrast to the 'centrifugal' or *dialogic* forces, which contest or fragment the singular into plural or multiple meanings. Not restricted by the monologic superiority of the texts, my utilisation of theoretical perspectives effects a deliberate reading against Fitzgerald's authorial intention, and is a subversion of the belief that the text says only what the author intends. Bakhtin's view of language as a field of struggle between the *monologic* and *dialogic* categories of force is useful, because it acknowledges that language is a two-way or multiple process rather than a unitary phenomenon.<sup>22</sup>

According to Bakhtin, literary language displays a high index of dialogism; and in particular, the novel exhibits the 'many-voicedness' or *heteroglossia* which reveals the full play of meanings potentially available in language. Language is no longer a unified, homogeneous and abstract system, but heterogeneous and material in the sense that it constitutes knowledge and consciousness. The aim of this study is not only to recover the quiet voice of Fitzgerald in contemporary British fiction, but also to retrieve the historical and contextual 'many-voicedness' — the kind of knowledge and consciousness — behind the literary language of Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction.

This thesis addresses questions such as the canon, periodisation, writing, gender and identity. In a sense, Penelope Fitzgerald becomes both the subject and object of knowledge presented. Foucault, in 'The Subject and Power', interpreted the term 'subject' as having double meanings. The individual is both 'subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to ... [his] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge.'<sup>23</sup> All the contexts explored in this study are

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<sup>22</sup> Mikhail M Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981), pp. 270-274.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, eds. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp.208-226, p.212.



institutional sites where Fitzgerald as a writer is shaped within multiple, invisible power relations of shifting grounds of domination.

Literary criticism, and literary and critical theories, are as much involved in, and are as much products of, historical processes as are the literary texts which they address. In this respect, as Philip Hobsbaum points out, criticism ought not to be taken as presenting factual proof (hence authoritative) but as demonstrating a point of view. Also, as contemporary literary criticism has taken on great emphasis in cultural patterns as ‘a determinant of human behaviour’, Hobsbaum continues,

in terms of criticism, this means that we should take into account our own historical standpoint at the time of reading a work of literature, as well as the historical character of the period when it was first produced.<sup>24</sup>

This thesis is primarily a study of the novels of Penelope Fitzgerald. However, as research on this topic developed, I became more aware of the social issues and cultural intricacies that are entangled in Fitzgerald’s works and career. I believe that, in order to understand a literary text in all its complexity, one must question the institutions of reading, the practices of writing, and the production of the text itself. The act of examining the ‘historical character of the period’ when Fitzgerald’s fiction and literary reviews were published does necessitate taking into account my own ‘historical standpoint’ at the time of reading. My weaving between current critical paradigms and the specific contexts of Fitzgerald’s formation as a writer, I believe, attends to both kinds of history in Hobsbaum’s methodology.

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<sup>24</sup> Philip Hobsbaum, ‘The Use of Criticism’, in *Essentials of Literary Criticism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983, reprinted 1993), p.11.

**PART ONE:**

**CONVENTION AND CONSERVATISM**



## CHAPTER 2

### A WRITER IN THE WRONG TIME? CONTEXT AND THEME

I have remained true to my deepest convictions — I mean to the courage of those who are born to be defeated, the weaknesses of the strong, and the tragedy of misunderstandings and missed opportunities which I have done my best to treat as a comedy, for otherwise how can we manage to bear it?

--- Penelope Fitzgerald<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I shall be studying Penelope Fitzgerald's novels from the viewpoint of social context and intellectual background. A study of social context is important here, since it places Fitzgerald in a literary tradition by elucidating the novelist's works in the intellectual climate of her time.

Conveniently categorised as 'contemporary' in major literary reference works, Fitzgerald's fiction does not fit easily into any such simplistic periodisation, because the word 'contemporary' — as in contemporary art and literature — is freighted with connotations of stylistic innovation and topical controversies, which are absent in Fitzgerald's fiction.<sup>2</sup> Think of A. S. Byatt, Peter Carey, Fay Weldon, and Salman Rushdie, for example, and the difficulty of placing Fitzgerald in the contemporary literary scene immediately becomes apparent. I would like to

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<sup>1</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, 'Penelope Fitzgerald', in *Contemporary Authors: Autobiography Series*, Vol. 10, ed. Mark Zdrozny (Detroit: Gale Research, 1989), pp.101-109, p.109. Reprint courtesy of the novelist.

<sup>2</sup> With reference to question 3 in my exploratory survey (Appendix A), there is no consensus as to the chronological definition of 'contemporary'. Among the answers given by the ten academic respondents, while four out of ten consider 'contemporary' indicates from 1970 onward, two out of ten opt for the date of 1950, another two for 1980, one for 1960, and one suggesting that the definition depends on the writer's time of writing. Question 4 explores the exchangeability of 'contemporary' with 'postmodernist'. While the majority of the respondents do not see an arbitrary conflation of these two, there is one who does consider these two terms synonymous.

suggest that, chronologically speaking, despite the fact that Fitzgerald is a contemporary author who published most of her works in the 1980s and early 1990s, she has more in common with the post-war novelists as far as theme, form and literary conventions are concerned.

Fitzgerald's fiction can be read as an integral part of a twentieth century English liberal humanism with a strong Christian affiliation. In this regard, her fiction shows strong affinity to post-war English novel as seen in the tradition of William Golding and Iris Murdoch. Therefore, Chapter Two argues that the *literariness* of Fitzgerald's fiction rests on the novelist's commitment to liberalism, humanism, and Christian faith. Her personal ideology as expressed in her fiction points to the foundation of a canonical literary perspective previously dominant in English writing, now fallen out of fashion.

The first part of this chapter sets out to investigate the intellectual and philosophical perspective Fitzgerald shares with the post-war novelists. Secondly, this chapter also attempts to elucidate Fitzgerald's thematic preoccupations by way of discussing the influence of Christian faith on her writing.

## **2.1) POST-WAR FICTION AND TRADITION**

Although it is in the late 1970s that Fitzgerald launches her literary career, which reaches its peak during the 80s and the early 90s, in terms of theme and subject matter, she draws a more explicit resource from the conventions of mimetic realism than her many contemporaries would have allowed themselves to. Born in 1916, graduating from Oxford in 1939, the two world wars as well as their subsequent socio-economical upheavals have unavoidably exerted a great impact on Fitzgerald as a young woman. Fitzgerald's works of fiction can only be fully appreciated by



taking into account the ideology of post-war English fiction which gives the novel at that time a social function.

### **The Social Function of Realism**

Conventionally the novel had been implicitly equated with realism, and so post-war critics who saw realism as integral to the novel argued that a crisis of the realist novel denoted a crisis of the novel as a form. Bernard Bergonzi, in *The Situation of the Novel*, suggests that post-war writers were faced with a choice between creating what he calls a ‘fiction of the Human Condition’ — which responds to the depersonalisation of the modern self and the disordered nature of modern reality, history, and politics — and holding on to the traditional ‘liberal’ novel of social and moral realism.<sup>3</sup> The former is an existentialist inquiry into the condition of the human subject; the latter is a documentary reportage of the human subject in society.

The literary tradition Fitzgerald’s earlier works represent is one of realism, one that portrays ‘things as they really are, in the sense of portraying objectively and concretely the observable details of actual life’.<sup>4</sup> For many post-war novelists, the concern with social experience and the intimate workings of power inevitably led them to favour realism and the language of empiricism, which, in Alison Lee’s words, makes manifest realism’s concern ‘with documentation and fact’.<sup>5</sup> This preference is explicitly expressed in Kingsley Amis’s comment on his own novels as ‘believable stories about understandable characters in a reasonably straightforward style; no tricks, no experimental foolery’.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 56-79.

<sup>4</sup> Alice R. Kaminsky, ‘On Literary Realism’, in *The Theory of the Novel: New Essays*, ed. John Halperin (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp.213-232, p.217.

<sup>5</sup> Alison Lee, *Realism and Power: Postmodern British Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.11.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from Blake Morrison’s *The Movement: English Poetry and Fiction of the 1950s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.299.

The British novel of the 1950s is more easily characterised by its social contents than its innovative literary form. It was devoted to the commonplace and the ordinary, and recorded the experiences of characters coping with social settings and relationships. Studying British fiction from the war years to the fifties, Randall Stevenson observes that 1950s fiction was taking a new 'shape' and 'shaking' which reflects 'new relations between social classes, and the opportunities for mobility within them'.<sup>7</sup>

Post-war novelists, like Iris Murdoch, Anthony Powell, and Evelyn Waugh in his later works, asserted a socially documentary, empirical purpose for the novel, no matter how bizarre or hilarious their stories. Despite a flourish of highly-individualistic experimentalism in the Bloomsbury tradition — with works such as B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1964) and John Berger's *G* (1972) — the literary mainstream saw a return to the techniques of realistic narrative in the reliance on strong story lines, clearly articulated plots, and well-observed character portrayal and dialogue. The conscious rejection of overt artistic experiment must in itself be seen as an essential feature of the post-war novel's central statements. In a literary tone generally anti-romantic, anti-experimental, liberal and rationalistic, novelists dedicated the genre to investigations of the problem of reality beginning in the social field. They considered that the novel — rather than dwelling in the pure subjectivity of the character's inner world — ought to offer an overview of the protagonist's external and social world, and his relation to it. Malcolm Bradbury suggests that this inclination was the result of a strong feeling 'of the need for intellectuals to represent Western liberal and democratic values, rather than the independent attitudes of a radical and rootless avant-garde, against the forces of totalitarianism that had been so powerful in recent history.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Randall Stevenson, *A Reader's Guide to the Twentieth Century Novel in Britain* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p.95.

<sup>8</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Novel No Longer Novel: Writing Fiction After World War Two', in *No, Not Bloomsbury* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp.87-114, p.102.



Most of Penelope Fitzgerald's novels are realistic in narrative, controlled in form, and disillusioned in spirit. Post-war realism is social in the sense that it aims to depict the correlation between individuals and society. With faithful treatment of the specific time-place juncture, most of Fitzgerald's domestic fiction focuses on the characters at their particular social crossroads. What Q. D. Leavis says of the novelist as a constant critic of society is illustrated in Fitzgerald's novels, which participate in the post-war cult of formal modesty and provincialism by focusing on native themes and social preoccupations.<sup>9</sup> The social satire of Fitzgerald's novels of England focus on debilitating bureaucratic corruption (*The Golden Child*), the abuse of cultural-political prestige (*The Bookshop*), the dysfunctioning of socio-interpersonal communication (*Human Voices*), the romanticisations of solidarity in a stratified society (*Offshore*), and the resiliency and resourcefulness of cultural monopoly (*At Freddie's*).

As Britain struggled to redefine itself in the aftermath of World War II and its consequent political upheaval, writers too struggled to find a voice appropriate to the changed circumstances of the emergent post-war society. Britain came out of the war a depleted victor, its economy drained and imperial role waning rapidly. The violence of the two great wars and the barbarism of so much twentieth-century life have thrown many liberals into despair. For those living in the lasting aftermath of these atrocities, it becomes less easy to believe in the innate goodness of man and the power of human reason.

Britain's wartime experience had increased rather than split social cohesion; and British society and politics retained a solid residue of custom,

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<sup>9</sup> Charlotte Brontë, disagreeing with a suggestion that she take Jane Austen as her model, thought Jane Austen restricted herself with matters of 'ladies and gentlemen in their elegant big confined houses'. Q. D. Leavis defends Austen as a social critic 'concerned in her novels to discover how it [society] could be altered for the individual's greater happiness yet without sacrificing the benefits the individual received from being a member of a high culture.' Although Leavis here directs her comments specifically at the nineteenth century, she nonetheless hints at a conflation of function between the novel of social realism and that of manners. See Q. D. Leavis, *Collected Essays: The Englishness of the English Novel*, ed. G. Singh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 30.



tradition, and historical continuity. In terms of intellectual background, Fitzgerald's fiction represents a continuation of English intellectualism which owes as much to John Stuart Mill and to the liberal middle-class culture of the late nineteenth century, as to the tradition of Renaissance Christian humanism. In short, central to the tenor of Liberal humanism is a trust in rationality, faith in the idea of progress, attachment to individualism, emphasis on human rights, and an eagerness to emancipate underprivileged groups.

Fitzgerald's commitment to liberalism and humanism is explicitly reflected in the worlds of her fiction. Like many postwar writers, she rejects the naive liberal view of human nature as innately good, and instead foregrounds a disillusioned recognition of the full human potential for both good and evil. This sense of acknowledgement can be discussed in terms of the novelist's concern with nostalgia for a recent past apparently immune from contemporary vices and complexities, her emphasis on self-fulfilment and the nature of moral action.

### **Nostalgia for Time Past**

The desire on the part of post-war novelists to seek anchorage in stability and balance amid swirls of change is apparent, particularly in the form of nostalgia. Fitzgerald's novels reflect at every level a world of apparent order at the point of breaking up and changing. Attempts to recapture the past, regret for the loss of childhood innocence, and a longing for better days, have all provided fundamental interests for post-war fiction, and motives for its creation. Nostalgia is a much-employed theme in war-time fiction which obviously captures the emotional longing for an Edenic utopia fractured in reality by war. Also, nostalgia can become a mental state in which dissatisfaction with the present manifests itself. It struggles to structure and assimilate the challenges confronting it, and therefore becomes consequently a distinctive feature, a new pattern, in the contemporary novel. Alison Light, in her study of Daphne du Maurier, looks at the discourse of



nostalgia in du Maurier's representation of the past. Light observes that the sense of the past has become

a constant presence inside the mind, a dimension in which modern people always live [...] It is a past become echo, trace and sign, the residue of human personality projected upon the world outside from the mind of the beholder, durable ghosts who constitute the spirit of place.<sup>10</sup>

Imparted as a spatial and temporal longing for the past, the sense of nostalgia, in Fitzgerald's case conveyed by the description of events and places that were familiar to her, gives the reader insight into the novelist's mind.

*The Golden Child*, though set in the post cold-war era, is apparently an allusion to the exhibition of the Tutankhamen treasure unearthed in 1922 by the British archaeologists, Lord Carnarvon and Howard Carter. It is particularly explicit in recalling the exhilarating fervency of Britain's contribution to this archaeological discovery — an event that was justified, if not justifiable, as an indication of British imperial prowess before its eventual decline. *The Bookshop* looks back to the insularity of a pre-urban Suffolk village, which in the early sixties still saw the modern public amenity as novelty. *Offshore*, *Human Voices* and *At Freddie's* deal with unrecorded anecdotes of life in the capital. Focusing on the boat-dwelling community in the Thames during the sixties, *Offshore* inscribes an elegy for a socially vagrant group. *At Freddie's* evokes a Dickensian London which is theatrically full of bizarre personalities and ambiguous expectations.

Jean Sudrann suggests that Fitzgerald's novels reveal an explicit longing for a 'long-since fallen world'. Offering an exclusively Christian interpretation of *Innocence*, the critic centres on nostalgia in a 'post-Edenic' world as an underlying pathos throughout Fitzgerald's novels.<sup>11</sup> The type of nostalgia prominent in

<sup>10</sup> Alison Light, in *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.187.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Sudrann, "Magic or Miracles": The Fallen World of Penelope Fitzgerald's Novels', in *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.105-127, p.111.

Fitzgerald's novels is not that of sentimental retrospect. On the contrary, her novels are nostalgic in their painstaking effort to secure a 'home' — a geographical and social collectiveness — fluctuating under change. Fitzgerald's engagement with the past, with nostalgia, is not accomplished in order to evoke a bitter-sweet longing for a happier, richer, lost time, but to acknowledge the loss with resignation and turn the eyes away. Even in accounts of childhood, there are no lingering scenes of joyfulness. Childhood in *At Freddie's* is tinged with neglect, exploitation, and premature association with affectation and slyness. The most childish and child-like character in Fitzgerald's novels is Sophie from *The Blue Flower*. It is exactly that guilelessness of childhood — which is at times roughly equivalent to ignorance of social norms — that intrigues the young Novalis as the purest manifestation of art. Even so, with Sophie dead of tuberculosis, the only plausible childhood in Fitzgerald's fiction perishes too. Childhood is always already over in Fitzgerald's writing, and nostalgia, though present, is a condition taken for granted: it is the position from which the characters and the reader begin their journeys.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Search for Self-Fulfilment**

The conviction that the source of progress lies in the free exercise of individual energy is central to liberal humanism. By adopting the motif of seeking — seeking for the genuine Golden Child treasure, for premises to run a bookshop, for professional training and vocational employment, Fitzgerald's fiction addresses the importance of individual self-fulfilment and how it might be subject to obliteration in a context of intemperate interference. This concern, for instance, is seen in Coker's protest that he is not allowed to study the Golden Child treasures for scholarly purposes. In Coker's words, this denial

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<sup>12</sup> I shall return to discuss in depth Fitzgerald's characterization of children in Chapter Five, Section Three.



amounts to a conspiracy, that's obvious enough, to deny the rank and file of the Museum any real chance to observe and comment. [...] The whole treasure was unpacked and whisked into place. No one could study anything.

(*The Golden Child*, p.46)

The importance of self-fulfilment is clearly dealt with in *The Bookshop*, when Florence — after living at Hardborough for eight years on the small amount of money her late husband left her — decides to 'make it clear to herself, and possibly to others, that she existed in her own right'. (p.7) Or in *The Gate of Angels*, where Daisy's ambition to become a competent nurse is impeded deliberately by Kelly and unforgivingly by the hospital matron. (pp.83-95)

Characterising individual self-fulfilment infringed by premeditated, artificial motives, Fitzgerald warns against the excessive use of the will, and advocates the need not to violate the individuality of other people. The liberal belief in non-interference is the focal issue addressed in *Innocence*.

Fitzgerald's concerns in *Innocence* are unequivocal: she examines how the liberal spirit of self-fulfilment might be shackled even under the exercise of unchecked benevolence, the genuine desire to improve things for everybody. Densely interwoven with a grotesque ancient family legend, the novel centres on Chiara — daughter of a declining Italian aristocratic family, the Ridolfi, in the late 1950s, and Salvatore — a self-made neurologist from a lowly rural background. Legend had it that the sixteenth century Ridolfi were all midgets, including their household employees. Gemma, also a midget, was the companion of the Count's only daughter. The fact that at the age of eight Gemma starts to grow out of her midget physique arouses overwhelming pity from the Contessina for her beloved friend's wellbeing. Compelled by her own compassion for — and distress about — Gemma's 'misfortune' and 'difference', and driven by her limited understanding about pain and its reward, the eight-year-old Contessina decides to ensure the happiness of her dear friend:



Since Gemma must never know the increasing difference between herself and the rest of the world, she would be better off if she was blind - happier, that is, if her eyes were put out. And since there seemed no other way to stop her going up and down the wrong staircases, it would be better for her, surely, in the long run, if her legs were cut off at the knee.

(*Innocence*, p.9)

The decision is absurd and brutal, nevertheless it is derived from a child's logic, intending *only* to be benign. The prelude suggests the appalling, unexamined consequences arising from well-meant intervention in the natural course of self-development. As the narrator confidently expounds, the Ridolfi, who lived in a make-believe world, show a 'tendency towards rash decisions, perhaps, always intended to ensure other people's happiness, once and for all.'(p.9) This tendency, in other words, involves an inability to discern the discrepancy between factual consequence and so-called benevolent intention. Professor Pulci, who had researched the Ridolfi history, characterized this family 'kind-hearted but incompetent, and ill-judged in carrying out their good intentions to a grotesque degree'. (p.160)

As the story of Gemma reveals, benevolent as her mistress's decision is meant to be, it yields an adverse outcome for the natural development of individuality. What Fitzgerald questions through this parable-like story is the often distorted view, and misuse, of benevolence in relation to the individual's search for self-fulfilment. The mutilation of Gemma out of protectiveness is one example; another is the charity work of Maddalena — the sister of the present Count Ridolfi — in setting up a Refuge for the elderly and the orphaned:

The failure of old people to be happy tormented Auntie Mad. The rest of the population endures their company only on sufferance. No-one, even under religious obedience, enjoys being with the old for long periods — with one exception, however, babies, who are prepared to smile at anything even roughly in human shape. Why not, therefore, a Refuge where the old folk could wear out their days looking after homeless infants? The toothless would comfortably co-exist with the toothless. 'But these ancients won't be competent, they'll forget which



child is which.' 'At times, possibly.' 'They'll drop them.' 'One child or two, perhaps, but what a sense of usefulness!'

(*Innocence*, p.12-3)

The realisation of one's full potential is important, yet the novelist here nonetheless appears to suggest that only in a wholesome, supportive yet not interfering environment can the human potential be adequately appreciated for more than its seeming — and at times misleading — usefulness.

*Innocence*, among its many episodic stories, mostly deals with the love affair of Chiara — the only daughter of the present Count Ridolfi — and a doctor, Salvatore. The story of Gemma is historically unproven, yet the sixteenth century Ridolfi episode elicits a parallel association with the post-war Ridolfi descendants. In contrast to the macabre legend, the post-war Ridolfi family is wrapped in apprehensive preparation for Chiara's rashly decided coming wedding — the couple scarcely know each other! Facing a marriage — a point of departure to a new phase of life — metaphorically Chiara appears able to walk out of the restricted make-believe world whose actuality the ancient midget contessina never doubted. It could be read that, as marriage binds Chiara and Salvatore together, Salvatore becomes the companion to the present contessina. The difference between these two parallel pairs is that the twentieth century Gemma, i.e., Salvatore, is one who resists being held by the constraints imposed on him, yet has himself, in attempting evasion of the pain of living, imposed his own crippling controls.

The shattering blow to Chiara and Salvatore's marriage comes not from their quarrelsome relationship but from Maddalena's generosity. Believing that 'there's such a thing as a moment of inspiration when one can judge what's best for others' (p.211), Maddalena buys back Salvatore's share of his family land — which he has already sold to fund his wedding — and legally bestows it upon him. Unfortunately, for Salvatore this piece of land had become a burden, a metaphorical prison constraining him within stereotyped social expectations he has

joyfully broken free of. Salvatore, mentally blinded by refusal to negotiate his own past, reacts with paranoid suspicion — which the narrator metaphorically aligns with the morbid legend:

Why should the mad aunt's lawyer allow her to do any such thing? It was Chiara, who, having no money herself, had appealed to the Countessa, pedlar of the orphans' wash-house. Chiara had been seized with the idea of surprising him with a toy, just the thing to keep him quiet, [...] But he would hardly have thought it possible that at nineteen — even though she loved him, which of course gave her an unfair advantage — she would have know how to *cut down a grown man*.

(*Innocence*, p.216; my emphasis)

For Salvatore, this generous endowment costs him his self-esteem and footing; or rather, it amputates him and deprives him of his self-reliance. With *Innocence* Fitzgerald calls attention not only to the danger of misusing benevolence, but also its undesirable impact on the individual spirit. *Innocence* deals with the failure of the liberal faith that man is capable of rational behaviour. Fitzgerald's fiction reaffirms the liberal belief that each choice of will must be determined by its special circumstances, and this accepts that a rational assessment of consequences is almost impossible. This leads to a revisionist rethinking of human nature that is of particular significance in post-war British fiction.

### **The Moral Outlook: Human Nature and the Macabre**

A sceptical vision shared by post-war novelists is one that sees the world as a battleground of forces of good and evil, as in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), which has come to be seen as an emblematic enquiry into human nature. Along with this perception in the post-war years is the view of human nature as inherently vicious and full of flaws. This attitude can be presented in a variety of ways: from a sarcastically optimistic romanticisation of human nature, to a disillusioned recognition of the extent of human self-limitation. The emphasis on



how human nature responds to different circumstances seems to indicate that the British, though losing a physical empire, were conscious of retaining a moral one, and in political life the moral and liberal attitude was powerful.

Remarking on figurative approaches toward moralism, Richard Kane notices that many post-war British authors share one intriguing phenomenon, which is ‘the odd combination of the moral and the macabre’.<sup>13</sup> Explaining how these two apparently separate issues are conjoined, Kane points out that, by ‘searching for the good within the realm of the grotesque’, novelists can use the demonic elements to ‘make significant moral statements’.<sup>14</sup> For instance, Iris Murdoch’s *The Nice and the Good* (1968) is sensationally coloured by black masses, chains, murder and mutilation. Eerie events and characters are similarly woven into Muriel Spark’s novels, such as *Not to Disturb* (1971), where a gothic/ghostly atmosphere permeates a chateau in which the servants elaborately conspire with the media to sell the story of their employers’ imminent murder/suicide. Post-war novelists appear firmly committed to exploring the ethical dimension along with the demonic and the violent. For Murdoch, the creation of art is a type of moral activity, as the novelist must constantly try to recognise contingency and construct a ‘house fit for free characters’.<sup>15</sup> Spark, in several interviews or essays, has stressed the importance of Roman Catholicism in her writing, and the way she sees fiction as ‘a kind of parable’.<sup>16</sup>

Fitzgerald’s novels partake of similar concerns. She demands ‘a modest degree of freedom’ for her characters, and recognizes the potential for wrong-doing in human nature.<sup>17</sup> The moral outlook of Fitzgerald’s fiction is not based on a pessimistic polarisation of good and evil. For Fitzgerald, good and evil are seen as

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<sup>13</sup> Richard C Kane, *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles: Didactic Demons in Modern Fiction* (London: Associated University Presses, 1988), p.11.

<sup>14</sup> Kane, *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles*, p.11

<sup>15</sup> Frank Kermode, ‘The House of Fiction: An Interview with Seven English Novelists,’ in *Partisan Review*, Vol. 30 (Spring 1963), pp. 62-65.

<sup>16</sup> Muriel Spark, ‘My Conversion,’ in *Twentieth Century*, Vol. 170 (Autumn 1961), p. 62. Quoted from Kane, *Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and John Fowles*, p.17.

<sup>17</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 1.



not contradictory but connected, and the borderline between is often blurred. Fitzgerald's novels set out to illustrate how people can become accustomed to a set of moral codes without realizing how easily transgression between right and wrong is made. The world of her fiction is full of people who apparently undertake the role of moral arbitrator: take for instance, Mrs Gamart who, when learning that a Private Bill is underway to affect the future of Florence's small enterprise, feels pleased 'both for herself and for the sake of others, because she always acted in the way she felt to be right.' (*The Bookshop*, p.99). The eight-year-old Contessina decides to mutilate her dear companion, with the intention to protect her and keep her away from harm. (*Innocence*, p.8-9) The world of Fitzgerald's fiction therefore is replete with metaphors of blindness, suggesting that blind spots exist even in consciously moral acts. The association between eyesight, mental acumen, and moral perception occurs in *The Bookshop*, where Florence is described as culpably blind to human predation:

She blinded herself, in short, by pretending for a while that human beings are not divided into exterminators and exterminatees, with the former, at any given moment, predominating. Will-power is useless without a sense of direction. Hers was at such a low ebb that it no longer gave her the instructions for survival.  
(*The Bookshop*, p.34)

Ironic failure to perceive the implication of subjective values is often repeated in Fitzgerald's works. *Human Voices* (p.20) offers an interplay between moral and physical blindness in the case of the self-centred and short-sighted RPD who rarely realises how he exploits the sympathy of his female staff. In *Innocence* (p.9) the hint that Gemma must be blinded so as not to see her own physical difference grotesquely illuminates the defectiveness of her patrons' moral sight.

The grotesque element in Fitzgerald's fiction ranges from the caricature of characters like the well-meaning Aunt Mad (*Innocence*) and the strong-willed, lopsided Freddie (*At Freddie's*), to the monstrously perplexing mock gothic ghost-story in *The Gate of Angels*, and the disturbingly funny scene of the burning bear-



cub in *The Beginning of Spring*. Determined to make the cub dance to ‘cut a dash’ in front of his English friends, Mitya, a Russian boy of thirteen, ‘blundered out of the room, and came back with a bottle of vodka and a pale blue saucer of fine china with a gilt rim.’ (p.58) Fitzgerald vividly presents a farce of play in this ‘half-savage’ Russian household. (p. 62) After having licked clean the saucer’s contents, the bear-cub

got on to its hind legs and was as tall, suddenly, as Mitya, who retreated. Losing its perilous balance it held out its paws like small hands and reeled on to the carpet where its claws gave it a better hold, while a gush of urine sprayed across the pattern of red and blue.

The children are all tickled by the clumsy disorientation of the hapless cub, who

lumbered from end to end of the table making havoc among glass and silver, dragging at the bottle of vodka which stood in each place, upending them like ninepins and licking desperately at what was spilled. The service door flew open and the doorman, Sergei, came in, crossed himself, and without a moment’s hesitation snatched up a shovel, opened the doors of the white porcelain stove and scooped out a heap of red-hot charcoal which he scattered over the bear. The tablecloth, soaked in spirits, sent up a sheet of flame. The bear screamed, its screams being like that of a human child. Already alight, it tried to protect its face with its front paws.

(*The Beginning of Spring*, p. 59)

Uneasy appreciation of the scene’s boisterous absurdity turns to horror:

‘Will you ask him what happened to the bear?’ asked Dolly.

‘No.’

‘Its face was burning.’

‘I shan’t ask him.’

(*The Beginning of Spring*, p.60)

Studying the efficacy of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser notes that this particular literary mode mixes heterogeneous elements: confusion, the fantastic, and even a

kind of alienation.<sup>18</sup> Its use often reinforces a clash between incompatible reader-reactions — laughter on the one hand and horror, or disgust, on the other.

Moreover, a similar clash in the text itself, between the gruesome or horrifying content and the comic manner in which it is presented, is not unusual. Philip Thomson shares similar opinion that this mode covers ‘the presence of the laughable and something which is incompatible with the laughable’. It encodes an intrinsic incongruity because it involves ‘rationalisation and defence-mechanisms’ on the reader’s part.<sup>19</sup>

Here the narrative voice conveys the hideous scene with unsurprised calm. The use of the phrase ‘like that of a human child’ horrifies and pains the reader and makes clear that the scene is being used to distance the Russian household. The moral incongruity of human nature — capable of detached pleasure in a sentient creature’s agony — is impressed upon us and defies rational explanation. By directing the reader’s attention to the metaphysical dimension of the grotesque Fitzgerald intensifies the moral seriousness of her humanism and wins support for her humane values.

Apart from the utilisation of the macabre to evoke a moral check, Fitzgerald is also interested in the moral dimension of human existence. This is consistently shown in her questioning, not the cause of an absent moral consensus, but the immediate constitution of ‘morality’ *per se*. Fitzgerald is more interested in the process by which we come to terms with morality — how we decide what is or is not moral. The novelist is not so much focused on *condemning* apparent inhumanity and cruelty, but on making visible the fact that while obvious evil is easy to ward off, it is ambiguous, self-justifying human nature that is most difficult to deal with.

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<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque: in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p.51.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Thomson, *The Grottesque* (London: Methuen, 1972), p.3.



## 2.2) A NOVELIST OF CHRISTIAN HUMANITY

The twentieth century has seen many English writers who were committed believers, like Dorothy Sayers, Charles Williams, Graham Greene, C. S. Lewis, or more recently Muriel Spark. At the same time there are the unbelievers. Philip Thody, in his *Twentieth Century Literature*, notes that many agnostics — such as George Orwell and Anthony Burgess — ‘base their rejection of God on the idea of the undeserved physical suffering of the innocent.’<sup>20</sup> Christianity has never been overt subject matter in Fitzgerald’s fiction. It has not been broadcast nor advocated, nevertheless her novels embody a sense of spiritual earnestness and are intended to address the problem of living in relation to Christian spirituality from a secular point of view.

If a certain phrase has to be used to describe Fitzgerald and her fiction, ‘a novelist of humanity’ probably can serve to pin down her preoccupation and focal point. The significance of Fitzgerald’s Christian faith seen in her fiction is demonstrated in several ways: in the novelist’s compassion towards the parochial smallness of ordinary people, in her treatment of the heart/mind and body/soul divides, in her preoccupation with the vicissitudes of mundane life, which is determined by chance, and the necessity of courage to survive.

Focusing on individuality, the exertion of will, and life’s mutability, Fitzgerald’s works are rich in allegorical implications. First of all, in terms of subject matter Fitzgerald’s fiction inspects the vicissitudes of human existence and its triviality. It is as if only by naming the overlooked and concentrating on the commonplace can the emblematic importance of this triviality be made known. Second, her earlier novels are concerned with Darwinian strife and competition in ‘civilized’ human living. As interpersonal relationships are often portrayed as in a state of contrariety and discord, Fitzgerald reveals the implicit animal side of humanity as a battle field. Third, her later works turn to a metaphysical inquest

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<sup>20</sup> Philip Thody, *Twentieth-Century Literature: Critical Issues and Themes* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.5.

into what makes humanity. I shall start from Fitzgerald's interpretation of humanity from a secular point of view. In order to get a rounded picture of Fitzgerald's world view through a religious and intellectual perspective, it is necessary to start from her later works to elucidate her inquest into humanity, before I offer to interpret the ways the novelist addresses the human dilemma through indirect textual strategies.

### **Triviality and Mutability of Life**

Fitzgerald's novels of manners demonstrate a literary provincialism by focusing on unimportant incidents in the lives of ordinary people. Her works project microscopic views on events that are trivial and unplanned; under a magnified, watchful eye these events reveal their paradoxical significance. All of Fitzgerald's stories take place in specific localities; they display a concern with minute details, a propensity for provincial meticulousness. The smallness of Fitzgerald's stories is their happening among the least regarded — and the most commonplace — aspects of life in society, in the sense that the novelist prefers to be fascinated by the specific and trivial dimensions of life and living, rather than to engage directly with their controversial and political aspects.

Fitzgerald's concern with the parochial is also seen in her fictional characters, whose ordinariness inevitably invites a reading of anti-heroism in the characters. Malcolm Bradbury, in *No, Not Bloomsbury*, notices that the novel of manners in the 1950s and 60s in Britain was freighted with the provincial and the prosaic, with stories focused on the lower middle classes and the working classes whose experience seemed under-recorded yet ordinary.<sup>21</sup> Fitzgerald's fictional heroes/heroines are often common people whom the reader is likely to encounter in real life: junior staff in institutions, self-employed shop-owners, or run-down stage-

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<sup>21</sup> Bradbury, 'The Novel No Longer Novel', p.106.



school teachers. Her novels are full of uncomplaining, unworldly, but contented people such as Florence, Annie, Waring and Chiara, as well as assertive, decisive and calculating fighters such as Mrs Gamart and Freddie. These people are involved in a process of change — Waring and the end of cold war in Western Europe (*The Golden Child*), Daisy and the beginning of higher education for women in England (*The Gate of Angels*), Freddie and the age of television, publicity and consumer culture (*At Freddie's*), and Frank and Nellie in the age of Tolstoyan spiritual rebirth and political commotion in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century (*The Beginning of Spring*) — and their lives reflect the ineluctable impact of the greater public crises.<sup>22</sup>

Fitzgerald's fiction does not portray the life of high society; instead, it is the apparent ordinariness in the smaller spheres of society that she endeavours to capture. With the lack of high drama in the pages, the author seems to opine that heroism is not necessarily glamorous and is often a matter of quiet dedication to monotonous tasks. The hard-working, underpaid, insensitive yet teeth-gritting Waring in *The Golden Child* springs to mind. Fitzgerald also reminds the reader that the ordinary heroes and heroines can also be selfish and stupid, maddeningly quirky and abundantly flawed. Take Carroll, in *At Freddie's*, for instance. The interview between Carroll and Freddie shows the inferiority and incompetence of the man:

‘Now, let me see, you didn't go to university, no specialised training, no diploma.’

‘That's about the size of it,’ he replied.

‘I'm afraid you don't look particularly attractive either,’ Freddie went on, glancing at him to see how he took this. He was quite unperturbed, but acknowledged the truth with a nod, almost a slight bow.

(*At Freddie's*, p.20)

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<sup>22</sup> In a personal communication Fitzgerald expresses her interest in seeing ‘a crisis in public affairs and small private ones at the same time’. See Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 11.

Mocked by the unruly children, underpaid by Freddie, and worst still, rejected by Hannah, Carroll 'created around him his own atmosphere of sad acceptance' and was accustomed to humiliation and failure. (p.26) Fitzgerald is concerned not with the monumental events of life, but with the trivial, insignificant accounts that make up the routine chores of ordinary people. Overshadowed by the complexity of life and the irrevocability of time, the smallness of humanity has become a constant concern in Fitzgerald's novels. The heroism in Fitzgerald's novels is the tribute paid to imperfect people in an imperfect world.

Fascinated by the vicissitudes of life, Fitzgerald persistently explores this issue in her writing, attempting to construe experiences inexplicable to limited human understanding. Take her latest novel, *The Blue Flower*. The novel recounts the love story between the German romantic poet, Novalis, and his fiancé Sophie, who died at the tender age of fifteen. The premature death of a lively young girl has always been one of literature's major tragic motifs, and here, for the grief-ridden poet-to-be, the sudden loss of his emotional anchorage was soon translated into an everlasting spiritual longing for the unattainable. The lamentation at life's swiftness and uncertainty is expressed in a parable told by Sophie's elder sister to the ill and innocent girl:

'There was a certain honest shopkeeper [...] who unlike the rest of us, felt no pain. He had never felt any since he was born, so that when he reached the age of forty-five he was quite unaware that he was ill and never thought to call the doctor, until one night he heard the sound of the door opening, and sitting up in his bed saw in the bright moonlight that someone he did not know had come into his room, and that this was Death.'

(*The Blue Flower*, p.139)

Sophie is unable to grasp the point. Instead of realising pain as a necessary warning to ensuring one's well-being, she considers the man lucky. Emotions such as regret and sorrow can only be gained from reflection on past experiences.



Sophie is still too young to reflect upon herself and indeed upon the vicissitudes of life. Artless and unaware of life's unpleasant aspects, she has not yet stepped out of the realm of Innocence into that of Experience; therefore her untimely death becomes the uncalled-for loss of a perfect state of being. Such a lament on life's unpredictability is quietly revealed in Fitzgerald's sober treatment of the tragedy.

*Offshore* also shares the same thematic concern. Describing the eventual break-down of this marginalized community, *Offshore* renders a sense of placelessness within an orderly-seeming society. Moreover, as I would suggest, it yields a strong feeling of homelessness in life. Among the characters: Richard savours his past in the Navy in the presently anchor-bound 'Lord Jim', and unjustly neglects Laura's wish to raise a family in a more socially 'rooted' way. Maurice, a male prostitute, allows some petty thieves to use his boat as a warehouse for stolen goods in exchange for false friendship. Nenna, once a talented violin student, is now struggling between two young daughters and an estranged husband who rejects the river and *Grace*, the boat she loves. Life carries them away, allowing them only retrospect on the might-have-beens. Besides, metaphorically speaking, a boat is destined to roll on the open sea, and living on an anchor-bound boat suggests, to some extent, that the dwellers no longer control their own direction of life — and lack momentum — since the boat is going nowhere.

By portraying the efforts and disappointments of those in the boat community, *Offshore* can be taken as an elegy for bygone days: for happiness long forgotten, for wishes unfulfilled, for negligently overlooked opportunities that resist salvage. Yielding an awareness of the fleeting irretrievability of life, *Offshore* reminds the reader of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*.

Both *Offshore* and *The Waves* poetically chart the lives of a group of people and succeed in presenting life's unpredictability and swiftness. *The Waves* presents its characters through various stages of their life; whilst *Offshore* disconnects its characters from both their past and future for a close-up view of their present being. In creating the atmosphere of life slipping away unconsciously,



*The Waves* employs descriptive narratives on land/sea-scapes interspersed with individual monologues, revealing thus each character's mental spaces and perception of life. Metaphorical use of these land/sea-scapes has been much noted by critics of *The Waves*. Oddvar Holmesland, for instance, comments that the 'macrocosmic cycle of creation' Woolf introduces in the interludes — the depiction of time and setting 'from dawn to dusk, from spring to winter, from the dawn of time until the world blurs into obscurity' — convincingly evokes a 'symbolic order' under which nature and human lives emerge simultaneously.<sup>23</sup> The ambiguity of Woolf's blending the consciousness of her protagonists and the depiction of their setting has prompted Hermione Lee, in *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, to ask 'Are the waves meant to suggest the human lives, or are they the detached, impersonal forces of fatality?'<sup>24</sup>

With exquisite visual images and vivid poetic rhythms *The Waves* internally builds up the sense of life, time and consciousness, by — as Holmesland remarks — drawing the reader's attention to 'the tentative ways in which consciousnesses try to make sense of the relationship between consciousness and self, self and world'.<sup>25</sup> If Virginia Woolf eliminates all social details for the sake of rhetoric, then facts and details, as presented through carefully constructed narratives, are what Fitzgerald utilises in *Offshore* to stir up the apparent inconclusiveness and hesitancies of life. While charting the lives of a group of 'creatures neither of firm land nor water', the novelist minimises the description of land/river-scapes to avoid choosing between the imaginative and the factual view. (*Offshore*, p.10) The unsettling tideline existence cannot be perceived through the change of year and season; it must be dramatised through the way in which the boats rock uneasily along with the rising tide, or why the postmen and milkmen

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<sup>23</sup> Oddvar Holmesland, *Form as Compensation for Life: Fictive Patterns in Virginia Woolf's Novels* (Columbia: Camden House, 1998), pp.151-184, p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp.167-168, p.168. Quoted from Holmesland, *Form as Compensation for Life*, p.160.

<sup>25</sup> Holmesland, *Form as Compensation for Life*, p.160.



refuse to deliver their service. The flotsam and jetsam stuck in the flowing heart of the city, of which the boat-dwellers make use, therefore become a metaphor for *Offshore*'s characters. The dialogue is equally sparse: no one says more than a few words at a time; yet atmosphere overflows in the fluent yet restrained prose that compresses and intensifies expression. The consciousness of Fitzgerald's characters is not voiced, but spoken by their moments of life stranded in the paradoxically moored barges that are eventually overwhelmed by the flooding tide.

The absurdity of human living is shown more perceptibly in *Human Voices*, where mankind's rationality approaches a breaking point under the impact of war, greed, and selfishness. That the development of humanity — understanding, benevolence, compassion, to name but a few human virtues — is mercilessly curbed is metaphorically manifest in the central cultural institution, Broadcasting House, where the congruity of human action and discourse is seen to have broken into a relentlessly unconnected, jumbled noise of confusion off-the-air. *Human Voices* recalls the war-time sense of abandonment, by recounting the apparently fruitless affair between a seventeen-year-old employee and her director, and explaining it as Annie's being in 'the last generation to fall in love without hope in such an unproductive way'. (p.96) The incongruity of human existence is brought to an apex at the end of the novel where, when Annie and the incurably selfish RPD temporarily rejoice in their moment of emotional revelation in a dingy café, the DPP — violating his resolution 'not to help Sam again with any request, reasonable or unreasonable' — is killed by a parachute bomb on his way to join them. (p.128) Dwelling upon the unpredictability of life, in the figure of Annie Fitzgerald takes up the conflict between rationality and passion — one that persistently disconcerts many humanists of all time.

### **Between the Observable and the Unobservable**

Dealing with perilous relationships and forfeited opportunities, the religiousness of Fitzgerald's fiction rests in the narrator's composed, humorous, and sympathetic tone towards the mishaps of life, a feature that unveils Fitzgerald's undoubted faith in God. She embraces human suffering as an inevitable part of life, as joy is. A fundamental preoccupation of Fitzgerald seen from her works is the recurring effort to articulate the enigmatic puzzle of humanity, both of its visible and invisible components — the balance between mind and heart, the debate between body and soul, and the marriage between the material and the spiritual. In a personal communication Fitzgerald admits that religion plays a significant role in her life and work:

I blame myself for not having born[e] stronger witness to Christianity. But you have to think very carefully how you're going to do this. Courage is necessary, & I'm not courageous.<sup>26</sup>

Fitzgerald's remark must not be taken as a confession of lack of religious involvement; on the contrary, it is a testimony to the humbleness of a committed believer. Although downplayed to a certain extent, Christianity is the innate make-up of the novelist's mentality and the invisible tenor of her works. Fitzgerald's family biography about her father and three uncles, *The Knox Brothers* (1977), is one major source through which the influence of Christianity in the Knox family may be glimpsed. In tracing the intellectual as well as religious development of her familial subjects, Fitzgerald also maps out the genealogy of her religious belief.

Christianity was a deep rooted feature of the Knox family. Many recent ancestors of Fitzgerald were clergymen; her missionary great-grandfather, Bishop Thomas Valpy French, was revered as a saint, and her parental grandfather, Edmund Arbuthnott Knox, was Bishop of Coventry. The family's clerical history equates, in Fitzgerald's own view, to a history of both the Victorian vicarage and of

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<sup>26</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 5.



Evangelicalism. More recently, one uncle, Wilfred Knox, was an Anglo-Catholic priest, and another, Ronald Knox, was received into and ordained a priest of the Roman Catholic Church.

From her family background Fitzgerald derives a penchant for metaphysical inquiry that later feeds her fiction's intellectual concerns. Importantly, Fitzgerald has observed that all four Knox brothers 'had to come to terms with an inner struggle between reason and emotion, and between emotion and the obligation not to show it.'<sup>27</sup> Emotional expressiveness was rare and perhaps difficult for the four brothers. Fitzgerald has noted that all four shared 'the Edwardian habit of understatement, the habit which called the massacre of the Somme "a show", and an expensive lunch at Simpson's "something to eat"'.<sup>28</sup> Of the four brothers, Fitzgerald tells us, Wilfred and Ronnie resorted to Christianity for spiritual support; whereas 'neither Eddie nor Dilly felt certain any longer about the truth of Christianity.'<sup>29</sup> The two elder brothers chose to disbelieve — itself an act of faith justified 'by an appeal to reason'.<sup>30</sup> In the family memoir, Fitzgerald observes that

God speaks to us through the intellect, and through the intellect we should direct our lives. But if we are creatures of reason, what are we to do with our hearts?  
(*The Knox Brothers*, p.89)

Fitzgerald, in personal communication, further explains this reason/emotion predicament:

Certainly I've grown old, but I haven't solved the problem of being brought up to believe that reason is the highest human faculty & we should rely on it, & yet finding that when we get to life's most difficult moments, we can't and don't.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Knox Brothers. Edmund ('Evoe'), 1881-1971; Dillwyn, 1883-1943; Wilfred, 1886-1950; Ronald, 1888-1957* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p.61.

<sup>28</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Knox Brothers*, p.259.

<sup>29</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Knox Brothers*, p.55.

<sup>30</sup> Fitzgerald, *The Knox Brothers*, p.72.

<sup>31</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication III [5 May 1995], question 2.

*The Gate of Angels* offers a fictive transcription of the dilemma of the heart/mind divide by way of discussing the debate between Christianity and science. The setting of the novel, Cambridge University and its intellectual atmosphere, was familiar to the young Fitzgerald, for, as well as being an Oxford graduate herself, she must have heard her father and uncles recalling their Oxbridge days. Religion versus science, reason versus emotion, all are symbolically interwoven in the love story between Fred, the head, and Daisy, the heart. The perplexity of mind/heart balance is discerned in the allegorical dimension of the characters. Fred, the college don who is required to remain celibate, is designated as the Mind; while Daisy, a probationer nurse, is associated with the Body. Such a dichotomy — Fred: male: mind: intellect: detachment / Daisy: female: body: common-sense: warmth — may appear clichéd, yet it captures the controversial debates about the issues of body/soul, mind/heart, and man/woman. Mingling morality and manners, philosophy and scientific inquest, *The Gate of Angels* resists an effortless reading at the thematic level and touches upon the debate about mind and body, all intertwined in an apparently straightforward love story.

Fitzgerald's novels are replete with a sense of enigmatic reticence. Very often the main plot of her stories is accompanied by episodes, analogies, and narratorial allocations whose function in relation to the plot is not explicitly shown. Her own intellectual commitment to Christianity is elucidated in a personal communication where she explains that her main concern in this novel is the distinction between the material and the spiritual — i.e. between body and soul.<sup>32</sup> Both Christianity and science have attempted to explain the origin of the universe and human beings, and for both, the need of a focal point to justify the physicality of our world is evident.

The allegorical import of Fitzgerald's later works — particularly in *The Gate of Angels* and *The Blue Flower* — builds on the formula of love. 'Love' in

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<sup>32</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 21.



Fitzgerald's fictional world is always ultra-romantic, platonic, given on unconditional terms — Waring's longing for his unsympathetic wife Haggie (*The Golden Child*), Annie's unproductive love for Sam (*Human Voices*), the passionate mutual love of Chiara and Salvatore (*Innocence*), and Fred's love for Daisy (*The Gate of Angels*). 'Love' in Fitzgerald's fictional world is often passionate. For instance, Salvatore's passion for Chiara is so great that when he says he loves Chiara more than he values his own life he means it literally, as he is prepared to take his own life believing Chiara is better off without him. (*Innocence*, p.219) In *The Blue Flower*, Fritz's love for Sophie needs no illustration — it immortalizes in the future poet's verse the otherwise unintelligent though lively girl. However, under pressure of repeated allusion to macabre bodily change, Fitzgerald's stories of love impart a confounding sense of puzzlement rather than certitude.

At an initial level *The Gate of Angels* can be read as addressing the mind/heart dilemma, as I have discussed; yet bearing in mind the original, intended title of the novel — 'The Unobservables', or 'Mistakes Made by Scientists' — the symbolic meaning of this story conveyed in terms of the observable and the unobservable demands to be recognized.<sup>33</sup> The difficulty of balancing rationality and feeling can be seen to have been expanded to inquire into the inter-relation between the seen and the unseen, both the material and spiritual aspects of life. Centring on the isolation of Angelicus College immensely undisturbed by natural change, this novel is laced with allusions insinuating an embattled debate between the early twentieth century authority of manifest materiality — the authority of science, and that of unobservable spirituality in the form of religious or psychic conviction. The college itself —founded by Benedict XIII who 'after many years of ferocious argument had been declared not to be the Pope at all' — becomes an

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<sup>33</sup> Kate Kellaway, 'Atoms, Angels and the Mach Factor', review of *The Gate of Angels* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Observer* (12 August 1990), p.50. The reviewer notes that the novel was originally named *The Unobservables*; then the title was changed to *Mistakes Made by Scientists*. Through the advice of Fitzgerald's publisher, *The Gate of Angels* eventually became the title of the book.



emblematic relic whose concrete material presence may not guarantee a continuing spiritual authenticity. (p.17) For Fred, to turn against God is a rational decision as he becomes unable to believe in ‘any idea that could not be tested through physical experience’. (p.35) Committed to the materiality of human perception as he is, he is totally confounded by his unaccountable love for the mysterious Miss Saunders, encountered only once under peculiar circumstances. The materiality of humanity is no more evidently shown in the human body, the flesh and blood of which is destined to undergo inevitable mutability, than human spirituality — seen in Fred’s frustrated devotion to Daisy — flourishes or diminishes under differing circumstances in witness to an invisible design. In the end, we believe that Fred will believe in Daisy though he cannot believe in God.

*The Blue Flower*, continuing the novelist’s contemplative study of humanity, raises the fundamental issue of human perceptions of love and spirituality. What Fitzgerald wishes to explore is the divergence between idealism and realism, the gap between the spiritual and the material. That Fritz’s love spiritualizes Sophie illustrates explicitly what Fitzgerald intends to show as the discrepancy between idealism and realism. In commonplace reality an ordinary, lively but not very intelligent young girl, Sophie is nonetheless Fritz’s ‘heart’s heart’, his ‘Guardian Spirit’. (pp.74, 226) In the quarter-hour of their first encounter Sophie’s artless purity immediately possesses Fritz and answers his spiritual longing. Fritz’s devotion to Sophie is so unqualified that her physical decline — head bald, skin yellowish — can only increase its fervour. The unexpected sympathy it provokes from his spiritually ascetic, dour Moravian father seems a natural human reaction in comparison.

Fitzgerald’s heavy use of gruesome imagery indicates not just her underlying preoccupation with the body/soul issue, but also her immersion in the religious inquiry into the materiality/spirituality divide. And as such, the novelist’s use of the grotesque as a structure has to be viewed as closely connected to her moral seriousness, and inseparable from her religious interpretation of the spiritual



and the material. As discussed earlier, the novelist presents human nature and behaviour as circumstantial, as dependent on the situations in which decisions are made. One persistent instance of the grotesque involves deformation of the body. Fitzgerald's fiction provides several telling instances of the grotesque motif of the mutating, and mutated, human body. The employment of the macabre pervades Fitzgerald's fiction. The macabre element of *The Golden Child*, for example, rests in the point that the priceless mummy, exhibited as a cultural artifact, presumed a child prince of some ancient African tribe, turns out to be the withered corpse of a child who has recently died of starvation. The bizarre ghost story awkwardly encased in *The Gate of Angels* describes how the corrupt lay sisters of a derelict convent murder a visiting priest who comes to deliver a writ of eviction, by disjuncting and stuffing him alive into a narrow sealed-off ditch. *Innocence*, in particular, explicitly employs the macabre: not only in its allusion to the legend of Gemma, dumb, blinded and cut off at the knees; but also in the lingering depiction of Gramsci, stinking of sickness, his dying body oozing blood. This objectionable invasion of the reader's senses, which as literal event triggers Salvatore's traumatized retreat from human commitment, also alludes figuratively to the degeneration and deformation of humanity under malignant or ignorant interference — benevolent or oppressive alike.

Like many novelists of the contemporary era, Fitzgerald has to resist the pull of experience towards a tragic view of life. Her use of the comic and macabre evokes more than a mere laughter; it arouses a recognition of the stories' metaphysical and moral dimensions. Given the weight of Christianity in Fitzgerald's life, it is perfectly possible to view the novelist's employment of the gruesome as both a moral, and an allegorical, move. Philip Thomson suggests that the ambivalent nature of the grotesque mode — its power of estrangement and alienation — is frequently mobilised in order to question the apparent acceptability of reality. Essentially disharmonious and dependent on conflict, the grotesque/macabre 'may be either the expression of a profound sense of dislocation

and alienation or employed as an aggressive device in the service of satire and the like'.<sup>34</sup> Wolfgang Kayser, on the other hand, focuses on the grotesque as a structure: the grotesque is the estranged world, the allegorical fissuring of which is designed to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world. The grotesque, in espousing 'the loss of identity, the distortion of "natural" size and shape', only enhances the visibility of the individually demolished, made-over and put-together fragments.<sup>35</sup> As a structure, the grotesque signals a sense of unrest and confusion of reception, and at the same time heightens the conflicts that defamiliarize the customary perspective.

It is by way of heightening our awareness of the material base of humanity that Fitzgerald reminds us of the invisible yet inseparable necessity of spirituality in humanity. Through Fritz's perspective Fitzgerald calls attention to the separation between body and soul. In one episode of *The Blue Flower* Fritz is called to witness a duel, during which one duellist is hurt:

'No, only two fingers,' said Dietmahler, urgently bending down to the earth, where weeds and coarse grass were already beginning to sprout. He picked up the fingers, red and wet as if skinned, one of them the top joint only, one with a gold ring.

'Put them in your mouth,' said Dietmahler. 'If they are kept warm I can perhaps sew them back on our return.'

Fritz was not likely to forget the sensation of the one and a half fingers and the heavy ring, smooth and hard while they were yielding, in his mouth.

*'All Nature is one,' he told himself.*  
(*The Blue Flower*, p.34, my emphasis)

It is by addressing the mutable deformity of the body that the effect of the unseen human spirit is brought into view to actualise a rounded view of human nature. The flesh may deteriorate and wear away, yet perhaps only by acknowledging the mutability of human flesh — as Fitzgerald does in her fiction — can the eyes be directed to seek the unobservable essences of humanity.

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<sup>34</sup> Thomson, *The Grotesque*, p.18.

<sup>35</sup> Kayser, *The Grotesque: in Art and Literature*, p.185.



### Courage in a World of Battle and Chance

Fitzgerald's earlier works are abundant in Darwinian metaphors. I suggest that this is because in works like *The Golden Child*, *The Bookshop*, *Offshore* and *At Freddie's* the novelist is committed to examining humanity in terms of predation and natural selection, and to viewing life as a battlefield. Life seen in this perspective is a constant flux of struggle and confrontation, wherein some perish and some survive. The brutality of human conflicts is such that the animal instinct of self-preservation is a crucial survival skill. Sir John, in *The Golden Child*, murders his aged beneficiary to preserve his own interest, like Mrs Gamart (*The Bookshop*) and Freddie (*At Freddie's*), he knows very well when and how to elbow away potential rivalry. Those who lack this 'worldly' knowledge, this predacious skill — such as the innocent public who pay to see a fake mummy plated with genuine gold-leaves (*The Golden Child*), or Florence (*The Bookshop*) — fail to sense the viciousness of their opponents.<sup>36</sup>

The game of the chase, meanwhile, to some degree depends as much on aggressiveness as on chance. By looking into the triviality of human daily living through a magnified close scrutiny, Fitzgerald shares with many post-war writers the view that human life is sometimes absurd and meaningless. But she avoids the fatal loop of determinism and pessimism by combining humanist compassion with Christian faith. The total effect of Fitzgerald's fiction is disillusioned but not pessimistic. Even in its resignation to the absurdity of mundane existence and the human potential for atrocities, her novels all quietly affirm the importance of individual freedom for self-fulfilment. More covertly still, the incongruity of life is relieved of its disheartening sense of existential alienation because the fiction is imbued with the novelist's belief in a divine purpose. The sense of divine mystery,

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<sup>36</sup> I shall return to Fitzgerald's use of Darwinian evolutionary metaphors, in Chapter Five, and discuss this aspect in terms of class-stagnation under a revisionist pastoral reading of Fitzgerald's works.

as seen in *The Gate of Angels* and *The Blue Flower*, for instance, replaces a gloomy view of humanity's insignificance with a possible purposefulness

The notion of chance is much dramatised in Fitzgerald's fiction, particularly in *The Gate of Angels*. Set in 1912 in the university town of Cambridge, the novel is a textual exploration of how chance, or randomness, plays a deciding role in one's life. The plot is straightforward: in order to secure his Fellowship Fred is required to remain celibate. Daisy has just been sacked and allowed herself to be propositioned by Kelly. One late evening Fred, cycling, collides with Daisy and Kelly, who are also cycling on their way to a hotel. Kelly runs away, leaving the two to be mistaken by the rescuers as a couple and consequently put in the same bed, undressed.

*The Gate of Angels* explores the notion of chance from perspectives both scientific and religious. Inquiring into the meaning of chance, the novel vividly recalls the intellectual controversies of the early 1910s — a time when the existence of God was being severely challenged by the progress of, and rising belief in, science. This is the decade when scientists started to investigate physics at the atomic level. Under microscopic observation, it becomes evident that the predictability of atomic movement in its natural law is very difficult to ascertain; nevertheless, should two atoms collide and interact, the impact is often disproportionate. However, a scientific reading of chance as mere randomness *per se* defies an in-depth, coherent interpretation of the function of chance in the story as well as in life. To explain randomness from a religious point of view is to acknowledge the possibility of miracle. Seen in this light, chance is to be interpreted as an act of God. It was through a miracle that Kelly had to abort his ignoble plan; it was magic that drew Fred and Daisy together.

Magic happens again on a miserable night, after Daisy has been publicly humiliated by Kelly and is ready to leave town. Mere curiosity leads her to walk into the tiny St Angelicus college — where animals of the female sex were never allowed — and rescue the blind, fainting Master who in distress finds the college



door unexpectedly opened and himself in the arms of a woman. In a personal communication Fitzgerald justifies Daisy as ‘a magic character’ because the always-locked-up gate mysteriously opens to let her in to the forbidden college.<sup>37</sup> Due to her delay in the college courtyard, Daisy meets Fred walking slowly back. As it happens, the couple are thrown together again by an unforeseeable power and given a chance to start over.

*The Gate of Angels* engages religious and scientific debate, and a violent macabre ghost story, to announce its metaphysical concern: Should the unobservable, like God, or the atom, be pursued and believed in? What, indeed, differentiates religious believers from scientists, since both of them believe in something that defies the capacity of our naked eyes? Isn’t the atom, like God, unobservable? In her second review of *The Gate of Angels* Kate Kellaway contends that:

[B]elieving that an atom exists is as much an act of faith as believing in God. And there are other problems to attend to besides splitting the atom — Fitzgerald inserts a sprightly debate about the splitting of mind, body and soul.<sup>38</sup>

In *The Gate of Angels*, the randomness and contingency of what seems to be an episodic plot are in the religious reading assimilated to a providential design. For Fitzgerald, ‘chance’ is much more than mere ‘randomness’; in fact, by aligning chance with ‘magic’ Fitzgerald allies herself with the believers in the providential Christian God. Making the novel an experiment, Fitzgerald textually explores how randomness may affect people’s lives just as scientists try to make out an explicable pattern from randomly moving particles. Anita Brookner in her review offers to read the fictional gate of the St. Angelicus College as a symbol for the novel. She notices that the novel is ‘difficult to explain without recourse to

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<sup>37</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication III [5 May 1995], question 1.

<sup>38</sup> Kate Kellaway, ‘A Bicycle Made for Two’, review of *The Gate of Angels* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Listener* (23 August 1990), p.24.

religious symbolism'. Brookner proposes to read *The Gate of Angels* as 'a fiction within a fiction' by focusing on those references, and episodes, related to religion and metaphysics.<sup>39</sup>

Thomas Vargish, in his *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction*, argues that 'the fictional representation of providence at work in the world is a major unifying thematic direction for the English novel before George Eliot.'<sup>40</sup> He maintains that, in order to convey a sense of a Supreme Being who foresees and controls human events for some divine purpose, a providential aesthetic is central to the shaping of literary material. Leland Monk, in *Standard Deviations*, also elaborates on the concept of chance and its literary manifestation. Showing the emerging influence of the concept of 'chance' on the development of the modern British novel, Monk points out that the early novel tends to suggest Divine providence or retribution in an incident.<sup>41</sup> The notion of chance is fundamental to the understanding of *The Gate of Angels*. It is indirectly insinuated, but is not what the novel tries to present. It is chance that brings Fred and Daisy together, a second chance miracle that reunites them. In reading Christian symbolism from *The Gate of Angels*, another reviewer, Zoë Heller, comments that this novel serves as a testimony to Fitzgerald's faith:

What surely stands as the novel's unofficial epigraph is glimpsed only briefly in the inscription on Daisy's ring: 'whatever there is to know, That we shall know one day.' With this insistence on the truth that transcends arrogant human brains, the wisdom that can only be revealed, Penelope Fitzgerald comes as close as she ever has in her novels to an explicit statement of Christian faith.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Anita Brookner, 'Daisy pulls it off', review of *The Gate of Angels* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Spectator* (1 September 1990), p.31.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Vargish, *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), p.2.

<sup>41</sup> Leland Monk, *Standard Deviation: Chance and the Modern British Novel* (California: Stanford University Press, 1993), p.33. Monk argues that Providence in *Robinson Crusoe* has become an element *in* the plot but is no longer unquestionably identifiable *as* the plot: it is a belief underlining the surface of the story's structure.

<sup>42</sup> Heller, 'Affairs of the heart in defiance of reason', p.29.



In the same interview Fitzgerald denies that *The Gate of Angels* is a novel about Christianity:

I still haven't put down in any of my books what I really believe. I'm ashamed of myself — but it would require so much courage. People think that sort of thing is ridiculous these days, don't they?<sup>43</sup>

The word 'ridiculous' indicates the novelist's awareness of a spiritual difference between people of her generation and those of the late twentieth-century.

Nevertheless, the ethos her works express is nonetheless indicative of a confirmed Christian attitude of humility, compassion, and faith in providence. Without the notion of chance as providence the novel would have presented quite a different story, comparable to the open ending of *At Freddie's*, or *The Bookshop's* unequivocally bleak conclusion.

Regarding the metaphysical nature of chance, *The Blue Flower* participates in celebrating the providential design more explicitly. It is by chance that Fritz/Novalis is taken to Grüningen where he falls passionately in love with Sophie. Fritz's commitment meets with disapproval from his brother and sister, who consider Sophie not his intellectual equal. Yet Fritz was determined:

Fritz would accept what Fate and Chance sent and take the opportunity to say nothing. The distance between himself and Erasmus [his brother] distressed him far more than any falling-out with his father. At Neudietendorf he had learned, even when he thought he was refusing to learn, the Moravian respect for chance. Chance is one of the manifestations of God's will.

(*The Blue Flower*, p. 98)

Fitzgerald obviously employs chance as a manifestation of some higher power; for the novelist, chance is the embodiment of Providence, even when it leads to a conclusion as hard and apparently futile as the death of Fritz's 'wisdom'.

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<sup>43</sup> Heller, 'Affairs of the heart in defiance of reason', p.29.

Courage is what is required to survive in a world of chance, strife, and incongruity. Fitzgerald's concern with the matter of courage is most aptly characterised in her humble, meek, unassuming protagonists. The meek are worth portraying, for they represent those who, though knowing that they may be eventually defeated, still endeavour to fight a good fight. Fitzgerald's novels lack no such oppressed humble character; Waring of *The Golden Child*, for instance, and Florence of *The Bookshop*, among others, are exemplary. Florence's insistence on opening a bookshop at the Old House provokes hostility from the local society hostess, Mrs Gamart, who wants the premises for other use. With her political connection Mrs Gamart eventually succeeds in dislodging Florence. Compelled to liquidate her remaining stock, Florence keeps only two books — Ruskin's *Unto this Last* and Bunyan's *Grace Abounding*. (*The Bookshop*, p.123) These two titles suggest Fitzgerald's sympathetic reckoning of the protagonist's graceful defeat up to the very last minute. The last paragraph continues Fitzgerald's unspoken compassion:

In the winter of 1960, therefore, having sent her heavy luggage on ahead, Florence Green took the bus into Flintmarket [...] At Flintmarket she took the 10.46 to Liverpool Street. As the train drew out of the station she sat with her head bowed in shame, because the town in which she had lived for nearly ten years had not wanted a bookshop.

(*The Bookshop*, p.123)

In a personal communication, in which I asked the novelist if Waring and Florence are what she meant by 'the innocent', Fitzgerald's reply reveals not only her sympathy toward the often defeated, humble type, but also her motivation in characterising them:

These characters, Waring, Florence, Fred, are not so much innocent as unworldly — they are not adapted to the world and the age they were born into, but at least they put up a good fight to survive.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication III [5 May 1995], question 1.



In *The Bookshop* Fitzgerald's sympathy towards the 'unworldly' is clearly expressed in the remark that human beings are 'divided into exterminators and exterminatees, with the former, at any given moment, predominating.' (p.34) The novelist's thematic preoccupation with courage is closely connected with her concern with life and people: Fitzgerald believes that 'courage and endurance are useless if they are never tested' (*The Bookshop*, p.18) — a view clearly restated in *The Blue Flower* through the dialogue between Fritz and Sophie's sister, about whether Sophie will have enough courage to leave home for the young, poor philosopher/poet/salt-mine administrator:

'You don't think, then, that she has the courage?'

'Courage when you don't understand what it is that you have to face is no better than ignorance.'

'[...] Courage is more than endurance, it is the power to create your own life in the face of all that man or God can inflict, so that every day and every night is what you imagine it. Courage makes us dreamers, courage makes us poets.'

(*The Blue Flower*, p.157)

Jean Sudrann describes the world of Fitzgerald's novels as 'flawed, untrustworthy, and mutable'. The voices, actions, and landscapes of her fiction 'open up for the reader a panorama of fallible human beings whose very lives are at risk in a long-since fallen world'.<sup>45</sup> To survive in such a world is no easy matter, particularly for the meek and humble, to whom Fitzgerald's compassionate reverence belongs. Fitzgerald's emphasis on the importance of courage and 'sense of direction' is also revealed in a personal communication, where she speaks of her belief that 'fortitude in the face of the world's difficulties is the same everywhere'.<sup>46</sup> Her fiction is a homage paid to the ordinary people for their unrecognised courage in getting through their day-to-day trials and disappointments.

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<sup>45</sup> Sudrann, 'Magic or Miracles', p. 112, 116.

<sup>46</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication IV [3 June 1995].

....5This chapter foregrounds my textual study of Fitzgerald's novels. In finding a place in contemporary fiction for Fitzgerald, I suggest that the notion of 'contemporaneity' as 'stylistic innovation' be guarded against. In terms of socio-intellectual context I would place Fitzgerald and her works firmly within the fold of conventional social realism and Christian liberal humanism. I contend that, as far as theme, form, and genre are concerned, Fitzgerald has more in common with the post-war novelists of the 1950s and 60s, than with writers of the past three decades. Fitzgerald's novels demonstrate the generic features of the novel of manners in their focus not on the social grandeur of some monumental epoch, but on the scaled-down incidents of life occurring at distinct junctures of time and place — stressing the inconsequentiality of the evanescent and the ordinary. Her writing is terse but fluent, humorous yet compassionate.

Most important of all are Fitzgerald's thematic concerns. She steers away from current controversial topics; instead, she is largely preoccupied with the insoluble moral dilemmas of life — such as the craving for power, the need to control, and the fear of losing independence. Relating Christian faith to liberalism and social realism, Fitzgerald's novels are notable for a humanist philosophy which speaks of a persistent fascination with human existence. In the light of her considerable knowledge of this world's dangers and incongruities, the novelist expresses her compassion for life's defeated congregation by dealing in her novels with questions of individuality, of morality and human nature, of the heart and mind, of reason, courage, and compassion. Her fiction speaks of the relationship 'between God and humanity':

I'm talking about the relationship between God and humanity, and I have only myself to blame if this doesn't come out clearly. I would agree with whoever it was that said that 20th century human beings have made themselves too unimportant to be tragic but too desperate to be comic.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication II [1 January 1995], question 5.



### CHAPTER 3

## A VERY ENGLISH KIND OF WRITING: 'ENGLISHNESS'

She [Penelope Fitzgerald] writes the kind of fiction in which perfection is almost to be hoped for, unostentatious as true virtuosity can make it, its texture a pure pleasure.

--- Frank Kermode<sup>1</sup>

A wonderful combination of deadpan *English* comedy and surreal farce.

--- A. S. Byatt<sup>2</sup>

Following on from Chapter Two's argument that the canonical literariness of Fitzgerald's works lies in her commitment to the liberal humanist tradition in British writing, Chapter Three argues that the canonicity of Fitzgerald's fiction is also a matter of prescribed Establishment tastes and criteria.

Since the inception of her career as a novelist, Fitzgerald has been recognised as a very *English* English writer, and this chapter investigates the question of 'Englishness' and its expression in Fitzgerald's fiction. The mere fact that Fitzgerald was born, brought up and has lived in England does not suffice to account for the praise of the novelist as very 'English'. In this chapter I would like to map out the literary manifestations of 'Englishness' in Fitzgerald's novels from two directions. Firstly, the rhetorical features of 'Englishness' will be discussed in order to give full demonstration to a preferred rhetoric of English writing. Secondly, I shall illustrate the notions of 'Englishness' as textualised in

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Booker Books', in *The London Review of Books* (22 November 1979), pp.12-13, p.12.

<sup>2</sup> A. S. Byatt, 'The Isle Full of Noise', review of *Human Voices* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Times Literary Supplement* (29 September 1980), p.1057. My emphasis.

Fitzgerald's fiction to support the argument that Fitzgerald's reputation as a significant English writer is indicative of an Establishment view that privileges a certain conception of 'Englishness'.

As I have already suggested, due to her relatively late entry into fiction writing, Fitzgerald is likely to be viewed as anachronistic. Section three proposes to see the genre of manners — including the detective genre Fitzgerald started with — as culturally and historically integral to the 'Englishness' of English writing, and to read Fitzgerald's employment of the genre of manners as an active, positive strategy of writing. By starting off with the detective story and in particular by employing the genre of manners, the novelist utilises the accessibility of the genres to reach out to the general reader. My contention is that the inherent nature of these two genres appeals to the general reading public *unobtrusively* — hence making the transmission of ideas and ideology less difficult. That is to say, the utilisation of the genre of manners to a certain degree serves to conserve and disseminate the construction of 'Englishness' as seen in Fitzgerald's fiction. The accessibility of the genre of manners contributes not only to her success as a novelist, but also to the perpetuation of Establishment literary values.

Fitzgerald's fiction is rooted in a tradition of 'Englishness' in terms of theme, characterisation, and language. Section Four examines her non-fiction works in an effort to map out the influence of canonical literary values on the author herself. I shall argue that, much as contemporary theorists and critics agree on the death of the 'grand narrative' of the Western European perspective, *the* literary Canon, as previously celebrated by the Leavises and *Scrutiny* critics, does not decline. On the contrary, it has been thriving unchecked in the domain of literary criticism practised by literary journalists and reviewers. I shall suggest that Fitzgerald's academic training has served to provide an orthodox critical approach that continues the tradition of a belletristic literary sensibility.

Section Four also explores the issue of canonical literary values embodied in Fitzgerald's association with the Booker Prize — an institution which exerts



immense influence in the public reception of literature, and with which Fitzgerald has been closely associated during her writing career. The issue at stake is the perpetuation of the literary canon. I suggest we view ‘Englishness’ — with its stylistic and ideological features — as a cultural construct exploited largely by this literary establishment to solidify an imagined, monolithic national identity. By briefly investigating the history and working of the Booker, I contend that the Booker Prize, since its inception as a major British and Commonwealth literary award, has been influential in popularising its Establishment values and trends, as it safeguards ‘Englishness’ as well as the traditional critical perspective of literature.

### 3.1) STYLISTIC FEATURES OF ‘ENGLISHNESS’

The success of Fitzgerald’s fiction is attributed to the novelist’s sharp evocation of the particularity of life, ‘an ability to make the reader see’.<sup>3</sup> Literary reviewers like Barbara Fisher Williamson, Robert Plunket and many others all comment on Fitzgerald’s fiction as ‘comedy of manners’.<sup>4</sup> Fitzgerald always sets her fictions in a fairly limited living/working environment. Even if the environs are located in cities — such as London, Moscow, and Florence — the narrative focus and the reader’s attention are often directed to the enclosure of the tiny space in which the characters move about. Usually Fitzgerald offers us a community, a group of people who at first appear irrelevant to one another. Yet gradually as the narrator advances to present the individuality of the respective characters, a connection

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<sup>3</sup> Allan Massie, review of *The Beginning of Spring*, in *Scotsman*, cited among blurbs for the novel.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara F Williamson, ‘Quiet Lives Afloat’, review of *Offshore* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *New York Times Book Review* (September 1987), p.51. Robert Plunket, ‘Dear, Slovenly Mother Moscow’, review of *The Beginning of Spring* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *New York Times Book Review* (May 1989), p.15.

among them is established and a conjoint story emerges. Renowned for their vivid reproduction of a specific time-place atmosphere, Fitzgerald's novels are slender in bulk, straightforward in plot, scant in dialogue, yet rich in the novelist's observation and reminiscences.

### **Atmospheric Description and Characterisation**

One prominent feature of the novel of manners is its vivid portrayal of society. Fitzgerald's novels do not aim to chronicle social customs, manners and conventions. Rather, they offer verbal pictures of conditions of various social groups at a particular time and place. The key characteristic of Fitzgerald's novels, and the talent in her fictional writing, is the magic of *deja vu*: its success in reproducing time-place specific atmosphere. In describing the troubled and disordered air in Broadcasting House during the second World War, Fitzgerald offers an audible sketch of the late shift staff sleeping in the make-do concert hall:

The sleepers were obscurely tormented by the need to be somewhere in five, ten, or twenty minutes. Awakened, quite often by feet walking over them, they struck matches whose tiny flames wavered in every corner of the concert-hall, and had a look at their watches, just to be sure. Yet some slept on, and the walls, designed to give the best possible acoustics for classical music, worked just as well for snoring. [...] No barracks or dormitory in the country produced snoring of such broad tone, and above that distinctly rose the variations of the overwrought, the junior announcers rehearsing their cues, correcting themselves and starting again, continuity men suddenly shouting: '...and now, in a lighter mood...', and every now and then a fit of mysterious weeping.  
(*Human Voices*, p.84)

The task Fitzgerald wishes to accomplish in her comedy of manners is to portray a diminutive environment and its enclosed, seemingly insignificant events; and her methods are thorough but economical. Take for instance *The Beginning of Spring*. Rural conventionality in pre-revolutionary Russia is conjured up in a passage about the rituals taking place in the bathhouse of a dacha:



Underneath a lid of perforated zinc there was a layer of stones from the brook, which could be heated by lighting a brushwood fire. When the fire had died down you went in, shut the door and pulled back the grating in the roof until Egor's face squinted down at you, ready to pour down a bucket of cold water that raised a suffocating cloud of steam from the blistering heat of the stones.

(*The Beginning of Spring*, p.170)

The vividness of atmosphere of a particular place and time in Fitzgerald's fiction percolates the reader's senses. Praised by Anita Brookner as 'part novel, part evocation', *The Beginning of Spring* provides a lucid recreation of the old Moscow in 1913, in its household full of servants of all sorts.<sup>5</sup> Fitzgerald's eye for the ordinary has very often made the commonplace extraordinary. In terms of scale she is a literary miniaturist who pays tribute to the insignificant details by meticulously and faithfully highlighting the significance of triviality. Take an eighteenth century dinner at a German country genteel household for example:

The servants had already brought in the soups, one made of beer, sugar and eggs, one of rose-hips and onions, one of bread and cabbage-water, one of cows' udders flavoured with nutmeg. There was dough mixed with beech-nut oil, pickled herrings and goose with treacle sauce, hard-boiled eggs, numerous dumplings.

(*The Blue Flower*, p.115)

Fitzgerald's success in recreating the past lies in her thorough mindfulness — a characteristic critics such as Brookner highly recommends:

Mrs Fitzgerald [...] is marvellous at detailing the number of dishes, toast-racks, eggcups, knife-rests, tea-strainers, milk jugs, gravy-boats, fish forks, blancmange dishes, [...] She is an excellent historian, quietly placing items of information which might have come from old London records, or, alternatively, off the back of a magazine such as the *Blackfriars*, *Vauxhall* and *Temple Gazette*, which she unobtrusively introduces into her overloaded but seamless plot.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Anita Brookner, 'Moscow before the revolution', review of *The Beginning of Spring* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Spectator* (1 October 1988), p.29-30.

<sup>6</sup> Anita Brookner, 'Daisy pulls it off', review of *The Gate of Angels* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Spectator* (1 September 1990), p.32.

Social convention under Fitzgerald's pen is conveyed with natural authority, in a style that makes the reader see and catch the significance of a place as well as its appearance.

Praises that connect Fitzgerald with the term 'Englishness' are plentiful, particularly in relation to the literary language and representation of her fiction. Penelope Lively, when evaluating contemporary fiction of the early 1980s, includes Fitzgerald as one of the best five novelists of late. Singling out 'wit, concision, brevity' as the fashionable taste of the 1980s, Lively applauds Fitzgerald's *Human Voices* for giving the reader 'another exercise in the fiction of economy and understatement'. On Fitzgerald's writing Lively comments,

*It is a very English kind of writing, backing away from emotional and stylistic excess [...] Penelope Fitzgerald brings off her effects through neat dialogue and a deft hand with the descriptive phrase that nails a place or situation in a way that pages of painstaking description would have failed to do.*<sup>7</sup>

The same opinion that identifies Fitzgerald as 'very English' is also found in A. S. Byatt's remark on the former's work, especially *Human Voices*.

Although considered by some critics as 'the least engaging'<sup>8</sup> of Fitzgerald's novels, *Human Voices* nonetheless has enjoyed a rather different acclaim as far as Lively and Byatt are concerned. Byatt and Lively, along with many other literary reviewers/critics, represent a shared attitude which highly privileges a particular style of 'reticence, absence, underemphasis' as the embodiment of English writing for which Fitzgerald's writing and novels are praised.<sup>9</sup> Michael Ratcliffe, reviewing *The Gate of Angels*, comments that the novel

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<sup>7</sup> Penelope Lively, 'Five of the Best: New Fiction', in *Encounter* (January 1981), p.56. My emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> Robert E. Hosmer, Jr., 'Penelope Fitzgerald', in *Dictionary of British Women Writers*, ed. Janet Todd (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 252-254, p.253.

<sup>9</sup> Byatt, 'The Isle Full of Noises', p.1057.



[c]ontains more wit, intelligence and feeling than many novels three times its length. It confirms Fitzgerald's place as one of the finest and most entertaining novelists writing in England today.<sup>10</sup>

From various publicity blurbs and reviews of Fitzgerald's novels, features like brevity, understatement, and wittiness are seen to be central to the novelist's writing, and equivalent to the essence of stylistic 'Englishness'. Therefore, I would like to offer a textual analysis of Fitzgerald's fiction in terms of these features.

### **Brevity and Concision**

By and large, brevity and concision is fully demonstrated in the slenderness and the economical prose style of Fitzgerald's fiction. She originally made her first novel, *The Golden Child*, a medium-length story of 75,000 words, which was then, at her publisher's behest, cut down to 50,000 words, with eight chapters — most of the characters, all the suspects and clues — excised. Yet the absences were not missed at all. Henceforth, Fitzgerald devoted herself to short, 'microchip' novels, as she calls them.<sup>11</sup> Brevity necessitates concision, stylistically and verbally. The novelist's evocative power of specific and richly atmospheric description enables her to present various social groups, to nail down the characters, with sharp crispness. For instance, in *Human Voices*, set in the half-paralysed London of the Second World War, a few lines in a 'General Circulation headed Christmas Arrangements 1940' suffices to pin down the chaotic, perilous situation, without actually describing the silently panicking and barricaded city:

Although it is not possible to forecast what shape this year's Christmas Programme will take, or to give any assurance as to whether His Majesty will broadcast to the nation as he did in 1939, all Departments are asked to send in their suggestions as soon as possible.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Ratcliffe's review of *The Gate of Angels* was published in *The Observer* (1990). Quoted from the blurbs on the back cover of the novel, as I have been unable to identify the exact date of its publication.

<sup>11</sup> Cited from Maureen Cleave, 'Maureen Cleave meets Penelope Fitzgerald', in *Over 21* (February 1980), pp.28-29, p.28. Also, see Appendix B, Personal Communication IV [3 June 1995].

(*Human Voices*, p.52)

These brief lines offer a concrete picture of Britain bracing itself against German aggression. Another instance from *At Freddie's* also demonstrates Fitzgerald's laconic use of language. Here the narrator offers a succinct account of Freddie's forceful character:

Debt collectors had long since given up waiting at the front and back doors of the Temple School. They knew there was no prospect of getting anything, and it was said that one of them, in the manner of the old comedies, had been persuaded to part with his waistcoat and jacket and donate it to the stock of costumes.

(*At Freddie's*, p.46)

To portray Freddie's manipulative tactfulness, Fitzgerald does not need dialogue to enable the reader to perceive the psychology of the protagonist. On the contrary, the novelist pinpoints 'Freddie-ism' by way of a miniature epiphany that succinctly captures her resourcefulness.

Penelope Lively, in another review on contemporary fiction, again commends Fitzgerald's stylistic employment of language. In Lively's view, Fitzgerald's fiction, curt and terse, offers the ultimate stylistic pleasure to a reader.<sup>12</sup> Apart from portraying individual character and situation, Fitzgerald offers 'stylistic pleasure' — to use Lively's phrase — by bringing to life conspicuous traits of the English. The novelist predominantly employs the descriptive approach to observe and document ordinary life at specific socio-historic points. The brevity of her style offers verbal snapshots that markedly pin down the points.

The following exchange occurs, in *Human Voices*, when Lise, a former assistant in Broadcasting House, is discovered by Willie, a fellow junior assistant,

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<sup>12</sup> Penelope Lively, 'Backwards & Forwards: Recent Fiction', in *Encounter*, Vol. LVIII, No.6 & Vol. LIX, No.1 (June-July 1982) pp.86-91. In Lively's own words:

[T]here are few who can match her [Fitzgerald] when it comes to the nailing of a character in a few words, the turn of phrase that brings a person or a place smoking off the page, the wry comment that sums up a situation.



to be in labour in an obscure corner of the House. Not knowing what to do to help the woman, Willie runs to seek help from the DPP, a high-ranking director. Here we see Fitzgerald resort to the use of dialogue to depict the urgent, even absurd, situation. The dialogue comically portrays an English young man attempting a measure of formality and composure to conceal his helplessness in the face of unexpected parturition. Willie, blood-stained and about to faint, thus reports to the DPP:

‘It’s Lise, sir, I mean Miss Bernard, really *perhaps* I mean Mrs Bernard.’

He glanced down at the knees of his grey trousers.

‘Perhaps the thought’s passing through your mind that I’ve murdered her.’

Jeff saw he was in a bad way.

‘Never mind what I think. We can discuss that later. Who is Miss Bernard?’

‘Well, she’s having a baby, Mr Haggard. I *suppose* she may have had it by now, but these things take some time, you know. That is, she’s giving birth to a child, in the concert-hall.’

‘In the concert-hall, you say?’

‘It’s one of those curtained off bits, just as you go in. I just happened to be passing. I had a ticket for tonight, that was all in order. No, sir, I’m not telling you the exact truth, I hoped perhaps if it was free I might go in there myself. It’s the one next to the door, so usually it’s kept for the Senior Announcer.’

‘But at the moment it’s occupied by Miss Bernard, who is in an advanced stage of labour?’

Willie nodded.

(*Human Voices*, p.118-9)

Within such a scant space the dialogue offers us in Willie a verbal Mr Bean — the spokesman of English character epitomised in the recent BBC television series — whose formality, stuttering, straying from the point, self-justification, peculiar mannerisms, and so on, are recognised as quintessential ‘English’ features. A manner peculiarly English is also conspicuously and concisely emphasised through Hawthorne-Mannering’s effeminate camp:

The Keeper of Funerary Art glided in and, looking exceptionally out of place on one of the coarse and creaky chairs provided in the

incident room, confirmed the matter of the dinner-party. It had been entirely private, arranged by himself.

‘Yes, certainly, a little celebration *à deux* ... or one might say, an *amende honorable* ... and of course, a new friendship ...’

‘Did you or your guest at any time during the evening go down to the Staff Library?’

‘Oh, we did. We directed ourselves downstairs ...’

‘This “directed ourselves”, sir, if you’ll excuse me — does that suggest that you may have had a certain amount to drink?’

‘A direct translation from the French ... but certainly one took wine ... the atmosphere was exciting, not to say vibrant.’

(*The Golden Child*, p.114)

Fitzgerald’s condensed utilisation of dialogue avoids any build-up of lengthy exchanges between characters. She provides abrupt distancing outbursts of comic release which, in Clare Boylan’s interview with the novelist, is marked as Fitzgerald’s greatest relief.<sup>13</sup> In an interview in 1981 Fitzgerald talks about her style of writing. She states that she prefers writing short novels because she likes ‘economy and compression’. In her own words: ‘I don’t think long novels are necessarily better than short ones, any more than tall men are necessarily better than short men — it’s a different form, that’s all.’<sup>14</sup>

### **Reticence and Understatement**

Fitzgerald’s fiction is noted for its finely honed dialogue which, along with reticence and understatement, are considered as specifically English rhetorical features. In her autobiographical article included in *Contemporary Authors*, the novelist recalls her father’s and three uncles’ fondness for quiet understatement,

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<sup>13</sup> Clare Boylan, ‘Conversations dipped in ink’, in *The Guardian* (21 November 1991), p.26. Boylan comments of Fitzgerald’s use of dialogue: ‘Fitzgerald’s greatest relief lies in stretches of dialogue.’ Judy Astor compares Fitzgerald with Muriel Spark in terms of the use of economic dialogue. Astor observes:

Like Muriel Spark, Penelope Fitzgerald knows exactly what she’s doing. In three lines and a snatch of dialogue she can nail a character, in a paragraph conjure up a place and an atmosphere — a Lyons tea-shop, backstage at the theatre or the streets of Covent Garden....

Judy Astor, ‘Children in Trouble,’ in *The Listener*, vol. 107, No. 2755 (8 April 8 1982), pp.23-4.

<sup>14</sup> Gerda Charles, ‘Penelope Fitzgerald’, in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. D. L. Kirkpatrick (London: St. James Press, 1986), pp.294-296, p.295.



and acknowledges that she also tends to ‘feel drawn to whatever is spare, subtle, and economical’.<sup>15</sup> A. S. Byatt applauds Fitzgerald’s use of dialogue in *Human Voices* as capturing ‘the nuances and peculiarities of human communication’. Yet more to the point would be to say it divulges how inconsequential and deficient people’s communication is always inclined to be, especially amid the wartime hubbub. Structurally the novel is chipped to trivial scraps which are heavy with atmospheric reminiscence and unexpected humour. What Byatt praises as ‘virtues of reticence, absence, underemphasis’ rather may be seen as encompassing a perception of the inconclusiveness of life, a kind of stuttering evasiveness habitual even in an institution apparently so well organised and composed.<sup>16</sup> Take the opening paragraph of *Human Voices* for instance:

Inside Broadcasting House, the Department of Recorded Programmes was sometimes called the Seraglio, because its Director found that he could work better when surrounded by young women. This in itself was an understandable habit and quite harmless, or, to be more accurate, RPD never considered whether it was harmless or not.  
(*Human Voices*, p.7)

The unspoken insinuation, and probably the fact taken for granted by the RPD, is that he much prefers the company of his women subordinates to that of his male staff or colleagues. Discrimination as well as over-attention based on sexual difference is hinted at through the nickname ‘the Seraglio’, while the seriousness and implication of this matter is blithely overlooked:

[I]t was understood by the girls that he [RPD] might have an overwhelming need to confide his troubles in one of them, or perhaps all of them, but never in two of them at once, during the three wartime shifts in every twenty-four hours.  
(*Human Voices*, p.7)

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<sup>15</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, ‘Penelope Fitzgerald’, in *Contemporary Authors, Autobiography Series*, Vol. 10, ed. Mark Zadrozny (Michigan: Gale Research, 1989), pp.101-109, p.103. Reprint courtesy of the novelist.

<sup>16</sup> Byatt, ‘The Isle Full of Noises’, p. 1057.

As noted, novelists of manners take society as the field of research and the development of the individual as their object. Fitzgerald is primarily interested in examining the effect of the milieu on individual. While conventional novelists of manners provide bountiful dialogues offering psychological insight into the formation of their characters, the novelist dispenses with verbosity, and works on concision. She does not intend to write like her predecessors in the novel of manners, with incessant situational dialogues. Dialogue in Fitzgerald's novels, on the contrary, is scarce, but rendered with pinpoint precision. Basically the manners of the specific period and the character of her protagonists are conveyed through the narrator's meticulous observation. Avoiding extensive dialogue interchange, Fitzgerald often relies on the narrator's succinct tell-tale supplementary information about the characters and stories. Understatement therefore becomes a central rhetorical employment in her fiction. Referring to 'the scrappiness, the silences and absences' as 'essentially part of the theme and method of the novel', Byatt remarks that *Human Voices* demonstrates a distinct 'Englishness'.<sup>17</sup> Take the characterisation of RPD for example. In order to pinpoint the selfishness of RPD without directly condemning him, Fitzgerald has the narrator describe RPD as one who 'continued like a sleepwalker, who never knows what obstacles are removed, and by what hands, from his path'. (p.25) His egotism is further disclosed in the following event:

He [RPD] had been at long last to inspect the Indispensable Emergency Personnel Quarters and found that his Department had been allocated something not much bigger than a coop. They would have to share washing facilities with Stores, Bookings and Long Term Contracts, but that would only mean a few reasonable adjustments. The point he wanted to make was that there was no provision for his four turntables. Room must be found; perhaps, after all, all this washing wasn't necessary.

(*Human Voices*, p.89)

Fitzgerald is renowned for her gift of saying a great deal in a few words.

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<sup>17</sup> Byatt, 'The Isle Full of Noises', p. 1057.



The force of understatement, in terms of the depiction of Fitzgerald's characters, is enhanced — rather than undermined — by insinuation. A passage about Freddie's office at the Temple School suggests more of her antediluvian determination than a chunky dialogue would have allowed:

Everyone who knew the Temple School will remember the distinctive smell of Freddie's office. Not precisely disagreeably, it suggested a church vestry where old clothes hang and flowers moulder in the sink, but respect is called for just the same. It was not a place for seeing clearly. Light, in the morning, entered at an angle, through a quantity of dust. [...] Freddie herself, to anyone who was summoned into the room, appeared in the shadow of her armchair as a more solid piece of darkness.

(*At Freddie's*, p.9)

Later in the fiction the narrator eventually describes Freddie's physical appearance — her cumbersome gait and lopsided smile, yet at the beginning here the characterisation of the protagonist is done through allusion and inference, rather than through photographic depiction.

### **The Use of Comedy: Irony, Humour, and the Grotesque/Caricature**

In her study of the novel of manners, Charlotte Morgan observes that the genre of manners is explicitly rich in the sense of comedy.<sup>18</sup> The use of humour and irony is important in the English novel of manners, and is particularly noteworthy in Fitzgerald's fiction. A. S. Byatt, in her review of *Human Voices*, compares Fitzgerald with Muriel Spark and Fay Weldon in terms of the self-consciously

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<sup>18</sup> Charlotte E. Morgan, *The Rise of the Novel of Manners: A Study of English Prose Fiction Between 1600 and 1740* (New York: Russell, 1963), p.65-66. Defining the novel of manners, Morgan noted:

The plots are intrigues but not of the conventional type and our sympathy is with the victims not the villains. The characters are not heroic, not even markedly romantic; but, on the other hand, they are not quite easy and natural. As for the style, it varies from the theoretical phraseology of the romances in the emotional outbursts, to bright colloquial diction in the dialogues. They show also another influence which had much bearing on the novel of manners, namely, that of contemporary comedy.

ironic tone of the novels. A tingling twist of irony and humour, according to Byatt, is what contemporary women novelists — with differing degrees of stress — successfully employ. Byatt notes that Fitzgerald's utilisation of comedy and irony lacks the 'acidity' and 'high-handed moral certainties' embodied in Spark's Catholic commitment and Weldon's feminist engagement. Where other women novelists are 'remorselessly satirical', as Byatt says of Spark in *Girls of Slender Means*, Fitzgerald is comical with sympathising irony.<sup>19</sup>

Fitzgerald's style can be briefly characterised as rapid and plain, where the narrator frequently informs, advises, and exhorts the reader. Her works are noted for the all-knowing narrator who keeps a disinterested distance, but whose voluntary allocutions often give away the emotional sympathy that is supposed to be concealed behind the dry wit. The comic inclination is strong in Fitzgerald's novels, and her employment of wittiness, humour, and occasional irony conveys the seriousness of ideas, and quietens down the enclosed didactic undertone. Jean Sudrann, in her essay on Fitzgerald's works, discusses the novelist's extensive use of the comic:

Barbs of wit, scenes of slapstick action, images of the absurd, the unexpected action or word which, deflating the cliché, destroys the sentimental, and, perhaps, most telling, the complex ironies of her endings — each of these comic modes sharpens the intensity of the action as well as the reader's understanding of that action's intent.<sup>20</sup>

From a linguistic perspective, *Innocence* is replete with puns and wordplay alluding to the gruesome, parable-like legend of Gemma. The linguistic-allegorical element in *Innocence* is fully personified in the name of the flat where the

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<sup>19</sup> Byatt, 'The Isle Full of Noise', p.1057. Why Fitzgerald lacks such ironic 'acidity' and 'high-handed moral certainties' is a matter of positionality, passion, and purposefulness that I shall return to discuss in Chapter Five in terms of the inter-relation between gender and Fitzgerald's writing.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Sudrann, 'Magic or Miracle: The Fallen World of Penelope Fitzgerald's Novels', in *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*, ed. R. E. Hosmer Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.105-127, p.111.



twentieth century Ridolfi lived: Piazza Limbo, and in the English convent school which Chiara attended: the Holy Innocents.

In Catholic theology, both the souls of unbaptised infants dead in their innocence; and the ‘good pagans’ — like Virgil, Dante’s guide — whose natural virtue without grace could not attain to heaven, were consigned to Limbo, an indeterminate region of neither pleasure nor pain. Are the arrogantly benevolent Ridolfi — as Maddalena, justifying her act which damages Salvatore’s marriage and nearly costs his life, says

I don’t believe in Providence, but I do believe that there’s such a thing as a moment of inspiration when one can judge what’s best for others.  
(*Innocence*, p.211)

by a sarcastic pun identically confined? More disturbingly, the narrator frequently refers back to images or events associated with violence or death, especially to the legend of Gemma’s mutilation. The use of ‘Limbo’ unpleasantly suggests the child’s lopped limbs, the legendary amputation: the enigmatic fable in which the novel’s moral meaning concentrates. These references and metaphors are juxtaposed with the serene landscape of olives and vineyards of Florence, of Virgilian antiquity.

The humour of Fitzgerald’s novels is marked in the novelist’s crystallised — but not cynical — view of the human condition. One example of such wit and humour occurs in *The Beginning of Spring*. Recapturing Moscow in 1913, Fitzgerald offers a fictional character, Selwyn Crane, a follower of Tolstoy’s spiritualism, to great comic effect. Selwyn is invited to attend a gathering held at a Tolstoyan lunatic asylum, and is also asked to sing for the crowd:

What he [Selwyn] had sung Frank didn’t know, but some of the patients in the audience had become restless, and others had fallen asleep. Selwyn, [...] had sung on, but afterwards, since there was no applause, he had taken the opportunity to apologise to Tolstoy, who was sitting in one of the back rows. At the time Tolstoy made no reply, but a few days later he had said: ‘I find you have done well. To be

bored is the ordinary sensation of most of us at a concert of this kind. But to these unfortunates it is a luxury to have an ordinary sensation.'  
(*The Beginning of Spring*, p.48)

Fitzgerald insinuates unexpected contradictions through humour and irony, fully alerting the reader to what the narrator implies. The effect of such stylish restraint and wittiness is instantly felt in a sketch of the pitfalls of English expatriate life in Moscow:

[Y]ou had to have a good digestion, a good head for drink, particularly spirits, a good circulation and an instinct for how much in the way of bribes would be appropriate for the uniformed and for the political police, the clerks from the Ministry of Direct Import, Commerce and Industry, and the technical and sanitary inspectors, to get anything at all. These bribes, too, must be called gifts, and with that word you began your study of the Russian language.  
(*The Beginning of Spring*, p.22)

Bege Bowers and Barbara Brothers, studying the genre of manners, suggest that humour plays an important part in the novels of manners as compared to other works in the vein of realism.<sup>21</sup> In conformity with realism's criteria, the novel of manners often employs comedy and irony to heighten — even caricature — the habitual manners of a given group. Reviewers and critics of Fitzgerald's fiction have long noted the novelist's eye for the absurd and gift for the comical. Zoe Heller recognises that Fitzgerald's most significant points are scored 'in the margins of her text — in half-buried allusions, jokes so quiet as to be self-effacing'.<sup>22</sup> *Innocence* attributes its comical effect to the narrator's obvious matter-of-factness in reporting absurd events. This novel begins with an account on midget families in the sixteen century Italy, who suffered severe mockery from the outside world:

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<sup>21</sup> Bowers and Brothers, 'What Is a Novel of Manners?', in *Reading and Writing Women's Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners*, eds. Bege Bowers and Barbara Brothers (Anne Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1990), pp.1-17, p.7.

<sup>22</sup> Zoë Heller, 'Affairs of the heart in defiance of reason', in *The Independent* (25 August 1990), p.20.



It was very well for the Valmarana, who had an abundance of dwarfs in both the villages beneath their walls. Travellers through those parts used to make a detour to see these dwarfs, and if none appeared the carriage-driver would offer to get down from his seat and root them out of their dwellings to be looked at.

(*Innocence*, p.6)

The scene imparts a farcical, even surreal sense of comedy, showing dwarfs — toy-like human beings — running about, forced to be looked at. Despite the novel's serious implication, the sense of comedy is at times so profuse as to reduce the characters or situation to caricature — a ploy Fitzgerald frequently resorts to in her comic treatment of characters. One example can be drawn from *Human Voices*, where Vi — a slightly more senior female employee — explains to a new girl about the probable situation at the department should London fall into German hands:

‘[...] he'll probably put you on the Department's Indispensable Emergency Personnel List. That's the people he wants close to him in case of invasion. We'd be besieged, you see, if that happened. They're going to barricade both ends of Langham Place. If you're on the list you'd transfer then to the Defence Rooms in the sub-basement and you can draw a standard issue of towel, soap and bedding for the duration. Then there was a memo round about hand grenades.’

Lise opened her eyes wide and let the tears slide out, without looking any less pretty. Vi, however, was broad-minded, and overlooked such things.

(*Human Voices*, p.9)

This passage consists of two-layers of comic twists. First, by semantically grouping together — and hence insinuating — towel, soap, bedding and hand grenades as daily necessities, Vi's undisturbed, composed tone procures a brusque comic outburst upon such an unlikely contrast. Second, the narrator's conscientious observation of Lise's response not only continues the previous comic flatness, but also enhances it by creating the effect of prolonged, caricatured disjunctiveness. The narrator's tonal calmness makes the irony of the passage even more pronounced. Concerning the employment of irony and comedy in

contemporary novels of realism, Raymond Williams points out an apparent paradox. Of these novels, Williams says,

[O]n the one hand they seem the most real kind of contemporary writing — they were welcomed because they recorded so many actual feelings — and yet on the other hand their final version of reality is parodic and farcical.

With this paradox comes an inherent contradiction in the novelists' literary presentation. Williams continues,

these writers start with real personal feelings, but to sustain and substantiate them, in their given form, the world of action in which they operate has to be pressed, as it were inevitably, towards caricature.<sup>23</sup>

The paradox and caricature Williams talks about is palpable in Fitzgerald's novels. Fitzgerald's narrator conveys the story of a group of people in the tone of irony and humour, interweaving aspects of comedy, tragedy, melodrama and farce.

English has been the language most widely used world-wide as a working medium of culture, commerce, and perhaps international diplomacy. Its popularity as the first choice of second language in non-English speaking countries and regions indicates a difficulty: how can the true English be defined? Any major reference to the philology of English would not only acknowledge the historical complexity of the emergence of the English language, but also recognise the language's current state of flux and divergence nationally and internationally. Given the hybrid nature of English, why and how is Fitzgerald's writing in English seen to be *more English* than, for instance, the English of Thomas Keneally, Jane Gardam, V. S. Naipaul, Julian Rathbone, and Fay Weldon — who were all on the Booker shortlist in 1979, the year Fitzgerald won?

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<sup>23</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Realism and the Contemporary Novel' (1961), reprinted in *20th Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (London & New York: Longman, 1972), pp.581-591, p.588.



Fitzgerald's fiction — praised for its 'Englishness' — invites an inquiry into the nature of such a definition. The 'Englishness' of the English language — reticence, wittiness, brevity, for example — is only a prescribed writing style which, advocated by George Orwell and practised by literary journalists, projects a supremacy onto the use of English by English writers.

George Orwell, in his seminal essay on the English people, argues that the two major characteristics of the English language — 'a very large vocabulary and simplicity of grammar' — results in the fact that 'the great weakness of English is its capacity for debasement.' Orwell declares: 'Just because it is easy to use, it is easy to use *badly*.'<sup>24</sup> Writing in a lucid and colloquial style that was suited to journalism, Orwell in several of his essays campaigned for a plain but clear usage of English, and has thus contributed influentially to what literary critics regard as 'good' English writing. For Orwell,

[t]o write or even to speak English is not a science but an art. There are no reliable rules: there is only the general principle that concrete words are better than abstract ones, and that the shortest way of saying anything is always the best. Mere correctness is no guarantee whatever of good writing.

He then elaborates on a more desirable practice of writing in English:

Whoever writes English is involved in a struggle that never lets up even for a sentence. He is struggling against vagueness, against the encroachment of Latin and Greek, and, above all, against the worn-out phrases and dead metaphors with which the language is cluttered up.<sup>25</sup>

Later on Orwell expands this passage on the English Language into an individual essay, 'Politics and the English language'. The inference I am drawing here is not the link between the corruption of language and political oppression, as Orwell intends, but the political and linguistic implication underlying such a prescriptive

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<sup>24</sup> George Orwell, 'The English People', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. III, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), pp.1-38, p.25, 26.

<sup>25</sup> Orwell, 'The English People', p.26.



notion, and nationing, of good writing. Fitzgerald's fictional prose exemplifies the literary style (and taste) of post-war English and is heavily influenced by Orwell's campaign for good English writing. In one private communication, the lasting influence of Orwell is incidentally revealed when Fitzgerald discloses that Orwell was the author she admired most in her Oxford years, although in those days 'twentieth century authors were not studied'.<sup>26</sup> The influence of literature is perhaps more pervasive and effectual in literary journalism than in pedagogic literature. Orwell may not be taught then and now, but the notion of good writing lives on, becoming stylistic traits of a literary nationality.

In 1998 *Paris Review* organized a *conversazione*, attended by Penelope Fitzgerald and twelve other celebrated British writers. The first question discussed was 'What marks a piece of literature as British?'. No consensus was agreed: while A. L. Kennedy considers that 'British writing doesn't really exist anymore', Hugo Williams has rather a clear notion of what British writing is like. In Williams's words, *British* writing means:

[a] sense that writing is a form of entertainment before it is a means of communication. Therefore a sense of fun, brevity, say your little sermon and get off. A deep preference for Anglo-Saxon over the Latin elements in the language. [...] Ah, a deep affection for the middle-brow, non-academic, cosy and maybe nostalgic.<sup>27</sup>

Interesting enough, all the features Williams mentions have appeared in previous commentaries on Fitzgerald's fiction. Many writers at the occasion identified wittiness as a textual feature of British fiction. Fitzgerald herself opined that:

Wit means self-concealment, meiosis, self-deprecation, a recognition that things are too desperate to be comic but not serious enough to be tragic, a successful attempt to make language (and silence) take charge of the situation, and all these are British habits.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 4.

<sup>27</sup> 'The Man in the Back Row Has a Question V', in *Paris Review*, Vol.40, No.146 (1998), pp.156-179, p.160. Writers present in this occasion include Julian Barnes, John Baley, Alain de Botton, Malcolm Bradbury, A. S. Byatt, Carmen Callil, Penelope Fitzgerald, Giles Foden, Paul Johnson, A. L. Kennedy, Will Self, Auberon Waugh, and Hugo Williams.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Man in the Back Row Has a Question V', p.163.



Fitzgerald's remark emphasises not only on the significance of wit and humour in contemporary British writing, but also the importance of understatement as the interplay between language and silence. The prominence of these textual features is already made clear in an earlier essay in which Fitzgerald draws the reader's attention to hearing how characters in a fiction speak, even in a voice of silence.<sup>29</sup> The point that Kasuo Ishiguro and Anita Brookner are Fitzgerald's favourite current writers is explained by the novelist's preference for 'restraint, formality, structure, understatement and silence'.<sup>30</sup>

In terms of rhetoric textual characteristics, not only brevity, concision, understatement, wittiness and humour are considered as quintessential features of English writing, as seen in Fitzgerald's works; increasingly in the discussion of the current condition of British fiction they are also accepted as traits marking British writing as *British*. The construction of an 'Englishness' of English writing is therefore made national and political as opposed to writing in — for instance — America. Although in the same *conversazione* most writers, Fitzgerald included, agree with the point that British writers are more attracted to regional — such as Cockney and Scottish — voices<sup>31</sup>, it is nevertheless ironic in this context to detect a *de*-problematized literary perspective — a fact taken-for-granted — that now reads Fitzgerald's rhetoric of 'Englishness' as 'Britishness'.

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<sup>29</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, 'Hearing Them Speak', in *The Agony and the Ego: The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored*, ed. Clare Boylan (London: Penguin, 1993), pp.141-150.

<sup>30</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 12.

<sup>31</sup> 'The Man in the Back Row Has a Question V', pp.168-170.

### 3.2) NOTIONS OF 'ENGLISHNESS'

Bruce Bawer, in his article on Penelope Fitzgerald's novels, describes Fitzgerald as 'decidedly English in setting and sensibility'.<sup>32</sup> Apart from her later works which venture into foreign characters and contexts, Fitzgerald sets her first six novels in England, specifically in London and the environs of East Anglia. The issue of a particular 'sensibility', as Bawer calls it, not only depends on the author's stylistic as well as geo-thematic preference, but, more importantly, on a shared perception which refers back to the intriguing complexity of identity and cultural background. In this section I would like to discuss the conceptual bearings of 'Englishness' of Fitzgerald's novels.

#### **Images of England**

Though her writing is noted for its quintessential 'Englishness', the England under Fitzgerald's characterisation is by no means confined to a singular, self-perpetuating perception. Fitzgerald's visions of England(s) echo what J. B. Priestley in the early 1930s had already questioned: our conceptualisation of England. Priestley identified three Englands: the first is of course the pastoral England of patchwork fields, distant spires, village greens and so on. In this version the urban is present only in the containable form of market-towns and elegant cathedral cities. Many Victorian thinkers and writers — John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, for instance — had already lamented that this pastoral England was becoming imaginary and was being gradually replaced by the increasingly decrepit industrial towns, yet for Priestley it was a transition to the third England which he ambivalently called 'new' — the democratic state with Woolworths as its

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce Bawer, 'A still, small voice: the novels of Penelope Fitzgerald', in *The New Criterion*, Vol.10, No.7 (March 1992), p.33.



symbol.<sup>33</sup> In Fitzgerald's novels, we can see the presence of all three Englands which, while not necessarily contradicting the stereotypical notions of 'Englishness', reinforces the multivalence of 'Englishness' as a construct.

Fitzgerald's characterisation of the countryside offers various perspectives on rural England. The first type of depiction of the rural is a state of historic oblivion shown in *The Bookshop*, set in a village immersed in narrow-mindedness and obscurity. The village is secluded, 'an island between sea and river, muttering and drawing into itself as soon as if felt the cold.' (p.12) It manages to resist time through naïve and insular disregard for the outside world:

By 1850 the Laze had ceased to be navigable and the wharfs and ferries rotted away. In 1910 the swing bridge fell in, and since then all traffic had to go ten miles round by Saxford in order to cross the river. In 1920 the old railway was closed. The children of Hardborough, waders and divers all, had most of them never been in a train. They looked at the deserted LNER station with superstitious reverence.  
(*The Bookshop*, p.12)

The portrayal of the village gives a period atmosphere of stillness, but not tranquillity. Beside, the Old House with its haunted 'period feature' is another queer reminder of a rural England noted for its dilapidation, naughty poltergeists, and ghost-stories often associated with ancient buildings:

The noise upstairs stopped for a moment and then broke out again, this time downstairs and apparently just outside the window, which shook violently. It seemed to be on the point of bursting inwards. Their teacups shook and spun in the saucers. There was a wild rattling as though handful after handful of gravel or shingle was being thrown by an idiot against the glass.  
(*The Bookshop*, p.67)

If the rural England Fitzgerald depicts in *The Bookshop* is of a curious nature, then another version of rural England is one that evokes nostalgia. This idyllic and

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<sup>33</sup> J. B. Priestley, *English journey: being a rambling but truthful account of what one man saw and heard and felt and thought during a journey through England during the autumn of the year 1933* (London: Heinemann, 1934, 1968), pp.179-186.



peaceful England does not literally appear in Fitzgerald's novel, but is instead implicitly referred to. The 'Englishness' of a pastoral England therefore becomes to the majority a world more imaginary than real.<sup>34</sup> In *Offshore* Laura voices just such an idyllic yearning, ironically disapproving of *Lord Jim*, the smart but stranded houseboat whose romantic name also suggests Conradian disgrace and honour lost:

'I got *Country Life* to-day,' she said.  
He had noticed that already. Anything new was noticeable on shipshape *Lord Jim*. The magazine was lying open at the property advertisements, among which was a photograph of a lawn, and a cedar tree on it with a shadow, and a squarish house in the background to show the purpose of the lawn.  
(*Offshore*, pp.13-14.)

In this novel the discord between Laura and Richard is characterised as a cold war which provides one of the major tensions leading to the break-up of the fragile community.

Writing at the turn of the twentieth-century, C. F. G. Masterman pondered the vicissitudes England was subjected to during her imperial prime. He lamented the disappearance of rural England, and wondered, dismally:

Is 'England' then to be discovered in the feverish industrial energy of the manufacturing cities? In the vast welter and chaos of the capital of empire? Amongst the new Plutocracy? The middle classes? The artisan populations? The broken poor?<sup>35</sup>

Masterman has every reason to fear the disappearing of the self-contained and serene 'English' way of life. With racial diaspora, vocational migration and social

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<sup>34</sup> The romanticisation of a rural, idyllic England is associated with pastoral literature. The fact that pastoralism is highly evoked in the attempt to construct 'Englishness', in my view, is because they both indicate a desire for an unattainable object — the Golden old days, the Edenic life, and, of course, a unanimous collective identity. I contend that Fitzgerald's treatment of the pastoral genre is crucial in envisaging the novelist's characterisation of the class issue. I will return to this point in depth in Chapter Five.

<sup>35</sup> C. F. G. Masterman, 'The Spirit of the People', in *The Condition of England* (London: Methuen, 1909), pp.1-18. Quoted from the extract in *Writing Englishness 1900-1950*, eds. Judy Giles and Tim Middleton (London: Routledge, 1995), pp.38-42, p.41.



restructuring all on the increase, the previously predominant association of England with the rural, often at the cost of ignoring or romanticising the service industry, was challenged.

Industrial England provides most of the setting for Fitzgerald's novels of the condition of England. The cityscape is scrutinised not for its sophistication and technological convenience, but mostly for the price it has paid in exchange for civic culture. The price industrialised England has paid is alluded to in the waning of traditional Shakespearean stage-training in *At Freddie's*. The neglected state of Freddie's stage school reflects the tradition which previously enjoyed a favourable, festive reception among the rural communities, but is now inevitably subdued by the encroaching urban civilisation epitomised by television commercials:

[T]he Temple School, with its forty years of Shakespearean training, was carrying on the old traditions in a state not far from destitution, with crippled furniture, undraped windows, and floors bare to the point of indecency [...]  
(*At Freddie's*, p.9)

The cracking wooden floors and the damp and ill-maintained building of the school alludes to the abandonment of a mode of life that was historically related to agricultural rhythms and ways of life. At the Temple School tradition tries to cling to its last breath, just as some of the countryside tries to shun the fate of urban-planning and depletion of nature. The destitution of a rural England sees its likeness in Freddie's dwindling enterprise — this time the narrator humorously offers the following observation:

[Freddie] hoped the ministry wouldn't send anybody too heavy as she was doubtful about the sagging floor of the upstairs hall, and had given the children instructions never to walk straight across it, but to skirt round the edge of the boards.  
(*At Freddie's*, p.14.)

The presentation of the decay of an industrial city is most aptly translated into the destitution of the city. The aftermath of over-industrialisation is firstly the

devastation of the countryside, secondly the deterioration of the urban environment or, even ultimately as in *Human Voices*, the possible disintegration of the city under war. In Fitzgerald's characterisation, England as a narrative motif is a perpetually disappearing place; it is constantly evolving and changing into something else. Any effort that seeks to locate 'Englishness' can exist only as an ideological construct, and thus 'England' dwells in the interstices between landscapes and places.

Apart from indulging in some nostalgic recollection of the England of times past, Fitzgerald also criticises contemporary England — the England of that recent past which re-directs the present. Old values are challenged and refused in this new England. Tilda's dislike of a Victorian musical box — in her opinion antiques are 'very old toys' which 'may have been all right for very old children' — registers a rejection of tradition. (*Offshore*, p.72) In this new England, children have become entrepreneurs and devotees of commercialism: 'They [Tilda and Martha] walked down the King's Road, went into Woolworths, and were dazzled.' (*Offshore*, p.72) Moreover, in *At Freddie's*, the new England to which Freddie wakes up after her stroke is one experiencing advances in telecommunication, an England that seeks not just to outlive but also to contravene the stereotyped old Englands. This new England relies heavily on the manifestation of advertisement, propaganda, public-relation work and public/popular opinion, the significance of which bursts upon Freddie when she is hospitalised. She then sees that the exploitation of these 'modern conveniences' is strategic and inevitable:

She intended to conduct her defence, which would be an attack at the same time, entirely through letters to *The Times*, which were then still in their golden age of influence and respect. Although she turned straight to the theatre page and never read any more of any newspaper, Freddie knew, as she did in every situation, where the power lay.  
(*At Freddie's*, p.111)

As the novel then discloses, Freddie launches a campaign of letter-writing, making full use of public/popular opinion, and the mass media, and succeeds in forcing



plans for a projected rival stage-school to be aborted. What Fitzgerald registers in *At Freddie's* is a cultural change, a reluctant resignation to a new England in which tradition has become fractured and discontinued, and new tactics have to be devised in order to survive. Freddie's new England of 1963 soon heralds the restructuring of late twentieth-century Britain, a condition of change crucial to Fitzgerald's writing career — the perception and reception of her works.

### **'Englishness' versus the Other**

England not only appears as the setting for most of Fitzgerald's early novels; in the author's later, foreign novels more importantly it serves as a structural frame or paradigm of social moderation. *Innocence*, *The Beginning of Spring* and *The Blue Flower* are three of Fitzgerald's novels that are set outside the British Isles. Apart from *The Blue Flower*, which deals exclusively with a non-English plot, these to different degrees refer to England, or the English way of life, as a structural frame or point of contrast.

In *The Beginning of Spring*, whose ethnically English protagonists are expatriates in Russia, England is technically employed as a pretext in order to illustrate the differences between Russia and England. The supremacy of England and English culture is characterised in the contrast between the English and the Russian. For instance, Frank is portrayed as a law-abiding expatriate who takes the welfare of his employees into consideration, despite the fact that his observance of the law in Russia includes giving 'necessary' bribes to petty officials. In an incident involving a student breaking into Frank's printing house — in 1913 pre-revolution Russia 'college students' enjoyed a synonymous infamy as trouble-makers in the eyes of the police — the police hint that they are prepared to go no further, as the complication of such a matter may lead to the closure of Frank's business. Taking in this suggestion, Frank

took an envelope out of his drawer, and, conscious of taking only a mild risk, since the whole unwieldy administration of All the Russias, which kept working, even if only just, depended on the passing of countless numbers of such envelopes, he slid it across the top of the desk. The inspector opened it without embarrassment, counted out the three hundred roubles it contained and transferred them to a leather container, half way between a wallet and a purse, which he kept for 'innocent income'.

(*The Beginning of Spring*, p.114)

Edward Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, observes that in much European writing about foreign lands, notions about bringing civilisation to primitive, barbaric, or less civilised peoples is often encountered. Said observes that many nineteenth century English novels — such as *Heart of Darkness* and *Mansfield Park* — encode overt patterns about Britain imposing itself upon its colonial subjects. The implication of juxtaposing England and the foreign in a work of fiction is what Said calls the 'consolidation of authority' which, presented as normative, is closely associated with 'the functioning of social power and governance'. Said convincingly points out that the English ideas of home, of the nation and its language, of proper order, good behaviour and moral values — as seen in Fitzgerald's foreign novels — consolidate the authority of England and therefore reinforce the desirability of 'Englishness' as a form of social power.<sup>36</sup>

The ideas of home, proper order, and good behaviour are humorously catered for in *The Beginning of Spring* by comparing Frank's family and that of his Russian business associate, Arkady Kuriatin. Upon the absence of his wife, Frank employs a governess to see to his three children, to ensure that they will be thoughtfully cared for. The sense of order in the family and the emphasis on a cultured upbringing is noted in Frank's effort. On the other hand, the Kuriatin family is nothing like its English counterpart. The bear-cub episode discussed earlier can be seen to offer a contrast between the English and the Russian. To impress the English visitors — Frank's children — the Russian boy determinedly

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<sup>36</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p.92, 97.



forces the bear-cub to dance, first by spraying cold water on the poor frightened beast, then by feeding it vodka. With the animal drunk and toppling the alcohol and silverware in the living-room, Kuriatin's kids fully enjoy the unruly bedlam which culminates in a servant's using burning charcoal to subdue the animal. The contrast between these two families shows in Frank's response to this 'entertainment':

Frank, quietly removing Dolly and Ben from the uproar, would have liked to know where Mrs Kuriatin had been all this time and why Sergei, half idiotic as he was, hadn't thrown water at the wretched animal instead of red-hot cinders. [...]

'You told us you thought we could go there every day after school,' said Ben, 'as long as we were reasonably quiet.'

'I don't think that now.'

(*The Beginning of Spring*, pp. 59-60)

To dramatise the difference between the English and the foreign, in her constant attention to the little details of English life Fitzgerald makes the English abroad appear faintly absurd, even though her tone is not ostensibly one of mockery, parody or satire. She has her characters do the mocking, and in a manner that is telling with regard to the English. The contrast between the English and the foreign is also shown in the two women characters in *Innocence*. Barney is described as a 'no-nonsense' English girl, who can 'sum a person up pretty well with a firm hand-grip and straight look in the eyes', in contrast to the hot-blooded, impulsive half-Italian, half-American Chiara, who is overwhelmed by her feeling that '[E]very minute of my life is being wasted. [...] It's all wasted unless we can be together and unless he's happy.' (*Innocence*, p.86, 75.)

To contrast the difference between English and foreign characteristics, Fitzgerald firstly maps out what counts as 'Englishness'. Bruce Bawer praises the *English* features in Fitzgerald's fiction:

At their best, her *dramatis personae* exhibit those *most English* of virtues: decency, honesty, quiet fortitude, a sense of duty, an uncomplaining acceptance of one's role and responsibilities in life.<sup>37</sup>

These *English* virtues have been much celebrated by many writers who wish to identify certain features that account for 'Englishness'. In 'The English People' George Orwell attempts to dissect the English mind and character. In this essay he satirically points out 'artistic insensibility, gentleness, respect for legality, suspicion of foreigners, sentimentality about animals, hypocrisy, exaggerated class distinctions, and an obsession with sport' as the 'salient characteristics of the English common people'.<sup>38</sup> It is also worth noting that Orwell himself too arguably shows a degree of xenophobia in his strong objection to enriching the English lexicon with foreign loan words.

One important English characteristic Orwell goes to the trouble of elaborating is the common sympathy with the underdog, which is a point well-dramatised in Fitzgerald's *The Bookshop*. Depicting the battle between an ordinary middle-aged woman attempting to run a small business, and a well-connected local society hostess gingerly guarding her matron status, the ultimate victory of the socially-advantaged is all too foreseeable. A pathos of sympathy is persuasively present not only in the narrator's tone but also in the reader's identification with the loser. In terms of popular culture, for instance, Orwell attributes the success of Mickey Mouse, Popeye the Sailor and Charlie Chaplin to this English characteristic of supporting the weaker, from which point the admiration for a 'good loser' is but an extension.<sup>39</sup> If Orwell's point-of-view is insufficiently objective, a government publication would affirm this particular pathos as a prominent English characteristic. During the Second World War the British Ministry of Information issued directives for film propaganda. The main objects of feature films stated in the publication are to portray British life and

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<sup>37</sup> Bawer, 'A still, small voice', p.34. My emphasis.

<sup>38</sup> Orwell, 'The English People', p.8.

<sup>39</sup> Orwell, 'The English People', p.8.



character, British ideas and institutions. Sympathy with the underdog is singled out as a common national feature, and used as a moral justification for Britain's participation in the war.<sup>40</sup>

The 'Englishness' of English character has been fervently discussed particularly in the first half of the twentieth century when Britain underwent a tremendous change both inwardly and outwardly. The opinion that the middle classes are the dominant force in England has been widespread. E. M. Forster in his 'Notes on the English Character' argues that the character of the English is 'essentially middle-class'.<sup>41</sup> Among all the English features he mentions solidity, caution, integrity, efficiency, lack of imagination, hypocrisy, and fear of emotional display. To what extent such supposed national characteristics remain — or were actually — current is not a question for discussion here. The point worth mentioning is the widespread acknowledgement of these traits in — and *beyond* — the characters of Fitzgerald's novels of England. They are as much a literary construct as a cultural reality. Catherine Wells Cole, praising *Offshore* for embodying a 'classless' community, reads the novel in terms of the theme of solidarity.<sup>42</sup> While in *The Bookshop* Florence is portrayed as possessing integrity and courage, and reminds us of what Arnold Bennett calls 'provinciality' — 'the quality of an honest and naive goodwill, of powerful simplicity'; in contrast Florence's social rival, Mrs Gamart, stands for hypocrisy and caution.<sup>43</sup>

*Human Voices* quietly reinforces an 'Englishness' that broadcasts stoical endurance and a refusal to be beaten: London's survival of the Blitz has become an

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<sup>40</sup> Documentary Newsletter (1940), issued by the Ministry of Information. Cited from *Writing Englishness 1900-1950*, eds. Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, pp.141-146.

<sup>41</sup> E. M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1936), pp.3-5. Cited from the extract included in *Literature in the Modern World*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.176-177.

<sup>42</sup> Catherine Wells Cole, 'Penelope Fitzgerald', in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Novelists Since 1960s*, Vol.14, ed. Jay L. Halio (Detroit: Gale Research, 1983), pp.302-308, p.305. In Chapter 5 I shall return to discuss Cole's remark in relation to Fitzgerald's treatment of class immobility.

<sup>43</sup> Arnold Bennett, *The Old Wives' Tale*; cited from the extract in *Writing Englishness 1900-1950*, eds. Judy Giles and Tim Middleton, p.36.



icon for ‘Englishness’. Indeed, wartime London has been much romanticised and dramatised retrospectively for the city’s apparently unifying identity under a shared crisis. *Human Voices* suggests the traditional Churchillian icon of ‘Englishness’ — the little man who stands up to the big bully. Another social characteristic Fitzgerald’s works have illustrated is the insularity of English culture. In a period when Britain had just faced a series of external and internal crises — two wars, mass unemployment, a series of labour disputes which at times were potentially revolutionary — deviation from perceived norms was unacceptable, and the hostility of many critics to new forms of art or literature was informed by both a conservative and a xenophobic hostility to the new. *The Bookshop*, by depicting Hardborough as a village ‘uncluttered by fish-and-chips shop, launderette or cinema’, where mutual trust ‘was not an everyday experience’, and the villagers’ suspicion of Florence’s small enterprise, Fitzgerald attacks the notion of insularity shown in geographical as well as mental/ideological narrow-mindedness. (p.8, 15.)

The ‘Englishness’ of Fitzgerald’s fiction can be attributed to the above qualities. It must be borne in mind that the effort of defining the ‘Englishness’ of the English novel has been of crucial concern to many literary scholars and critics. Q. D. Leavis, pursuing this issue, laments that the essence of the English novel has been disappearing in the contemporary novel. In her opinion, one important characteristic of the English novel is the form of autobiography and its subsequent variation, the autobiographical novel. For Q. D. Leavis,

even with plot or romance they [the autobiography and autobiographical novel] show the English gift for recapturing the formative experiences of childhood — something that has been an important element in the English novel — and the English attachment to and understanding of a locality.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Queenie Dorothy Leavis, *Collected Essays*, ed. G. Singh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp.303-327, p.321.



Reference drawn from personal experiences and ‘understanding of a locality’ is never a question in Fitzgerald’s fiction, for Fitzgerald, in an interview, has clearly stated that

I write from my own experience and places where I’ve worked and from what I can judge of the feelings of other people, particularly when they are quiet by nature and prefer not to give away too much.<sup>45</sup>

For Q. D. Leavis, writing ‘from one’s boots’ is as important and essential a feature of the English novel as the moral courage necessary for constituting the ‘Englishness’ of the English novel. In her earlier works Fitzgerald writes about localities which she understands through her personal experience; Leavis’s judgement of what the ‘Englishness’ of the English novel is supposed to be, therefore, is relevant for Fitzgerald’s early works. Nevertheless, her notion of ‘Englishness’ also exposed the artificial nature of such a literary criteria. The implication of such a subjective set of criteria is not just stylistic, it is also political and ideological. In the next two sections I shall address the ways in which the ‘Englishness’ of Fitzgerald’s writing might possibly be conjoined with the use of particular genres and the influence of literary prizes and culture industry.

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<sup>45</sup> Charles, ‘Penelope Fitzgerald’, p.295.

### 3.3) GENRE AND READERSHIP

From Fitzgerald's textual presentation and thematic preoccupation, we can detect a manifestation of a literary canon that prefers a circumscribed set of values. It is my contention that the 'Englishness' of Fitzgerald's works — a feature that has earned her both national and international acclaim — is a typecast characteristic, the upholding of which is arguably associated with the literary Establishment in the novelist's days. These conclusions hint at a fundamental issue as regards a preferred literary taste and the presence of a literary Establishment in post-war Britain. Much as the 'grand narrative' of White Western Eurocentrism has been severely challenged in the past few decades, the eminence of a canonised view of literature — previously elevated by Matthew Arnold, T. S. Eliot, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis — is far from subsiding. On the contrary, it is seen to be flourishing in the popular domain of literary journalism and is further complicated by the politicised dimension of the culture industry.

Before I continue to argue for the presence of Establishment patronage in present-day English literature in relation to Fitzgerald's literary career, a discussion of the implications of Fitzgerald's employment of her particular kind of fiction is called for. Since realistic novels of manners attract more readers than other generic categories, they are more likely to be canonised, making this genre arguably a more effective 'chaperon' for a somewhat belated career of writing. I suggest that the generic accessibility and popularity of the novel of manners, including the detective puzzle of *The Golden Child*, enables Fitzgerald — a rather mature writer new in the field of fiction — to immediately reach out to a general readership. The significance of the accessibility of Fitzgerald's chosen genre of manners is that, as a popular and well-received genre, it appeals to the general reading public unobtrusively — hence making the transmission of ideas and ideology less obvious or indoctrinating. Therefore, the utilisation of the genre of manners to a certain degree also aids to conserve and disseminate the construction of 'Englishness' as seen in Fitzgerald's fiction.



The issue of readership in Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction is an intriguing matter, given that throughout the mainly descriptive accounts of her fiction the narrator often all too readily inserts phrases and remarks that are clearly aimed at the reader. Fitzgerald's concern about art and its reception among the public is overtly exhibited in *Innocence* where, during a cultural gathering, a writer asks:

[A]t what point does the professional artist or indeed the professional writer make contact with the man or woman of the people? What can be hoped for in this field?  
(*Innocence*, p.104-105)

Indeed, at what point does Fitzgerald make contact with her reader? For what kind of reader does she write? In her acceptance speech at the Booker Prize dinner, which was later recalled in an interview, Fitzgerald spoke of the actual readers of novels:

If you go back on the Underground or on the train to Clapham Junction as I do, you see people getting out their novels from under masses of shopping or the bottom of their brief cases. They've always got their places marked, and often they can only half open the book because there isn't room, and as they get into the novel, you see their expression change while the strain of the day eases, and they are lost in this story for now, alone with the book.<sup>46</sup>

This remark quite possibly suggests the type of reader Fitzgerald intends her own fiction to be read by. Writing in an unassuming voice, Fitzgerald might expect her reader to be the mostly 9-to-5 work-a-day middle classes for whom her 'commuter fictions' propose a temporary haven of repose between work and domestic routines. Moreover, judging by the length, theme, and literary genres of her novels, Fitzgerald's intended readers are likely to be those who 'are not so fond of blockbusters, and are ready to listen to a quiet voice' — as the novelist speculates in a personal communication.<sup>47</sup> Apart from the biographies, Fitzgerald's literary trajectory starts from the detective story of manners — a genre not only attracting a

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<sup>46</sup> Cleave, 'Maureen Cleave meets Penelope Fitzgerald', p.28-29.

<sup>47</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 3.

highbrow readership in a more relaxed mood, but also appealing to a general reader with its unpretentiousness. That is to say, when the average educated readership — usually socially established, materially secure, and quite possibly middle-aged or older — want something which is not blatantly commercial, something that comes with a hint of culture and taste and *not* sensational excitement, the genre of manners is more often than not preferred. Fitzgerald's employment of literary conventions has a lot to do with her securing the middle-classes readership for her novels.

### **The Detective Story and the Reader**

Fitzgerald starts her creative writing career in 1977, with *The Golden Child*, a detective story. A closer look into this sub-genre of manners might provide some insight into the question of readership, particularly since the author used it in the early stage of her literary career. The appearance of the 'whodunit' as a recognisable and distinctive kind of detective story, differentiated from the thrillers and mysteries with which stories about crime had formerly overlapped, was a modern event in literary and cultural history.<sup>48</sup>

There are sufficient reasons to assume that Fitzgerald is fairly familiar with the genre of detection. Firstly, this genre had been immensely popular between the wars and after, coinciding with Fitzgerald's formative years. Secondly, Dorothy Sayers, one of the finest writers of the detective genre then, throughout the late 1920s and 1930s strengthened a literary/novelistic tradition at Somerville College, Oxford, of which Fitzgerald was soon to become a member in 1936. Thirdly, Fitzgerald's uncle — Monsignor Ronald Knox — was himself a renowned practitioner of this genre — an intellectual diversion fondly discussed at family

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<sup>48</sup> The OED gives the first usage of 'whodunit' as an Americanism from the *News of Books* in 1930 but it does not seem to enter popular English currency until after 1945 when, like the 'Golden Age of Crime', it is applied retrospectively and nostalgically.



occasions. Alison Light, studying Agatha Christie's works, acknowledges Ronald Knox's place in the history of the detective story:

Monsignor Ronald Knox was able to draw up a list of its mock rules in 1928, a decalogue to be jealously observed by the Detection Club founded two years later. Authors were already proclaiming themselves bored and exasperated by the search for novelty, and convalescence was growing irksome.<sup>49</sup>

The decades between the 1920s and 1940s saw the height of the detective vogue. One of the formulaic changes in detective 'whodunit' fiction is the removal of the threat of violence. Violence as what had formerly been enjoyed became 'distinctly pacific in its retreat from old-fashioned notions of the heroic'. This feature is present in Fitzgerald's detective work too. Just when the reader prepares for some violent confrontation, violence itself is unexpectedly toned down. One instance in *The Golden Child* occurs where, frustrated by his unsuccessful attempt to meet a Moscow professor and suspecting political interference in this scholarly inquest, Waring rushes up to the platform demanding information from the hosting Moscow military-diplomatic official at a meeting at the House of Friendship. Immediately he is 'being invited firmly to enter a large black car, a Zil, waiting in a no-parking area in Kalinin Street.' Here, as the Zil drives on an unfamiliar route and enters the Kremlin through a non-tourist entrance alongside which 'there were guards who saluted', the reader may expect Waring soon to be beaten up on account of espionage. On the contrary, what follows next is that he is simply shown the glittering Golden Treasure of Garamantia. (pp. 91-92) By doing away with violence, the need for a hero is also discarded.

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<sup>49</sup> Alison Light, 'Agatha Christie and conservative modernity', in *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991) pp.61-112, p.74. Fitzgerald refers to how Ronald Knox, as the chaplain of Oxford University in the 1920s and 1930s, had to 'make ends meet by writing detective stories', and was fairly successful. (*The Knox Brothers*, p.186). Knox's contribution to the development of the detective story in Britain is also noted in Brian Harrison's *The History of the University of Oxford: The Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), p.299.

The detective story, maturing in the decades between the two wars, has always been a much-loved genre in Britain. Nevertheless, in discussing the detective genre, a differentiation between the English ‘soft-boiled’ and the American ‘hard-boiled’ kind has to be made. Written in the late 1970s, *The Golden Child* refers back to the rules and conventions of the inter-war English detective literature and is a mixture of the detective story and the political thriller or spy story portraying a couple of solitary individuals confronted by the menace of power politics. It shares with the conventional English detective genre a belief that ‘human affairs could be ruled by reason and that virtue, generally identified with the established order of society, must prevail in the end’.<sup>50</sup> Fitzgerald’s detectives are Waring, Coker, and Prof. Untermensch, who are as intelligent and ordinary as the typical reader of detective stories. In fact, the type of detective in a characteristic English crime story — like Arthur Conan Doyle’s Holmes, G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown, or Agatha Christie’s Poirot and Miss Marple — suggests qualities of logical reasoning, keen observation, and a degree of social gentility.

In contrast, the ‘hard-boiled’ detective thriller, such as the works of Raymond Chandler, thriving in North America after the wars, rarely identifies itself with a moralistic perception of reason and virtue. It emphasises fast-moving events in a corrupt world and the hard-hitting, quick-on-the-draw private detective. While maintaining the element of puzzle and crime, it is particularly explicit in portraying the heroic consciousness — even masculinity — of the private operative in the looming face of underworld power and bureaucratic corruption.

Colin Watson, in *Snobbery With Violence*, pithily examines the socio-historical development of the genre of detection in Britain from mid-nineteenth century to the 1970s. Watson convincingly points out how the popularity of this

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<sup>50</sup> Julian Symons, *The Detective Story in Britain* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1962), p.34.



genre lies in its nature as ‘a “leisure” literature’.<sup>51</sup> In Fitzgerald’s case, if biographical writing is to be seen as factually conservative, then *The Golden Child* as the author’s first novel could possibly serve as a ‘safe’ literary category to start with, as it aims to cater for the popular taste. Speaking of the ‘whodunit’ detective story, Alison Light believes that this genre offers no catharsis. It does not stimulate nor release deep feeling; rather, in Light’s words, its effect is ‘preoccupying’. This genre is likened as ‘the mental equivalent of pottering, which works more to relieve general anxiety than to generate strong emotion’.<sup>52</sup>

Critics, reading the detective story as belonging to the genre of manners, suggest that its intellectual setting proves appealing to the middle — even upper-middle — class reader even today. In Carolyn G. Heilbrun’s words, the setting of the detective story

was among intelligent people, comfortably surrounded by examples of dull rectitude, living a life readily evoked and encompassed in a recognizable community, in which murder was as outrageous as it was unusual. This detective novel of manners was never set in a world of criminals devoid of upper-class moral or social principles; its major story never encompassed those outside the bounds of the gentry, aristocracy, professional, or upper-middle classes.<sup>53</sup>

The conservatism of the detective genre Light refers to is a manifestation of its popularity with the general reader. Julian Symons, early in the 1960s, observes that the popularity of the English detective story indicates a significant symbolic wish-fulfilment:

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<sup>51</sup> Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and Their Audience* (London: Methuen, 1987; first pub. 1971), p.37. In Watson’s opinion, the rise of the crime fiction is parallel to the rise of fiction in general — a phenomena attributed to the spread of literacy and wealth, railway bookstalls and circulating libraries. The development of the crime story encompasses Victorian thriller, stories of crime and detection as seen in the first half of the twentieth century, and the story of espionage in the post-war and coldwar era.

<sup>52</sup> Light, ‘Agatha Christie and conservative modernity’, p.69, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Carolyn G. Heilbrun, ‘The Detective Novel of Manners’, in *Reading and Writing Women’s Lives*, eds. Bege Bowers and Barbara Brothers, *Reading and Writing Women’s Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1990), pp. 187-197, p.187.



In a social sense the detective story expresses in an extreme form the desire of the middle and upper classes in British society for a firm, almost hierarchical, social order, and for an efficient police force.<sup>54</sup>

Ernest Mandel, in his study of the crime genre, associates even more forcefully the detective story's extensive readership with the class-specific bourgeois. In Mandel's words, the detective story — itself a branch of the crime genre — is 'bourgeois *par excellence*, bourgeois medicine for the middle-class sufferers from the ills of bourgeois society.'<sup>55</sup>

Bearing in mind the far-reaching attraction of the detective genre among general readers and intellectuals alike, I suggest that Fitzgerald's writing her first novel, at the age of 59, in the tradition of the English detective story, is not simply a matter of coincidence and inspiration. It may well be a deliberate choice. Growing up in the golden era of the detective genre of which her youngest uncle was a fine practitioner, the genre must have been familiar to Fitzgerald as a reader. Certainly a novelist can write in whatever genre and style she prefers. But in terms of publication, she would think twice about employing a genre that is obsolete to the reader, unless some higher aesthetic or authorial claims unknown to the reader are being brought into play. Nor would a publisher accept a work without considering a balance between commercial potential and artistic expressiveness. In this regard, the utilisation of the detective story as Fitzgerald's literary *début* suggests a strategic employment of conservatism safeguarding her literary initiation. Fitzgerald's 'whodunit' detective story, dispensing with violence as well as with the hero, signifies a disavowal of a romantic masculinity and its heroic performance. The novelist's literary *début* therefore can be seen to reflect a literary sensibility familiar to the British middle classes, and by the gesture of acceptance it also affirms the literary 'Englishness' of the 'soft-boiled' detective story as an endemic mode of the British novel of manners.

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<sup>54</sup> Symons, *The Detective Story in Britain*, p.34.

<sup>55</sup> Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (London: Pluto, 1984), p.73.



## The Novel of Manners and the Reader

The genre of manners has long been considered as largely equivalent to, if not synonymous with, the much broader genre of the novel. Generally accepted as a work of fiction that recreates a social world, the novel of manners conveys with finely detailed observation the customs, values, and mores of a society. A novel of manners takes not just the social customs and conventions of a particular time and place into account, but also the actions of its characters: as well as the way in which those actions or behaviours are propelled.

Most of Fitzgerald's novels are set in the work-place, yet they provide as good comedy of manners as their domestic drawing-room counterparts. Bege Bowers and Barbara Brothers view the novel of manners as focusing on the individual in relation to society:

[I]t does not take as its subject merely the particular manners and customs of a specific social class at a given place and point in time. Instead, the novel of manners offers a perspective on the nature of the *self* as shaped but not entirely determined by social forces; as expressing itself in relation to, but not necessarily in accord with, the values of a society embodied in outward conventions.<sup>56</sup>

These critics maintain that the genre is best employed in negotiating between the private and the public spheres, in the sense that as the social manners in portrayal are tied up with forms of cultural power and control, it is thus impossible to reveal one without disclosing the other.

There are several explanations as to why the genre of manners favourably appeals to the general reading public. Charlotte Morgan, attributing the rise of this genre to the amalgamation of literary fiction and popular fiction between 1625 and 1700, aligns this particular genre with the development of the bourgeois novel, as a consequence of the spread of literacy and emergence of the commercial class. Moreover, the novel of manners integrates both literary and popular tastes.<sup>57</sup> James

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<sup>56</sup> Bowers and Brothers, 'What is a Novel of Manners?', p.13.

<sup>57</sup> Morgan, *The Rise of The Novel of Manners*, p.2.

R. Kincaid, on the other hand, emphasises the effectiveness of the novel of manners as a form of social critique. In Kincaid's words:

novels of manners tend to allow a pretty fierce criticism of the system upholding any given set of manners. No novels, then, are more relentlessly political and ideological than these presumably domestic and personal works. They resist the dissociation of the personal from the political and see forms of power everywhere...<sup>58</sup>

As these critics point out, the novel of manners aims not just to offer an account of the particular manners of a time and place; more importantly, it also helps the reader to reflect upon one's negotiation between the private and the public spheres. Bowers and Brothers suggest the genre of manners should be seen as a study of characters as well as of society<sup>59</sup> — a view shared by critics like Jeremy Hawthorn who argues that the genre 'most consummately unites an exploration of the subjective and the social, of the private and the collective'.<sup>60</sup>

The popularity of the genre of manners with both readers and writers is inseparable from its capacity to voice a social critique from individual stances. On the one hand, in terms of interiority the genre recognises the individuality of the protagonists, and by ascribing a liberal freedom to the human characters the genre establishes an association with the reader. On the other hand, the exteriority in which the characters are situated — the social environment, the behavioural modes, the physical layout of the characters' living quarters, etc. — are scrutinised to provide a critique of social values.

All Fitzgerald's novels focus on the individual in relation to their part of a particular society. This feature strongly responds to the form of the post-war British novel which adheres to traditional mimetic realism and is much concerned with characters, manners, and social practices. The post-war novelists deliberately

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<sup>58</sup> James R. Kincaid, 'Anthony Trollope and the Unmannerly Novel', in *Reading and Writing Women's Lives: A Study of the Novel of Manners*, eds. Bege Bowers and Barbara Brothers, pp.87-104, p.88.

<sup>59</sup> Bowers and Brothers, 'What is a Novel of Manners?', p. 4.

<sup>60</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, *Studying the Novel: an Introduction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992), p.22.



choose to portray small groups of people in a limited, perhaps confining, environment, and to mould the apparently trivial incidents of their lives into a poised work of manners. Regarding this aspect, Fitzgerald's novels demonstrate the minute inter-relations between the individual and his/her specific environment as a microcosm of society. The characters in Fitzgerald's novels tend to interpret the social milieu through their understanding of what is proper and right, and through the conceptual projection of people who are outside this particular milieu.

The focus of the novel of manners is therefore the problem of reality, explored through close observation of the shifts and conflicts of the characters' social existence. In the contemporary novel of manners the characters now are drawn not only 'from country villages, the middle class, and, on occasion, the lower class',<sup>61</sup> but also from university towns and city milieu, shop assistants, self-employed and company executives, all walks of life. Therefore, the pre-conceptualised readership of this genre is the general educated public, middle-class readers who, upon reading, find it practical to identify with those accounts in the novel of manners most relevant to themselves and their own observations.

Malcolm Bradbury's sociological study of modern English literature affirms that the growing presence of commercialism increases the stratification in literary taste. While not disregarding either the minority intellectual audience or a lowbrow readership, Bradbury observes that the major book market offers predominantly middlebrow literature for largely middle-class taste.<sup>62</sup> Popularising literature doesn't mean that the divide between high and low taste is cancelled out; on the contrary, it reinforces the divide by inserting a blurred zone in between. Fitzgerald's literary career can be taken as an effort to address both the elite and the general — but decidedly not the lowbrow — reader, which she has succeeded in doing by a thoughtful employment of accessible genres.

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<sup>61</sup> Bowers and Brothers, 'What is a Novel of Manners?', p.7.

<sup>62</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971), pp.199-230, p.211.



Reading, therefore, for the middle-class commuters who are Fitzgerald's intended audience, is not a mere escape. It also enacts a social reaffirmation for the readers as they go through the course of socialisation with the fictional characters. Besides, fiction in the post-war era has become more accessible than ever through private and public lending libraries, through cheap reprints by book clubs, through serialisation in popular women's magazines and paperback publications; new novels are even read on the radio. With an upsurge of advanced literacy through the prevalence of higher education, an increasing number of readers resort to fiction as a pastime. It is through 'writing-down' — through employing the most popular and readily accessible genre of detection and manners — that Fitzgerald strategically combines her literary aspiration and moral high-mindedness in the making of her career as a novelist. She has an engaging style, a serious theme, a creative mind of acknowledged sensibility; and she won the Booker Prize at the outset of her literary career. But the 1980s and 1990s turn out to have witnessed a conscious cultural shift that inadvertently somehow works to the disadvantage of the popular reception of Fitzgerald's writing.

Steven Connor, in his introduction to *The English Novel in History 1950-1995*, has accurately pointed out that post-war fiction in England cannot but reflect Britain's socio-cultural transition from a largely hegemonic empire to a multicultural — and multinational — state.<sup>63</sup> England, from its previous imperial supremacy, has yet to come to terms with devolution politically and socio-culturally. This transition can be seen as an inseparable consequence of academic

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<sup>63</sup> Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.2. The social factors which influenced, and still influences, post-war Britain are, in Connor's words:

In domestic political terms, the development of the Welfare state was followed by its dramatic erosion from the mid-1970s onwards. These were also the years of the definitive stripping away of Empire, and, as effect and cause of this from the 1950s onwards, the loss of British power and influence in the world in political, military and economic terms. [...] Internally, it has had as its direct effect the arrival of considerable numbers of immigrants from different regions of the Empire and the challenge to an undisturbed sense of Englishness and Britishness produced by the resulting plurality of impinging and co-operating cultures and histories.



English's acceptance of continental critical thoughts that emphasise the periphery instead of the mainstream. Due to this transition, the post-war novel in Britain is particularly characteristic of the diverse ethnic as well as cultural components from outside the British Isles and the previous colonies. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ben Okri, as well as James Kelman, Roddy Doyle and Bernard MacLaverty, imbue British literary society with a compelling sense of otherness, the energy of which is something the Booker Prize — and many other prestigious literary awards — cannot afford to dismiss.

As Britain comes to terms with the fact that it is a multicultural nation, the cultural focus is inevitably directed away from 'Englishness', whose hegemony is therefore seen to have been curtailed. Multiculturalism has become constitutive of contemporary Britain in the sense that it appears to have provided an alternative way of writing and reading other than the previously mainstream 'English' mode. By reinforcing its enlarged context of Britishness, multiculturalism inevitably challenges the notion of 'Englishness', yet at the same time elicits a counter-focus on the 'Englishness' of the contemporary English novel. The consequence of Britain's literary multiculturalism not only sees to the narrowing emphasis of Fitzgerald's literary 'Englishness', but also implies a down-sizing of her potential readership. The fact that present-day readers, particularly the younger reading public, are more versed in fiction by multicultural writers accounts for Penelope Fitzgerald being less well-known in the British Isles compared to other Booker Prize winning novelists. It is in such a self-consciously multicultural context of contemporary literature in Britain that Fitzgerald's novels arguably suffer a disadvantage in terms of readership.

### 3.4) THE ESTABLISHMENT VIEW OF LITERATURE

#### Fitzgerald: the Critic and Canonicity

Fitzgerald's literary writing ranges across several categories: biography, book review, art history, and fiction. A quiet and careful writer, Fitzgerald has not sought popularity through sensational writing. In fact, to some extent she is better known as a reviewer and commentator regularly appearing in prestigious literary magazines such as *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and others.<sup>64</sup> Fitzgerald's reputation as a woman of letters derives not only from her novels, which have earned her several prizes, but also from her biographies and reviews. I contend that Fitzgerald's role as a reviewer and general literary critic demonstrates the perpetuating influence of the English literary canon predominant in English studies in the first half of this century.

Raymond Williams, in a lecture addressing the 'crisis' in English Studies, observes that while literary studies in the earlier days were quick to dismiss various 'isms', it failed to recognise that 'criticism' had been long incorporated in literature itself. Williams points out that the question of the 'Englishness' of English literature is

not just a body of writing but a major projection from this, in which the actually very diverse works of writers in English are composed into a national identity — the more potent because it is largely from the past — in which a mood, a temper, a style, or a set of immediate 'principles' [...] are being celebrated, taught and — where possible — administratively imposed.<sup>65</sup>

Academic institutions of English have employed feminism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism, to name but three, to examine the contextual aspects behind literature's textual existence. Nevertheless, the conventional humanist approach towards literature is still thriving in the popular reception and perception of literary

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<sup>64</sup> See Appendix C for Fitzgerald's book reviews and journal articles.

<sup>65</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Crisis in English Studies', *Writing in Society* (London: Verso, 1983), pp.192-211, p.194.



studies, especially in the language of literary journalism. It is my contention that, as the focuses between general literary criticism and academic criticism have irretrievably diverged, the canonicity of English literature is hence seen largely transferred to the hands of literary journalists, critics, reviewers, and biographers.

Writing critically is not the same as writing creatively and imaginatively, for these two acts demand different stylistic and literary capacities. Critical writing calls for scrutiny and argument based on accountable materials and facts, whereas creative writing could easily tackle its subject-matter with more personalised, and at times imaginative, handling. Fitzgerald's biographical and critical works show traits of influence from the canon because these genres specifically rely on the privileged 'know-all' speaking position of the author to engage trust from the reader. On the other hand, fiction as a textual practice necessitates much more ambiguity and evasiveness.

Fitzgerald did not start her literary career immediately after her graduation from Oxford University, with a first class honours degree, in 1939. She would have liked to stay for further study, yet with World War Two breaking out, staying at Oxford 'hardly seemed to be the right thing to do at that time'.<sup>66</sup> She then moved around among various jobs and only in the mid 1970s did she commence her literary career as a biographer. Those who became Fitzgerald's biographical subjects are Edward Burne-Jones (1975), her distinguished father and uncles who were well-recognised Edwardian intellectuals (1977), and Charlotte Mew (1988).<sup>67</sup> Fitzgerald has also edited and introduced William Morris's *The Novel on Blue Paper* (1983). As a literary biographer whose duty is to record and interpret the subject's life and works together as a whole, Fitzgerald always convinces the

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<sup>66</sup> Fitzgerald, 'Penelope Fitzgerald', p.104.

<sup>67</sup> Speaking of why she pursued with these biographical projects, Fitzgerald says:

The Knox brothers were my father and my 3 uncles, so this is a family book. I admire Burne-Jones' painting & design, & Charlotte Mew's poetry (about 6 of them, I believe, are great poems). Burne-Jones had no complete biography, & Charlotte Mew had none at all, when I did my research.

See Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 6.



reader of, and is most praised for, faithfully constructing an incisive, enticing story through limited materials. Her biographies are competently written, well researched, carefully constructed, and accurate.

Fitzgerald's scholarly competence ranges from literature to aesthetics, particularly that of the Romantic and Victorian periods. As a general art commentator, she criticises, and recounts anecdotes concerning the Pre-Raphaelite school, Edward Burne-Jones, William Morris, and William Blake. As a literary critic/reviewer she is often invited to offer her opinion on books about canonical figures. Fitzgerald's role as a general critic on the one hand shows that her taste, sensitivity, and competence is appreciated by the public; on the other hand it puts her in a position to authenticate works on eminent cultural figures of late nineteenth century English art and literature. In 1992 *The Times Literary Supplement* invited 12 writers to contribute on Tennyson. In this special issue Penelope Fitzgerald is among famous literary writers and critics like Kingsley Amis, Terry Eagleton, A. S. Byatt, Seamus Heaney, and Isobel Armstrong.<sup>68</sup> Fitzgerald's expertise in the fields of romanticism, literature and art, is well recognised; and more evidence of her credibility is to be found in her critical reviewing of books on, or biographies of, C. S. Lewis, Ford Madox Ford, and Evelyn Waugh, — all prominent men of letters of this century. Even more recently Fitzgerald is seen to have ventured further into late twentieth century literature, and become a commentator on current writers such as Frank Moorhouse and Ben Okri.<sup>69</sup> With her consistent engagement in literary reviewing for the past two

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<sup>68</sup> 'A hundred years after. Twelve writers reflect on Tennyson's achievement and influence', in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4670 (2 October 1992), p.8-9. Writers who contributed to this special issue also include Tom Paulin, Andrew Motion, Pat Rogers, Gavin Ewart, Paul Muldoon, and Anthony Hecht.

<sup>69</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, 'The Man from Narnia', review of *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* by A Wilson, in *New York Times Book Review* (18 February 1990), pp.11-12; 'The Great Encourager', review of *Ford Madox Ford* by Alan Judd, in *New York Times Book Review* (10 March 1991), p.7; 'The Only Member of His Club', review of *Evelyn Waugh: the Later Years 1939-1966* by M Stannard, in *New York Times Book Review* (13 September 1992), p.1 et seq.; 'A Worldly Education', review of *Grand Days* by Frank Moorhouse, in *Book World*, Vol. XXIV, No. 13 (March 1994), p.5; and 'The Grass is Singing to a Different Tune', review of *Songs of Enchantment* by Ben Okri, in *The Spectator*, Vol.270, NO. 8593 (March 1993), p.33.



decades, Fitzgerald is undoubtedly an established literary critic; her literary reviews therefore offers a site of observation to show how a commentator, a critic, is engaged in introducing, or even promoting, a new book to the public through the process of bringing to note the nature and qualities of the text in question.

The first feature of Fitzgerald's review articles is that they are heavily biographical. Meticulous attention is always paid to the author's life-account in relation to the reviewed book, so that the source of the author's inspiration is mapped out by identifying the experience of the author with the world his work represents. Fitzgerald relies chiefly on biographical information about authors to provide clues or insight into the book under discussion. Take for instance her article on an exhibition of Edward Burne-Jones's water-colours and drawings at the Tate Gallery.<sup>70</sup> Much attention is paid to the artist's biographical details, with particular reference to Burne-Jones's dispute with the Old Water-colour Society as a crucial event in his creative career. By identifying the connection between art and life in her reviews, Fitzgerald situates the author/artist in his history and demarcates the work under discussion within a specifically biographical, historical frame. *The Novel on Blue Paper*, William Morris's manuscript edited and introduced by Fitzgerald in 1982, demonstrates Fitzgerald's biographical approach fully. In her introduction to this novel Fitzgerald establishes a close correlation between this work and Morris's personal life. This novel's concern with self-control and renunciation in the matter of love and loss is therefore explained in terms of Morris's attitude both to the affair between his wife and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and to the rejection of his affection by Georgie Burne-Jones, wife of Edward Burne-Jones.<sup>71</sup>

The second feature of Fitzgerald's review articles is that they are based preponderantly on textual analysis. In terms of the structure of the review article,

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<sup>70</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, 'With a magic circle. The obsessive themes of Burne-Jones's watercolours', in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4725 (22 October 1993), p.18.

<sup>71</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, ed. and intro., 'Introduction', in *The Novel on Blue Paper: by William Morris* (London: Journeyman, 1982), v-xvi.



Fitzgerald is exact and thorough. She often provides a recapitulation of the plot, an introduction to the background and the author's style of writing, a brief analytical account of how the novel is divided in terms of each distinct aspect, and finally a brief general critique of the stylistics or structure of the book in question. As far as criticism is concerned, Fitzgerald offers little critical, evaluative judgement in her commentary. Her tone of critique is urbane and polite in the sense that she does not judge nor moralise. Though content and form are both discussed, plot and theme predominate. Bypassing matters of form, structure, and genre, Fitzgerald's reviews often launch straight into content, judged by standards implicit but unclarified. Her review of Cees Nooteboom's *The Following Story* is one example:

The first part of Mr. Nooteboom's book is a wonderful thing. The details of Mussert's daily life are brilliantly placed – even his cat is unforgettable — and beneath the self-deprecating, dry, rueful schoolmaster's voice you can feel the fury and melancholy only just under control.<sup>72</sup>

Take her review of Rose Tremain's *The Sacred Country*, for example. Basing her account largely on recounting plot, Fitzgerald throws in a concluding remark about Tremain's use of literary language: 'Rose Tremain has written a strong, complex, unsentimental novel, luscious in some passages, wonderfully restrained in others.'<sup>73</sup> In the concluding passage of her review of Candia McWilliam's *Debatable Land*, Fitzgerald again relies on intuitive, belletristic understanding to comment on the novelist's style:

As hard to describe as the South Seas themselves are the glittering substance and the uneasy shadow of this novel. As in her two earlier books, McWilliam is an astonishing wordmaster, or wordperson, who

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<sup>72</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, 'Where am I?', review of *The Following Story* by Cees Nooteboom, in *The New York Times Book Review* (19 December 1994), p.13.

<sup>73</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, 'Time's Wounding Arrow', review of *The Sacred Country* by Rose Tremain, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4666 (4 September 1992), p.19.



time and again dazzles the reader, leaving him to pick up the pieces while she herself, having got it just right, goes calmly on.<sup>74</sup>

All the features of Fitzgerald's reviews illustrate the influence of the conventional critical approaches most strongly advocated in Oxford in the first half of the twentieth century. Oxford has been, and arguably still is, a major part of the literary Establishment in Britain that self-perpetuates its canonised and institutionalised authority. In terms of research methodology, Fitzgerald's predominantly factual and historical exactness, shown particularly in her works of biography, demonstrates the Oxford scholarly strength in historical disciplines. Oxford English was noted for its principal concern with scholarship and belletristic appreciation. It placed great emphasis on the historical, linguistic, biographical and even bibliographical aspects of a work.<sup>75</sup>

On the other hand, Fitzgerald as a literary critic fulfils to a great extent the social mission that Cambridge English, under the influence of Practical Criticism, the Leavises and *Scrutiny* (1932-53), had championed. Cambridge English placed great importance on the social, ethical, and above all, moral function of English literature — a characteristic which in Fitzgerald's literary career is embodied in the role she takes up as a literary and art critic, the role of an instructor. As a critic of fiction, the sort of literary criticism Fitzgerald practices is one that appeals to general human values common to all readers and in a language accessible to all. It is a practical criticism without the strong judgmental and didactic tone conspicuous in *Scrutiny*. Fitzgerald's critique of fiction rests largely on her aesthetic intuition and moral convictions. It strongly implies a superior teacher-critic figure whose great concern, in Leavis's words, is 'to save the student from the usual laborious

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<sup>74</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, 'Far north, Far south', review of *Debatable Land* by Candia McWilliam, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4757 (3 June 1994), p. 23.

<sup>75</sup> Literary historians have suggested that one major reason that contributed to the research orientation of Oxford English is that when the English course was first set up at Oxford in 1894 it contained a very heavy element of historical language study. See, among others, Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), and Bernard Bergonzi's *Exploding English: Criticism, Theory, Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).



dissipation, to put him in the way of the concentrated reading that will truly educate him by giving him, as it were, the essential structure of literary experience.’<sup>76</sup>

The traditional literary critic imaginarily occupies a transcendent, virtual point outside of history, and from this position proceeds to exert his or her own critical acumen through establishing a knowledge of the author in such a way that the author is made the work’s standard of unity and coherence. Underlying this methodology is the assumption that the meaning and significance of a text is limited to what an author could have intended or meant. A work of literature, therefore, is perceived as possessing a transhistorical objectivity and unchanging identity awaiting the critic’s discovery. Fitzgerald — in her introduction to various novels of Margaret Oliphant, for instance — illustrates this process quite conventionally. She establishes the coherence and integrity of the text through introducing the author’s life and in particular the event that links that respective experience with the work in discussion. Along with textual coherence, the traditional critic, through the figure of the author, establishes a sense of stylistic evaluation.

Among various forms of literary writing, literary review and biography are largely denied critical, academic attention, but are most effective and direct in reaching out to the general reading public. Their intimate association with literary journalism, manifested in the sheer number of publications in these categories, indicates the vastness of the literary market. The lack of prestige of literary reviews and biography within the literary hierarchy is shown in the fact that, while studies of the creative use of language enjoy a lasting prominence in literary and academic discourse, researches on the role of literary reviews and biography, in terms of literacy and literary reception, are often consigned to journalistic interest.

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<sup>76</sup> F. R. Leavis, ‘How to Teach Reading’, in *Education and the University: a sketch for an English school* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), p.110.



The sociological significance of literary reviewing and biography is constantly, and unwisely, neglected.<sup>77</sup>

Malcolm Bradbury, studying the rise of modernism in England, notices that the emergence of literary journals played a significant role in enhancing public awareness of this literary movement. These ‘little’ magazines — such as *The Criterion*, *Rhythm*, and *The Egoist*, for instance — ‘have fairly clear manifestations of the reciprocal relationship between writers and readers’ and they are responsible ‘for maintaining the cultural dialogue [...] for giving a public currency to ideas and discussion’.<sup>78</sup> In terms of contemporary circulation of literary periodicals and journals in Britain, it is beyond question that *The Times Literary Supplement* and *London Review of Books* — journals which specialise in literature academically as well as generally, and for which Fitzgerald has been a regular contributor — are widely considered authoritative and therefore accountable for transporting a vocabulary of cultural dialogue to the dimension of public awareness. With the aim of introducing a specific piece of work, or presenting in reconstruction a particular writer’s life and work, literary reviews and biography necessitate a go-between role between academic perspectives and public literary taste. Fitzgerald’s writing spans a variety of genres. As reviewer and literary critic she disseminates, consciously or not, the criteria of judgement she herself, as biographer and novelist, may seek to employ.

The emergence of critical theories in academic discourse for the past few decades in Britain has induced an oppositional divide as regards an appreciative perspective on a literary text. On the one hand, academic institutions of English

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<sup>77</sup> As a genre, literary biography has enjoyed popularity especially since the 1960s. Recently it has started to attract critical attention as regards the reconstitution of a historical life in narrative terms. The academic interest in this genre deals largely with the ethics of interpretation and knowledge — such as seen in the debates on the cause of Evelyn Waugh’s death, or Philip Larkin’s ‘special’ collection of literature. The sociological significance of the (auto)biographical genre — its ideological role in literary reception and perception, for instance — awaits research. For discussion on the nature of the biographical genre, see John Batchelor, ed. *The Art of Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

<sup>78</sup> Malcolm Bradbury, *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971) pp. p.180.



are engaging in a lasting questioning of the making of literary values and novelists. On the other, the marriage between remunerative literary organisations and the culture industry produces an extensive infiltration of more conservative ideology, methodology, and perspective.

Most literary journals still practice a kind of evaluative literary criticism much challenged for its assumptions and criteria by academic critical perspectives. In essence, this evaluative criticism inherits practical criticism's strengths but discards that imposing aggressiveness seen in *Scrutiny*. It combines the analytical precision of the formalist and the depth and breadth of the historical critic and offers moral and normative judgements through these techniques of isolated internal analysis. For instance, Leavis believes in the transcendental values of literature as a moral teacher, and in a common sense of what life, values, and morality mean. The literary criteria and values seen in Leavis are replete with realist assumptions: such as the value of biographical criticism, the immediate correspondence between art and life, and the transparency of language. We see this attitude not only in the literary reviews that praise Fitzgerald for her ability to capture the real, but also in the reviewing works of Fitzgerald herself when she comes to evaluate fiction by other writers.

T. S. Eliot, in his essay, 'The function of criticism' (1923), talks about the sense of tradition which the artist ought to have. Eliot considers literature

not as a collection of the writings of individuals, but as 'organic wholes', as systems in relation to which [...] individual works of literary art, and the works of individual artist, have their significance.<sup>79</sup>

The years in Oxford have provided Fitzgerald with not only sufficient literary education and academic training, but most importantly, a sense of tradition and continuation of the canon which was the objective of institutionalising English at that time among most universities. The themes of her fiction reveal a genealogical

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<sup>79</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'The function of criticism' (1923), in *20th Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), pp.77-84.



inheritance of key humanist concerns — such as courage — that dwell upon issues essential to our perception of ourselves and the world. Moreover, her role as an art/literary critic and reviewer calls forth an inquiry into that much debated controversy around the nature of a so-called cultural/literary criticism. Traditional critics insist that, to be good, a piece of fiction must involve an idea of some real significance for mature and thoughtful human beings, and they therefore tend to equate aesthetic and philosophical values. While they were able to discuss the values of the particular ideas expressed in a narrative, their analyses did not touch on the broader area of the politics of interpretation itself. Eliot, in the same essay, explicitly claims that

[c]riticism [...] must always profess an end in view, which, roughly speaking, appears to be the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste.<sup>80</sup>

As far as Eliot is concerned, those who practice well the art of writing make good critics. Though he later stretches this frame, he still considers that competent novelists make skilful fiction critics, just as fine poets make exceptional poetry critics. There must still be people holding similar views, since Fitzgerald starts assuming the role of the critic only after she has been recognised as an accomplished novelist with the winning of the Booker Prize. Fitzgerald is a concise novelist, a precise biographer, and a polite reviewer. As a novelist Fitzgerald encounters the complex problems of literary conventionality and originality, which she handles with care and liberty. In terms of thematic concern she remains faithful to liberal humanism which characterises much conventional fiction. The influence of the literary canon — particularly in terms of critical approach — is most evident in Fitzgerald's critical work, which displays traditional attitudes towards literature: the sense of tradition and the refinement of taste. As a novelist, Fitzgerald's works are incorporated into a canonical state of

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<sup>80</sup> Eliot, 'The function of criticism', p.78.

‘Englishness’; as a literary critic, she evaluates and introduces literature through the same lens of conservative and canonical criticism.

### **Popularising the Establishment Taste: the Booker Prize**

In the previous section I have suggested that the ideal reader of Fitzgerald’s novels is a member of the like-minded educated public. Fitzgerald’s novels serve both as a pastime, and as a mouthpiece for her serious ideas on life. The sarcasm about the nature, availability, promotional and political effect of art in *The Golden Child* and *The Bookshop* has shown that Fitzgerald is all too aware of the intricacies of the culture industry. In her first novel, as Bruce Bawer points out, Fitzgerald ‘contemplates with a jaundiced eye the rampant popularisation of culture’;<sup>81</sup> whereas in *The Bookshop* she subtly touches upon the commercialisation of literature in a humorous yet apprehensive tone by describing the paperbacks in Florence’s bookshop:

[C]heerfully coloured, brightly democratic, they crowded the shelves in well-disciplined ranks. They would have a rapid turnover and she had to approve of them; [...] The Everymans, in their shabby dignity, seemed to confront them with a look of reproach.  
(*The Bookshop*, p.39)

Bawer also suggests that Fitzgerald’s abundant employment of wit and humour implies her ‘impatience with shabby contemporary values and with the wretched prospects for Western civilisation in an age of hype, self-seeking, phoniness, and philistinism, high and low.’<sup>82</sup> Bawer’s comment is somehow ironic, given Fitzgerald’s association with the Booker Prize — a literary institution not lacking recognition of its potential in both seeking self-importance and commodifying serious fiction. Written in the language of ‘Englishness’, Fitzgerald’s literary

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<sup>81</sup> Bawer, ‘A still, small voice’, p.35.

<sup>82</sup> Bawer, ‘A still, small voice’, p.35.



career as a whole reflects the overpowering presence of an Establishment literature, and the impact of its intricate correlation with the culture industry. The force that intends to forge the community of readers into a single, monolithic readership needs to be reckoned with.

The issue of readership dovetails neatly with the popularisation of literature. Q. D. Leavis displays insight in seeing the sociological impacts of commercialism on the public's reception of literature. Writing in the first half of the twentieth century, Leavis warns against the increasing powerful control of the book clubs and publishers in relation to fashioning middlebrow taste.<sup>83</sup> Leavis sees the expansion of middlebrow literature as a disintegration of highbrow sensibility, therefore a threat to literature's potential for greatness. Leavis observes that, due to the intervention of commercial and economic forces, a homogenous reading public is disintegrating. Bearing in mind the Leavises' commitment in literary politics, it is not difficult to realise that what Q. D. Leavis meant by that remark is the diminishing interest — even prior to World War Two — in the literature of conventional 'polite' sensibility and elitist scope. Such an antagonistic demarcation between highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow literature — as seen in the Leavises' stance — is hard to sustain today. Nevertheless, it is interesting to view Leavis's observation as heralding the birth of the Booker, which was set up to revive public interest in literary fiction — hence rendering the formal difference between highbrow and middlebrow commercially and aesthetically redundant.

The inception of the Booker Prize coincides not only with the intellectually turbulent and subversive 1960s, but also with Britain's political conservatism during the post-war era. The conception of this institution is inseparable from the perceived state of peril of the British novel in the 60s, an opinion that is reflected in the debate on 'the death of the novel' and in phrases such as 'the novel no longer

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<sup>83</sup> Queenie Dorothy Leavis, 'The Disintegration of the Reading Public', *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), pp.151-202.



novel', with which post-war critics addressed the issue with a sense of urgency. There is no direct evidence to link the Booker Prize with the apocalyptic views of such anxiety-ridden critics. However, with the benefit of hindsight, it is not impossible to see that the stance the Booker Prize adopted in its early phase did 'coincidentally' lean toward the advantage of the conventional novel whose future under the impact of experimental writing seemed jeopardised. The Booker Prize, as the most prestigious award for literary works in Britain, becomes a major instrument of the literary Establishment in the public sphere.

The Booker Prize, as the most prominent prize-giving institution in the field of fiction, is now closely connected with the history of the novel in contemporary Britain. The impact of the Booker on the growing commercialism and commodification of literature — by calling attention to the marketability the Booker brings to the shortlisted, and, of course, the winning titles — has only recently been observed in the field of literary sociology.<sup>84</sup> Bearing in mind the Booker's innumerable connections with the press, the media, the public and civic sectors, and the academic world, I contend that the Booker has transformed itself from a commercial organisation to one conspicuously capable of consolidating the old canon while consecrating the new.

As a self-styled literary Establishment *per se*, the Booker is seen to have become a democratic authority in the sphere of public literacy. The Booker's critical criteria and values have marked a clear divide from the literary criticism of the contemporary academy, which now largely employs different critical paradigms to read against the grain, and is self-consciously aware of the political dimension inherent in the acts of critique and canon-formation. The role the Booker has come to assume in contemporary literature in Britain invites one to

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<sup>84</sup> The impact of the Booker Prize on orienting the readership has only recently attracted academic concerns. See, for instance, Richard Todd, *Consuming fictions: the Booker Prize and fiction in Britain today* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); and Sharon Norris, "'Simply the Best (better than all the rest?)": an investigation into the Booker Prize, 1980-1989, with particular regard to the general rise in business sponsorship of literary awards during the eighties; and the likely effects of the Booker on fiction', unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Glasgow, 1995.



reflect on the notion of a ‘literary gatekeeper’. As a relatively young discipline, academic English literature had always — until recently — been the gatekeeper of literary values and taste. Consider what T. S. Eliot did in resurrecting the Metaphysical poets, and what F. R. Leavis achieved in *The Great Tradition*. Much as academic interest and discussion adds to the publicity and debatability of literature, English as a university subject today is less effective as a cultural machinery in canon-making, than it once was. Include an obscure author in an academic syllabus, and it is likely that the author’s obscurity remains profound outside the classroom and the university bookshop. Crown him/her with a televised prize, his/her publicity and reputation immediately soars. The tension between the two establishments of literature thus ensures that the entrenched focus of academic English is scholarly, ‘theoretic’, and sociological; whereas the literary perspective revealed in the Booker and its accompanying industries is largely belletristic and shyly commercial. Certainly a degree of overlapping mutual influence has to be acknowledged, in a sense that the dialogue — or tension — within the two literary apparatuses is itself a culprit of canon-making. However, in quantitative terms of influence, the role of the literary gatekeeper has been besieged by prestigious literary prizes such as the Booker, which, in explicit attachment to the culture industry, has made the prize so ceremonial an event for writers as well as decisive for their status.

Sharon Norris’s assertion that, between 1969 and 1989, the literary establishment in Britain as a whole had not changed substantially since *Scrutiny* is not without a degree of truth. Although by concentrating on the Booker as the Establishment voice of current fiction Norris inadvertently overlooked the dissension caused by academic English, the elitist nature of the Booker Prize as Norris identifies it largely coheres with my argument that Fitzgerald’s success may be to do with the conservatism of ‘Englishness’ during the 1970s and 1980s. Addressing the Booker’s capacity for self-promotion, Norris brings out a few



useful observations such as the practice of ‘pre-selection’ in literary reviewing, the Prize’s ‘pro-Establishment bias’, and incestuous use of social connections.<sup>85</sup>

The Booker is well-noted for its potential in enhancing the reader’s awareness of current fiction. It must be stressed that, to popularise certain works of literature is more than to promote the sales of these books — it is a privileging of a prescribed canon. Keeping this point in mind, Norris’s assertion that the Booker ought to be seen as an elitist coterie literature offers a helpful sociological view of the overall success of Fitzgerald’s literary career under the patronage of the Booker. The domination in the literary scene of a metropolitan socio-literary elite is of long historic standing, and is closely related to the monopoly of literacy and literary patronage before the advent of Industrial Revolution. During its first twenty years, the Booker has shown a strong pro-establishment bias, and especially ‘pro’ the Oxford/Cambridge, literary and media establishments centring in the south-east of Britain/England. The tendency to favour a London-/England-based authority is attributed to a geographical concentration of cultural investment. With London producing more books and media programmes than any other British city, the preponderance of this geo-cultural investment is therefore complicit in substantiating the indigenous English literary values as the homogenising, national ones.

The patronage of the Booker, as Norris suggests, also extends to the practice of ‘pre-selection’ within literary reviewing. It is noticed that only the novels which had been favourably reviewed in the literary press managed to reach the Booker’s shortlist. Yet the bitter fact is that most published fiction has not been reviewed. Only a small percentage of novels published in any given year get reviewed in key literary journals. Pre-selection works in a way that favours the already established writers — this is explicit in Fitzgerald’s career as a literary

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<sup>85</sup> Norris, *Simply the Best (better than all the rest?)*, p.45, 109-127. There were literary prizes pre-existing the Booker, but in terms of the amount of prize money, the Booker is nonetheless the first to award a large sum of money as material reward.



reviewer, as the writers whose works she reviews are already well-known authors or scholars, such as Muriel Spark, Ben Okri, and John Bailey, to name but three. Moreover, the literary reviews circle is also noted for its incestuous tendency. This is obvious in the fact that, for instance, *The New York Times Book Review* not only enlists Fitzgerald as a regular contributor to its literary review section, but also participates in the promotion of Fitzgerald's fiction in America, by publishing reviews of Fitzgerald's fiction by other contributors to the same literary journal.<sup>86</sup> Given the incestuousness of literary reviewing, it is not unusual for established novelists to review fictions of other established writers favourably. Becoming a 'back-scratching' reciprocal practice, literary reviewing is intrinsically bound up with the culture industry to the point of self-perpetuating established, and Establishment, values.

From the beginning Fitzgerald has found herself situated inside a cultural mainstream, and her employment of literary conventions and conservatism means that not only is she a renowned biographer in the field of late Victorian/early Edwardian literature and art, but also a novelist of distinction. A different stage of Fitzgerald's literary career took off, after her two appearances in the Booker Prize, when in 1980 she started writing reviews for prestigious literary journals and magazines. The 1980s and 1990s saw Fitzgerald successfully combining the roles of novelist, fiction reviewer, and Romantic/Victorian art historian.

In terms of the constitution of the Booker's judging-panel, D. J. Taylor, a literary journalist, observes that the Booker Prize has changed substantially since its establishment, most obviously in the composition of its judging panel. Taylor points out that the early judge-panels 'oozed gravitas' and were mostly 'professorial and authoritative'. The names of Rebecca West, Frank Kermode, and John Fowles, for example, in the early Booker panels were reminiscent of the

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<sup>86</sup> Michael Hofmann, 'Nonsense Is Only Another Language', review of *The Blue Flower* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The New York Times Book Review* (13 April 1997), p.9. Valentine Cunningham, 'Among the Proles and the Posh', review of *The Book Shop* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The New York Times Book Review*, (7 September 1997), p.11-12.



orthodox English literary tradition. Then followed a tendency towards celebrity names: the well-known news announcer Trevor McDonald, and Lady Wilson and Joanna Lumley — as Taylor helpfully points out — were all once on the panels not because of their knowledge of literature but their celebrity status. Nowadays, a typical panel is made up of ‘an assortment of novelist-cum-literary journalists with an occasional review-writing academic figurehead’.<sup>87</sup>

Every award involving the act of selecting and excluding is subject to controversy, and is only justifiable by the judges’ liking and taste. In terms of literature, it indicates a much debated fundamental question about the *worth* of a literary text, and the criteria of judgement. Personally, Fitzgerald does not consider competition as the right way to judge the arts at all, particularly in the case of fiction, because novels are ‘read in solitude, but judged in committee’.<sup>88</sup> In reply to what criteria she relied on during the two occasions — in 1991 and 1998 — she served in the Booker judging-panels, Fitzgerald emphasises the importance of the authorial voice:

I try to hear the ‘voice’ of the novelist, which should be unmistakably individual from the very first page and should persuade me to follow him into his own world, however different it is. Sometime, particularly on moral questions, I may not agree with the author and find myself arguing with him in empty air. The quality I look for most is the quality of pity and kindness. I don’t see how this world is to be managed if we don’t pity each other.<sup>89</sup>

This question of literary sensibility and judging criteria brings us back to what the *Leavises* and *Scrutiny* had fervently combated in the early half of the twentieth century: the decline of literary taste. They believed that literary critics and universities have a responsibility to uphold the English literary canon and a common moral value, for the benefit of the reading public. Since the 1970s the

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<sup>87</sup> T. J. Taylor, ‘Booker: musical chairs with quirky corners’, in *The Independent* (20 October 1990), p.10.

<sup>88</sup> ‘The Man in the Back Row Has a Question V’, p.177.

<sup>89</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication VI [8 March 99].



authority of the canon has encountered multiple attacks from theorists whose works question the tenability of so-called objective taste, and indeed challenge the political nature of such an exclusivity. Nevertheless, as the culture industry works in ways that are elaborate as well as unobtrusive, it is not surprising that traditional values have survived and indeed thriven in a major literary forum such as the Booker. This literary Establishment and its values have not changed substantially because the thriving culture industry, which demands more fiction to be written than ever, generates a supportive network of practices that perpetuate as well as refurbish an Establishment literature.

With its social interconnection among education institutions, the media, the press and publishers, the Booker is seen to have taken over the social mission F. R. Leavis would have liked the university to continue shouldering, and makes it its obligation to see that the public has quality fiction to read, and itself has the profit to reap. The Grand Narrative of canonicity does not disappear in Britain in spite of merciless challenge from contemporary critical theories. Liberal humanism as an interpretative approach now flourishes less in the ivory towers but more in various commercial sectors, especially the book reviewing industry and literary prize bodies. There was one canon in Leavis's time, and now we speak of canons. Among these, that which the Booker has been making is the most coercive, as it has the power to disseminate a prescribed standard of 'good' literature the definition of which it has hitherto failed to explain.

The Booker's presence as a literary patron is explicitly revealed through its potentially lucrative matrices in the culture industry. The notion of 'patronage' — with its implication of canonicity — is valuable in understanding the intricate interdependency between the triangle of the Establishment, the culture industry, and the writer. Given the publicity associated with the prize as *the* prize, writers associated with the Booker gain readier access to — and are more likely to benefit from — value-added prestige. Once associated with the Booker, writers become established and are likely to work *within* and *for* the culture industry, becoming



regular contributors to widely read literary journals, or contracted fiction reviewers. Bearing the notion of patronage in mind, it is worth noting that Fitzgerald diversifies to literary reviewing only since establishing herself after several appearances in the Booker shortlists, from 1980 onwards. The early 1990s becomes the active phase of her career as a literary critic, culminating in her sitting in the Booker judging panel in 1991 and 1998. This is remarkable because very few established novelists get the chance to be a Booker judge, not even once but *twice* — an indication of Fitzgerald's current authority and credibility in Britain as a novelist, reviewer, and literary critic.

Recently, as seen from the reviews of Fitzgerald's novels in American literary journals, it seems that the novelist and her works are undergoing promotion and enjoying a belated, modest success: she won the 1998 United States National Book Critics Circle Award for *The Blue Flower*, which, according to the novelist herself, has made a great difference to her sales in America.<sup>90</sup> The intertwined complexity of the present-day literary canon therefore is seen to have much to do with the media and literary — rather than with academic — reviewing and publishing, since the combined force of the former contributes to the popularisation of literature and the perpetuation of preferred literary values which the latter to some extent purports to deny. Of course, occasionally well-reviewed and then prize-winning works are read and discussed by academics; yet again the factor of 'pre-selection' is crucial to such an inclusion.

The popularisation of literature, under the phenomenal influence of the Booker, is indicative of the persistence and perpetuation of a literary canonical legacy since the early stage of institutionalising English as a discipline. As regards the Booker's capacity for commodifying fiction, the academic holds a rather sceptical and at times self-contradictory view. My exploratory survey has looked into the possible connection between Fitzgerald's fiction, the university English

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<sup>90</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication VI [8 March 1999].



Literature curriculum in Britain, and the Booker Prize. Ten out of fifteen British academics completed and posted back the questionnaire I devised. Asked if they agree with the Booker Prize's choice of shortlisted and winning titles, all of the respondents disagree to various degrees. (Question 8) The following question probes their attitude towards the function of the Booker. In this regard my respondents agree that the Booker Prize enhances the public's awareness of recent novels, makes fiction a commodity subjected to market forces, and presents a middle-class literary sensibility. Worth noting is the less commonly shared, but not unusual, opinion that, although the Booker caters largely for high-brow serious fiction and provides necessary judgement of literary standard, it ought to focus more on its role as a national literary prize. Yet when asked what might prompt them to buy a work of fiction without specific purpose, my respondents all agree that favourable reviews, the fame of the novelist, and a prize-winning record often work persuasively as the purchasing incentive.<sup>91</sup> It is therefore evident that even in the academic world there exists a contradiction between theoretical disapproval of, and practical response to, the Booker Prize.

This chapter embodies my attempt to demonstrate textually the 'Englishness' of Fitzgerald's fiction. Having proceeded from two directions, both stylistic and conceptual, I have suggested that 'Englishness' is essentially an ideological construct. My discussion of the generic accessibility of the novel of manners, including the detective story, was meant to expose the popularity and persuasiveness of the genre, the way in which the novel of manners is often exploited as a genre particularly suited to a literary traditionalism and formal conventions.

I have also examined Fitzgerald's literary criticism, and argued that it is imbued with a circumscribed Establishment taste which is noted for its

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<sup>91</sup> Please see Appendix A for the questionnaire and the result.

preoccupation with the integrity of life, art, and language on a transcendental, universalising plane. By discussing Fitzgerald's role as a reviewer and literary critic, and her involvement with the Booker Prize, I have contended that the present-day literary Establishment can be seen to centre on such awards and their affiliated culture industry. It is through these cultural matrices between literature, literary prizes, literary journalism, and marketing sectors that a circumscribed process of canon-formation is seen to be self-perpetuating.

The present-day cultural industry — for instance, the Booker Prize — could be said to favour a particular form of 'Englishness'. In the first half of the twentieth century, literary critics, mostly academics, assumed the role of a cultural vanguard; whereas in the postmodern era it is arguably the cultural industry — the press and media — that forges literary and cultural fashions. Much as academic critics are cautious about the Booker's judgement, they have only recently started to recognise the intricacy of the connection between the new Establishment and the issue of canon-formation.

The subversion of a canon is not simply a matter of replacing one set of texts with another, because mere replacement would not be able to disclose all that is implicit in the idea of canonicity itself. A canon is not a body of texts, but a set of reading practices consisting of the enactment of numerous individual and common assumptions about, for instance, genre and writing. Literary canonicity, embodied as reading practices, is particularly explicit in institutional structures, such as education curricula and publishing networks. Therefore, the subversion of a canon involves the bringing-to-consciousness and articulation of these practices and institutions, as well as the application of alternative reading practices on the canonical texts, practices I will demonstrate and discuss in Part Two.



**PART TWO:**  
**POLITICS OF READING**

## CHAPTER 4 WRITING IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

The act of knowing is not like listening to a discourse already constituted, a mere fiction which we have simply to translate. It is rather the elaboration of a new discourse, the articulation of a silence.

--- Pierre Macherey<sup>1</sup>

Part Two, comprising Chapters Four and Five, aims to articulate a silence in terms of Fitzgerald's engagement with topical controversies such as postmodernism, feminism, and the critique of power — issues necessitating a discussion of gender, race, class, writing and the nation. As I have suggested, the themes of Fitzgerald's fiction elicit a sense of anachronism and remoteness to contemporary readers. The objective of Part Two is to explore the ways the novelist handles these current intellectual and political perspectives in her seemingly conventional novels. The theoretical assumption of Pierre Macherey's much-acknowledged conceptualization — that literature says what it cannot say — is central to the politics of reading demonstrated in Part Two.

This thesis proposes to read Fitzgerald's paradoxical success as referring to, firstly, a circumscribed literary taste that privileges Christian liberal humanism, followed by a recent sea-change in British cultural focus. In the previous chapters I have elucidated Fitzgerald's novels through aspects of theme, form, genre and context. Consigning the novelist's earlier fiction to the post-war literary scene in terms of convention and context helps to reconfigure her cultural and social

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), pp.5-7, p.6.



rootedness. Fitzgerald's novels are in keeping with a humanist literary tradition favouring uncontroversial, metaphysical subject matter. The fact that Fitzgerald has recognisably more in common with writers of the post-war period, as far as theme and form are concerned, solicits an impression of anachronism. It is also true that part of the anachronism in how the novelist is perceived results from her intentional disengagement with these intellectual — and intrinsically political — trends of thought.

The last two decades of the twentieth century witnessed a shift of cultural and intellectual focus in literature in Britain. Diversity has become strength, and now makes a virtue of its previous marginalized status. In terms of cultural theme and focus, the winning titles of the Booker Prize from 1980 onward have testified to a gradual increase of multi-cultural voices. Late twentieth century British fiction is infused with discourses of postmodernism, gender, race, and class, to name only a few dominant themes. Fitzgerald herself has more than once suggested that her fiction ought not to be read within these critical frameworks.<sup>2</sup> It is in this context of boisterous energy that Fitzgerald's fiction — with its disengagement and distance — appears unfamiliar and quiet.

To put the author into the contemporary era, Chapter Four discusses specific aspects of postmodernist writing and relates them to textual features seen in Fitzgerald's fiction-writing. I suggest that, compared with her earlier, more conventional fictions, Fitzgerald's later novels in the late 1980s and early 1990s reveal some stylistic influence of the now dominant postmodernist literary expression. It is my contention that the novelist's later works of fiction are indicative of an effort to bring conventional realism together with postmodernist experimentation.

The second section of Chapter Four explores Fitzgerald's utilization of history in writing. The relationship between history and fiction is of significant

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Sale, 'Passed/Failed: Penelope Fitzgerald', in *The Independent* (18 February 1999), Education, p.7. Also, Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 21.

interest for two reasons. Literature in the postmodern era is preoccupied with the issue of representation in relation to historicity — the referentiality of language and textuality of history. Moreover, the issue of history and fiction is of interest as all of Fitzgerald's foreign novels are to some extent negotiating the space between these two realms; whereas the 'historical' in her earlier, 'English' novels is confined to annotation of social change. Chapter Four therefore returns to the aspects of form and writing. I argue that Fitzgerald's writing can be seen to offer an appropriation of postmodernist stylistics and postmodern thinking.

#### 4.1) FITZGERALD AND POSTMODERNISM

Andreas Huyssen, in his seminal essay, 'Mapping the Postmodern', suggests that we can discuss the postmodern as either a historical condition or as a particular style.<sup>3</sup> Bearing this in mind, my discussion of Fitzgerald's later fictions and their relationship with postmodern writing calls for critical discussion regarding the divide between realism and experimentation, and the presence of postmodernism in contemporary fiction in Britain.

Critical discourse on postmodernism and fiction, though pointing to an evolution of both literary style and preoccupation, is often slanted, particularly in an American context, towards the innovative nature of language. Geoffrey Lord, in *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference*, contends that though postmodernism is broadly seen as a Western literary movement, national cultural differences should be taken into account in view of the development of literary postmodernism in the USA and Britain. In the discourse of postmodernism and fiction, Lord observes that there has long been a tendency to privilege American

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<sup>3</sup> Andreas Huyssen, 'Mapping the Postmodern', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 234-277, p.237.



experimental writing. As the United States emerges to become a global power, its political and economical infiltration also enables experimental postmodernism to be seen as a dominant literary norm. Under this bias, contemporary British fiction is often criticised for lack of active engagement as regards postmodernist stylistics. Within this predominant critical climate, postmodernism, as it appears in American post-war fiction, is often defined along lines that posit it as opposed to realism and as radically experimental.<sup>4</sup>

Richard Todd, in 'Postmodernism in British Fiction', suggests that contemporary fiction in Britain operates within a field of tension animated by notions of necessity and contingency. Todd laments that contemporary British fiction suffers from 'Britain's reviewing establishment's fondness for the exclusively thematic approach' which obscures the novelists' handling of narrative and technique.<sup>5</sup> Such a thematic approach causes Fitzgerald to be widely perceived as a conventional writer. In terms of literary genre and convention there is little doubt that Fitzgerald's works fall into the category of realism. Moreover, Todd shares Lord's opinion that British postmodernism ought not to be taken as exclusively connected with 'the countercultural, avant-garde, experimental writing which critical discourse has persistently located at the margins of the contemporary fictional enterprise in Britain'. In stretching the narrow definition of postmodernist writing in present-day fiction, Todd maintains that critics should allow themselves to recognise that contemporary fiction in Britain

may be conceived of in terms of its having steadily evolved a number of strategies across a broad spectrum for confronting the problems posed by the constraints of selfhood, as the mode of naïve social realism came increasingly to be equated with solipsistic closure, and to

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Lord, *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference: A Comparison of Postmodern Fiction in Britain and America* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), p.10, and p.21.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Todd, 'The Presence of Postmodernism in British Fiction: Aspects of Style and Selfhood', in *Approaching Postmodernism*, eds. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 1986), pp.99–117, p.104-5.



prove steadily less satisfactory as a vehicle for the expression of contemporary reality in fictional terms.<sup>6</sup>

Todd's view of accommodation and reconciliation as appealing strategies for British culture in terms of the acceptance of postmodernism is shared by many critics. Marguerite Alexander, for instance, suggests that literary postmodernism in Britain can be seen as a revisionist appropriation of realism, instead of a rebellion against realism.<sup>7</sup> This critical consensus — that fiction-writing in the postmodern Britain calls for an re-examination of the divide between realism and experimentation — provides fertile ground on which to discuss Fitzgerald's later works.

The post-war novel, feeling the increasing pressure from mass culture in the form of radio, cinema and television, is also preoccupied by debates on avant-garde writing and conventional realism, which have never been as fervent as in the post-war literary scene.<sup>8</sup> However, despite more diverse literary innovation brought forth by linguistic and visual experimentation, what remains central to much post-war writing, broadly speaking, is the impulse to represent a changing society with the greatest possible fidelity. The deep-rooted tradition of realism still nourishes contemporary British novelists, who continue to draw resources both from the nation's literary past and convention, and from across the Atlantic as well as across the English Channel. The sense of suspicion, even aversion, towards

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<sup>6</sup> Todd, 'The Presence of Postmodernism in British Fiction', p. 104, 103.

<sup>7</sup> Marguerite Alexander, *Flights from Realism: Themes and Strategies in Postmodernist British and American Fiction* (London: Edward Arnold, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> The hostility between realism and experimentalism in postwar fiction is so prominent that, during the first two to three decades of the postwar period, 'the death of the novel' was frequently debated. For instance, although Malcolm Bradbury recognizes the perceptible tendency of a willed return to realism, he is all the more ready to proclaim the death of traditional novel of 'social reality, moral assessment and direct representation of life and history' and celebrate the rebirth of the fiction 'that challenged its own history and its own reality'. On the other hand, for those who disagreed with experimental writing (such as C. P. Snow), modernism — and hence experimental writing — was considered too inwardly obsessed with personal subjective awareness that reflects the author's lack of attention to the changing social context. Under the focus on form and style, the novel was seen to be reduced to a linguistic construct and therefore was unable to deal with social questions. For the controversy, see Malcolm Bradbury, 'The Novel No Longer Novel: Writing Fiction after World War Two', in *No, Not Bloomsbury* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 87-114, p.89.



postmodernism in Fitzgerald is not an isolated instance — in fact, it is not uncommon in many contemporary British novelists.<sup>9</sup> A discussion of Fitzgerald's fiction in terms of postmodernism and contemporary English fiction is most practicable insofar as we bear in mind that contemporary British novelists' negotiation with literary postmodernism ought not to be taken as a matter of wholesale acceptance of literary experimentation.

Iris Murdoch's remark about Sartre's fiction offers an illustration of the development of Fitzgerald's concerns in writing. Murdoch, in *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist*, complains that Sartre 'had an impatience, fatal to a novelist proper, with the *stuff* of human life ....' In Murdoch's opinion, Sartre also lacked 'an apprehension of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and of their relations with each other'. Discussing Sartre's view of language, Murdoch observes that our awareness of language has given rise to an increasing sophistication in the way we construct our world. In Murdoch's own words:

We can no longer take language for granted as a medium of communication. We are like people who for a long time looked out of a window without noticing the glass — and then one day began to notice this too.<sup>10</sup>

What Murdoch summarizes here — preoccupation with the 'stuff of human life', 'apprehension for the absurd' and the interpersonal relations — is precisely the characteristic underpinning the majority of post-war British novelists. Fitzgerald shares this focus on the absurd, the unique, the idiosyncratic and the individual. Moreover, Fitzgerald's later fiction shows that she has noticed the glass through which she observes the 'stuff of human life'. Starting from *The Gate of Angels* (1990), a sense of narratological self-awareness and stylistic deviation emerges

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<sup>9</sup> Take Alasdair Gray for instance. Gray's works, such as *Lanark*, are renowned for their postmodernist stylistics. However, in an interview on his recent novel, *Poor Things*, Gray openly expressed his objection to being called a postmodernist. See, Joe McAvoy, 'An Old-Fashioned Modernist: Alasdair Gray talks to Joe McAvoy', in *Cencrastus*, Vol. 61 (1998), pp.7-10.

<sup>10</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987; first pub. Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1953), p.146, and p.64.

more visibly, making Fitzgerald's foreign works markedly different from her early ones. I suggest that in *The Gate of Angels* and *The Blue Flower*, Fitzgerald's previous reliance on some of the conventions of mimetic realism is seen to have receded to reveal the presence of a poetics frequently found in more intriguingly free-spoken postmodernist fiction, although in terms of narratology and innovation these works still largely conform to the norm set in realism.

Linda Hutcheon is correct in her insistence that postmodernism cannot simply be used as a synonym for the contemporary.<sup>11</sup> Following her point, I shall suggest that Penelope Fitzgerald's more contemporary works embody all three definitions of postmodernism supplied by Edmund Smyth. For Smyth, 'postmodernism' indicates a cultural condition, a set of textual and artistic characteristics, and a periodising description.<sup>12</sup> These criteria are met, I shall maintain, in *The Gate of Angels* and *The Blue Flower*.

### **Narrative Fragmentation and Intervention**

Fitzgerald's novels of England are characterised by the use of linear narration and a natural authority which ensures smooth reading. All of Fitzgerald's texts are written from a third-person omniscient perspective, but the use of narrative authority is a different matter as her writing proceeds into the Nineties. The smoothness of her early works indicates a kind of invisible narratological control that effaces the distance between the reader and the work. It is a subtly coercive control of narration which leaves the reader comfortably in the hands of the invisible narrator. But Fitzgerald's later works are a different matter. The tonal disinterestedness is so conspicuous in her later works that from the narrator's plainly deliberate reportage the reader is well aware of the narrator's textual

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<sup>11</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988), p.4.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund J. Smyth, ed., 'Introduction', in *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1991), p.9.



existence and control. Fitzgerald's novels are noted for their patchy yet catchy use of dialogue. In Fitzgerald's later novels a dialogic situation is often reduced to the sparsest exchange and sandwiched between hefty narrative descriptions. Take Chapter 39 of *The Blue Flower* for instance. Here Fritz Hardenberg is fondly, jokingly noting how his sweetheart Sophie has turned from an unknowing child into an innocent, young woman of thirteen. Teased and annoyed, Sophie breaks into tears. The narrative focal point presses on the young couple's quarrel, yet it meanders discursively around other incidents about Sophie and her brother, before the narrator returns to this quarrel in the dialogue between Fritz and Sophie's elder sister, Mandelsloh. The incident is indirectly referred to through different narrative voices, and is basically *told* — instead of *shown* — to the reader by the narrator:

He had no manners, Sophie had wept. That was what they said to her when she was in disgrace, the strongest reproach she knew. Fritz replied that he had been to the Universities of Jena, Leipzig and Wittenberg, and knew somewhat more about manners than a thing of thirteen.

‘A thing of thirteen, Frieke! Can you believe that, can you explain that?’

‘How did he explain it himself?’

‘He said I was a torment to him.’

In his next letters to Sophie, Fritz called himself inexcusable, uncultivated, ungracious, impolite, incorrect, intolerable, impertinent and inhuman.

The Mandelsloh advised him to stop it. ‘Whatever the cause of the trouble was, she has forgotten it.’

‘There was no cause,’ Fritz told her.

‘That makes it more difficult, still, she has forgotten it.’

(*The Blue Flower*, p.147)

The narrative description is informative in providing narratorial explanations of the occurrences in the novel, while the dialogue itself is short and at times insubstantial, serving mostly to provide supplementary confirmation of what the narrator has observed. The blending of such dialogue into the authoritative narration produces a sense of bumpiness as the reader is from time to time made aware of the abrupt shift of narratological localisation. Consequently, instead of

drawing the reader's attention to the characters' textual existence, the language of the text forces us to recognise the narrator's presence, function, and power. Although Fitzgerald herself is interested in building dialogues free from the author's interjection, her own textual endeavour often runs counter to her intent by revealing too much of the indistinguishable narrator's/author's voice and too little of the characters' psychology.<sup>13</sup> What is then frequently demonstrated in Fitzgerald's sandwiching of a slice of dialogue between two narrative descriptions is an apparent narratological manoeuvre outwith the range of characterization. The narrator's detached localisation makes it clear that she is there to inform the reader, and not merely to report all the details; yet the dialogues appear cutting despite the fact that they are often in need of the narrator's comments to supplement the unsaid.

Fitzgerald's narrator is basically an informer but not a conscientious storyteller. She tells the story selectively depending on her convenience, and as a result the narration is more or less a reconstructed version of how things happened told strongly in the narrator's voice and not shown from the characters' actions. For instance, the narrator of *The Gate of Angels* decides to reveal Daisy's generous nature only partially through a brief dialogic exchange between the heroine and her friend Kate, and more forcefully through her comment:

The very first time they worked together they had to go down one of the female wards, Daisy to the right, Kate to the left, putting the patients' hair in tight pigtailed; they were being got ready for their operations. Daisy finished first and looked back.

'Lord, Kate, whatever have you done to them?'

'Put them right for me, Daisy!'

And Daisy rapidly put them right for the first of many times, not knowing how dangerous generosity is to the giver.

(*The Gate of Angels*, p.78)

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<sup>13</sup> Clare Boylan, 'Conversation dipped in ink', interview with Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Guardian* (21 November 1991), p.26. Fitzgerald comments on her use of dialogue:

'I am very interested in dialogue because the reader has to learn to listen to the voices and to identify the character without the author's interjection.'



Unlike the invisibly coercive narrators in Fitzgerald's domestic novels, the narrator in *The Gate of Angels* markedly shows control over the characters and stories. The presence of a magisterial narrator who is decidedly telling stories in her own way is crucial, as it narratologically holds up the overall structure of the novel under a conspicuous focal perspective. Fitzgerald's later novels rely heavily on episodes to the degree that a central interlocking plot is at times elusive, at least as far as the conventional meaning of plot is concerned. They are sectioned, sometimes, into unevenly distributed chapters. The structure of *The Gate of Angels* is fragmented into three parts and twenty-two chapters, and with temporal sequentiality discarded it resembles a collection of short stories. Chronological sequence dissolves to create a montage-like effect in words, characters, and suspended plots. The sequence that connects individual stories is broken down and reshuffled.

In *The Gate of Angels* not only does Fitzgerald explore the random collision of people's lives, she also experiments with randomness in the process of structuring the fiction as a whole. Each chapter of the novel can stand as an individual item of story, thus enabling the novel to be full of stories but without a solid form. If Penelope Fitzgerald's novels have always tended towards brevity and directness — their chapters short, their style plain, crisp, and unadorned — then the tendency is even more manifest in *The Gate of Angels* and eventually dominant in *The Blue Flower*, which consists of fifty-five elliptical, titled narratives. This is the longest novel among Fitzgerald's works, yet the average length of each chapter is less than three pages, with the shortest — extracts from Sophie's diary — of only 23 sparsely filled lines. Jean Sudrann, in her essay on *Innocence*, comments on the purposefully fragmented structure and use of irony as Fitzgerald's 'closest approach to experiment':

Her closest approach to experiment in the form of her fiction is her frequent use of ironic closures with their attendant ambiguities and a habit of building in very short chapters or simply numbered, seemingly

discrete, brief episodes whose sequence creates a significance not apparent in the episode itself.<sup>14</sup>

The structural discontinuity of Fitzgerald's works also attracts Frank Kermode's attention when, in his review of *The Blue Flower*, he notes the effect of the novel's shattered unity:

The method used here is episodic, discontinuous: the effect is rather *tachiste*, which enhances one's sense that the book's design or designs are for the reader to make or discern.<sup>15</sup>

The point Kermode as well as Sudrann touches upon — how the chipped structure of Fitzgerald's novels compels the reader to struggle for an underlining authorial import — strengthens rather than contradicts my argument that the narrative fragmentation of Fitzgerald's later works can be read as a deliberate challenge to the conventional presumption of a smooth, chronological development in a fiction. This then leads us to look into the degree of narrative intervention in the novels.

Fitzgerald's fiction is notable for the use of an instructive narrator, whose presence can be traced back to *Human Voices*, but is even more perceptibly obtrusive in her later works. Fitzgerald's narrator often deliberately intervenes within the supposedly smoothly interlocking narration as a gesture of reinforcing her narratological superiority over the reader's desire for information. An episode from *Human Voices* demonstrates how the course of narration makes the reader aware of the presence and control of the narrator. The episode, told through hindsight, relates an event regarding a live speech given by a French general supposedly to encourage the British to hold out against Germany. To everyone's surprise, the speech turns out to urge the British people to surrender in order to

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Sudrann, "Magic or Miracles": The Fallen World of Penelope Fitzgerald's Novels', in *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Hosmer Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.105-127, p.105.

<sup>15</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Dark Fates', review of *The Blue Flower* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *London Review of Books* (5 October 1995), p.7.



avoid unnecessary loss of life and strife. Jeff Haggard, the DPP (Director of Programme Planning), somehow sensing the queer twist of purport, single-handedly pulls the plug before it is too late. But his instinctive insight is not appreciated. In the passage quoted below the narrator contemplates DPP's character and his relationship with his colleagues:

Jeff Haggard was useful because if he felt a matter was worth taking up he didn't mind what he said or who he said it to. *Look at what he'd done, over the years, for Sam Brooks!* Undoubtedly, also he was clever. But they felt, perhaps out of a sense of self-preservation, that no-one can be good and clever at the same time.  
(*Human Voices*, p.36; my emphasis)

The narrator's intervention in the story-telling process is present in the narrative control embedded in the grammatical descriptiveness which denotes an 'I-tell-you' speech relation. The reader is explicitly placed in the position of being addressed, and informed, by the narrator. In *The Blue Flower* the narrative voice, the speaking 'I', eventually emerges to declare dictatorship. The passage given below describes the engagement party of Fritz and Sophie from the narrator's view. Anton, Fritz's brother, is playing the piano to welcome the arrival of Sophie and her family:

The front rows of chairs emptied and shifted to make place for the newcomers. Anton nodded, and continued with a setting of some of Zinzendorf's hymns for the Brethren, passing on to the airs from two or three Singspiele and the, what was the piece that he played after that? — that very beautiful piece, I did not know it, could Anton have improvised it himself?

No-one admitted to knowing it, but all half-closed their eyes in pleasure.

(*The Blue Flower*, pp. 175-176)

Though paradoxically here she claims otherwise, the voice of an omniscient, authoritative narrator may be discerned in the way the incident is told by a narrator very confident in managing narrative relations. With or without the typographical presence of *you*, the narrative tone very often strongly announces 'the presence of a



communicative circuit linking addresser and addressee' which, for many critics such as Brian McHale, is a dominant feature of postmodernist writing.<sup>16</sup> The narrative tone revealed in Fitzgerald's later works is self-reflexive in the sense that it often reminds the reader more of the presence of the narrator than of the characters: the presence of the narrator is far more perceptible than that of the characters. The role of Fitzgerald's narrator as a mediator, an intervener, is manifest in *Innocence*. Take for example a passage about Maddalena's accident. Note the authority of the narrative voice emerging to sight from the level of conventional omnipresence:

In appearance Maddalena had a meagreness which suggested that she might not be long for this world, although this was contradicted by her persistent good health. Her firmness Giancarlo would have appreciated if there had been any way of telling what she would be firm about next. Take the matter of the third and fourth fingers of her right hand. They were missing, having been taken off with a pair of sharp poultry-nippers by a thief sitting behind her on the 33 bus coming back from Bagno a Ripoli. The diamond ring given her by her English husband in their happier days was of course the object. The incident was not at all an unusual one, and the strong-minded Maddalena refused to make any kind of official complaint. She regarded the loss, she said, as a tax, which all those who have something to be stolen must expect to pay.  
(*Innocence*, p.12)

The narrator's matter-of-factness in disclosing such a dire accident is rather disturbing to the unprepared reader. Her banal assertiveness increases the force of shock and inserts a sense of domination/submission into the often unproblematic course of reading. The allocutions and summings-up clearly bring to light the narrator's controlling presence. Fitzgerald's narrative intervener also gives the reader behind-the-scenes information to supplement the plot. For instance, in *Innocence*, where Salvatore attends a medical symposium, the reader gets to know first the narrator's own comments and opinions regarding this event, *before* s/he is

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<sup>16</sup> Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991; first pub., London: Methuen, 1987), p.223.



introduced precisely to the referred incident. Note the authoritative tone in the beginning of the narration, before the narrator gets to the episode itself:

The obsessed are blind to their obsessions. To them it seems no more than a coincidence that so many unrelated things seem to refer to their one and only concern. Or it may be that the senses have become preternaturally selective, and detect it everywhere. To give an example, at an international symposium on diseases of the lung, organized by the University of Florence, the first slide of the first lecture was a close-up of the so-called dwarfs of the Ricordanza. (*Innocence*, p.49.)

As the reader is led to anticipate some plot development, the narrative focalisation is often abruptly interrupted and rotated to the thought of the narrator. Fitzgerald's narrator intervenes in the process of story-telling, and not just by deliberately leading the reader's focus from one character to the next. She also moves the time frame into a non-chronological order, switching the subject matter from one story to another as the numbered sections progress. This change-of-focus — the assembly of accounts of dissimilar purpose — manifests itself in not only the fragmented narrative structure of Fitzgerald's works, but also in the way the reader is lead to follow the shift of narrative focalisation. Take *Innocence*. In suggesting the looming unease Chiara's choice of husband causes, her father Giancarlo is first described walking down to an apparently peaceful village. Yet very soon, as if by a slip of the tongue, the narrator's attention shifts to an unpleasant, seemingly irrelevant, historical detail: 'In the fourteenth century the whole area had been a graveyard for unbaptised infants, whose salvation was doubtful.' (p.14) By way of this sudden, disconnected and disconcerting change of focus a threat to Chiara's happiness is conveyed, not through any of the characters' views, but through the narrator's voice. Such narratological manoeuvres, too obvious in Fitzgerald's later writing to be ignored, constantly reminds the reader of the textuality of writing.



Narrative intrusiveness is also exemplified in the way the supernatural or violent themes in some of Fitzgerald's novels are referred to.<sup>17</sup> None of these subplots is presented as a central or indispensable component in relation to any story in its completeness. Often loosely fitted into the novel, they are offered as anecdotes additional to the major plot. What happens is that the narrator chooses to remind the reader of previous violent and grotesque events, yet refuses to establish a metaphorical or symbolic connection. The reader is constantly kept aware of the process of reading, because the response a reader would conventionally be supposed to assume is so frequently challenged. Faced with the narrator's apparent imperturbability, the reader is frequently puzzled by the unexplained suggestiveness of these eerie scenes. The surface calm of the narrator's tone appears to suggest a certain degree of narrative autonomy with which the narrator observes the characters and induces an impact of estrangement.

This narrative detachment and distance in Fitzgerald's later works strongly reminds the reader of nineteenth century literary naturalism. With keen observation of insignificant details, and an outsider's stance of uninvolved involvement with the characters, *Innocence* assuredly offers a naturalistic text. It foregrounds and foretells an hereditary flaw in the family — the Ridolfi's tendency toward being kind-hearted yet ill-judging. Also, in the hope of giving a well-rounded picture of the environment from which the characters' subsequent development can be thoroughly understood, the narrative details expand as far as the apparently irrelevant characters around the major protagonists. On the one hand, it seems feasible to read this fiction as reflecting naturalist concerns, for it demonstrates an exclusive concentration on the interaction between the characters and their preclusive environment. On the other hand, the curious humour in the narrator's tone, together with the disconcerting oddity, even absurdity, of the actual story,

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<sup>17</sup> Subplots of supernatural, or even violent, purport have frequently appeared in Fitzgerald's novels, such as the poltergeist in *Bookshop*, the gruesome ghost story in *The Gate of Angels*, the harrowing scene where children set fire to a defenceless bear in *The Beginning of Spring*, and the appalling legend of an amputee in *Innocence*.



simultaneously cancels out the impression of an absolute dispassionate objectivity proper to classic naturalism, and disqualifies *Innocence* as naturalistic. The quantifiable difference between these two kinds of narrator resides in the Fitzgeraldian narrators' far more frequent, and obtrusive, intervention. Unlike the naturalistic narrator who keeps himself away from giving opinions to create observational objectivity, Fitzgerald's narrator seems unfettered and ready to be helpful. Her reader is frequently receiving hints and comments from the narrator, as if the narrator is supervising the reading process in case some point may be missed out. Thus the naturalist reference is called into question, freeing the text to suggest possibilities which cannot be confined to natural determination.

### **Fictionalization**

Richard Todd, in another essay studying the use of the intrusive author in British postmodernist fiction, concisely points out that 'the more intrusive the authorial conscription of the text becomes, the closer the text moves towards an exploitation of the self-referent and the self-reflexive'; and the acme of this self-referentiality and self-reflexivity is shown in Alasdair Gray's and Martin Amis's device of pushing the intrusive author 'to a point where stylistic and topographical elements have become practically autonomous of any reference' to the tradition of postmodernist writing.<sup>18</sup>

Fitzgerald's later works are similarly rendered self-referential through an intrusive style of narration. With the story segmented into various discrete units, Fitzgerald's later novels strongly suggest a kind of self-reflexivity which denotes the controlling presence of the author/narrator in the act of writing. This presence

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Todd, 'The Intrusive Author in British Postmodernist Fiction: The Cases of Alasdair Gray and Martin Amis', in *Exploring Postmodernism: Selected Papers Presented at a Workshop on Postmodernism at the XIth International Comparative Literature Congress, Paris, 20-24 August 1985*, eds. Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1990; first pub., 1987), pp.123-137, p.124, and 135.



reveals the textual nature of a novel. Self-reflexivity, or fictionalization, reflects in Fitzgerald's works not in the way of building up a dialogue between the narrator and the reader, but in the way the reader is anticipated and the way the plot is shuffled and shaped according to the narrator's master plan.

*The Gate of Angels* reveals a prominent sense of recognizing itself as a textual construct in its use of sub-titles — shown in the contents, and as the heading of each chapter — a narratological feature unprecedented in her earlier works, in which each individual chapter is given only numerical ordering. These subtitles are important, not simply because they provide the reader with foresight as to what is going to occur in the chapter concerned, but exactly because they embody the narrator's self-consciousness and preoccupation with the presentation of the story. The story — mainly the love story between Fred and Daisy and their development since childhood — is not too complicated to understand without narrative hints. It opens with Fred in his college room pondering how to start a letter to a Miss Saunders but being frequently disturbed by callers. The first chapter is titled 'Fred's Three Notes', and ends with suspense as to who this Miss Saunders may be and what accident Fred seems to have recently gone through. However, leaving the mysterious beginning she has just created, the narrator finds it necessary to talk about the setting instead of continuing the story in chapter two: 'A Few Words about St Angelicus'. These chapter headings impart more self-reference to the narrator than their assumed rhetorical function.<sup>19</sup> Apparently, the narrator is less interested or engaged in the development of fictional plots, and more occupied with the idea of presenting and documenting all the materials she has.

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<sup>19</sup> The contents of this novel are: Part One: 1. Fred's Three Notes; 2. A Few Words about St Angelicus; 3. How Fred Got this Job in the First Place; 4. Dinner at St Angelicus; 5. At the Rectory; 6. The Disobligers' Society; 7. Who Is Daisy? Part Two: 8. Daisy; 9. The Blackfriars Hospital; 10. The Men's Ward; 11. The Case of Hames Elder; 12. Kelly; 13. Daisy Leaves London. Part Three: 14. No Mystery about Daisy's Movements; 15. A Walk in the Country; 16. A Visit from the Fairlys; 17. Dr. Matthews' Ghost Story; 18. An Unusual Court Case; 19. Kelly Laid to Rest; 20. Fred's Advice to His Students; 21. At Dr Sage's Hospital; 22. The Gate of Angels.



‘Dr Matthews’s ghost story’ (Chapter 17) in *The Gale of Angels* is a further, more substantial example of fictionality. This tantalisingly macabre tale provides an example of how a story is constructed. Firstly the narrator introduces Dr Matthews pondering upon Fred’s accident; then the reader is directly transported to Matthews’ dialogue with an invisible audience — either himself or the reader/listener, or both. This chapter is largely written from Dr Matthews’s viewpoint, and, in a sense, the narrator has created another narrator to narrate the ghost story. The shift between the original narrator’s focalisation and that of Dr Matthews’s is done so seamlessly that the reader is quickly confused by the unexplained designation of ‘we’ and ‘I’. Donating events, questions of how, when and where, Dr Matthews invites the reader/listener to construct their own version of the accident. In communicating his analogy of the seemingly unrelated ghost story with the accident, Dr Matthews as a story-teller becomes identical to the narrator, both eagerly engaging in the art of fictionalization.

The use of chapter headings is present in *The Blue Flower* too. As mentioned, this novel is episodic and loosely held together by the use of headings. Not only do these headings provide stage-settings for each individual chapter, they also serve to interlock various episodes dominated by specific sets of characters. For instance, the chapters under the headings of ‘In Jena’, ‘The Jena Circle’, ‘At Jena’, all deal separately with the group of intellectuals at the university town. Here figures prominent in German Romanticism come alive, enthralled by philosophy as well as gossip. The novel’s headings encode a sense of parody — such as ‘The History of Freiherr Heinrich von Hardenberg’, ‘From Sophie’s Diary, 1795’, and ‘How Professor Stark Managed’ — which render them still more self-consciously fictive. The course of fictionalization in this novel culminates in chapter 35, ‘Sophie is Cold Through and Through’. In the beginning of this chapter the reader is confronted with an epigraph:

Sophie to Fritz — ‘... I have coughs and sneezes, but it seems to me that I feel quite



well again when you are in my mind. Your  
Sophie.'

In the autumn of 1795 Fritz plodded over to Grüningen to find Sophie without cares. She was playing with Gunther, [...]  
(*The Blue Flower*, p. 135)

In this novel the fictive nature of a work of fiction is signposted from time to time, through the narrator's intervention and presence, through typographical intrusions like the above-quoted instance, and through inclusion of a literal translation of Sophie's diary. (p.107-108, 120-121) The novel as a narrative totality holds its power not just in the fictional events it discloses, but in the way the novel's substance — an unfading spiritual and intellectual yearning — is revealed: through disjunctive narratives and unexpected connections between episodes.

Although not apparently devoted to producing the kind of fictional fabulation seen in obvious experimentation, Fitzgerald's later novels participate in postmodernist stylistics in a modest yet nonetheless discernible way. Her fiction writing, particularly obviously in her later works, embraces various features which Ihab Hassan, in 'Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective', considers as postmodern features.<sup>20</sup>

Fitzgerald's fiction is noted for its sense of ambiguity and inconclusiveness. Most fiction closes with a proper sense of ending; however, such a sense of closure is often absent and replaced by moments of epiphany-like suspense in Fitzgerald's fictional world. Such is *The Beginning of Spring* where the only appearance of Nellie, whose disappearance constitutes the central plot of the novel, occurs at the end — and in a single unemphatic sentence — when she comes back unexpectedly to her family at the beginning of spring. Set in Moscow in the turbulent years before the Bolshevik revolution, the novel offers a sense of unsettling anticipation as well as apprehension as the characters are confronted with an unpredictable force compelling them to move,

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<sup>20</sup> Ihab Hassan, 'Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective', in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1986), pp.503-520. For Hassan, a postmodern perspective embraces indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonisation, selflessness (or depthlessness), the unrepresentable (and unrepresentable), irony, hybridization, carnivalisation, performance (or participation), constructionism, and immanence.



change, and adapt. In spite of a romantic sounding title and the hopeful window-opening ritual at winter's end, the reader is not given any clue as to whether Nellie's return signals a family reconciliation — a morally conventional and reassuring close; or a beginning of self-assertion by a renegade wife alluding to Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

Irony includes elements of play, interplay, dialogue, allegory, and self-reflection — features that assume indeterminacy and multivalence. This ironic feature is extensively demonstrated in Fitzgerald's fiction, and — together with the novelist's moral and rhetorical use of comedy — builds up a sense of indeterminable expressiveness.<sup>21</sup> It is worth suggesting here that the effect of incongruity and puzzlement — resulting from the gruesome, macabre accounts — signifies the indeterminate nature of the ironic polylogue. Fitzgerald's awareness of the textual nature of language is explicitly shown as the novelist employs directly terms in Italian, Russian and German, instead of using the English equivalent. This is particularly obvious in *The Blue Flower*, where Michael Hofmann notes the playful side of language in Fitzgerald's fiction.<sup>22</sup> Hybridization in Fitzgerald's fiction is illustrated in her negotiation between the limitations of conventional genres and the current intellectual climate throughout the time she writes. This feature, particularly evident in the novelist's use of historical materials, evinces a challenge to the boundaries between genres and the authority of historic knowledge.

The tradition of literary realism was a strong characteristic of post-war British literature. It had important implications for a whole generation of novelists who continue to work within this tradition, and had also inevitably enticed others to explore and move away from it. This reconsideration of realism was to become part of the rising theme of fictional enquiry that was to run through British fiction

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<sup>21</sup> See Chapter 2 for the discussion of Fitzgerald's moral outlook, and Chapter 3 for her treatment of humour, wit, and comedy.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Hofmann mentions 'the tiny doses of German ("the *Gaul*," "the *Amtsrichter*") and of literally translated German expressions ("own-ness" and, very tellingly, for Fritz's little brother, "the Bernhard"). See Michael Hofmann, 'Nonsense Is Only Another Language', review of *The Blue Flower* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The New York Times Book Review* (13 April 1997), p. 9.



from the 1960s onwards. I contend Fitzgerald's later novels are situated, if unconsciously, within this compromised ground. In reconsidering the boundaries and employment of realism in fiction-writing, it is obvious that the authority of the narrator — which was previously omnipresent and omniscient — comes into question. This concern with the constituents of a discourse takes into account the status of a text, the nature of a plot, the substance of a character, and the sense of an ending.

In justifying the unreliable narrator in *Midnight's Children*, Salman Rushdie explains how he, during the course of writing, has gone astray from his original Proustian intention. At first he was hoping that his spatio-temporal distance from the subcontinent would help to bring out a filtered-through image of India at a certain past point. However, as he was writing, his attention was diverted to the process of filtration itself. His subject changed henceforward from 'a research for lost time' to 'the way in which we remake the past to suit our present purposes, using memory as our tool'.<sup>23</sup> This diversion of authorial interest from the prescribed subject-matter to the procedural nature of writing is not uncommon in contemporary writers, as quite a few of whom are intrigued by the privilege and wordplay of writing/narrating, as Laurence Sterne was in *Tristram Shandy*.

The awareness of writing a novel — fictionalization — subjects not only the characters and plot, but to some degree, the reader, to the author/narrator's control. It is in terms of this particular technique and narrative voice that Fitzgerald's later fictions can be said to encode a postmodernist stylistics. However, in spite of the strong narrative deviance that marks the postmodern self-referential poetics in her later works, realism and its generic implication still play a significant part in Fitzgerald's writing. The frequently encountered sense of sophistication and self-engrossed aesthetic rumination in a postmodernist fiction

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<sup>23</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Errata": or, Unreliable Narration in *Midnight's Children*, in *Imaginary Homeland: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Granta Books, 1991), pp.22-25, p.23.



— for instance, in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* — is not shared by Fitzgerald.

Given though that Fitzgerald's later works show an inclination towards a postmodern poetics, it would be misleading to conclude that I am offering a value-related progressivist view of her development by analysing the narrative evolution of her fiction. Such a progressivist view is weak precisely because it fails to consider the problematic nature of literary periodisation. What is particularly remarkable in contemporary fiction in Britain is the mixing of forms, styles and techniques displayed and utilised by Fitzgerald as well as other contemporary writers. This impels any literary study to look into the constitutive role of language, the doubleness inherent in fictional representation, and the impossibility of unmediated access to the real. As Andrzej Gasiorek sharply points out, the old division between realism and experimentalism is no longer tenable 'if that distinction is taken to support avant-garde claims that experimental writing is inherently radical (aesthetically and politically), whereas realist writing is essentially conservative'.<sup>24</sup> If postmodernism is used merely to denote the representational crisis, then it unavoidably

becomes a virtually useless catch-all, for, if the entire period is seen in terms of a general crisis of representation and historicity, we lose sight of the enormously differentiated responses to realism and modernism, to politics and history, evidenced by postwar British fiction.<sup>25</sup>

Starting from story-based realism, the development of Fitzgerald's later fiction encases some postmodern characteristics as regards the problem of representation. Her later novels are characterized by a reflectiveness and a probing curiosity in investigating, semi-playfully, the representational nature of fiction. Fitzgerald's later writing embodies a reconciliation between realism and postmodernism as she

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<sup>24</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p.18.

<sup>25</sup> Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction*, p.18.

refurbishes the former with the latter's ontological preoccupation.<sup>26</sup> The notion of the author — one of many problematic issues in postmodernist discourse — is made most manifest in Fitzgerald's later work when the author-narrator

flickers in and out of existence at different levels of the ontological structure and at different points in the unfolding text. Neither fully present nor completely absent, s/he plays hide-and-seek with us throughout the text, which projects an illusion of authorial presence only to withdraw it abruptly, filling the void left by this withdrawal with surrogate subjectivity once again.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Brian McHale, 'Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing', in *Approaching Postmodernism*, eds. Fokkema and Bertens, pp.54-79, p.60. In this essay McHale raises the difference of dominant philosophical nature between modernism and postmodernism. For McHale, the dominant philosophical inquiry of modernist writing is epistemological. In contrast, postmodernism's concerns are ontological and can be expressed in questions like 'what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?'

<sup>27</sup> McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p.202.



## 4.2) HISTORICAL FICTION REVISITED

### History in the Postmodern Era

The idea that history has come to an end is inseparable from recent debates over the nature of history as a scholarly discipline. This kind of controversy has heralded a questioning and rethinking of the nature, methodology, and theoretical underpinning of History. The influential critics of the late 1960s have made it very hard to find a place for history, for they contend that history really is fiction in disguise. Paul de Man expresses his scepticism as regards so-called historical truth:

[T]he bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions.<sup>28</sup>

The same opinion is expressed in Andrzej Gasiorek's *Post-war British Fiction*, where he sums up the theses leading to this postmodern mindset. Firstly, historians should endeavour to be openly self-reflexive in their work as regards the fact that they are inevitably susceptible to some kind of bias and exclusion. Secondly, history should be treated as the study of textuality, through which conflicting accounts of the past are mediated, rather than as the study of the past as it really was. Thirdly, the former distinction between text and context needs to be erased, for 'context is itself a textual construct.' Fourthly, the previous concepts of continuity, development, and progress in historical accounts need to be challenged by approaches 'that are alert to conflicts, discontinuities, and aporias.'<sup>29</sup>

Postmodern accounts of history have had a clear though varying impact on recent fiction. History has been held to be a mode of enquiry with procedures similar to those of fiction; therefore, the narrative possibilities generated from the interaction between these two genres are hard to ignore. In Gasiorek's own words,

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<sup>28</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p.165.

<sup>29</sup> Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction*, p.148.

If history has splintered into disparate discourses, none of which is necessarily more reliable than any other, making it little more than a form of story-telling tricked out in scientifically respectable language, then fiction's propensity to fabulate receives a new lease of life. History, it turns out, is not only itself a form of fabulation but is also reliant on the very narrative strategies that historians previously claimed belonged to the imaginative world of literature, but not to the more scholarly one of history.<sup>30</sup>

Laurence Lerner's *The Frontiers of Literature* exhibits a similar view. Lerner here attacks a long-sustained historical positivism. He argues that history gives no direct access to objective facts, for

the ideology and the verbal strategies of the historian will determine what he chooses to notice and how he describes it, to say nothing of the connections between events that he then establishes.<sup>31</sup>

The belief in the untenability of History is manifested and upheld by many contemporary critics who defy the notion of an 'extra-textual referent'. Lerner proposes that the notion of an extra-textual referent, an *hors-texte*, is tenable only to the writers touching the genre of autobiography, for they have an overwhelming sense of obligation to approximate a life, or a social condition, as it actually was.<sup>32</sup> Reality is the target and realism the aim of a textual practice of this kind, the preference of realism is reflected in the genre of biography Fitzgerald practices prior to her fiction-writing, and then shown in her early novels in which personal experiences are interwoven with the fictive element to provide a note of verifiability. Novels that strive to confer personal experiences, and localised pictures and conditions, resort to the employment of history and rely heavily on empiricism and historical positivism. On the relation between history and fiction, Lerner recommends the notion of historical imagination brought forth by R. G. Collingwood, from whom he quotes,

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<sup>30</sup> Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction*, p.149.

<sup>31</sup> Laurence Lerner, *The Frontiers of Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p.60.

<sup>32</sup> Lerner, *The Frontiers of Literature*, p.61.



Each of them [both the historian and the novelist] makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters.<sup>33</sup>

Fiction differs from history in not making a claim to truth, except to poetic truth. Where history, with its rootedness in time and space, presents an account or a picture meant to be true, fiction does not make such a claim.

The picture presented by fiction is not purely imaginary, but overlaps with the world of history. The overlap is evident particularly in the case of realistic fiction, of which Fitzgerald's domestic novels, her semi-autobiographical novels which show the conditions of England, display a fidelity to the notion of history and a textuality adroitly interwoven between the historical and the fictitious elements. Therefore, Fitzgerald's domestic novels are memorable and much praised for their understanding of the need to recover a history with its particular minute details.

### **The Ambiguity of History in Fiction**

Fitzgerald's foreign novels are especially interesting in that the novelist's previous fidelity to positivism is being displaced by a less realism-oriented fusion of the historic and the fictional. In her European novels the intricate conjunction between history and fiction in narratives is more pronounced. While the domestic works are set in the novelist's own environs and based largely on her personal experiences of living in a Thames houseboat, and her working experiences in a provincial bookshop, stage school, and the BBC, etc., the foreign ones in contrast seem less 'real' because of the receding temporal distance between then and now, and more 'fictional' because of the non-native subject matter and characters. However, there exists an interesting contradiction in the 'less-real' impression of Fitzgerald's foreign novels: all her

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<sup>33</sup> R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (1946), quoted from Lerner's *The Frontiers of Literature*, p.64.

foreign novels are drawn from historic moments and include historic figures. Ihab Hassan, theorizing his grammar of postmodernism, uses ‘hybridization’ to designate ‘the mutant replication of genres, including parody, travesty, pastiche’.<sup>34</sup> This feature, particularly evident in Fitzgerald’s deliberate inclusion of historical materials, evinces a challenge to the boundaries between genres and the authority of historic knowledge. Hybridization, in Fitzgerald’s fiction, is illustrated in her negotiation of the textual nature of fiction-writing, and the limitations of conventional genres.

*The Blue Flower* becomes a hybrid genre as it raises questions about the boundary between a work of fiction and that of a literary biography. Jane Gardam, reviewing *The Blue Flower*, notes that ‘[t]he chapters, often only a page or two long, are sometimes straight extracts from the Hardenberg papers’, and maintains that the novel is ‘a beautiful example to use in debate about whether biography is fiction or fiction biography run wild’.<sup>35</sup> Fitzgerald’s inclusion of the exact table of contents of a book about salt-mining, and the pathetic little scraps of Sophie’s diary, indicate the novelist’s heavy reliance on the bibliographical sources of her characters. The element of biographical writing is evident in the novel where the assertive narrative command disappears to be replaced by an observant, objective voice. Note the unassuming narrative authority in the following passage:

Between Artern and Jena, Langensalza and Jena, Dürrenberg and Jena, Fritz traversed the dusty summer roads, crowded now with migrants and soldiers. In his notebook he wrote —

I am like a gambler who has risked everything  
on one stake.  
The wound I must not see.

Sophie underwent another operation to drain the abscess on the 8th of August, 1796. A third, toward the end of August, was necessary  
[....]

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<sup>34</sup> Hassan, ‘Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective’, p.506.

<sup>35</sup> Jane Gardam, ‘The professor and the flower’, review of *The Blue Flower* by Penelope Fitzgerald, in *The Spectator* (23 September 95), p.38.



Sophie to Fritz: 'Hardly, dear Hardenberg, can I write you a line but do me the kindness not to distress yourself — This asks heartily your Sophie.'  
(*The Blue Flower*, p.195)

The narrative focalisation of Fitzgerald's novels is usually marked not by impartiality but by a sense of detached humour and control. Yet in *The Blue Flower* this narrative voice is constantly shifting between objectivity and assertion, in a manner that raises the question of the difference between a fiction and a literary biography. Regarding the notion of hybridization, Hassan refers to plagiarism, neatly punned as 'playgiarism' by Raymond Federman.<sup>36</sup> This punning — though somewhat obvious — is piquant and efficacious because it uses deliberate wordplay and language game to point out the elusiveness of any clear-cut generic definition. Premeditated incorporation of heterogeneous sources signals a contemporary perspective in literature that shifts playfully between genres and semiotic inferences.

As the boundary between fiction and history becomes blurred in these works, how does the novelist view the employment of historic materials in novel-writing? In a personal communication, when asked about whether historic truthfulness or literary imagination plays a bigger part in her foreign novels, Fitzgerald suggests that she tends to consider the blending of history and fiction as a literary tradition:

If you look back to the beginnings of the English novel you find that Walter Scott was one of the earliest (and most successful) authors, and Scott introduced historical figures (Queen Elizabeth, Richard Coeur de Lion, &c) into his fiction whenever he wanted to. I don't mean that 20th century authors are copying Scott! But I think English (and American) novelists feel free by tradition to recreate the past and that may mean conjuring up real people as well as real places.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hassan, 'Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective', p. 506.

<sup>37</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998].

To uncover the constructed nature of historical discourse and its reliance on narrative modes, Linda Hutcheon coins the term ‘historiographic metafiction’ to designate the novels that play with the boundaries between ‘real’ and ‘invented’. With the blurring and indeed blurred boundary between fact and fiction, Fitzgerald’s foreign novels — particularly *Innocence* and *The Blue Flower* — recycle the references and materials drawn from historical discourse, making the distinction between fiction-as-text and history-as-record appear dubious.

Elisabeth Wesseling, exploring the use of historical elements in writing, suggests that the most striking feature of postmodernist historical fiction is ‘not so much its dominant self-reflexivity [...] but its wilful falsifications of history’.<sup>38</sup> Wesseling observes that the deliberate inclusion of counterfactual versions of history is by no means unprecedented, yet in terms of scale the invention of alternative versions of the past through intentional use/misuse of factual material generates postmodern discourse. This observation applies to Fitzgerald’s treatment of historical sources, in the sense that by including counterfactual versions of the past the novelist adroitly oversteps the authority of historicism in order to heighten her irony.

The gruesome legend of Gemma in *Innocence* is of allegorical significance. The story is told through a firm and authoritative narrative voice. It is told in such a quasi-historically truthful way that it not only suggests a sense of verifiability but also demands the reader’s unquestioning belief in this atrocious act. For contemporary readers with knowledge or even experience of the world wars, perhaps atrocity is no longer an anomaly. However, although the narrator claims historic documentation for this legend, preserved in the ‘Biblioteca Nazionale’, it is actually fiction for the novelist. (p. 158) Fitzgerald, in a letter, discloses that the story of Gemma is not based on historical fact; yet she also states that ‘surely it’s a

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<sup>38</sup> Elisabeth Wesseling, ‘Historical Fiction: Utopia in History’, in *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, eds. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1997), pp.203-211, p.203.



novelist's business to *sound* verifiable?'<sup>39</sup> In order to sound verifiable, apart from employing a dominating narrator and introducing specified time and place, Fitzgerald also encloses much 'historical' information. The reader is told that as the sixteenth century Ridolfi 'searched on all sides for better advice,' a letter from Paolo della Torre, 'a medical man of scholarly reputation,' can be found 'now in the Biblioteca Nazionale.' (p. 6-8)

The deliberate ambiguity and selective blurring of the fact/fiction boundary, which represents the rewriting of history, is shown in the beginning of the novel where the narrator introduces Gemma's story. Despite all the make-believe information, the reader soon encounters an abrupt contradiction in the section immediately following:

This story is not the one given out nowadays in the leaflet provided by the Azienda di Turismo or by the Committee for Visiting the Most Beautiful Villas of Florence - it starts in the same way, but ends differently. Nor, probably, is the Ricordanza, for all its high and airy position, for all its lemon terraces, really one of the most beautiful villas of Florence. Nor, in a sense, is the present Count Ridolfi really a Count, although the leaflet calls him that, because all titles were abolished in Italy after the Second World War.  
(*Innocence*, p.9)

Here the untenability of truth in a historical sounding account is strongly implied. With hindsight we now know that the Ridolfi legend is purely a fiction. Yet the problem exposed by the blending of fiction and history is precisely the doubtful nature of such a writing practice.

Another major quasi-historical narrative is used where Antonio Gramsci is brought into the picture. Gramsci's own political output and the subsequent research on him leaves no doubt as to the existence of the Italian political thinker. Also, there is no doubt of his being kept a prisoner for the rest of his life after he was arrested in the 1926 Fascist uprising. Yet, what the reader is not sure of is not so much the credibility of the account of Gramsci but that of the Gramsci-

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<sup>39</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998].



Domenico-young Salvatore episode (pp. 33-43). The reader is duly confused, knowing that some element of this discourse is true, yet not knowing how much of the rest of the discourse is imagined. What, in fact, Fitzgerald means by this Gramsci episode is to use it as a crucial element in the novel's ironic structure.<sup>40</sup> In the story, Salvatore's father takes him to see Gramsci in the hope of inspiring him politically. Yet facing the pale prisoner of conscience — great but terminally ill and physically revolting as a result of his political commitment — the boy resolves never to concern himself with politics! The employment of historical figures here is to provide an irony to aid the novelist's contrivance. Instead of committing himself to politics as his father would have wished, Salvatore becomes a neurologist, in order to maintain his detached pathological view of human conviction/passion/obsession. The ambiguity of re-using historical figures and accounts is judiciously pointed out when the narrator, while describing symptoms of neurological disorders, notes that 'it was impossible in these circumstances to attach any meaning to "real" or to "imagination"'. (p.45)

*The Blue Flower* is both a biographical and historical fiction. In this textual construction, historical exactness is a great deal more important than it is in Fitzgerald's other foreign novels. In the preface to this novel we find the author acknowledging her debt to the editors of Novalis's surviving works, letters, diaries and documents, which indicates the factual nature of her fiction. Another example of the historical exactness shown textually is chapter 14, which describes the contents of Fritz's luggage. Not only does the narrator inform the reader of the divergent disciplines Fritz's books cover, she also patiently outlines the precise subtitles of Franz Ludwig Cancrinus's *Foundations of Mining and Saltworks*:

Volume 1. Part 1: In What Mineralogy Consists. Part 2: In What the Art of Experiment Consists. Part 3: In What the Specification of Aboveground Earth Consists. Part 4: In What the Specification of Belowground Earth Consists. Part 5: In What the Art of Mine Construction Consists. Part 6: In What Arithmetic, Geometry and

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<sup>40</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998].



Ordinary Trigonometry Consists. Part 7, Section 1: In What Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Aerometrics and Hydraulics Consists, Section 2: [...]  
 (*The Blue Flower*, p.51-52)

The list of contents tediously runs on to include all parts and sections. This reportage deliberately demonstrates that it is precisely in the point of exactness that history differs from literature.

*The Blue Flower* offers a combined force of biographical and fictional writing. The heavy reliance on documentary facts and historical biographical materials constitutes the major source of inspiration for Fitzgerald. However, as there is presumably a definite difference between a biography and a work of fiction, what, then, is *The Blue Flower*? Literary biography has only recently been seen as a questionable genre in need of theoretical scrutiny. Richard Holmes, in 'Inventing the Truth', dates the expansion of interest in biography as a popular, literary form from about the early 1960s — paradoxically, at the time when critical theories endeavour to take the author out of the text.<sup>41</sup> As critics give increasing attention to the reconstruction of a life in a narrative form, the pliant use of historical materials in a reassembled literary account is more often than not questioned. In a sense, a critical reader is left to wonder if there are such things as biographical facts? Replicating the inevitable degree of speculation and intervention in a biographical work, *The Blue Flower* shows a similar degree of factual fluctuation. Despite its fidelity to historical facts, the novel inevitably includes Fitzgerald's fictional intervention and demonstrates her freedom to select and organise, making the fiction partly a falsified historical version of Novalis's early life. The friendship between Fritz and Dietmahler, which opens the novels, serves narratologically as a thread sewing together various episodes of Fritz as a young philosopher-poet. The characterization of Dietmahler is vividly done and central to the overall structure of the novel, and his textual interaction with Fritz is

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<sup>41</sup> Richard Holmes, 'Biography: Inventing the Truth', in *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp.15-25, p.20.

as believable as the other ‘historical’ facts — such as Novalis’s biographical details, and the mentions of Goethe, Schlegel, Schiller, and Fichte, the great figures of German Romanticism. However, as Fitzgerald discloses in a personal communication, Dietmahler, though he has similar fictional status, is the novelist’s invention, an imagined character.<sup>42</sup>

In Fitzgerald’s foreign novels, episodes and stories are illustrated as contingencies and somewhat inexplicable particularities. Fitzgerald is evidently preoccupied with the inaccessibility of the past; yet her dealing with such a problematic issue leads her to focus both on the past itself — the object of historical inquiry — and on the modes by which it is apprehended. In these novels, it is hard to separate fact from fantasy within the textual economy. This vagueness of perspective suggests the difficulty of reconstructing history, of developing a totalizing account of the past. Reality, or historical fact, and fiction thus seamlessly blur together. Very often Fitzgerald’s novels close with a lingering sense of inconclusiveness; this slippery elusiveness is emblematic of the wider problem of apprehending the intricate relation between history and fiction. Moreover, these novels disclose the frequent interpenetration of fact and fiction; yet by doing so they also emphasise the need to differentiate them. Fitzgerald’s re-textualization of historical moments does not aim to provide a hermeneutic relation (or explanation) of past to present.

Fitzgerald’s foreign novels are replete with verifiable historical occurrences serving not merely as the works’ scaffolding but also as the pivots around which the novelist’s fabulation/fictionalization revolves. The structures foreground in her foreign novels include the Italian Marxist heyday in *Innocence*, the deceitful calmness of a Moscow late winter before the revolution in *The Beginning of Spring*, and the advent of German Romanticism in *The Blue Flower*: decisive moments of quest and zeal for a higher (perhaps delusive) ideal — be it love,

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<sup>42</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998].



spiritual rebirth or an idealistic commitment. Were *The Blue Flower* written as a linear narrative, its structure of continuity would then suggest a sense of historical factualness. In this case, it might have looked more like a chronological account which pays respect to the supremacy of time and constructs a knowable past. Yet, under that pseudo-objectivity the complex correlation between historicity and literariness would have been blithely overlooked. Paradoxically, it is through the effect of the smooth blending of fact and fiction that Fitzgerald makes clear that history, after all, is also a textual presentation encoding possibly the historian's, or the writer's, ideology, selection, and desire for factual reconstruction. In comparison with a renowned metafictional text such as *Flaubert's Parrot* (1985), Fitzgerald's attempt in her foreign novels is modest and inconspicuous. Nevertheless, it also alerts the reader to the textuality of an historical discourse. Like Julian Barnes's works and many more in this category, Fitzgerald's foreign novels show an awareness of text-based historicity and a preoccupation with the way different discourses map reality.<sup>43</sup> Like much well-known contemporary (postmodern) fiction, Fitzgerald's foreign novels testify to the difficulty of knowing the past with an absolute reliability. In Fitzgerald's works, the narratives either break down into fragments under the strain of reconstructing the past, or make no attempt at all to offer totalizing accounts. Emphasizing discontinuity, uncertainty, and confusion, Fitzgerald's works suggest that history cannot do without the mediation of the interpreter because the sources used to apprehend the past are not neutral documents but interested interventions. The description of the Ridolfi legend used by the tourist bureau in *Innocence* is an ironic illustration of the point:

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<sup>43</sup> Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Pan, 1985) reveals how reliant human beings are on cognitive paradigms and suggests that different paradigms generate dissimilar bodies of knowledge. More examples are also available from Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things : episodes from the early life of Archibald McCandless M.D., Scottish public health officer* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992).



In the Monti version of the story, Gemma da Terracina avoided the fate in store for her by escaping from the Ricordanza. She climbed over the wall at a spot where there was now a pull-in on the opposite side of the road, so that photographs could conveniently be taken by visitors sitting in their coach.

(*Innocence*, p.162-163)

Obviously the official leaflet issued by the tourist department serves not as an account based upon historic truth, but as an advertising ploy meant to appeal to the tourists' curiosity. With the awareness that 'interested' interventions constitute historical discourse, it is not unsurprising that the sense of an intangible reality persistently manifests itself in many contemporary novels, and in Fitzgerald's foreign novels too.

Preoccupation with the connection between the referentiality of language and textuality of history is a dominant theme in postmodern thought; in this regard Michel Foucault's writings have invited further debate. Foucault's writings are critically perceived as both histories and theoretical critiques of a kind that address a variety of social and cultural concerns. Stuart Sim, in his compilation of modern literary and cultural theorists, notes that some social historians reject Foucault's histories, claiming that they are not based on thorough research nor sufficient evidence. Moreover, Foucault himself had playfully called his own writings 'fictions' in response to the academic disparagement they face.<sup>44</sup> It is not at all difficult to agree with Sim's view that Foucault's challenges to the conventions of scholarship were related to the contingencies attached to the organisation of knowledge, rationality, subjectivity, and the production of social norms. In this regard, perhaps Fitzgerald's liberal, equivocal use of historical facts in her foreign novels also, to some extent, serves to alert the reader to the disappearing boundary between history and fiction.

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted from 'Michel Foucault', in *The A-Z Guide to Modern Literary and Cultural Theorists*, ed. Stuart Sim (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), pp.136-141, p. 139.



Chapter Four examines the writing of Fitzgerald's later fiction in terms of the discourse of postmodernism. With regard to Fitzgerald's negotiation with contemporary writing, the concept of 'hybridity' — much used in postcolonial discourse and carrying racial, linguistic and cultural import — is helpful. In linguistic terms hybridity describes 'the condition of language's fundamental ability to be simultaneously the same but different'. In cultural terms, it denotes an act of interaction and intermingling. Robert Young situates the term in a postcolonial context to evoke a structure of domination and politics of subversion. The hybridity of colonial discourse, in Young's words,

describes a process in which the single voice of colonial authority undermines the operation of colonial power by inscribing and disclosing the trace of the other so that it reveals itself as double-voiced.<sup>45</sup>

Although the conceptualization of cultural hybridity is often associated with multicultural writers, such as Salman Rushdie and Kazuo Ishiguro, I suggest that it is applicable too to Fitzgerald. This chapter embodies my contention that the double-voiced hybridity of Fitzgerald's writing can be made explicit by examining the shift of the dominant thematic focuses and stylistic devices.

Fitzgerald's fiction-writing, especially in her later works, expresses a modest trend towards participation in postmodernist stylistics. Her later works are noted for the features of structural fragmentation and narrative disjunction and intervention, and acknowledge the textual nature of a work of fiction. Fitzgerald's postmodernism is not an expression of obvious visual, literal experimentalism, but serves to appropriate mimetic realism under a postmodernist syntax. The development of Fitzgerald's fiction-writing demonstrates — as Richard Todd, David Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury, and other critics have contended — the way in

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp.20-23, p.23.

which contemporary English fiction is seen to have negotiated a dialogue with literary postmodernism.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONFORMITY OR DISSENT?: IDENTITY AND WRITING

I have to admit that I love my country and don't want to live anywhere else for more than a short time. England has changed, but it's still a place of understatement, irony, green fields, water-colour painting, obstinacy and unexpected courage.

--- Penelope Fitzgerald<sup>1</sup>

A discussion of identity — of the nuance between conformity and dissent — is called for here in view of the formal, thematic and intellectual demonstration shown in Fitzgerald's fiction and literary career.

Part One argued Fitzgerald's fiction-writing and literary career as not only participating in, but also reinforcing, a discursive dialogue of 'Englishness'. The 'Englishness' I have identified consists of features of conservatism, literary tradition, and an elevation of Establishment values. These features are concrete and definable, representing what Robert Young, in his study of cultural hybridity and diaspora, contends that

[t]oday the Englishness of the past is often represented in terms of fixity, of certainty, centredness, homogeneity, as something unproblematically identical with itself.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, as Young and other critics have already observed, 'Englishness' is also fraught with inherent controversies as well as essentialist denotation. The definition of 'Englishness' as we see it in Part One is but an evidence of the effort

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 13.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.2.

to name, categorise, and make up a constantly mutable and mutating identity for England. Chapter Five aims to read beyond the conspicuous 'English' features of Fitzgerald's writing, and to bring together Fitzgerald's fiction with dissident, non-conformist socio-intellectual topics. The purpose is to dispute the universalising, highbrow predisposition the social remoteness of Fitzgerald's fiction inadvertently invites. I wish to argue that, beneath an apparent conformity to English literary conventions, Fitzgerald's fiction is not in fact without important contemporary intellectual connections.

Since the 1970s, feminist literary historians have begun to recover 'lost traditions' of women's writing. This rediscovery aided, and was aided by, the republication of novels by women. Academic writings have also reassessed the importance of women novelists. But Penelope Fitzgerald is not a 'lost' writer; neither does she require any re-instatement into the literary canon. My concern with the overlapping relationships between writing, the dominant literary taste, and the capacity of critical theories is shown in the presupposition that contextual factors are crucial to a writer's formation and textual representation. Fitzgerald's novels offer an unproblematic, even obliging, subjectivity which is prescribed by — and in harmony with — an exclusive mindset of 'Englishness'. Yet the implications of a relationship between a quiet, unassuming woman writer and her dominant intellectual culture are far more intricate than they appear.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, suggest that the natural anxiety of authorship experienced by any writer is compounded for women writers. Gilbert and Gubar argue that women authors have to manage the difficult task of simultaneously subverting and conforming to patriarchal standards.<sup>3</sup> I contend that the issue of authorship is of particular intricacy for women writers writing between the two feminist movements, for their works tend to be read with a sense of complicity instead of overt subversiveness. Fitzgerald's

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<sup>3</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 45-92.



relationship with feminism requires cautious examination. I suggest that, taking into account improved social, material, educational and professional conditions, for Fitzgerald as well as for most postwar women writers, a transcription of the 'anxiety of authorship' into literary conservatism is a strategic, even obligatory, means to create an audible voice within the mainstream literary fashions, whereby a dissident identity may be maintained within a voice of conformity.

Therefore, I suggest that there are two literary personalities demonstrated in Fitzgerald writing of fiction and criticism: one is Fitzgerald the conventional novelist of manners and moralism, the other is Fitzgerald the intellectual dissident. I do not conceive these two personalities to be oppositional and contradictory. On the contrary, diachronically, these two literary stages indicate not only the development of Fitzgerald's literary and intellectual scope, but also the shift of margin/centre of cultural focus. Contemporary Western-European intellectualism is marked with a revisionist, subversionary scepticism which takes nothing — neither gender, knowledge nor language — for granted. Fitzgerald's writing endorses such a sceptical perspective, a dissident undertone, although at the same time it externalises a sense of conformity. This double-voicedness, as I shall argue, speaks for women writers' sense of unconscious apprehension in a male-centred literature, a desire to avoid marginalisation and yet a suspicion of patronage.

As has been noted, Fitzgerald's disengagement from a political *and* politicised stance in contemporary writing inadvertently consigns her works to anachronism and old-fashioned metaphysics. The central concern of Chapter Five is to elucidate Fitzgerald's conceptualisation of topical social issues such as power, class, and feminism by way of studying her novels. Given the 'Englishness' of Fitzgerald's literary persona and language and the social remoteness of her subject matter, this chapter, therefore, starts from a discussion of the issue of conformity before it proceeds to incorporate the novelist's dissident critique of power — institutional, metaphysical as well as social — as a source of victimisation. Section Two investigates Fitzgerald's textual treatment of power, and maintains that in this

particular regard her novels — such as *The Golden Child* and *The Bookshop* — are highly political and subversive as they incorporate a critique of power as both institutionalised and interpersonalised.

Section Three proposes to read Fitzgerald's fiction in terms of class issues. It is my contention that, generally though the novelist is generally considered as an upper-middle writer primarily focused on themes of metaphysical import, it is nonetheless possible to associate her humanist belief in emancipating the underprivileged *with* her emphasis on the tension between the landscapes and the characters through a revisionist pastoral perspective, which betrays an awareness of class-powerlessness.

By way of studying the representation of women in society, Section Four elucidates the novelist's attitude towards gender and writing. Fitzgerald certainly is not a feminist writer by her own account, as the kind of passion, positionality, and purposefulness many feminist writers embraced in the 1970s and 80s is not proclaimed in Fitzgerald's works. My argument here is not that Fitzgerald be read as a feminist, but that we ought to read feminism from her fiction. I argue that Fitzgerald's objection to being associated with feminism *per se* arises not from her antipathy to the movement as such, but from her awareness of the multivalences and difficulties of such a broad, political project: from her writerly resistance to 'labels'.



## 5.1) NATIONAL IDENTITY VS PERSONAL IDENTITY

### Apparent Conformity And Undercurrents

The problem of conformity begins with a key question: to what does one conform? In terms of the question, the issue of identity — both personal and national — is important as it speaks of the prerequisites of conformity. As already noted, post-war fiction is largely realistic in approach, and attempts to sum up the condition of England. As Fitzgerald endeavours to depict and define in her novels of England aspects of life in the light of geo-social demarcations, the question of belonging becomes more than a matter of literal representation; it involves identifying with a prescribed, collective memory and perspective.

Studying contemporary British fiction, Steven Connor remarks that many novelists offering condition-of-England portrayals have to be both inward- and outward-looking in order to recapture the ambience of a particular time and place. Turning inward with questions of identity and belonging, Connor observes, is like imagining the nation as a secure, interior collective space, ‘which is both a retreat and a matrix for the social monad’.<sup>4</sup> Looking inwards to the immediate past, Connor maintains, provides a sense of heritage and continuation for many contemporary British novelists.

Commenting on English novelists’ thematic and narratological reliance on the nation, Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson note that the portrayal of love of the mother-country, sentimentally or impassionedly — particularly ‘when traced to recollections of youth and perceptions of rural England’ — proves central to expressions of ‘Englishness’.<sup>5</sup> All of Fitzgerald’s early novels are set in England and reminisce about the past; they contribute to the realisation of the imaginary physicality of England and ‘Englishness’.

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<sup>4</sup> Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950-1995* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.84.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brooker and Peter Widdowson, ‘A Literature for England’, in *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920*, eds. Robert Colls and Philip Dodd (Australia: Croom Helm, 1986), pp.117-161, p.117.

From Fitzgerald's fiction we can read out a wish — not as pronounced as a desire — to return to a lost England before its full awakening to the social, cultural, and technological complexities which characterise the era from which the novelist is writing. Confronted with the problems of a post-industrial England — signs of class immobility and conflict and a newer English landscape of expanding metropolis, suburbia and industrialism — Fitzgerald conjures up a journey homeward in her earlier fiction. This wish to 'return home' is implicit in the stories as well as the genres the novelist employs. Stories about the condition of, and lives in, England accumulated as personal experiences have, in a sense, become Fitzgerald's emotional 'home'. In terms of genre, the detective story and the novel of manners are not unfamiliar to Fitzgerald, for these are the literary genres she grew up in and utilises as a novelist. Therefore, fiction-writing for the author becomes a metaphor for a homeward journey. With nostalgia inscribed in the very interstices of the texts, Fitzgerald's novels then become the place where home itself is located for the novelist. With the fiction as a textual journey homeward, the sense of the past speaks for Fitzgerald's sense of self, and by speaking implicitly about oneself often one's personal identity becomes inseparable from a larger social identity.

The question of a unified national identity is particularly prominent in times of national crisis, of which there has been no scarcity in Fitzgerald's life. National crises such as the Depression, World War Two, the waning of Britain's international influence, for instance, are all personal experiences to Fitzgerald as much as they were public crises. Evoking an apparently common past and a common culture is one of the ways in which a sense of national identity is promoted. This, therefore, leads to the question of English literature as a crux of cultural nationalism. At its most aggrandising height, English literature can be, and still is, read as British literature. It is often reckoned as an act of cultural nationalism, the conflation of 'Britishness' with 'Englishness'. An example of this conflation is the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey in London. The corner has



honoured many great poets and writers, mostly English *and* canonical figures of the national literature of Great Britain. However, such a homogenising identity becomes harder to sustain with equanimity from 1968 on, due to the emergence of socio-political controversies of race, gender, class, and industrial conflict. Stuart Laing, in 'The politics of culture', notes that Britain since the 1970s has been further burdened by the rise of nationalism and the hardening of the English North-South divide in terms of prosperity and employment.<sup>6</sup>

Julian Wolfreys in his *Being English* questions the notion of a monolithic 'Englishness' and its politicised connotation of national identity. Wolfreys offers close readings to reveal a 'fragmented and often paradoxical vision of Englishness'. The example he uses to demonstrate the political malleability of so-called national identity is Thatcherism — a political reign during which 'Englishness' was often defined in terms of Victorian values based on two notions of the nuclear family and the aggressively competitive (heterosexual) individual.<sup>7</sup> Discussing the narration of national identity, Wolfreys alludes to the politics in the 1980s which sanctioned some 'proper' narrative forms and contents of selected idioms to 'perform identity'; he also observes that part of that cultural idiom for the New Right was 'the rewriting of the past through nostalgia'.<sup>8</sup>

As has already been argued, Fitzgerald's literary success is partly indicative of a coercive, homogenising national identity — a political objective pursued by the Thatcher government which posited an assertive, unified identity for the British State. The 'Englishness' of Fitzgerald's fiction-writing identifies with an exclusively white middle-class Southern English conservatism of the postwar decades. It is also precisely the rewriting of the past through nostalgia that initiates Fitzgerald's earlier fiction writing. The English culture she grew up in, and the

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<sup>6</sup> Stuart Laing, 'The politics of culture: Institutional change in the 1970s', in *The Arts in the 1970s: Cultural Closure?*, ed. Bart Moore-Gilbert (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.29-56, p.30.

<sup>7</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Being English: Narratives, Idioms, and Performances of National Identity from Coleridge to Trollope* (Albany: State University of New York, 1994), p.1, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfreys, *Being English*, p.3.



literary England she returned to, is invariably one that largely belongs to the white, middle-class Southerner. The idea of such an exclusive England and its way of life has, through various literary romanticisations, become the transcendent national culture. As most of Fitzgerald's novels are about the English condition, it is tempting to see this localisation as suggestive and evocative of a literary and cultural insularity. Fitzgerald's love for England — shown in the epigraph above — and even her conflation of England with Britain, evince a sense of pride in being English, which is not uncommon in England.<sup>9</sup>

The conservatism of Fitzgerald's works, told through a tone which refrains from explicit moralisation, is shown not principally in her internalising an elitist, metaphysical concern with the human condition — which manifests itself in a discursive yet most accessible stylistics — but in the novelist's reluctance when it comes to identifying with dissident stances forcibly. Yet I contend that the issue of identity is multifariously constructed jointly by factors personal, cultural, racial, social and sexual, let alone political, material and intellectual. If 'Englishness' can be read with a fixed, circumscribed definition, so can it be read into a 'fragmented and often paradoxical vision of Englishness'.

Fitzgerald's fiction and literary career present a series of illustrations of 'Englishness' which conform to a national culture and identity; yet on the other hand, the friction — an undercurrent of dissent — between a privately reflective identity and an accommodating public identity can be seen as textualised in some of her novels. By allowing Gemma — in the local tourist literature — to escape from the cruel fate of physical mutilation, which is a decision to make her conform to the midget family's normative values, *Innocence* offers a metaphor of non-conformist resistance. The logic behind this decision takes no account of Gemma's own subjectivity, as if by ignoring her perspective, she may be freed from pain.

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<sup>9</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 12 and 13. Fitzgerald, when asked if she will be comfortable in taking England as a synonym for Britain, and vice versa, said 'It doesn't matter to me, unless Scotland and Wales really become separate self-governing communities.'



Gemma is therefore treated as an unfeeling possession tailored to suit the need of the aristocratic family; and in a sense this legend insinuates that conformity is secured largely by cutting off whatever awkward bits that do not fit. By allowing Gemma to run away Fitzgerald proposes resistance to an imposed conformity, and diverts the reading of *Innocence* into one that engages the politics of class and gender from a historical perspective that relies on parable.

Studying conformity and resistance to the 'Englishness' of English literature, Brooker and Widdowson ascribe the internal threats to the 'flexible but resilient hegemony of a mystic England' to three sources: 'the shift in British political life which brought versions of socialism on to the national agenda; the agitation for women's suffrage; and the modernist assault upon liberal values and received literary culture.'<sup>10</sup> In short, what the critics contend here is the complexity of social change, gender and writing, which encompasses the complete implications of a woman writer's relationship to writing in a changing society. Fitzgerald's literary writing and career — I maintain — internalise abundant dissident undercurrents within her narratives of identity.

In terms of writing, Brooker and Widdowson opine that 'unconventional' stylistic employment has potential to subvert a uniformity of 'Englishness'. The critics refer to modernism's stylistic novelty, which of course by now has been thoroughly exploited and absorbed into contemporary writing in Britain. Although Brooker and Widdowson's remark is better appreciated in terms of early twentieth century English literature, yet the 'newness' of literary experimentation is still relatively a lesser — nonetheless forceful — practice of contemporary writing in comparison to the prevalence of realism. Fitzgerald's recent fiction demonstrates a fusion of the older English tradition of social realism and the later self-reflexive writing. Her very recent works gently subvert the conventions of 'Englishness' much praised in her early works. Stylistic doubleness lies in the fact that most of

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<sup>10</sup> Brooker and Widdowson, 'A Literature for England', p. 141.

her early novels focus on the stereotypical features of 'Englishness', yet her later works are noted primarily for their episodic and fragmented features, through which the novelist mediates the correlation between form and content instead of taking it for granted. In one private letter Fitzgerald discloses that she is very much absorbed by the form of the novella — a characteristically European genre.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the average bulk of English fiction, the slenderness of Fitzgerald's novels demonstrates a relatively recent stylistic preference for concision and compression.

As to the impact of the shift of political climate and the feminist movement on Fitzgerald's writing, the following sections will soon discuss in detail the novelist's dissident critique by elucidating her fictional representation of issues of class, feminism, and power. Fitzgerald's fiction portrays free spirits of individualism restricted, or dampened, by social and political dogmatism. I contend that contemporary topical issues of gender, class, and power are not alien to Fitzgerald, because her commitment to Christian liberalism and humanism anticipates, and encompasses, an acute awareness of the implication of these social problems. Moreover, the novelist's quietude of engagement is not an inertia of political sensibility. Her refusal of obvious labelling as either a novelist of manners, a postmodernist, or a feminist, I suggest, is an indication of her anti-dogmatic involvement. Only on the precondition of realising the novelist's liberalism can any discussion of Fitzgerald's critique of feminism, class and power be deemed meaningful.

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<sup>11</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication IV [3 June 1995]. Fitzgerald admits a 'great fondness' for the novella. Her favourite writers of this genre include Tolstoy (*Master and Man*), and D. H. Lawrence (*The Fox, The Captain's Doll*).



## 5.2) WRITING ABOUT POWER

In a recent letter I asked Penelope Fitzgerald if she agreed that some of her novels suggest reservation about — or scepticism toward — the establishment. She disagrees, saying that her novels are not in any way political, and in fact she does not take much interest in politics.<sup>12</sup> Although Fitzgerald objects to the claim that her novels are intentionally political, she cannot dispute that some of them do invite a political reading. The question of power is integral to some of her works, particularly *The Golden Child* and *The Bookshop*, which explicitly employ a workplace setting and can be read as political satires. The innate political implication of these works has to be recognised, even against the author's intention.

As Julian Wolfreys points out, the social power of national identity and its cultural power, regardless of political parties and traditional models of national hierarchy, have been and still are vested in and across the large, often contradictory, body of the middle class, who are themselves 'produced by the negotiations of specific economic structures'.<sup>13</sup> Disregarding the prevalent features of 'Englishness', Fitzgerald's dissident contradiction to her narratives of national identity is shown in her political scepticism, rather than commitment. In spite of their conservative language, Fitzgerald's fictions of England nonetheless interrogate the nature of power and the abuse of political authority. As far as Fitzgerald's fiction is concerned, resistance to England's hegemony is conceptually shown in reservations about the Establishment and the Law.

On the other hand, by bring the reader's attention to the delicate issue of power and authority, yet refraining from outspoken faultfinding, the novelist appears to embrace a liberal socialism which recognises 'the inevitability of gradualness' — an important legacy of Fabianism whose mode of approach to social questions, based on socialist ideas and a study of social problems, evokes resounding echoes in Fitzgerald's novels. Fitzgerald's commitment to liberalism is

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<sup>12</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication [27 June 1998], question 1.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfreys, *Being English*, p.9.

anti-authoritarian; to explore her treatment of politics and power Michel Foucault's analysis of various forms of power is helpful from two aspects: Fitzgerald's novels examine power as institutionalised domination, and power in its more unobtrusive form as oppression within personal relations.

### **Power as Authoritative Institution**

Traditionally, power is associated with the establishment, the institution, and legitimatization. An obvious element of a political reading is the image of a power centre, in this regard *The Golden Child* offers explicit political reading in its reference to the British Museum and the Kremlin. Set in a prominent museum in a London wrapped in cold war and international hostility, the novel is full of concrete images of power centres from which politics interweaves both the national and personal spheres. The domination of such a power-centre over the public and the ordinary outsider is depicted as formidable. The novel begins with a startling image of the fortified museum and its imminent confrontation with the outsiders:

The enormous building waited as though braced to defend itself, standing back resolutely from its great courtyard under a frozen January sky, colourless, cloudless, leafless and pigeonless. The courtyard was entirely filled with people. A restrained noise rose from them, like the grinding of the sea at slack water. They made slight surges forward, then back, but always gaining an inch. Inside the building the Deputy Director, Security, reviewed the disposition of his forces.  
(*The Golden Child*, p.7)

The museum, the 'enormous building', is imaged as solid, impregnable, and unfriendly, and it evokes an atmosphere of uneasy calm, as if before a likely attack.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Similar imagery of a centralized power is also shown in the description of Broadcasting House as a majestic liner in *Human Voices* (p.10):

The gossip of the seven decks increased the resemblance of the great building to a liner, which the designers had always intended. BH stood headed on a fixed course



Power politics in *The Golden Child* operates at two levels of intertwined plots. Firstly, inside the museum there is a greedy struggle over owning an ever-increasing collection of artefacts. Among others, the museum's current director, Sir John, has secretly contrived to invest the large legacy soon to be left by the aged Sir William — discoverer of the golden child tomb — to promote his own professional standing. The second level of power politics is shown in the international feud over the golden tomb treasures. At this level the novel becomes a pastiche of the cold-war spy story depicting a clandestine diplomatic war of conspiracies and hypocrisy, and indeed the novel is abundant in images of military secrecy.

Apart from London, another heart of powerplay is Moscow, where the real treasures have been 'pawned' by their poverty-stricken home country for a patronising measure of economic support. Under such an undiplomatic exchange, the significance of the golden child treasures have thus transcended their materiality: they become tokens of power and authority to be won through competition. Alluding to the discovery of the Tutankhamen treasures in 1922 and its first exhibition in the West in the early 1970s, this story of intrigue focuses on the ownership of a gold-plated mummy of an ancient African child-prince. It inquires into the passion to own, by hook or by crook, as one manifestation of powerplay.

The novel encodes a coherent theme — the passion to own and control — around which these two levels of conflict and scheme are intertwined. With each nation-state struggling against the others to get hold of the treasure, the museum has metaphorically become a focal point, a centre, a source of knowledge, to accommodate power *per se*. It is no longer a centre that holds knowledge and truth; nor is it indiscriminately open to the public. On the contrary, it is to be seen as an elite, exclusive administrative core of politicised knowledge. With the

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south. With the best engineers in the world, [...] it looked ready to scorn any disaster of less than Titanic scale.

symbolic prestige attached to the accommodated artefacts, the museum and its associated conspiracies indeed lead to what Foucault calls a power/knowledge couplet. This is demonstrated in the museum's library which is only 'for the use of staff of a higher grade'. Therefore the junior assistant, Waring Smith, among those 'who did not earn enough to consult the many thousands of costly reference books', is not allowed in. (*The Golden Child*, p.43) Or more explicitly, as the Director later says — 'A great museum is like a sovereign state at war. Only one can decide.' — an authoritarian view of power as domination and control is evoked. (p.177) Here, the passion to own and control the golden child treasures, and other priceless artefacts, can be equated with Nietzsche's 'will to power', a concept that heavily influences Michel Foucault. Nietzsche demonstrated that the will to truth and knowledge is indissociable from the will to power.<sup>15</sup> Seen in this light, the museum is therefore more than a location of cultural enrichment, but a site of explicit symbolic power.

For Foucault, knowledge and truth have lost their epistemological grounding; they are no longer neutral, objective and universal. Instead, they are integral components of power and domination. Against the view that sees knowledge as neutral and objective or emancipatory, Foucault emphasised that knowledge is indissociable from regimes of power.<sup>16</sup> Foucault, in his analysis of power, replaces the traditional problem of sovereignty/obedience with a modern notion of domination/subjugation. Power, as he defines it,

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<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, [1886], trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1966). Also, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, [1887], ed. K. Ansell-Pearson, trans. C. Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980). In Foucault's view, power manifests itself through various practices and technologies of exclusion, confinement, surveillance, and objectification. Institutions consequently function as laboratories for the observation of individuals, experimentation with correctional techniques, and acquisition of knowledge for social control.



must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organisation....<sup>17</sup>

Power is to be taken as more than its conventional interpretation as force and authority; it is indeed a mechanism manifested in ways explicit as well as implicit — ‘a multiple and mobile field of force relations where far-reaching, but never completely stable effects of domination are produced’.<sup>18</sup>

As *The Golden Child* unfolds, the exhibited items in the London museum turn out to be counterfeits; yet the public, who have patiently waited for hours to get just a few seconds’ glimpse, are not allowed to know the truth, for the museum and those in charge cannot risk their reputation. The public’s right to learn the facts and not be cheated is thus sacrificed. Whatever information is to be offered publicly, the novel seems to suggest, would inevitably be filtered to an extent so as to ensure social control and retain the distinctive authority and credibility of the controlling institution/centre. Measures to regulate available source and amount of knowledge are never fair. At this point Fitzgerald is addressing not only the question of censorship and control of knowledge, but also practical questions such as the nature and function of institutions of knowledge. This question is asked through a dialogue between Sir William, who strongly opposes the idea of charging the public for access to the Museum, and a department director of the museum who regards the public as a threat to the artefact’s safe-keeping. In their verbal confrontation Sir William interrogates Hawthorne-Mannering about the purpose of the museum; the later replies, hypocritically,

‘The object of the museum is to acquire and preserve representative specimens, in the interests of the public,’ he said.

‘You said that,’ returned Sir William, with another winning smile, ‘and I say balls. The object of the Museum is to acquire power, not only at the expense of other museums, but absolutely. The art and treasures of the earth are gathered together so that the curators may

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1979), pp.92-93.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p.102.

crouch over them like the dynasts of old, showing now this, now that, as the fancy strikes them. Who knows what wealth exists in our own reserves, hidden far more securely than in the tombs of the Garamantes?’

(*The Golden Child*, p.21)

By characterising the arbitrariness of a power-centre that activates and supports powerplay, the novel questions the nature of such an institution. Conflicts and politics must always, inevitably, be involved because no authority can maintain its advantageous position should information be indiscriminately open to all. The political satire *The Golden Child* is making — by insinuating the condition of corruption resulting from the monopoly and potential deceitfulness of institutional, legitimised power — is unequivocally shown in the ending of the novel where Sir John, is confronted by Waring, Coker and Prof. Untermensch who come to unveil the truth. Sir John justifies his murderous schemes on the ground of Sir William’s lay opinion. In his eyes, the old archaeologist, ‘a digger’,

had no conception of the Museum as a great empire of objects to be preserved for endless time in ideal conditions, unseen, unpolluted, for which his money was needed — all his money!

(*The Golden Child*, p.177)

Apart from its satirical attack on a centralised stronghold of power and knowledge, *The Golden Child* address the question of referentiality, textuality, and authority by way of portraying the general public’s unthinking trust, readily induced in a coercive regime. Challenging the institutional grip on knowledge and ideology, Fitzgerald adroitly brings in a parallel between the queues of school children — who have taken overnight coaches departing from remote towns of the country and standing in cold open wintry air for hours, waiting to see the golden child to educationally verify information related to this exhibition — and the queues of people in the Red Square in Moscow who stood with frozen drops in their noses awaiting their turn to see the embalmed body of Lenin. (p.78) Rather cuttingly,



through Waring's eyes, the novelist conveys the irony that '[t]he true international solidarity was not between workers, but between queuers'. (p132)

The dissident voice of *The Golden Child* also stretches to depict the intellectual agitation in Britain in the late 1970s caused by introduction of continental critical thought. In this regard Fitzgerald can be seen to have participated in bringing up a sceptical perspectivism towards not only the previous ideology of homogeneity, but also the arriving dialectics of poststructuralism. The referentiality of language, and the textuality of narrative, are two fundamental issues inseparable from late twentieth-century intellectual trends of thought. Although Fitzgerald's most recent works explicitly negotiate these issues in her mixing of generic features, with the benefit of hindsight it is nevertheless clear that Fitzgerald has shown this tendency since the inception of her fiction writing career.

Typographically *The Golden Child*, though Fitzgerald's first work of fiction, is innovative as it deals with the fictional hieroglyphic ideographs of the Garamantian language, in which Sir William's last will is written and displayed in public. The task of deciphering these ideographs — included near the end of the novel — proves frustrating to Prof. Untermensch, who is the leading authority in the dead language, for he is unable to make sense of the passage through the semantic and the grammatical rules of Garamantian. Upon the suggestion that he ignore the originally signified meaning of those pictorial elements, and focus instead on the approximated English pronunciation and lettering sequence of the passage, the professor dejectedly declares: 'What then becomes of my ideographs? What is the fate of my signifiers?' (p.143) Fitzgerald's first novel, *The Golden Child*, open-heartedly engages with present-day intellectual debates of structuralism and poststructuralism, and even wryly humours the state of complexity of this philosophical question to the extent that the novel can be taken as Fitzgerald's most sharply unconformist piece of work. Contemporary cultural theorists are much concerned with the fate of the totalising ideological Signifier. *The Golden Child* — the least acknowledged work so far — addresses this

intellectual concern with the referential nature of language. As a satire it questions the authority behind such an act of signification in relation to institutions of cultural purport and power.

### **Power Diffused and Invisible**

Foucault's analysis of power, which he also appropriated from Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony, epitomises the diminutive ways in which power is enacted and displayed. For Gramsci, power is best understood as a relation, which is a great leap forward from orthodox Marxism, which saw power as concentrated in the state. Therefore, the social relations of civil society are relations of power, and power is diffused throughout civil society as well as being embodied in the coercive apparatuses of the state.<sup>19</sup> Take *Innocence* for example, where the political philosopher is made a character. The existence of power is manifested not only in the confrontational, ideological variance between the State and Gramsci who is a prisoner of conscience, it is also present in the imaginary dimension which subjects Salvatore to fear being socially stereotyped as a southern opportunist rising through marrying-up. (*Innocence*, p.49) Continuing Gramsci's notion of power as a relation, Foucault maintains that

[r]elations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter[.]<sup>20</sup>

For Foucault, there is no relationship which exists outside the anonymous and continuous operations of power. *The Golden Child*, apart from exemplifying the secrecy of coercive power exerted by any institutionalised apparatus, also shows

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<sup>19</sup> Roger Simon, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An Introduction* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), p.28.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p.94.



how this invisible power constitutes one's identity. Waring Smith, the underpaid and overworked protagonist, is seen to be constricted by the weight of a material force:

In order to continue living in a very small terraced house in Clapham South, [...] he had to repay to the Whitstable and Protective Building Society the sum of £ 118 a month. This figure loomed so large in Waring's daily thoughts, was so punctually waiting for him during any idle moment, that it sometimes seemed to him that his identity was changing and that there was no connection with the human being of five years ago who had scorned concentration on material things.  
(*The Golden Child*, p.27)

Foucault's account of power emphasises the highly differentiated nature of modern society and the heteromorphous power mechanisms that operate independent of conscious subjects. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner elucidate Foucault's notion of power as 'dispersed, indeterminate, heteromorphous, subjectless and productive, constituting individuals' bodies and identities' stresses the microscopic scrutiny of powerplay particularly on the personal level.<sup>21</sup> This type of diffuse, less visible, yet nonetheless evident powerplay manifests itself in ways that bind the individual to certain modes of behavioural patterns, and subject the individual to certain interpersonal political relationships, as illustrated in *The Bookshop*.

*The Bookshop* is set in an isolated, economically and socially stagnant Suffolk coastal village in 1959. Mainly because of the disconnectedness of the village from the outside world, the villagers are suspicious of change and susceptible to the local political climate engineered by Mrs Gamart, the local society hostess. It is within such an inanimate and passive milieu that a sharp contrast magnifies the minute working of micropolitics. The local feud results from the use of an old house, which, seen as a landmark of history and heritage, continues Fitzgerald's preoccupation with the symbolic importance of a prestigious, potential power

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<sup>21</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp.48-49.



centre. *The Bookshop* extends *The Golden Child*'s theme: the will to own and control; yet it concentrates on the abusive use of interpersonal political power. If *The Golden Child* satirises only discriminately the secretive control over informational sources that ought to be accessible to all, then *The Bookshop* openly points out the intentional abuse of legislation/legitimatization for private benefit.

Characterised as committed and a little simple-minded, the protagonist, Florence, decides to invest her meagre capital in the dilapidated Old House to set up the first ever bookshop in the village. Mrs Gamart, fearing that her social superiority will soon be thus replaced, resolves to discourage Florence by all means. Her potential political influence is plainly, and semi-publicly, displayed:

Silver photograph frames on the piano and on small tables permitted a glimpse of the network of family relations which gave Violet Gamart an access to power far beyond Hardborough itself.

(*The Bookshop*, p.20)

Out of conviction as well as ignorance, Florence overlooks various undertones and intimidation from the villagers insinuating that she should give up the Old House; therefore she innocently provokes shrouded revenge from Mrs Gamart. A few months after the shop opens, with Mrs Gamart's appearance, it dawns on Florence that 'the shop had been transformed into a silent battleground in a nominal state of truce.' (p.73) Moreover, with Mrs Gamart leading the assault, 'all the tradespeople were now either slightly or emphatically hostile to the Old House Bookshop. It was decided not to ask her to join the Inner Wheel of the Hardborough and District Rotary Club.' (p.89) Mrs Gamart eventually exerts her influence upon her politician nephew and procures the passage of a bill empowering the council to expropriate any previously uninhabited ancient building. As a result, Florence is dislodged, and rendered penniless, ironically, by law.

Fitzgerald is acute in depicting the abuse of power which makes it possible for Mrs Gamart to patronise and eventually defeat Florence. The kind of power manifested in *The Bookshop*, in the scheming of Mrs Gamart against Florence, fits



into the category of power which for Foucault must be understood as ‘capillary’.<sup>22</sup> The capillary form of power is seen in the practice of interpersonal manipulation, as in *At Freddie’s*, where Freddie deliberately defers paying Carroll on account of his affair with the other woman teacher:

In the main, she preferred the staff to be at loggerheads. They were easier to control then, or to urge into mild competition. If one of them felt unfairly treated, the other would not be displeased. But it was her habit to look for advantages. If Carroll had fallen in love with Hannah — and it seemed quite impossible to tell what he might take it into his head to do — then in his besotted condition he could be paid well in arrears, and even later than the Bluebell.  
(*At Freddie’s*, p.41)

Much of what Foucault says about power stresses the systematic nature of power and its presence in multiple social relations. More notable is his focus on how individuals experience and exercise power. His emphasis is on the micro-level of powerplay and resistance. He contended that individuals ‘are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power’.<sup>23</sup> As Foucault argued, power is omnipresent, not because it embraces all human action, but because it is constantly being produced. It is ‘the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power’. Moreover, it is a ‘relational’ power that is ‘exercised from innumerable points’. For Foucault, the macroforces, such as class or the state, ‘are only the terminal forms power takes’; and he suggested that more analysis should be made on the plurality of microforces.<sup>24</sup> For a modern concept of macropolitics, where clashing forces struggle for control over a centralised source of power rooted in economy and the state, Foucault substitutes a postmodern concept of micropolitics where numerous local groups contest diffuse and decentred forms of power spreading throughout society. *The Golden Child* and *The Bookshop* demonstrate both the

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<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p.95.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p.98.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p.92-94.

macroforces and microforces at work. In a personal communication Fitzgerald explains her interest in the elusive manifestation of power of one human being over another:

I'm much less interested in power connected with force and authority than with the mysterious power which one human being, often quite unintentionally, exerts over another.<sup>25</sup>

This focus on the minute scale of power-relation is also demonstrated in *The Blue Flower*. Intelligent as Fritz is, he falls completely in love with the then 12-year-old girl who is nearly unlearned and shows no desire for intellectual improvement. Saying that *The Blue Flower* conveys the illogicality of love is undervaluing its possible depth of interpretation. In fact, the novel can be read as Fitzgerald's textual answer to Foucault's analysis of power as indeterminate particularly on the personal, mental, and even emotional level. In one personal communication Fitzgerald suggests that *The Blue Flower* is a clarification of her interest in an evasive, interpersonal power. In the novelist's own words:

Fritz is totally under the power of Sophie, although she has exerted it quite unconsciously and it is incomprehensible to everyone else.<sup>26</sup>

With regard to the conceptualisation of power as a relation, Fitzgerald shares Foucault's view that we are all subject to the diffuse, less visible, yet nonetheless evident interpersonal-political powerplay. This emphasis on microscopic interpersonal manipulative power is investigated most thoroughly in feminism's belief that the personal is political. This leads me to discuss the representation of women and sexual politics in Fitzgerald's fiction, and the interconnection between gender and identity in relation to Fitzgerald.

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<sup>25</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 2.

<sup>26</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 2.



### 5.3) WRITING ABOUT CLASS

Studying the tradition of liberal humanism in early twentieth century novels, C. B. Cox observes that a sense of embarrassment regarding the issue of class is expressed in works by (upper)middle-class liberal writers. Cox points out that the ideal of liberal tolerance is ‘to a large degree dependent on a secure social framework’. The sense of embarrassment and tone of guilt revealed in much fiction results from the fact that — in Cox’s words — ‘liberalism in Britain and America has thrived among those not particularly subject to economic pressures’.<sup>27</sup> Cox’s observation is shared by Mary Eagleton and David Pierce, who suggest that changes in class structure — the growth of the lower middle-class and the increasing political consciousness of the working class — have forced new material, new attitudes and new forms into the novel. But what is often seen in (upper-) middle-class writing is an increasing defensiveness as these writers realise their involvement in the perpetuation of a class-bound society, and their increasing pessimism as they fail to find solutions.<sup>28</sup>

There may be some degree of truth in these critics’ observation in terms of the muted treatment of class in Fitzgerald’s fiction. Regarding the issue of class and social stagnation, Fitzgerald as an upper-middle class writer is certainly seen to court criticism of her bourgeois distance, because she does not subscribe explicitly and forcefully to the issue of class struggle. This insinuation of class guilt is ironically evoked not in Fitzgerald’s own writing, but in one particular comment *Offshore* receives. It is my contention that Catherine Wells Cole’s comment on *Offshore* as offering a ‘classless’ community fails to elucidate in full complexity Fitzgerald’s literary treatment of class.<sup>29</sup> I argue that Fitzgerald, instead of

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<sup>27</sup> C. B. Cox, *The Free Spirit: A Study of Liberal Humanism in the Novels of George Eliot, Henry James, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Angus Wilson* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p.9.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Eagleton and David Pierce, *Attitudes to Class in the English Novel: From Walter Scott to David Storey* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p.13.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Wells Cole, ‘Penelope Fitzgerald’, in *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British Novelists Since 1960s*, vol. 14, ed. Jay L. Halio (Detroit: Yale Research, 1983), pp. 302-308, p.305. Cole remarks that *Offshore* offers a touching story of harmony among social classes:



romanticising and effacing the just perceptible class friction, approaches this social issue through a perspective of Darwinism and pastoral. And her concern with the underprivileged is also shown in her characterisation of children, who are a class of their own.

### **Class in a World of Pastoral Absence**

Fitzgerald has never put herself forward as a political writer. What she is most interested in is the various ways in which people live within particular contexts, and so she always builds her fictional worlds on limited circumstances and specific themes. Presenting these worlds as images of life, Fitzgerald examines its uncertainties as product of how society impacts on individuals. In her own words, ‘it’s interesting to see a crisis in public affairs and small private ones at the same time’.<sup>30</sup> The restriction of social class in Fitzgerald’s novels can be seen to be expressed through Darwinian allusion — that of ‘the survival of the fittest’; this particular thematic reference, I argue, is potent as it heightens the sense of ineluctable dissension and strife her fictional worlds imply.

Set in the 1960s, *Offshore* deals with a community of houseboat dwellers on Battersea Reach. The novel encapsulates Fitzgerald’s view of social class. In this limited setting Fitzgerald scrutinises the physical ambivalence which these boat-dwellers encounter:

The barge-dwellers, creatures neither of firm land nor water, would have liked to be more respectable than they were. They aspired towards the Chelsea shore, where, in the early 1960s many thousands lived with sensible occupations and adequate amounts of money. But a certain failure, distressing to themselves, to be like other people, caused them to sink back, with so much else that drifted or was washed up, into the mud moorings of the great tideway.

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The nature of the setting, the irregularity of where they live, makes this community something rare in English fiction — convincingly classless.

<sup>30</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 11.



Biologically they could be said, as most tideline creatures are, to be 'successful.' They were not easily dislodged. But to sell your craft, to leave the Reach, was felt to be a desperate step, like those of the amphibians when, in earlier stages of the world's history, they took ground. Many of these species perished in the attempt.  
(*Offshore*, p.10 )

The allusion to Darwinian theory of evolution explicitly aligns the barge-dwellers with amphibians, in the sense that they are attempting to advance to a 'more respectable' social stage. The dilemma of locationlessness — both geographically and socially — is shared by these community members, who are drifters between land and water, between acceptable and controversial social strata.

The characters of *Offshore* are caught by incomprehensible personal obstinacy and impending domestic crises. All of them struggle to find a degree of fulfilment and stability in their lives, only to find themselves overwhelmed by events beyond their own control. Cole's comment on *Offshore* as a portrayal of a *classless* community is only sustainable from a utopian point-of-view, which only serves to reveal the intricacy of class at work. Cole has subscribed to a romantic notion of classlessness on an oversimplified pretext which confuses the depiction of a socially mixed community with a moral conceptualization of the issue of class. The critic focuses on the classless ideal of solidarity, yet the ironic force of *Offshore's* ending — the dispersion of these social amphibians in the face of nature and the breaking-up of this community — runs counter to such a frail romanticisation. This group of boat-dwellers is 'classless' only when it is protected from comparison with other groups whose immediate environment adds a more concrete affirmation to their symbolic social position. Although Fitzgerald does not explicitly categorise her characters in terms of class, potential class division does exist among them and is seen to constitute social strain. In *Offshore*, this implicit class division is disclosed in terms of how the houseboat community is perceived:

One of the last pleasure steamers of the season was passing, with cabin lights ablaze, on its way to Kew. 'Battersea Reach, ladies and

gentlemen. On your right, the artistic colony. Folk live on those boats like they do on the Seine, it's the artist's life they're leading there. Yes, there's people living on those boats.'  
*(Offshore, p.16)*

Social division in this paragraph is discernible not only in geophysical terms — obviously most of the 'ladies and gentlemen' live on land; it is also suggested in material terms — these tourists' appreciation of the tideline existence, temporarily evoked on the 'pleasure' steamer, surely is not the same as that of those fastened in 'the artistic colony'.

The problem of social mobility is not indignantly foregrounded in Fitzgerald's novels; rather, Fitzgerald's treatment of class subscribes to a kind of geo-physical determinism indirectly revealed through the narrator's view. In *Offshore*, the fluidity of the river Thames provides a strong contrast to the social impasse confronted by the barge people who are just vaguely aware of the limited social mobility of their own position through the eyes of the outsiders. The unspoken demarcation in class structure is made apparent in a taxi driver's unspoken response when he learns of Nenna's destination:

The taxi drew up opposite the Battersea Bridge end of the boats. Only the driver's expression showed what he thought of the idea of living in a place like that. But it might suit some people. Carefully, as one who was used to such endings, he woke Nenna up.

'You're home, dear.'

Then he made a U turn and drove away so rapidly that she could not make out his number, only the red tail light diminishing, at more than legal speed, down the deserted Embankment.

*(Offshore, p.98)*

Similar implicit class division is humorously pinned-down in *The Gate of Angels'* hierarchy of newspapers:

Matron took the *Morning Post*, the doctors glanced, so they said, at *The Times*, the juniors read the *Daily Mail* and in the hospital kitchen there were copies of *Tit-Bits* and the *Police Gazette* and the local, which came out three times a week.

*(The Gate of Angels, p.87)*



Fitzgerald's awareness of class-bound social stratification and the effort one has to make in society is clear. The allusion that the boat-dwellers are amphibians caught in the evolutionary gamble, and constantly disregarded by the land-dwelling majority, suggests that mobility and the survival of the fittest in a social-scape is something beyond the effort and will of the social subject. While the sense of comradeship temporarily overrides the potential class division within the drifting community, nevertheless, once out of their wobbly dwellings, they are not *classless* but *de-classed* — they are ignored and consigned disparagingly to a dubious category. Fitzgerald's preoccupation with the class structure and stricture seen in Darwinian terms recurs in the description of Freddie — 'like a sea creature on dry land' — insinuating her success in social evolution (*At Freddie's*, p.15), and of Florence, who, though much reminded of witnessing the battle between a heron and an eel, refuses to believe the classification of human beings as 'exterminators' and 'exterminatees' (*The Bookshop*, p.7, p.34).

The question of social belonging elicits indirect acknowledgement in many of Fitzgerald's novels, which in general concentrate on the lower-middle class who are caught in the evolutionary process from the labourer to the bourgeois. In one way or another her works show that one's social mobility — among other metaphysical questions like subjectivity or the perception of reality — is easily pre-determined by (geo)physical limitation in addition to personal limitations. This sense of stricture and displacement is most overtly expressed through Salvatore's awareness of the 'popular imagination' of his affair with Chiara, which depicts them both as

the ambitious young, or youngish, arrival from nowhere, hoping to make good connections, the innocent young girl of good family, and on top of that all the stale antitheses, dark, fair, excitable, cool, South, North, the whole boiling.  
(*Innocence*, p.49)

What is distinctly spoken of here — in contrast to the novelist's habitually reticent handling — is an unfolding of the intersections between class, gender, sexuality and social hegemony. Most particularly of all, these criss-crossed demarcations are pinned down to a geophysical division. The fusion between society and the characters' physical setting is seen to be crucial in Fitzgerald's works; the description of Gentilini's rural origin and his sense of unease in a competitive urban setting clearly shows a perspective combination that is both pastoral and Darwinian. Gentilini is always homesick for his village hometown, where

he had only to sit down for a drink in his own piazza, even now, to be surrounded with friends, calling from table to table, while others wheeled in on their Lambrettas like late returners to a hive.  
(*Innocence*, p.48)

The metaphor of a buzzing rural order, explicit in the bees/hive simile, poses a strong contrast to Gentilini's sense of reluctance and displacement in Florence: 'Gentilini's place was not where he would have liked it to be, in the university quarter and near S. Agostino, but in a back street where he was more or less resigned to living.' (p.53)

This geophysical perspective on how the characters view their immediate setting, I argue, is connected to the novelist's treatment of class and social immobility through a pastoral paradigm.

Pastoral is a variable form capable of stretching over elegies, lyrics, plays, romances and novels. A simplified view of pastoralism is that it creates an image of a peaceful and uncorrupted existence, endorsed by the harmonious relationship between the shepherd and all-embracing Nature. The idyllic rural life is deemed as an artless way of living, an idealised way of life — of peace, innocence and simple virtue. In the most idyllic pastoral description, the pastoral life is presented as sequestered and protected.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The definition of pastoral is expanded by the moral implication it gathers through time and convention. As a controversial and yet conventional genre, pastoral has been the subject of numerous debates. Interpretative theories associated with it vary from one perspective to another.



Probing into the history of pastoral writing, Raymond Williams observes that pastoral literature ought to be seen, primarily, as a perspective, and that its predominant ethos — for example, in classic bucolic poetry — is ‘directly related to the hopes and fears of the small farmers under threat of confiscation of their land’. Williams remarks that the social constitution in Renaissance England requires a generic reappropriation of pastoral to take account of man’s relation to nature.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, with the mass urbanisation and modernisation which transforms green arable field into satellite industrial town, and disperses excess rural labourers into factories, post-industrial pastoral pronounces social change in its appropriation of the genre. Contemporary pastoral may therefore go beyond the focus of a Constablesque landscape, and be interpreted in the light of its socio-cultural context.

Pastoral has long been politically contested. Paul Alpers, in ‘What is Pastoral’, suggests that pastoral can concern itself with the lives of people who are not literally nor necessarily shepherds, and environs not necessarily rural. Alpers’s opinion of common folk as a synonym of the shepherd is useful in accounting for pastoral works and their relations to each other. The generic ambiguity of pastoral therefore justifies an amalgamation of the ‘formal and conventional elements’ of pastoral, and ‘the various themes, feelings and attitudes they encode or express’.<sup>33</sup> Following this approach, the focal issue in pastoral is subsequently translated from

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As Paul Alpers has remarked, some of the definitions are derived from universal human psychological need: ‘a longing after innocence and happiness’; from the antithesis of Art and Nature; or are deduced from explicit themes and concerns. For an helpful account on the theorisation of the pastoral genre, see Paul Alpers, ‘What is Pastoral?’, in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Spring 1982), pp.437-460. The approach taken here is not to fix on a single trait, but to arrive at a possible reading strategy — in the light of pastoral — of contemporary fiction, to take Fitzgerald’s novels as an example, and to see how this literary genre has been transformed through appropriation.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p.16, 21-22. Williams argues that, historically, villages and peasants were sometimes moved away by their landlords to make room for a full, undisturbed landscape. Pastoralism, therefore, can be seen to sustain itself through a distanced perspective, a perspective that visualises the idyllic greenery by refusing to see the actual.

<sup>33</sup> Alpers, ‘What is Pastoral?’, p.457, 458.



the landscape to the subject living within, and to the relationship between these human subjects and their environments.

I suggest that Fitzgerald's novels of England can be read to have reappropriated pastoral's allusive power to procure the sense of stricture of a class-bound society. It is my contention that Fitzgerald's treatment of class can be interpreted through her appropriation of the pastoral genre, with which she depicts the sense of impasse of her characters in relation to the issue of social mobility, and focuses on the fear/sense of displacement and disempowerment internalised within the mode itself.

Fitzgerald's reappropriation of pastoralism rests on what Harold Toliver calls the 'pastoral contrast': instead of depicting a benevolent nature providing for the jolly shepherd, her fiction portrays an unfeeling landscape — often urban — detachedly looming over the resigned subjects. For Toliver, such a contrast promotes 'a variety of "perspective by incongruity"' — by which he means

[w]hether the scene is an explicit Arcadian society or some place of enclosed quiet, it is likely to be exposed to such things as industrialism, death, unrequited love, unjust property division, or merely an opposing idea of perfection.<sup>34</sup>

Pastoral nature, as Toliver and many other critics have observed, is more ceremonial than useful, its periodic renewal symbolic rather than economic. Fitzgerald's treatment of setting introduces into the ambience of her fictional world a symbolically omniscient and all-encompassing power which imposes — contrary to the benevolence of conventional pastoral — a sense of impasse, strife, competition and hardhearted ambivalence. Speaking in pastoral terms, the effect of this ambivalent Higher Power leaves the shepherds in a state of incomprehension and incertitude.

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<sup>34</sup> Harold Toliver, *Pastoral Forms and Attitudes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p.1.



*The Bookshop*, strictly speaking, is Fitzgerald's only novel that is set in the countryside and deals with country life. Hardbough — 'an island between sea and river', a secluded town of neither swing bridge nor railway — appears to be an ideal pastoral setting; yet this presumed tranquillity is instantly effaced by the name of the village: 'Hardbough', a punning on the day-to-day battling in this trivial locality. (p.12) *The Bookshop* represents an altered picture of man's relationship — no longer harmonious — with nature. Nature provides, just as in the conventional pastoral counterpart, but only through competition and toiling strife, which rarely comes with possibilities of reconciliation. The beginning of this novel metaphorically summarises this ambivalent irreconcilability in the merciless skirmish between a heron and an eel:

She had once seen a heron flying across the estuary and trying, while it was on the wing, to swallow an eel which it had caught. The eel, in turn, was struggling to escape from the gullet of the heron and appeared a quarter, a half, or occasionally three-quarters of the way out. The indecision expressed by both creatures was pitiable. They had taken on too much.

(*The Bookshop*, p.7)

Another passage depicting a stretch of beach enjoyed by mothers with children suggests that nature is not to be seen as a tranquil surrounding but an antagonistic entity. Seen through the narrator's eyes, the beach is full of multi-coloured pebbles which children were more than delighted to gather; yet there is something nasty too:

Farther to the north unacceptable things had been washed up. Bones were mixed with the fringe of jetsam at high tide. The rotting remains of a seal had been stranded there.

(*The Bookshop*. p.59)

For Fitzgerald, nature does not stand as an idealised Arcadia. A sense of ambivalence — almost antagonism — between nature and its sentient creatures is always suggested in the narration, and most overtly manifested in the poltergeist which constantly intimidates the dwellers within the Old House.

The pastoral contrast — the perspective of incongruity — as illustrated above in Fitzgerald's rural pastoral works is also present in her urban novels. The cosmopolitan city, with its status as an achieved centre of learning, communication, and cultivation, effortlessly paints itself as a prosperous golden land, attracting plentiful migrants from the country. However, this vision is as bleakly untenable as that of a post-industrial Arcadia. The literal architecture of the cityscape in Fitzgerald's fiction is inconspicuous, and mainly prescriptively bestowed by the narrator. In *Offshore* the Reach, blending cityscape and riverscape, is studded with flotsam awash at low tide. This is a part of the city where even postmen and milkmen fear to tread. Here the image of the city is reflected not in its historical landmarks or bustling street-scenes, but alternatively conveyed through a sharp contrast between the tideline dwellers and the onlookers. *Offshore* offers a transposed pastoral perspective on the relationship between man and society. Here, the significance of nature's power is expanded into the social symbolic domain. The Reach community, though geographically situated inside the city, is nonetheless a semi-rural, dodgy section of the Thames. Metaphorically it then becomes a place caught in transition, unable either to look back to the lost Arcadia or press forward towards El Dorado, signalling a stage where the only possible sentiment is resolved endurance. For the boat-dwellers, lacking a solid connection with the land-based society elicits a sense of separation and misplacement, and projects the city as an inanimate, apathetic enclosure. Father Watson's opinion of this particular section of Thames anticipates the Reach as an underworld beyond redemption:

But, rat-ridden and neglected, it was a wharf still. The river's edge, where Virgil's ghosts held out their arms in longing for the farther shore, and Dante, as a living man, was refused passage by the ferryman, the few planks that mark the meeting point of land and water  
[....]  
(*Offshore*, p.21-22)



As soon as Father Watson finishes his visit, he ‘couldn’t have looked more relieved if he had completed a mission to those that dwell in the waters that are below the earth’. (p.23) Here the pastoral setting is drastically deformed not only to signify the sense of loss of the Edenic haven, but also to further contrast the sense of rigidity and trauma imposed on a socially disfavoured community.

Fitzgerald’s urban novels, all set in London, are also infused with an omnipresence of an invisible, disinclined power, the kind identical to the unsympathetic supremacy of nature discussed above. In *Human Voices* the cityscape is very much understated and largely presented through the enclosure of Broadcasting House, presented through the muddle of makeshift sleeping spaces, sand-bags, and barricades.

In *At Freddie’s*, the image of the city as a combination of Arcadian garden and opulent El Dorado is initially conjured up in the description of Covent Garden, where Freddie’s stage school is located. To convey the importance of this area, the narrator alludes to the Opera House and the Theatre Royal as ‘[rising] majestically, beset[ting] with heavy traffic, above a wash of fruit, flower, and vegetables.’ (p. 23) However, when night falls, the cityscape transforms; the image of the Garden is transformed into a purgatory:

Evangelists of various religions patrolled the queues late into the night, calling on them to repent, and distributing tracts which lay with the other rotting debris about the Garden.  
(*At Freddie’s*, p. 23)

The dilapidated state of the city in Fitzgerald’s works — Covent Garden hauntingly atmospheric, London itself blitz-wrecked — becomes an unkept pastoral promise. Fitzgerald’s novels exploit this subliminal reminiscence to offer an unidealized revisionist pastoralism without explicit Arcadian referent. What Fitzgerald shows is a realisation of the actual contrast between the *bona fide* austerity of reality and its pictorially imagined lyricism. This realisation subtly

hints at nostalgia, and is rather like resignation, accepting the fact that paradise is gone for ever.

Nostalgia, an important element of pastoral, is indispensable in Fitzgerald's fiction. Jean Sudrann, in her essay on Fitzgerald's novels, observes that Fitzgerald's novels present 'a fallen world' full of 'fallible human beings whose very lives are at risk'.<sup>35</sup> As far as Sudrann is concerned, the pastoral theme in Fitzgerald's fiction resides in the allegorical allusion to the prelapsarian state of innocence and contentedness, which she sees as in opposition to the contriving and tribulation of the worldly characters. Whereas for Sudrann the pastoral element in Fitzgerald's fiction is delivered through the narrator's — and Fitzgerald's — crystal-clear vision, it may be suggested that, in the post-industrial era, the loss of the pastoral Arcadia projects onto the city and city-life a limbo-esque distortion; and that the pastoral resignation is most visibly shown in the social and class-related entrapment of the characters materialised as their geo-physical stagnation.

The world of Fitzgerald's fiction is one of combat and conflict. Daisy, in *The Gate of Angels*, is among many who hold this view. Sitting opposite the matron during her interview in the Blackfriars hospital, she can not refrain from saying to herself that to get to the matron's position she will have to 'struggle, perhaps fight and bleed'. (p.71) As an extension of the Darwinian struggle for survival, under Fitzgerald's reappropriation of pastoral the relationship between mankind and nature — largely joyful in conventional pastoral — is stretched to accommodate the ways 'natural selection' works both in nature and in human society. Discarding the conventional pastoral theme, Fitzgerald accepts the loss of paradise and instead sees the present world as a garden loud with strife.

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<sup>35</sup> Jean Sudrann, 'Magic or Miracle: The Fallen World of Penelope Fitzgerald's Novels', in *Contemporary British Women Writers: Texts and Strategies*, ed. Robert E Hosmer Jr. (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.105-127, p.106. In the critic's words: 'Fitzgerald's authorial voice embraces its own post-Edenic role in self-conscious recognition of the challenge the fallen world offers to the maker of truth-telling fictions[.]'



Fitzgerald's fictional characters are spread among different classes: some are middle-class employees in institutions, such as Waring in *The Golden Child*, Annie in *Human Voices*, Daisy and Fred in *The Gate of Angels*, and Salvatore in *Innocence*. Some are self-employed middle class, like Grace in *The Bookshop*, Frank in *The Beginning of Spring* and Freddie in *At Freddie's*. The rest, like the boat-dwellers in *Offshore*, and the student-poet-philosopher Fritz Hardenburgh — before he was known as Novalis — in *The Blue Flower*, belong to a class that is often of ambiguous and marginal connotation. Characters of these class categories constitute the largest part of contemporary fiction. The translation from the rural shepherd to the urban underclass and (lower) middle classes is less of a positional reverse if the impact of accelerated industrialisation and urbanisation after the two world wars are taken into consideration. These two processes have drawn a considerable proportion of human resources from agriculture, and converted them into semi-skilled or opportunistic workers in the mushrooming industries which presumably provided more immediate material gratification. However, it is also noticed that an urban underclass is often composed of the dispossessed from the countryside, when farms are amalgamated in order to compete in the growing world market, devastating small villages as they shrink below critical mass. This one-way flow of human power not only exposes the problem of social and vocational dislocation, but further intensifies the consequential shift of identity, or even sense of loss of community.<sup>36</sup>

The role of 'shepherd', especially in a pastoral reading of contemporary texts, is often appropriated as the underrepresented, the disenfranchised, the marginal.<sup>37</sup> In their study of attitudes towards class in the English novels, Mary

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<sup>36</sup> In understanding Britain during economical turmoil, Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann's *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971) provides detailed insights into the socio-psychological transformation of lower middle classes.

<sup>37</sup> Peter V. Marinelli, *Pastoral* (London: Methuen, 1971). A difference in conceptualising the shepherd is noticed here. 'Shepherd' in a Greco-Roman context differs tremendously from the Christian theological connotation. The former is social, while the latter tends to be individual. Peter V. Marinelli discusses the conceptual change in the nature of 'shepherd':



Eagleton and David Pierce conflate the lower middle class with the working class on the grounds that they are subject to identical social impediments.<sup>38</sup> Unlike some contemporary novels about lower middle-class life, Fitzgerald's works do not propagandise the emotional importance of solidarity and identity, although her concerns about the class-based social structure are not in the least trivialised by occasional light-heartedness.

Fitzgerald is particularly drawn to depicting the sense of containment imposed onto her characters by their immediate social and geo-physical environment. Fitzgerald's characters are often presented as either unable to cross over from one assigned space to another, or unable to realise that they are faced with an impasse. The necessity of a sense of self-preservation is depicted — Freddie and Mrs Gamart practice it relentlessly, whereas Waring and the rest of the 'unworldly' characters learn it the hard way. It has been observed that in contemporary pastoral the place of the shepherd has been replaced by some relatively simple figure, such as the wage-earner, or more usually the child.<sup>39</sup> The key characteristic of pastoral is that it is written when an ideal, or at least more innocent, world is felt to be lost. It aims to convey a sense of loss, of longing, of lament. Nostalgia cannot be the emotion of those who are not conscious of having experienced a loss; however, for the adults who have entered the realm of the law, the social, the loss appears to be permanent and irreversible. Hence the characterisation of the child constitutes a possible escape from this loss because, as

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The shepherd remains first and foremost an emblem of humanity, a general rather than a specific type. and his afflictions and joys are universal. The process is reversed in the romantic pastoral, which begins with the individual figure, concentrates upon his hard lot in life, and then magnifies him, almost insensibly, into a figure of titanic proportions, an emblem of general Humanity. (p.5-6)

<sup>38</sup> Eagleton and Pierce, *Attitudes to Class in the English Novel*, p.76. These critics note that the English novel is populated with characters of lower-middle class such as clerks, office workers, and shop assistants who

[t]hough supposedly higher up the social scale than the working class, [...] does daily battle with poverty, poor housing, unemployment, insecurity, while at the same time trying to retain pretensions of social standing or culture and aspirations to a better life.

<sup>39</sup> Marinelli, *Pastoral*, p.5-6.



childhood innocence symbolises a state of simplicity comparable to the idealised pastoral aura, by looking into or identifying with the child the heaviness of loss is, it is hoped, alleviated.

### Writing about Children

As a bourgeois novelist, the writing position Fitzgerald takes up is her willingness to see underrepresented communities not as a cause of social problems, but as an outcome of the existing social evolution. Its outcome of ‘breaking through the barrier of decorous subject matter’ cancels the unconscious sense of guilt abundant in previous middle-class novels which had found it difficult to recognise their share in the exploitation of the casual poor and the underrepresented.<sup>40</sup> Central to this strategy of writing is therefore an identification by such an author with the victimised class in revealing gaps, discrepancies and inequalities. The stories in Fitzgerald’s fiction are told by narrators who, though impersonal, are never indifferent to the characters’ plight. Rather, as I have discussed earlier in Part One, Fitzgerald’s use of humour and moments of comic relief arguably serve to lighten the determinist heaviness in the novels.

In *Some Versions of Pastoral* William Empson suggests a different approach towards the characterisation of children in fiction through the formula of ‘child-become-judge’.<sup>41</sup> Pre-pubescent children can be interpreted as a type of critic of adult society firstly because of their incessant questioning, and secondly, due to their equivocal position as both outsider and insider within the social world. In his essay on pastoral Terry Eagleton elaborates on this idea of Empson’s. According to Eagleton, the reason that the characterisation of children in fiction serves as a counterpart of — or criticism of — the grown-ups, is because children are ‘parasitically dependent on a language they nonetheless find baffling and alien’.

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<sup>40</sup> Eagleton and Pierce, *Attitudes to Class in the English Novel*, p.72.

<sup>41</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), p.254.

Eagleton suggests we should see children as ‘isolated “intellectuals” not fully conversant with common practice of feeling yet also more emotionally sensitive than most; because their social marginality is the source at once of their blindness and insight.’<sup>42</sup>

In Fitzgerald’s novels a curious contrast between disoriented adults and smarter children is often encountered. *Offshore* provides a sharp contrast between adult feebleness and childhood strength through Nenna and her daughters. In contrast to their parents’ practical disorientation and inability, the narrator offers the children as stronger and self-sufficient:

Martha, small and thin, with dark eyes which already showed an acceptance of the world’s shortcomings .... The crucial moment when children realise that their parents are younger than they are had long since been passed by Martha.  
(*Offshore*, p.23)

Compared with Nenna, the despairing wife and mother who announces loneliness and unemployment in statements like ‘I don’t know what I’m going to do with my mind. [...] I’m not too sure what to do with my body either.’ Martha and Tilda appear to have a clearer sense of self-worth. (p.105) Their suppleness of body and mind is illustrated in how Tilda retrieves two ceramic tiles, and in the way Martha discerns the authenticity of William de Morgan tiles. (p.66-72) Martha’s instinctive self-preservation is further strikingly shown when she is negotiating a price with an antique dealer. Just when she is to strike a good deal the negotiation is interrupted by Tilda, who indignantly complains of a broken Victorian musical box:

‘I think not,’ said the dealer, leaving the girls and hastening out front. He began to search irritably for the key. The woman sitting at the table made no attempt to help him.  
‘Tilda, have you been tinkering about with the musical box?’  
‘Yes.’

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<sup>42</sup> Terry Eagleton, ‘The Critic as Clown’ in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, pp.619-631, p. 620.



Martha saw that discovery, which could not be long delayed, would reduce her advantage considerably.

‘We’re asking three pounds for the two De Morgan lustre tiles. Otherwise I must trouble you to hand them back at once.’  
(*Offshore*, p.72)

The way Fitzgerald characterises children in her novels seems to suggest a possible state most hopeful in children: a state of retained self-reliance that is innocence sieved through experience. Far from being embodiments of angelic merits, these child-characters preserve a quality of self-knowledge that helps them enormously to survive better in society than their adult counterparts. Take young Salvatore in *Innocence*, for example. When Salvatore was little his father took him to visit Gramsci. This visit proves disastrous to the boy as Gramsci, after decades of illness and confinement, finally and rather suddenly gives up life in front of the visitors. From the narrator the reader comes to know what this event means to the young Salvatore:

Domenico was right in believing that this visit to Rome would provide a lasting memory for his son. Salvatore’s resolution, as soon as he began to be able to translate his impressions into terms of will and intention, was this: I will never concern myself with politics, I will never risk imprisonment for the sake of my principles, I will never give my health, still less my life, for my beliefs. He also resolved to be a doctor. In the end we shall all of us be at the mercy of our own bodies, but at least let me understand what is happening to them.

The sight of his father’s tears as they walked back to the station was also disagreeable to Salvatore. He was reluctant to admit to himself that, for the moment, he was older than his parent, and ashamed that they hadn’t got a handkerchief between them.  
(*Innocence*, p.44)

The ten-year-old Salvatore shows a kind of resolution and will-power that is often absent in the adults. He also shows an adaptive instinct for coping with the real, physical threat of both society and bodily nature to the individual. Children in Fitzgerald’s fiction always amaze the reader, because they tend to exhibit a useful understanding of the human condition.



Philip Thody, in his study of twentieth century literature, notes that the idealised conceptualisation of the child as angelic and the poetic romanticisation of childhood has gradually disappeared in works of this century, for modern and contemporary writers show more 'readiness to accept that children have as great a capacity for evil as the adults around them'.<sup>43</sup> This view is shared by Peter Marinelli, who suggests that the child be seen as an 'embryonic adult', as prone to mistake- and mischief-making as the adults.<sup>44</sup> In her attempt to depict the child in her comedy of manners, Fitzgerald does not romanticise the innocence or guilelessness of the child. Although not ill-natured, her fictional children are miniature grown-ups; they are self-indulgent and self-serving. Very often the fictional children are remarkable not for their mischievousness, but for their resourcefulness, which enables them from time to time to mock the seemingly inferior adults.

Fitzgerald's fictional children are seldom childlike; they don't possess the air of ingenuousness and unknowingness often seen in and presumed to be possessed by 'innocent' children. They do not in Eagleton's sense find the adult language 'baffling and alien'; rather, they are more than articulate and are often portrayed as possessing quick-witted (sometimes wiser) insights than the adult characters. What ought to be noticed in Fitzgerald's novels is that the setting, whether it is in the country, is often pictured as a place of social and cultural bleakness which causes the child to be seen as nuisance:

To cajole the unwilling traders, in fact to Freddie them, was better than bargaining for a stale bacon sandwich from the back of the market public houses, which opened at seven o'clock in the morning and closed at nine. Whatever they got, they ate it at once, sitting on the empty floats. Yet in all those years the police never had to record a complaint against them. Doubtless they were regarded as one of the hazards of the market, like the rats, like the frails.

(*At Freddie's*, p.24)

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<sup>43</sup> Philip Thody, *Twentieth-Century Literature: Critical Issues and Themes* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p.49.

<sup>44</sup> Marinelli, *Pastoral*, p.78.



*At Freddie's*, set at a derelict London stage school, offers a portrayal of some very unchildlike children trained to perform their childishness. In so doing they also learn to manipulate their presumed ingenuousness. Mattie, for instance, is naughty enough to deliberately jam the vending machine and consequently causes a severe spillage which damage the new carpet in the theatre. But when facing possible punishment from Freddie, he is anything but innocent in his efforts to dodge his way out :

‘Go away, Mattie,’ said Freddie.

Still in make-up, his skin like a kid glove, his eyes lined and ringed with black, the child clung to the door-handle, his voice broken with sobs.

‘You saved me, Miss Wentworth...I’d be out of work, I’d never get work again, if you hadn’t spoken to Mr Lightfoot...I owe everything to you...’

Freddie paid no attention whatsoever.

‘God who created me,’ Mattie went on in a thrilling contralto, ‘Nimble and light of limb In three elements free To run to ride to swim Not when the senses dim But from the heart of joy I would remember Him Take the thanks of a boy.’

‘I’m deducting thirty per cent this week for damage and nuisance,’ Freddie remarked. Mattie, with an expression of deep malignance, departed.

‘He’s acting,’ said Miss Blewett.

‘Worse than that,’ said Freddie. ‘He’s acting being a child actor.’

(*At Freddie's*, p.16)

In the always astonishing and exceptional world of theatre, playfulness becomes these children’s daily attitude, for they are always ready to improvise, affect and impersonate. On one occasion the narrator presents Joybelle affectionately leaning her ‘brightly crisp head against Hannah’s breast’, relating a domestic scene at home:

‘When he heard my mother was carrying again my father got something to terminate it. He made my mum swallow it out of a spoon. She showed me the spoon afterwards in case I had to come to court and swear to something. The metal had gone all black. It was black, Miss.’

(*At Freddie's*, p.28)

The horrifying significance of a forced abortion, of domestic violence, is cancelled out under this ten-year-old girl's affected air of vulnerability and fear. These child-actors find no difficulty in switching between the world of the child and that of the adult, so long as they succeed in impressing and attracting attention. On another occasion Joybelle comes round to Carroll to express her admiration of his haircut. She then suggestively asks would Carroll like her 'just to run her fingers through it for him, she often did that at home for her uncle, and he said it turned him on'.

(p.42) She was impersonating a confident and seductive young woman to make fun of the apparently diffident teacher. The explicit sexual connotation in Joybelle's proposal is meant not to court a response, but to evoke a sense of superiority and control by provoking shock and repugnance. Fitzgerald's characterisation of children does not exploit the possibility of the child as a symbol of unsullied goodness within corruption. But children like Mattie and Joybelle in *At Freddie's* are no emblem of simplicity. They simply have prematurely outgrown their childhood naiveté, unknowingly.

The emphasis on childhood, as Marinelli offers, is essentially a Romantic innovation based on the notion that the child as an unpolluted being is more capable — in contrast to the socialised grown-ups — of perceiving a clear natural vision of the world. The common, even mythical, notion that children have a greater amount of potentiality and virtually boundless opportunities, that they are not yet socially labelled and located, that they have the future in their hands, transform them into an identifiable existentialist condition through which the adults come to terms with their own sense of loss. Yet Fitzgerald's characterisation of children does not endorse such a romanticisation — though she depicts them as wiser than the socially inept grown-ups, she also calls attention to the limitations of their innocence. These fictional children may be resourceful, but they are children still. At their entry into the social realm, they are seen to lose their previous firmness; they start to flounder.



The sight of Gramsci dying of his own belief and commitment compels young Salvatore to refuse political involvement and adopt a distanced view of human emotion and mentality. Instead of acknowledging his passion for Chiara, Salvatore explains to Gentilini his state of mind as ‘hyperaesthesia’. (*Innocence*, p.51) Salvatore’s resolution to be free of constraints — a decision made in childhood — becomes the major emotional limitation in his adult life. This self-inflicted, limited scope — though later Salvatore recognizes that ‘it’s not impossible that at an early point in my life I took a wrong direction’ — still induces him to contemplate suicide: ‘Chiara and I are not able to accept each other, and I believe that on balance she would be better off without me.’ (p.219)

Christine Gipping is another child character who possess a sense of self-assurance in the face of the adult world, yet who later suffers from hindrance from her own confined scope. A lean girl of ten, she is hardly an ideal helper for Florence:

‘Please don’t get the idea that I don’t want to consider you for the job. It’s just that you don’t really look old enough or strong enough.’

‘You can’t tell from looking. You look old, but you don’t look strong. It won’t make much difference, as long as you get someone from ours. We’re all of us handy.’

(*The Bookshop*, p.53)

The young Christine has integrity and is diligent; yet with ‘eleven plus’ marking an end of childhood and her failure in this exam, Christine’s boldness and confidence is seen to be receding, exposing her limited scope:

‘I shall miss you, Christine, and I wanted to ask you what you’d like for a present.’

‘Not one of those books. Not the kind you have.’

‘Well, then, what? I’m going into Flintmarket tomorrow. What about a cardigan?’

‘I’d rather have the money.’ Christine was implacable. She could only find relief in causing pain. Her resentment was directed against everyone who had to do with books, and reading, and made it a condition of success to write little compositions, and to know which picture was the odd one out.

(*The Bookshop*, p.105)

Whether Fitzgerald considers the loss of childhood innocence as inevitable is a matter she refrains from defining. The fact that her fiction portrays children as an individual class, whose sense of adventurous assurance contrasts with adult hesitance and resignation, elicits a questioning of how nature — and nurture — can transform the evolving being.

Pastoral is an ironic form, based on a perceptible ambiguity of meaning and illusion of actuality which result from the very distance between the observer and the observed. Empson, in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, defines pastoral as essentially ‘the process of putting the complex into the simple’ (p.23), such as a small but universal truism voiced by the humble. For Empson, pastoral is more than just a set of rigid literary conventions. The pastoral process of putting the complex into the simple is paradoxical and, as in Bryan Loughrey’s study on this genre, it ‘manifests a particular structural relationship which clarifies complex issues by restating them in terms which emphasise the universal at the expense of the accidental’.<sup>45</sup> Through pastoral motifs the writer criticises life as we ordinarily live it and also reconciles us to it. Paul Alpers suggests that pastoral for Empson has a unifying social function, ‘bridging differences and reconciling social classes’<sup>46</sup> — a function Terry Eagleton conceives of as an enactment of ‘a certain class collaborationism’.<sup>47</sup> Eagleton’s remark is specifically directed toward Empson’s dilemma in not explicating pastoral’s ‘ironic interchanges of refinement and simplicity’ in a more politically forceful tone, for the genre itself could well serve effectively for the cultural critic — i.e., critics, poets, and writers alike — to come ‘to terms with the fraught relations between critic and text, intellectual and society’. For Eagleton, pastoral serves as Empson’s ‘political-apologia, a form that exposes the ironic contradictions of intellectual sophistication and common

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<sup>45</sup> Bryan Loughrey, *The Pastoral Mode* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p.39.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Alpers, ‘Empson on Pastoral’ in *New Literary History*, Vol. X, No. 1 (Autumn 1978), pp.101-123, p.102.

<sup>47</sup> Eagleton, ‘The Critic as Clown’, p. 619.



wisdom'.<sup>48</sup> With its focal emphasis on the characters and their relationships with social grammars, contemporary appropriation of pastoral indicates an expansion of political awareness no longer restricted by the romanticisation about the rural, the city, and the mass, of the privileged bard.

Avoiding structural questions of domination and subjection, Fitzgerald focuses on alternative social groups, and their experiences with their social-natural setting which encode implicit class tensions. This determinism of confinement therefore subjects the characters to an environment that is impoverished and limited in opportunity; and they are trapped by their powerlessness to transcend or transform these limitations. Reading Fitzgerald's novels from a pastoral perspective, it seems clear that even if the novelist herself is not outspoken on the class problem, she is never unconcerned. Fitzgerald's appropriation of pastoral is based on 'tension' — the kind of tension that worries the farmer of the productivity of the soil, that alienates the bard from the idyllic nature he praises, and that estranges the characters from those immediate socio-physical settings with which they find it hard to integrate. This pastoral perspective of displacement and alienation abounds in Fitzgerald's fictional world. The implication of a class-conscious social grammar in her works is translated into a pastoral perspective that sees mostly ambivalence, quandary, and uncertainty in one's relation to the social and natural setting. Most of Fitzgerald's characters belong to alternative communities — groups, although not necessarily marginal or underprivileged, seldom represented politically or in fiction, because they are ambiguously situated within the social strata. They are neither working class nor bourgeois, but petty bourgeois, caught in the process of bourgeoisification — the struggle of becoming middle class and socially respectable. Fitzgerald addresses the issue of class through a pastoral perspective; and it is only by pastoralising her otherwise apolitical works the novelist's attitude towards class becomes visible. The novelist

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<sup>48</sup> Eagleton, 'The Critic as Clown', p. 620, 621.

tactically makes use of the ambiguity innate in this genre, playing with its indeterminacy. This 'pastoral indeterminacy', as Eagleton terms it, might account for the way in which Fitzgerald's novels tend to appear as inconclusive in textual meaning.<sup>49</sup> It is significant too in the sense that it registers strategies of writing as well as opens up tactics of reading into textual multiplicity.

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<sup>49</sup> Eagleton, 'The Critic as Clown', p. 621.



#### 5.4) WRITING ABOUT WOMEN

Flora Alexander begins her study, *Contemporary Women Novelists*, with the statement:

Novelists whose careers have developed since the mid-1960s have been writing in a cultural climate that is deeply affected by contemporary feminism.<sup>50</sup>

This statement can apply both ways to Fitzgerald. In terms of authorial intention, Fitzgerald may have a few words to say against Alexander, because the novelist — though starting her career in the late 1970s — does not appear to be participating in any explicitly feminist way.

In her novels Fitzgerald does not protest openly against patriarchal society, nor does she, on her women characters' behalf, protest against men who do them harm. By no means is Fitzgerald involved in overt support of feminist writing. But that is not to say she is an anti-feminist or that her fiction does not reflect valid arguments for a feminist reading. I would like to suggest that, although Fitzgerald prefers her fiction *not* to be read within the feminist framework, nonetheless she can be considered to have shared some feminist concerns which she treats in her fiction.<sup>51</sup> But, to use 'feminism' to denote the full range of the movement is misleading. Already at the inception of feminist discourse diversification split the movement into liberal feminism, radical feminism, and social feminism. I suggest that Fitzgerald's objection to being associated with feminism *per se* rises not from her antipathy to the movement as such, but from her awareness of the multivalences and difficulties of such a broad, political project.

In spite of her intention to avoid gender polemics, Fitzgerald's fiction can nonetheless be seen to encode feminism in challenging patriarchy and male domination. Her novels reveal patriarchal social relations by focusing on the

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<sup>50</sup> Flora Alexander, *Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), p.1.

<sup>51</sup> Fitzgerald objects to being read as a feminist writer. In the novelist's own words: 'If what mainly interests you is feminism (and why shouldn't it be?), I feel I'm not the right study for you.' Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 21.

dimensions where public power and exploitation converge with personal servility. The feminism of Fitzgerald's fiction is introspective rather than declarative; it textually investigates various issues concerning misogyny, patriarchy and the construction of femininity and masculinity as related to social recognition and acceptance.

### **Exposing Misogyny and Patriarchy**

Reading images of women in literature has enabled feminist critics to expose the practice of misogyny and patriarchy. Contemporary women writers, particularly writing after the second wave women's movement in the 1960s, use their fiction as sites of struggle in which they characterise the lot of women in a sexually discriminating society. The novels of Fay Weldon and Edna O'Brian, using the first-person narrator to emphasise the tone of experience and protestation, are full of mistreated women. Fitzgerald's fiction also consists of women characters who are manipulated and bullied, but they are the quiet, uncomplaining sort who, if they are not able to get out of harm's way, simply endure it and wait for the judgement day.

*The Gate of Angels* offers a typical victim of male power: a resourceless young girl confronting an aggressive, materially superior man. Daisy is dismissed from her nursing job on the grounds of her violating the hospital's regulation on confidentiality. Daisy is found out because the journalist she goes to, Kelly, deliberately reveals her identity in the tabloid story. Penniless, she is then approached by Kelly, who proposes that Daisy should be his mistress in exchange for her financial upkeep:

'[...] you must be more than ordinary fond of men if you was going to risk losing your job on account of this James Elder.' — 'I didn't mean to lose it,' said Daisy. 'I love nursing.' — 'You need a man, though,' said Kelly. 'I mean a man of some kind. ... I won't marry you, that's



not my style, apart from being married already, but I'll look after you, I give you my dicky-bird.'  
 (*The Gate of Angels*, p.100)

Coerced and succumbing to her over-generous nature, Daisy acquiesces. The world for Daisy is one of sexual malice and aggressiveness, a world she has always struggled against.

As seen in *The Gate of Angels*, male dominance manifests itself not only in physical, sexual aggressiveness, but also in metaphysical monopoly of knowledge. This novel depicts the historical marginalisation of women excluded from higher education. From a feminist point of view, the fictional St Angelicus College represents an epitome of patriarchy. It is suggestive of an intellectually guarded seat exclusive to a circumscribed male group. Fitzgerald ridicules traditional institutionalised misogyny by amusingly giving the college regulations which deny admittance to any 'female animals capable of reproduction' — 'though the starlings couldn't altogether be regulated.' (p. 12) The humour seen in the above fun-poking quotation presumably bears out the difference between Fitzgerald's non-committal feminism and its politically alert counterpart. Fitzgerald denounces the long-standing acceptance of misogyny by making fun of institutionalised patriarchy. Ancient superstition has it that the college gate should always remain rigidly closed in order to guard against any devilish forms, female included, for inadvertent opening announces mischief. The first opening of the gate in 1423 coincides with the death of Pope Benedict XIII, the college founder; the second, in 1869, with permission to open the first women's college. Narrated with semi-playful disinterestedness, Daisy's experience nonetheless draws a telling analogy with what Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) refers to regarding the inequality faced by women seeking education as an alternative to marriage and motherhood.

Daisy's predicament invites feminist sympathy. *The Gate of Angels* illustrates the restricted path of social mobility available to women from deprived

backgrounds, who are objectified and preyed upon. This is explicitly presented in the suggestion of Fred's colleague, after Kelly has maliciously breached his silence in court to defame Daisy:

Well, I've seen your Miss Saunders now, and it is only too evident that, although good-looking, she is not of the marriageable class. You, I imagine, cannot, after what passed, possibly intend to see her again, but Fairly, you've no idea how difficult it is for me to get hold of a woman of any kind. Here is my suggestion. I cannot afford to marry, but neither can I afford to be particular and nor, I suppose, can Miss Saunders....

(*The Gate of Angels*, pp.152-3)

In this letter Daisy is completely objectified as no more than a piece of merchandise to be bargained over. This 'suggestion' in nature is the same as Kelly's proposal; it is equally impudent, only less direct. The court scene here, where Daisy is called as both a witness and victim of the accident, shows Daisy confronted with Kelly's deliberate scandal-mongering. Infuriated by Daisy's avoidance of him, Kelly decides to 'cock it all up' now by disclosing their aborted plan. (p.146) This public hearing represents the ultimate male gaze which subjects Daisy, again, to Kelly's male supremacist power, and exposes her under the townsfolk's voyeuristic condemnation. *The Gate of Angels* therefore presents Daisy with a dilemma: she can only hope to rise materially as an objectified sexual commodity, or remain an outcast in an unsympathetic society.

Sexual discrimination in *The Gate of Angels* is apparent not only in Daisy's victimisation under the male gaze, but also in the laughable academic gynophobia which marginalises women. Apart from its conventionally romantic outcome, the novel elicits a documentary reminiscence regarding the place of women in English higher education, by recalling the bitterness and opposition of ancient English universities towards women — a sentiment heavily complicating the policies of admitting full membership to women in higher education from the Victorian era into the first half of the twentieth century, which Fitzgerald's suffragette mother —



and to a lesser degree, Fitzgerald herself — must have personally witnessed at Somerville College, Oxford.

The construction of stereotyped gendered roles has long been associated with the issue of socialisation, seen in the debates regarding nature and nurture; between the definition of ‘sex’ (the biological construct) and ‘gender’ (the behavioural, psychological, and socio-cultural traits); and between ‘feminine’ and ‘female’. In Fitzgerald’s fiction the construction of gendered roles is of particular interest not because her fictional world compliantly conforms to, or censures, the typecast, gendered social norms. On the contrary, it is of significance because it suggests that the world in its state of instability requires a new balance achievable through more than the politically corrected amendment of gendered roles. Seen against the gender images prescribed by patriarchy, men in Fitzgerald’s novels tend to be needy and have troubles with their lives, while women, by contrast, are strong and resourceful. But this is not to say that the world Fitzgerald’s fiction depicts is patriarchy-free. I argue that Fitzgerald’s deliberate role reversal through unconventional male/female characterisation is significant, as it accentuates women’s unremitting struggle against patriarchy.

*Human Voices* provides an example of how patriarchy triumphs in spite of the characters’ reversed gender features. Fitzgerald’s male protagonists are generally the decent sort, who are clumsy in relationships and at times socially inept. They are emotionally weak and irresolute. The story hints at an accepted sexist ambience by portraying the RPD (Recorded Programmes Director) as a self-centred, innocent but not malevolent sexist, who ‘could work better when surrounded by young women’ in his department, nicknamed the ‘Seraglio’. (p. 7) A scene showing RPD alone with one of his female assistants subverts the conventional role of the consoler and the consoled:

When he recognised who she was he stopped pacing about and took off his spectacles, changing from a creature of sight to one of faith. Lise, the crowded office, the neatly angled sandwiches, the tray with its white cloth suitable for grades of Director and above, turned



into patches of light and shade. To Lise, on the other hand, looking at his large hazel eyes, the eyes of a child determined not to blink for fear of missing something, he became someone who could not harm her and asked to be protected from harm.

(*Human Voices*, p.20)

Though portrayed as an egoist, RPD's incompetence in dealing with human matters nevertheless becomes synonymous with child-like vulnerability, unconsciously self-exploited to elicit toleration of his casual sexism. RPD's inability to connect with the other is contrasted with the empathetic strong-mindedness of orphan Annie who is quite clear-sighted in seeing herself hopelessly in love 'with a middle-aged man who said the same thing to all the girls'. (p.97) The point the role-reversal in *Human Voices* makes, from a feminist stance, is the self-justifying patriarchal coerciveness that elicits pardon for exploiting women's favour. This self-justification, in a rather circular manner, reinforces women's subjugation by demanding their subservience.

Among many male characters in Fitzgerald's fiction, Carroll in *At Freddie's* displays the greatest feebleness and incompetence. A humble good-for-nothing, Carroll concedes that 'whatever I do is bound to turn out unsuccessfully.' (p.25) The reader is given no physical description of Carroll, but is told that he 'created around him his own atmosphere of sad acceptance'. (p. 26) He is equivocal about whatever he cannot reach, therefore he is not disappointed should his effort fail. Anticipation is but a euphemism for frustration, hence Carroll 'would never ask a question if he did not want to hear the answer.' (p.98) It is exactly in this manner he asks — in fact, tells — Hannah to marry him, by informing her of his undertaking to sort out his share of the family farm, instead of putting his matrimonial intention clear to her. In this self-deceiving evasiveness Carroll translates Hannah's consent into financial terms of wifekeeping and housekeeping, ignoring Hannah's individuality as an independent career woman. (p.103-106) Innocuously as Carroll's proposal is put, it nonetheless reveals an assumption of female subjugation and subordination.



The typical gender characterisation of strong man versus weak woman is indeed often reversed in Fitzgerald's novels. In contrast to the feebleness of the male characters, Fitzgerald's female characters are usually more resilient and accomplished in general. They are the coping sort, admirably phlegmatic and commonsensical. In *Human Voices* Fitzgerald derisively suggests that Annie embodies the virtue of 'endurance' and the 'inexhaustible fund of tranquil pessimism'. (p.97) Arguably, this ought to be taken not as praise but as irony of such female virtue in the face of patriarchy. Fitzgerald's woman characters cooperate better with reality and, despite some odds, are stronger in will and practical sense. They are opportunists. This is particularly the case in *At Freddie's*. Female decisiveness and determination is comically presented in Freddie, who is a matriarch in her derelict stage school. Her coerciveness and manipulative dexterity in this little world mirrors the patriarchal world outside. Her resourceful exploitation is humorously presented in a scene where she takes a phone-call complaining about the upholstery damage caused by one of her boys:

'What became of the old chair covers?' Freddie interrupted.  
'What of the old carpets?'

The manager said that this was a matter for his staff. It seemed, however, that the Temple School, with its forty years of Shakespearean training, was carrying on the old traditions in a state not far from destitution, with crippled furniture, undraped windows, and floors bare to the point of indecency, and it was not to be believed that a prosperous theatre like the Alexandra would stand by and watch such things happen without giving a helping hand. The manager knew what was happening to him, even though it was for the first time, for he had heard it described by others. He was being Freddie'd,... Thirty-seven minutes later he had agreed to send the old covers and carpeting round to the Temple, on indefinite loan. He felt unwell.

(*At Freddie's*, p. 8-9)

Mostly immobile in her office, Freddie solidly handles and negotiates the theatrical world. The key to the survival of her ill-financed stage school depends entirely on her resolution and tenacity. By styling their posts in venerable terms of tradition and culture, she succeeds not only in persuading the teachers to accept the



unreasonably low salary, but also to accept it *voluntarily*: exploiting Hannah's enthusiasm for theatre management, and Carroll's inadequate qualifications. Freddie's devoted determination to establish and continue a cultural enterprise parallels, and indeed exceeds, Florence's modest ambition to run a bookshop (*The Bookshop*). Contrary to Florence's unawareness of the downside of human nature, Freddie succeeds, 'with the calm of a born survivor' (p.47), because she is well capable of surviving through 'Freddie-ism' — that is, by manipulating human weakness, she can always persuade people to comply.

Fitzgerald's characterisation of man and woman does not correspond to a conventionally gendered recognition of masculinity and femininity. Notions of masculinity as strength and femininity as submission are challenged and upturned, without guaranteeing a harmonious solution to the problem in reality. Fitzgerald's employment of reversed gendered characterisation does not aim to promote a sense of political correctness. Extensively Fitzgerald's works have disclosed the presence of patriarchy and its impact on women — such as victimisation, misogyny, and subordination — they do not provide a sociologically feasible answer. Fitzgerald's fictions encode a wryly detoured vision of patriarchy. The issue of gender cannot be divorced from questions of class, and the full predominance of patriarchy is best explored by way of Fitzgerald's treatment of courtship and marriage as social acts.

### **Marriage as Social Franchise**

Looking into the issue of marriage is another way to see how Fitzgerald conceptualises, and textualises, the relationship between the sexes. For feminist critics, places where male domination operates — the family and sexual relations in particular — are sites of struggle. Fitzgerald's fiction, having the quest and question of love as its constant motif, provides ample materials for feminist readings. The relationship between the sexes is frequently a notable theme in the



novel of manners, and in Fitzgerald's fiction its treatment can be divided into two groups. Some of her novels portray relationships as marriages that are problematic or on the brink of break-down. For instance, Waring and Haggie in *The Golden Child*; Richard and Laura, Nenna and Edward in *Offshore*; Frank and Nellie in *The Beginning of Spring*. Happy, fulfilling marriage is rare in Fitzgerald's novels. The break-up of the family structure is presented as the result of conflict originating from the discrepancy between the characters' emotional needs and their social reality. *The Beginning of Spring* opens with the enigmatic disappearance of Nellie and her three children, whom she left to be collected by Frank in a small railway station. Although the novel ends with her unexpected return in spring, suggesting a probable happy ending, the reticence of the text is such that somehow it is with suspense and incertitude — rather than relief — that the reader closes the book. The fact that Nellie returns to her family does not necessarily suggest a blissful reunion with Frank, because Nellie has always wanted to find escape from her socially restricting environs. Marrying Frank enables her to leave the narrow dogmatism of her east-midland village home, just to land her in another enclosure: that of expatriate life in Moscow. In both places she finds herself unable to fit in.

In treating the issue of marriage, Fitzgerald emphasises the wife/mother role. The success of a woman's marriage, as Fitzgerald's fiction at times explicitly implies, depends on whether she is adaptive in her role as both a wife and mother. The grudge Laura has against Richard is not so much her resentment at living on the houseboat, but her longing to have and rear children in a conventional way. Nenna also fails in this social role of wife/mother. Incompetent in organising herself and her two daughters' education, Nenna's failure as a mother coincides with her failure as a wife, headstrong in the face of her husband's disapproval. (*Offshore*)

The second type of relationship in Fitzgerald's novels, such as that of Annie and Sam in *Human Voices*; of Carroll and Hannah in *At Freddie's*; of Fred and Daisy in *The Gate of Angels*, and of Chiara and Salvatore in *Innocence*, deals with



the notion of marriageability itself. Falling in love is central to Fitzgerald's plots, as it is to many women's novels. Her particular use of falling in love is to examine character and morality. The idea of marriageability — the social recognition of who matches with whom and why — suggests that socially-prescribed conventions and opinions may easily exert an effect on individuals. In *The Gate of Angels*, Fred proposes to Daisy and is accepted. However, after he learns of Kelly's aborted plan of making Daisy his mistress, Fred suddenly discovers himself acquiescing in his colleague's instigation to break up with her. What arouses his concern and the public's disdain is not so much Daisy's nearly lost chastity, but rather her openly scandalous association with this defamation which accordingly expels her from the marriageable class.

In Fitzgerald's portrayal of the issue of relationship, the social environment becomes an important factor which chisels the characters' attitudes about relationships. As shown in *Human Voices* and *At Freddie's*, the work-place as an enclosure not only induces the characters to seek a relationship from a self-limiting range of choices immediately at hand, but also superimposes judgmental interference on the characters. In *Human Voices*, with younger colleagues off to serve Britain in war, the inexperienced Anna falls in love with her self-seeking boss, regardless of the difference in personality as well as age. In *At Freddie's*, Hannah has a short fling with Carroll before she gets to know people outside the run-down, under-staffed stage school she and Carroll work in.

Family as a social institution has always played a considerable part in the novel. The relationship between the sexes and domesticity is frequently looked into and is symbolically more significant from a woman novelist's point-of-view. In her study of femininity and war-time English literature, Alison Light suggests that the married state for most women has long been the only way of being truly grown-up. The significance of marriage is that it provides for a woman 'a place and status' and helps her to avoid 'the dreadful dependencies and stigma of an



extended girlhood'.<sup>52</sup> Light sees marriage as empowering women to access the social realm and gain public recognition which is previously denied them. The female characters in Fitzgerald's fiction, and the dramatisation of relationships/marriages, cohere with Light's observation. For the married couples in Fitzgerald's fiction, their dissatisfaction with — and failure in — marriage is reflected in the social displacement these women feel. The sexual as the social is shown in Laura's, and Nenna's, frustration at being unable to relate to their respective husbands via the social setting, i.e. the houseboats in Battersea.

*(Offshore)*

Sociologically speaking, sexual desire used to be problematic for women not because it may lead to unwanted pregnancy or subordination to a male, but because for women sexual and social place are one, and if they lose one, they lose both. For Fitzgerald as well as for many other women novelists, the idea of sexual freedom is fraught with anxiety about social place; and as a consequence of this awareness the boundary between the private (sexual) and the public (social) is internalised in the fiction, just as it is an actual prohibition in the world outside. For most of the single young woman characters in Fitzgerald's novels, marriage as the eventual fruition of a relationship provides just the way to be taken seriously. The personality change in Chiara from an over-protected, indecisive girl recently out of convent-school, to a wife who speaks her mind and takes matters into her own hands, is noticeably an effect of her being married. Entering marriage, she also enters the social realm with the symbolic empowerment of franchised sexuality.

Nancy Armstrong, in her study of the domestic novel, expounds sexuality as a cultural construct dating back to a specific female ideal in eighteenth and nineteenth century conduct books and educational treatises for women. Armstrong suggests that this culturally constructed notion of sexuality 'understood desirability in terms of the

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<sup>52</sup> Alison Light, 'Peace in our time: Mrs. Miniver', in *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp.113-155, p.121.



woman's claims to fortune and family name'.<sup>53</sup> The desirability of a woman is closely attributed to her domestic dexterity. Daughters of genteel families during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were inculcated with a knowledge of domestic management to be more marriageable, more competitive in moving socially upward. The marriageability of a woman is therefore spoken for by a desire that seeks its gratification in economic and political terms.

Because a woman's duties were traditionally defined as marital and domestic, and the giving and sharing in family life was considered not just her responsibility but her sole purpose in living, the single woman was often viewed with suspicion. For those women characters who have been denied a marital companion — like Freddie (*At Freddie's*), Aunt Mad (*Innocence*), and Sophie (*The Blue Flower*) — their negotiation with the social often suggests a sense of uneasiness. Freddie, as an old unwed woman devoting her life to conducting a stage school, is caricatured with mock-heroic immortality/longevity as an ossifying matriarch. The apparent lack of femininity in Freddie therefore becomes the price she must pay for being established, being taken seriously, in her chosen social sphere. Whereas Aunt Mad, long separated from and unwanted by her husband, is likened to the kind of do-gooders whose superficial charity-mindedness outweighs the actual efficacy of their deeds. Self-sacrifice and well-meaningness — features conventionally ascribed to the 'Angel-in-the-house' type of women — do not comfortably fit with her. Although she aspires to 'angelic' benevolence in her brother's house, she has no house to call her own and thus is seen as an appendage to the social proper, an extra, a dispensable something like those two fingers which she uncomplainingly allows to be cut off by a robber aiming for the wedding ring. (p.12 )

One crucial point to align Fitzgerald with feminism is that the novelist does not hold a romanticised, sentimental attitude towards the place of women in society. Fitzgerald fully realises the complexity and difficulties imposed on women. This

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<sup>53</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 8.



realisation is illustrated in the way she depicts how easily a marriage can be shattered on petty grounds. Take *The Golden Child* for instance: Waring and Haggie's marriage nearly breaks up, due to Waring's unexpected overtime work which arouses Haggie's suspicion (p.60).

In view of the portrayal of woman in general, Fitzgerald provides a reading of the female Bildungsroman, because her fiction as a whole lays much emphasis on the issue of social integration as far as her heroines are concerned. Fitzgerald is aware that a woman's social place is constantly associated with, or even dependent on, her negotiation between the private and public spheres. The dominant metaphor for the traditional Bildungsroman is a successful journey into social integration; in Fitzgerald's fiction this theme is further complicated by the gender of her heroines, and their quest for selfhood and self-development entangles Fitzgerald's preferred non-feminism in her art. Many of Fitzgerald's heroines are once aspiring but now frustrated, or even defeated: Nenna, in *Offshore*, who 'fell in love as only a violinist can', discontinues her musical career for her family (p.34). The world in Fitzgerald's fiction offers limited options for women, even for Mrs Wrayburn who — having studied four years at Newnham and acted as 'both the Treasurer and the Organising Secretary of the Women's Social and Political Union' — still indignantly objects to being categorised as a mere housewife when inquired at the court hearing:

Mrs Wrayburn, after Fred had sat down, was sworn in, and was told that she was a housewife. 'I should be a graduate,' she said, 'if the university allowed women to take degrees.'

'Mrs Wrayburn, you are a housewife,' the inspector went on.  
(*The Gate of Angels*, p.142)

Seen in this light, Fitzgerald's awareness of women's subjugated position within society is explicit; and her works can be said to engage with a feminist project of exposing patriarchy. However, though feminism has created a cultural hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of a new set of values and attitudes, within the movement itself there is little sense of unity. For instance, Alice Walker calls her fiction 'womanist' to

set it apart from the discourse of feminism, which in her opinion is largely taken as the discourse of white, middle-class women.<sup>54</sup> Fitzgerald's ambivalence towards feminism perhaps can be explained by the fact that she writes too late to endorse the old order; and her mindset is comparatively too conservative to embrace the new. She lacks, for instance, Angela Carter's purposefulness, Fay Weldon's passion, and Edna O'Brian's positionality; nevertheless, Fitzgerald contributes in her own way to feminism's fundamental objective — raising the reader's awareness of patriarchy and women's subjugation.

### **Gender, Identity, and Writing**

In terms of the impact of feminism, Fitzgerald's literary career evokes the questioning of the place of a female writing subject — 'the daughter of educated men' who earns her living by reading and writing — in relation to the nation as well as in relation to the family. This implication is most pointedly offered in a passionate declaration from Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*:

[A]s a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.<sup>55</sup>

Woolf here incisively points out the ambiguous relation of women to the idea of a shared country. She argues that women have historically been outsiders, adrift from mainstream society, and the so-called 'our country' does not legitimise nor acknowledge the role women have played. Woolf argues that because the woman is not recognised as a subject within the plural 'we' of national identity, she, in turn, will not recognise such identity. What then is England to Penelope Fitzgerald? What does it mean to her to be English? And how does she approach

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<sup>54</sup> David Bradley, 'Novelist Alice Walker: Telling the Black Woman's Story,' in *New York Times Magazine* (8 January 1984), pp.25-37, p.35.

<sup>55</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth, 1952), p.197.



the issue of a public (social) identity Woolf found so difficult to deal with as a woman writer?

Regarding the significance, or relation, of nationality to a woman writer, Fitzgerald quite resolutely considers nationality as ‘simply a fact of your existence, which you must accept.’<sup>56</sup> Woolf’s indignation is directly related to her marginalised position in relation to education, legal rights and social acknowledgement, issues which had been redressed and improved in Fitzgerald’s generation. The indignation Woolf disclosed, therefore, has more or less worn off and been replaced by a resignation that deems nationality as part of one’s humanity. In approaching the issue of public/social identity which Woolf in the early twentieth century found infuriating, Fitzgerald — not just an educated man’s daughter, but herself an educated woman — explains Woolf’s lack of such an identity as the result of inadequate social participation. In Fitzgerald’s words:

Virginia Woolf never went to university, and she never took a job [...] and she never had children — and in all these things she had to compare herself with her sister. This is what I think made it difficult for her to settle on a public identity. She had to create the structure for her own life.<sup>57</sup>

Here Fitzgerald appears to suggest that experiences involving the social and interpersonal spheres, such as education, work, and child-rearing, prepares the individual to be a subject of complete nationhood. Indisputably, social experiences do contribute to the construction of one’s subjectivity, and it is indeed with regard to socialisation — the invisible permeation of social, experiential, and ideological structuration — that Fitzgerald diverges from the passion and purposefulness of active feminist writers.

If gender and identity are overlapping realms difficult for Woolf to negotiate due to her lack of recognised social womanhood, Fitzgerald, on the

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<sup>56</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 10.

<sup>57</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 10.

contrary, finds herself engaging with them in real life as in writing. In terms of subjectivity, gender, and discourse, Fitzgerald handles the identity crisis — often prominently pronounced by feminist novelists — with a calm, dispassionate yet occasionally humorous style of writing, whose tonality distinguishes her from the assertive voice of feminism. It could be argued that by taking up a characteristically English style of writing — i.e., understatement, humour, for example — Fitzgerald textually represents the kind of woman writer who ‘internalise’ the already prevalent writing technique, and therefore presents a case which, in Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own*, is categorised as ‘the feminine phase’ — a phase in which women writers conform to dominant male artistic norms and aesthetic standards.

It is tempting to yield to a reading of Fitzgerald’s fiction as internalising the gender-specific attributes of male English writing. Fitzgerald’s cultural background in religion and literature effects a language previously reserved for the white, English, upper-middle class intellect. However, as Showalter observes that ‘the female literary tradition comes from the still-evolving relationships between women writers and their society’, what Fitzgerald’s fiction demonstrates is the intricate manifestation of various literary traditions at work rather than a compliant writing of conformity.<sup>58</sup> Gender politics, which since the 1960s has figured so largely in contemporary fiction, is evident in Fitzgerald’s novels. Married couples and people in relationships often take on the roles of protagonists in her works, and the author also elaborates from time to time upon the obstacles, frustrations and delusions occurring in any such relationship. In addition, many of her novels are in effect women-centred — in Fitzgerald’s own opinion — such as *The Bookshop*, *Offshore*, and *Human Voices*.<sup>59</sup> The politics of gender is present in the novels, however textually equivocal it is. And quite possibly Fitzgerald’s evasiveness in addressing this issue signifies both her, and the society’s, reticence about the

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<sup>58</sup> Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1978), p.12.

<sup>59</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 18.



possibility of remedy. Although Fitzgerald is sympathetic to feminism, she does not wish to tint her stories with an oppositional, accusing perspective. In one letter, the novelist speaks of her opinion of feminism:

My mother was a suffragette though not an activist and I have every sympathy with the history of the movements and the failure of organised labour to support them. But the liberation movement of the 60's was followed by fragmentation and disillusionment of all kinds.<sup>60</sup>

Fitzgerald does not see sexual difference as a reason sufficient enough to engross her as textual representation. Instead, her preoccupation is made explicit in her own words,

I'm only concerned *not* with the difference between men and women, but the difference between body and soul (which is what I am writing about in *The Gate of Angels*) and between those human beings who, however good their intentions, will always be defeated by the world as it is now, and those who will flourish, though perhaps not for ever.<sup>61</sup>

Fitzgerald's selection of subject matter, for instance, reflects her attitude, which noticeably distinguishes her from other women novelists publishing more or less at the same time. Rosalind Coward, in her essay 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', carefully addresses feminism's self-imposed limitation under the all-inclusive umbrella of the women's movement, publishing, and media. Coward objects to an indiscriminate crowning of woman-centred fiction as feminist:

it is to be regretted that [...] to describe experience typical of woman was sufficient to justify calling that account 'feminist'.<sup>62</sup>

Coward's suggestion that a feminist reading should question the institutions of reading, the practices of writing, and the production of a text, and that woman-centred writings should not necessarily be equated with feminist writings, throws light on a questionable fallacy that either over-stretches or restricts the applicability

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<sup>60</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 17.

<sup>61</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication I [18 November 1994], question 21.

<sup>62</sup> Rosalind Coward, 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago, 1986), pp.225-239, p. 237.

of feminism. I agree with Coward here, and I think the same logic is valid in reverse: it is also to be regretted if feminist critics accuse women writers of treason, or insensibility, because these writers prefer to stay outside a circumscribed feminist orbit. The relationship a woman writer has with feminism is a matter of controversy and is indicative of the divergent concerns and approaches within such a broad framework. I believe Penelope Fitzgerald's reservation about her novels being read within a feminist framework rests not on her suspicion of feminism, but on her apprehension of such a misused strategy that takes an antagonistic stance. Fitzgerald says,

I think you feel increasingly sorry for people as you get older, you can't help it. I always think women are born feeling sorry for people [...]  
Yet modern women's literature paints such a depressing picture of being a woman. I wonder if things are *quite* as bad as that?<sup>63</sup>

Fitzgerald's remark — profuse with sympathy towards humankind, regardless of sexual differences — expresses not her detachment with feminism, but her different positionality within a much broader liberal feminism. In terms of coping with daily chores and social belonging, Fitzgerald recognises the plight of women; moreover, she also understands what men have got to go through on their own account. Talking about the women characters in her fiction, Fitzgerald explains that some are battlers, while some are ready to give in from the start. As she clarifies,

[A]ll of them, men and women, are likely to be victims, in danger of extermination by human society as it is because they can't come to terms with it.<sup>64</sup>

This opinion shows that the novelist is fully conscious of the straitjacket effect for *both* men and women in a patriarchal society; and her realisation is definitely not from a mind that, with all readiness, internalises and conforms to a gender-biased

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<sup>63</sup> Maureen Cleave, 'Maureen Cleave meets Penelope Fitzgerald', in *Over 21* (February 1980), pp.28-29, p.28.

<sup>64</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication II [1 January 1995], question 3.



semiotics. This liberalism, not specifically tied to the female cause, is also the root of Woolf's purposeful feminism. Speaking of women's marginalised position to a group of upper-middle-class women, the so-called 'educated men's daughters and wives', Woolf asserts that her claim is no claim of women's rights only; instead, it is 'larger and deeper': 'a claim for the rights of all — all men and women'.<sup>65</sup>

Not all women novelists choose to make their fiction sites of feminist polemics, just as not all female critics take up an oppositional stance against the establishment politics. Nina Baym, in her celebrated 'The madwoman and her language' (1984), offers an insightful critique of the importance of writing that does not profess a feminist politics yet is not the least anti-/un-feminist. She attacks *écriture féminine* for holding the view that women's un-subjugated consciousness — silenced by the speech of patriarchy — can only be revalorised by the articulation of a 'feminine language'. 'Women', in Baym's words,

are not resigning themselves to silence and nonspeech; we cannot afford to, and as we enter the public arena in increasing numbers we are not silent, and we do not (publicly) scream. Wishing to speak *to effect*, we use rational sequential discourse and, evidently, we use it well. Have we, then, chosen to become *men*?<sup>66</sup>

In deciding to utilise a conservative language and not disseminating political correctness, has Fitzgerald, then, become an anti-feminist apathetic towards the plight of women?

In terms of positionality and purposefulness, as an educated woman from a highly cultivated background and a materially self-reliant career and family woman, Fitzgerald's approach to feminism is definitely different from that of the Victorian and Edwardian suffragettes and the feminists of the 1970s and 80s.

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<sup>65</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p.185.

<sup>66</sup> Nina Baym, 'The madwoman and her language: why I don't do feminist literary theory', in *Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Robyn R. Warhol, and Diane Price Herndl (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp.278-292, p.283. In this essay Baym engages the issue of the gap between feminist theory and practice. She objects to the metaphor of madwoman as a figure for female authors, rejects the notion of an *écriture féminine*, and disputes psychoanalytic assumptions.



Baym's point, therefore, suggests an invaluable strategic point for women writers and critics who are difficult to categorise in distinct feminist jargon. It reminds us that, just as feminism originates from women's historical submissiveness, oppositional thoughts in regards to gender issues cannot be considered to exist only within feminism. Somewhere else in an essay studying the absence of women writers in theories of American fiction, Baym addresses the same problem of why feminist literary theory cannot do justice to women writers who are not politically committed feminist. She argues that the limitation of theories — of which feminist literary criticism is certainly one — is prone to an anachronistic judgement. In Baym's words,

[G]ender-related restrictions that do not arise out of the cultural realities contemporary with the writing woman, but out of later critical theories ... impose their concerns anachronistically, after the fact, on an earlier period.<sup>67</sup>

Baym does not speak from an anti-feminist stance, rather, it is an antitheory and antitotalising position which, in my view, many women writers including Penelope Fitzgerald share.

In terms of the intricacy revolving around gender, writing, and subjectivity, feminist critics are quick to point out that literature reinforces and promotes social norms while also providing a forum where social experience can be worked through and to some extent collectively possessed. This attitude is succinctly put in Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*:

Literature does not merely constitute a self-referential and metalinguistic system, as some literary theorists believe, but it is also a medium which can profoundly influence individual and cultural self-understanding in the sphere of everyday life, charting the changing

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<sup>67</sup> Nina Baym, 'Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors', in *American Quarterly*, Vol. 33 (1981), pp.123-139. Quoted from Patrocínio P. Schweickart, 'Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading', in *Feminism: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, eds. Warhol, and Herndl, pp.609-634, p.620.



preoccupations of social groups through symbolic fictions by which they make sense of experience.<sup>68</sup>

Many critics share with Felski the view that literature ought to be seen as a site where both practical ideology — accepted representations, images and modes of action — and new interpretative possibilities can be negotiated, contested and imagined.

The classic feminist maxim that epitomises Felski's stance is Simone de Beauvoir's well-known proposition: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.' De Beauvoir's remark offers an enabling distinction between natural and culturally defined identity, between biological sex and socially recognised gender.<sup>69</sup> Judith Butler extends de Beauvoir's formulation by focusing on the ambiguity of 'becoming' as both 'being constructed' and 'constructing oneself'.<sup>70</sup> Butler's formulaic extension calls forth a positive positionality akin to what Nina Baym has addressed. That is to say, women writers can *unashamedly* situate themselves within a literary tradition, perceiving their use of this conventional language in positive light as 'working-from-inside'.

On the other hand, the importance of feminist literary theory is that it provides a dynamic theorem to treat literature as an important cultural site of gender construction, by way of analysing women writers' negotiation of generic forms and strategies as a process of gendered cultural choice. In investigating the inter-connection between gender, writing, and subjectivity, Carol Watts, in her 'Releasing possibility into form', contends that women writers inevitably take up a gendered cultural politics while settling down into generic implications.<sup>71</sup> In

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<sup>68</sup> Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p.7.

<sup>69</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p.69.

<sup>70</sup> Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender', in *Feminism as Critique*, eds. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), pp.128-142.

<sup>71</sup> Carol Watts, 'Releasing possibility into form: cultural choice and the woman writer', in *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992), p.83-102.



Watts's view, the recent renewal of interest in the question of women's authorship and its relation to literary form suggests that generic formal constraints might relate to the ways 'in which women writers and readers engage with their gendered identity'.<sup>72</sup>

Both Watts and Judith Butler argue that a writing woman only 'becomes' a woman writer when she participates in a 'tacit project to renew a cultural history', and their point is helpful in elucidating Fitzgerald's view of writing as a project.<sup>73</sup> As a writer, Fitzgerald participates in a similar cultural historical project, though she prefers to be viewed in her own right rather than in terms of gender, style, and political view — which is arguably only another way to relate to a specific identity. Cultural history for Fitzgerald is one that is institutionalised and canonised. Her novels of England pay tribute to those who endeavour to preserve an English heritage in various institutions such as museums, bookshops, the media, and theatres. She chooses to write about her own experiences as a woman associating with those cultural institutions, and her act of choosing — in the view of Butler and Watts — is an important means of 'coming-to-consciousness' of her gendered position as a writing subject in society and culture.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, as Watts points out, critical reconsideration of realism, in response to a feminist critique of literary forms, is 'itself part of a wider attempt to rework our understanding of the social mediation of generic forms and strategies'.<sup>75</sup> The outcome of Fitzgerald's 'understanding of the social mediation of generic forms and strategies' is demonstrated in her utilisation of the novel of manners, which is largely considered as a feminine literary genre.

The use of impersonality, for Virginia Woolf, signals a symbolic entry for a woman writer into the public sphere. With this impersonal voice the woman writer speaks not merely as a woman about her gender, but as a writer conferring her view

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<sup>72</sup> Watts, 'Releasing possibility into form', p.84.

<sup>73</sup> Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender', p. 131.

<sup>74</sup> Watts, 'Releasing possibility into form', p.86.

<sup>75</sup> Watts, 'Releasing possibility into form', p.88.



through her gender. In 'Women and Fiction', Woolf welcomes the turn to the impersonal in women's writing:

The change which has turned the English woman from a nondescript influence, fluctuating and vague, to a voter, a wage-earner, a responsible citizen, has given her both in her life and in her art a turn towards the impersonal. Her relations now are not only emotional; they are intellectual, they are political.<sup>76</sup>

The use of the impersonal voice, for women writers, thus suggests a newly enfranchised social status by enabling them to 'look beyond the personal and political'.<sup>77</sup>

Fitzgerald's social class — derived from her clerical and intellectual background — is one element that draws her into the Establishment. Yet her position of writing inside, with, and for Establishment values does not cancel out the gendered politics exhibited in her works as a whole. Fitzgerald's works are marked by metaphysical rootedness in the liberal humanist tradition of English literature of the pre-1970s, which was the collective intellectual tradition. As I have discussed earlier, this tradition, made manifest in Fitzgerald's literary career and novels, is more concerned with what vigorous literary institutions — such as Cambridge and *Scrutiny* — called 'Life studies', and less with the social function of literature from an openly oppositional stance. The educational perception of literature in the 1930s was marked by a moral and missionary attitude, which, by straining for unity intended to demystify literature, symbolically reconstructed it.<sup>78</sup> This accounts for the tonal inconclusiveness of Fitzgerald's works whenever the novelist touches socio-politically sensitive points. The issue of gendered subjectivity, then, in Fitzgerald's case, is of more significance in the sense that, by being dissociated from perspectives of political deliberation, Fitzgerald's literary

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<sup>76</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Women and Fiction', in *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, ed. Michele Barrett (London: Women Press, 1979), p.43-52, p.50.

<sup>77</sup> Woolf, 'Women and Fiction', p.51.

<sup>78</sup> Peter Barry, 'Theory before "theory" — liberal humanism', in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp.11-38



career can be seen to inaugurate a cultural politics that enables her to become a recognised novelist in a man's world.

The complexity of the issue of identity covers various interrelated factors of class, race, and gender. 'Englishness' is an intricate, slippery notion, especially when it specifies a national identity. National identity is constructed through a process of inclusion and exclusion, in which certain groups — and the characteristics and values associated with them — come to stand for the nation as a whole at the expense of other groups, who are either placed outside, or rewritten and defined as secondary. Through the agency of key political, social and cultural institutions and their effort to reinvent tradition, this process is effected and reproduced in culture. But to attribute the manufacture of a common culture solely to the working of key institutions is somewhat narrow.

Antony Easthope, in 'Writing and English national identity,' points out that the obstacle to analysing English national culture and identity arises firstly from a prejudice which tends to employ a vulgar Marxist approach to read nationalism as 'a hegemonic deception organised by the ruling class in order to mask its own power' and 'an exercise in class domination'. Secondly it arises from the notion of the nation as an imagined community. A third difficulty lies in the dismissal of discourse, culture and identity as 'outside serious discussion'.<sup>79</sup> What Easthope suggests is that we approach national identity in terms of materials produced through institutions, practices and traditions, and also through narrative and discourses. To see a national culture and identity as an imposed artefact is an oversimplification, for it is also spontaneously lived and supported. The correlation between discourse and subjectivity is exemplified in the genre of autobiography, in

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<sup>79</sup> Antony Easthope, 'Writing and English national identity', in *Contemporary Writing & National Identity*, eds. Tracey Hill and William Hughes (Bath: Sulis Press, 1995), pp.146-157, p.147, 148. This opinion recognises economic, social and political forces as real, but discredits discourse and culture.



which one reconfigures one's memories to gain a sense of individual identity.

Similarly, the correlation is applicable to a larger, national scale. Easthope writes,

[T]he national narrative recalls past events for us so we may imagine a future which confers an identity on us in the present. I participate in a national culture to the extent that I identify myself as a subject of the national narrative.<sup>80</sup>

Beyond all question, the national narrative is continuously contested, and the emergence of various and varied versions of the national narrative is to be expected. Although Fitzgerald's novels confirm many stereotypical features of 'Englishness', a glimpse into her genealogical background reveals the problematic side of a totalising conceptualisation of 'Englishness'. None of Fitzgerald's names — her married name 'Fitzgerald' and maiden name 'Knox' — point to an uncomplicated 'Englishness'. Her husband and ancestors came from Ireland. Five generations back, Fitzgerald's family were landed settlers in Ulster. Besides, her family history shows that there was significant involvement of the family with the Empire's colonial past. Her grandfathers, great grandfathers and even great great grandfather all had lived in Britain's former colonies, as sugar plantation owners in the West Indies, and as missionaries in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>81</sup> In terms of religious outlook, her family history encompasses a catholic range of Christian sects: Anglican, Presbyterian, Evangelical, and even Quaker. Two of her uncles entered the priesthood, one Anglican, the other Roman Catholic. It is a curious revelation that what lies behind the quintessentialism of Fitzgerald's acclaimed 'Englishness' is not a pure pedigree English genealogy, but one fraught with the implications of cultural assimilation and fragmented identity.

The few years Fitzgerald spent reading literature in Somerville, Oxford, provide possible cultivation grounds for her multivalent perspective on identity, as women in higher education in the late 1930s benefited from integration, yet on the

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<sup>80</sup> Easthope, 'Writing and English national identity', p.151.

<sup>81</sup> Penelope Fitzgerald, *The Knox Brothers* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p.15.



other hand still suffered from constraints of various kinds. Much of the dissident pathos in *The Gate of Angels* epitomises the predicaments women faced as regards education and gender bias. It also reverberates through the novelist's life-long perspective formed in those years, on top of the influence of her mother's earlier experience as a Somervillian herself. Higher education for women in Victorian Britain was largely middle-class oriented. It is in *The Gate of Angels* that Fitzgerald most evidently shows her sympathies towards the cause of women.

Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, various regional councils, such as the North of England Council for Promoting the Higher Education of Women, organised and offered extra-mural lectures and classes to women who wished to expand their house-bound education. In 1878 London University opened admission to women; and in other provincial areas, civic universities and Scottish universities were already practitioners of co-education. Somerville College was established in 1879 to offer higher education to women.<sup>82</sup> However, it was not until 1910 that the existence of women students in Oxford was officially acknowledged, and not until 1920 that Oxford women students were granted degrees and full university membership. The five 'women's societies' established in Oxford between 1879 and 1893 became full colleges of the university only in 1959, while Cambridge delayed full membership and degrees admission to its women students until 1948.<sup>83</sup>

Somerville was strongly supportive of the Suffrage Movement during the early twentieth century. Pauline Adams's official history of the college records

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<sup>82</sup> Somerville College began to admit male students, and has become a mixed college since 1993.

<sup>83</sup> Older English universities — like Oxford, Cambridge, London (established in 1836) and Durham (established in 1832) and the four Scottish universities — were slow in granting women right of education. In comparison, civic universities springing up during the turn of the twentieth century were offering education to women, and are of crucial importance in national history and the development of British social life. Old universities, instead of awarding degrees, designed an alternative of awarding certificates to women who attended classes. Among many accounts, Carol Dyhouse offers a thorough history of the relationship between women and higher education in *No Distinction of Sex? Women in British Universities 1870-1939* (London: UCL Press, 1995). Pauline Adams's *Somerville for Women: An Oxford College 1979-1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) is the official chronicle of Somerville College and charts the development of Somerville from a ladies' hall in the late nineteenth century, to a mixed college from 1993.



that, by 1910, three quarters of the College's current students were members of the Somerville Women's Suffrage Society.<sup>84</sup> The characteristic, as well as tradition, of Somerville lies in its non-conformity, which is shown in the non-sectarian character of college prayers and services right from the inception of the college.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, none of its principals were ever content with shaping their students into mere amateur gentlewomen. Somerville had principals who actively campaigned for the admission of women to degrees, and who, unlike in other ladies' colleges, insisted that women should seek membership of the university on terms of equality with men. Adams observes that Somerville's distinctiveness is more than a matter of gender, and notes that the non-denominational status of the college

distanced it at the outset from a university establishment which remained, for many years after the abolition of religious tests in 1871, overwhelmingly Anglican and clerical.<sup>86</sup>

This is not to say that Somerville is an irreligious college. Rather, by tradition it allows more room for non-conformist thought as well as religions. Somerville also enjoys a strong meritocratic tradition which, in Adams's words, 'helps explain why social divisions have tended to be less marked than at some other colleges.' The dissident dimension of the college's political spirit is explicit in the sense that 'many of its early supporters and benefactors were convinced and active Liberals'.<sup>87</sup> In a personal communication Fitzgerald describes her own political stand as Liberal. Although she laments that the type of political party that shares

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<sup>84</sup> Adams, *Somerville for Women*, p.79.

<sup>85</sup> *The History of the University of Oxford* notes that Somerville, since its establishment, has had a strong association with university liberalism. Also, over a third of Somerville's students in the early twentieth century were nonconformists. The college had no chapel until its governing body, in the face of some opposition, accepted a benefaction in 1932 to build an undenominational house of prayer for all peoples. Brian Harrison, ed., *The History of the University of Oxford: The Twentieth Century*, p.346.

<sup>86</sup> Adams, *Somerville for Women*, p. 352.

<sup>87</sup> Adams, *Somerville for Women*, p. 355, 358. Adams also notes that Somerville is a fertile ground for international politicians, among whom the best known are Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi.



her belief has disappeared in England, her commitment in Liberalism, as she quotes from the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*,

springs from a vision of society as composed of individuals (rather than, for instance, of classes) and of their liberty as the primary social good. This liberty is to be defended in such rights as those to free political institutions, religious practices, intellectual and artistic expression.<sup>88</sup>

Somerville's role within Oxford in the first half of the twentieth century suggests that its women students, including Fitzgerald, internalise a precarious, double-sided identity. A Somervillian in the late 1930s — or anyone from a women's college in an ancient university before full membership is granted — had a different Oxford tradition and identity compared to their male counterparts. Although physically she was in Oxford, yet metaphorically she was only with, rather than in, the male-centred Oxford intellectual scene. Viewing her literary career as a whole and the development of her fiction, Fitzgerald gathers many contradictory positions and situations into her writing, which on the one hand advertises a conspicuous conservatism and establishment values, and on the other hand suggests otherwise through passages of hidden implication. The contradiction is political, not through the author's active gesture of gathering, but through her refusal to conform to any stifling category.

The contradiction between Fitzgerald's politically uninvolved novels and herself as a cultural participant lies in the way she formally and textually structures her novels. The complexity of a single reading of Fitzgerald's novels is compounded not only by the major textual focalisation accommodated by the narrator/presumed author, but also by the refusal of a dominant conceptualisation. Bakhtin's view of the novel helps to further illustrate the dissident elements in Fitzgerald's works. Where there is a plurality of positions which are not obviously unified, then we have a more *dialogic* or plural text which does not seek to impose

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<sup>88</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 1.



a single world view or ideology.<sup>89</sup> For Bakhtin, one of the things which sets the novel apart from many other literary genres is its ability to incorporate the most disparate elements from human life and experience itself. What distinguishes the novel is the heterogeneity of its ancestry, a heterogeneity that Bakhtin has argued is mirrored in the variety of individualized voices. For Bakhtin, the novel's flexibility and fluidity in incorporating different voices prevents it from being nailed to any system of fixed generic characteristics.

Fitzgerald's novels resist a monologic reading, which readily embraces surface thematic concerns at the cost of narrative intertextuality, where the dialogic is located. The monologic theme in *Innocence*, for instance, invites the reader to follow the major plot of an eventful love affair, and thus suppresses the projection of the other seemingly slight episodes. The intertextuality of *Innocence*, on the other hand, directs the reader to the legend of the amputated girl, and to the deathbed of the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci. The dialogic therefore negotiates between the past and the present, history and fact, fiction and documentary. Or take *The Blue Flower*, where the monologic is the illogicality of love depicted in the naive twelve-year-old Sophie as a mystifying love-object for the young romantic poet Novalis. The dialogic dimension of this fiction questions the boundaries between ideality and reality, between biography and fiction, between the novel as a whole and its fragmentation as a loosely connected collection of episodes.

The monologic dimension of Fitzgerald's literary career, in short, may appear to be one of conformity and 'Englishness', her affirmative response to a circumscribed national discourse of rhetoric and identity. Yet its dialogic aspect rests on the novelist's suspicion of any ideological dogmatism, and her willingness to explore —albeit within particular limits— a line of dissent. The doubleness of her writing means that the novelist can be writing about high-minded metaphysics

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<sup>89</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holoquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holoquist (Austin: Texas University Press, 1981).



and secular minutiae both at the same time. She can also write an authority-weary scepticism into her novels which are then praised for their ‘Englishness’. She can write about feminism but not be proclaimed feminist, and provide a critique of class displacement under a pastoral guise. By supplying an anti-Establishment, alternative text beneath the surface level of conformity, Fitzgerald’s dissident undercurrents have effected a perspective of intellectual scepticism that controverts her fiction’s authoritative ‘Englishness’. What is ironic in interpreting Fitzgerald’s writing exclusively in terms of conformity is that the conspicuousness of Fitzgerald’s voice of dissent — hitherto overlooked under the prescriptive terms of ‘Englishness’ — is perfectly understandable, given her commitment to the kind of social liberalism, akin to Fabianism, which is itself a non-conformist, oppositional stance *within* the political mainstream. The definition Fitzgerald gives for her kind of liberal humanism — one that ‘has disappeared in this country’ — juxtaposes coherently a quietened political voice with the novelist’s refusal of explicit categorisation.<sup>90</sup> As far as her fiction is concerned, Fitzgerald’s writing breaks the boundaries between realism and postmodernism, between an upper-middle class writing stance and a subject matter of lower-middle class life, between acquiescence and subversiveness. This challenge, in short, is an examination of the centre/margin polarity perceived by Fitzgerald herself, as one who has experienced the passage between the mainstream and the margins.

Refusing to adopt a single voice for her novels and overstepping the limitations of party-political line or specific ideology, Fitzgerald offers the possibility of a communication at which ‘all politics stop and begin’.<sup>91</sup> According to Jean-Luc Nancy, such limits are those constituting the possibility of communication itself, which, in turn, are the means by which we determine ourselves as community and therefore exercise an internal, and often implicitly

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<sup>90</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 1.

<sup>91</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.80.



political, critique of our cultures.<sup>92</sup> 'England', in the narrative of the past, is not a fact of nature, nor a given thing unchanged for a thousand years, but the product of a fractured, divisive and often violent history.

Chapter Five has proposed to read against the sense of conformity of Fitzgerald's writing by elucidating the novelist's characterisation of class, power and gender. Its objective is to exploit the referential arbitrariness of a prescribed national identity, and read against her fiction's 'Englishness' her dissident engagement with socio-political critique. In terms of her fiction's political dimension, Fitzgerald's dissenting approach to her narratives of national identity is shown in her political scepticism, which questions the nature of power and the abuse of political authority.

In terms of appropriating the pastoral mode, Fitzgerald's novels are different in that they do not construct a myth of England by investing in 'country-house fiction' ideas of ownership of the land and the heritage of rural England. Fitzgerald's reappropriation of pastoral's elementary themes discloses a sense of stagnation, victimisation, and alienation — a translation of the characters' social immobility. Her novels provide a record of the tensions and difficulties facing those in the transitory phases between landscapes and classes. The novelist's disillusioned perception of the post-industrial human condition, together with a realisation of social transformation — its pluralism and contrast, its centre and margins, the conflict between the human subjects and their respective environments — brings about a complex pastoral longing in her novels.

As a female English writer living in England, Fitzgerald has to negotiate between issues of subjecthood and nationhood. She attempts a bridging of the more pronounced demarcation between the private and the public spheres, and seeks as a literary writer a place of her own, among a previously and still largely

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<sup>92</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p.80.

male-centred field of contemporary literature. Fitzgerald's writing brings together 'Englishness' and foreignness, fuses Establishment literature and sceptical readings, combines genres and voices yet maintains a discernible separation. Through different aspects of reading — reading the issue of conformity, reading Fitzgerald's novels as political satire and social critique — this chapter maintains that Fitzgerald's fiction can be seen as internalising a dissident scepticism that gently defies ideological conformity. Fitzgerald neither uncritically embraces the new, nor holds on blindly to the old. Rather, she negotiates between the two, and it is through this process of negotiation that she finds a space for her own writing in both the contemporary and the canonical contexts.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION:

### A VOICE OF RESTRAINT

The complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions — traditions, institutions, and formations — but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements.  
--- Raymond Williams<sup>1</sup>

#### 6.1) FITZGERALD'S LITERARY CAREER

##### **Writing within the Establishment: Tradition and the Nation**

Raymond Williams, writing in 1975 about the social character of television, comments on the discursive matrices between technology, consumerism, hegemony, and culture.<sup>2</sup> Tony Bennett uses 'cultural technologies' to elucidate William's argument. 'Cultural technologies', in Bennett's words, are

specific combinations of technical, economic, semiotic and ideological conditions and effects — which, alongside other technologies (religious, educational), play a significant role in producing, monitoring and deploying specific forms of social individuality [...]<sup>3</sup>

Benedict Anderson, in 'Apprehensions of time', observes that cultural forms such as cinema, fiction, newspaper, and television have been exploited to make possible an imagining of the nation, and hence the impersonation of a national identity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Dominant, Residual, and Emergent', in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.121-127, p.121.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, ed. Ederyn Williams (London: Routledge, 1975), pp.135-152.

<sup>3</sup> Tony Bennett, ed., 'Introduction', in *Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.1-8, p.6.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, 'Apprehensions of time', in *Popular Fiction*, ed. Tony Bennett (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.70-80.

Bennett, in his synopsis of Anderson's essay, offers the phrase — 'the cultural instruments of nationing' — to register 'particular ways of imagining the unity, continuity and identity of a nation' through 'the interacting network of cultural forms and technologies'.<sup>5</sup> Fiction is complicit in 'nationing' a literary identity insofar as literary conventions, traditional perspectives, and canonicity are concerned. This is particularly true in the perception of Fitzgerald's writings, which — with its association with the Booker Prize as a 'cultural form' — demonstrates the shift of cultural margin/centre in the re-structuration of contemporary British fiction.

This study has attempted to investigate the paradoxical success of Penelope Fitzgerald's literary achievement. Though categorized as a contemporary novelist, there is a sense of remoteness in Fitzgerald's works that denies a 'contemporary' reader's expectation of a 'contemporary' work. The questions at stake then are more than the feasibility, and arbitrariness, of literary periodisation; they concern the formation and dissemination of literary taste, the relationship between a writer and her socio-intellectual contexts, and, crucially, the volatile nature of culture and its impact upon, or interference with, both the practice and reception of literary writing. I have argued that the paradox of Fitzgerald's literary recognition — her unfamiliarity as a much-acclaimed novelist — ought to be seen as a consequence of these factors.

The stated aim of this study is to engage with Fitzgerald's fiction by way of exploring the issues of literary canon-formation, and the relationship between identity and strategies of writing. Throughout, I have contended that Fitzgerald's literary success ought to be viewed against Britain's political conservatism during the 1970s and 80s, whose insistence on tradition, conservation, and sovereignty is seen to have underpinned the reception of Fitzgerald's fiction exclusively for its 'Englishness' of language and sensibility. Moreover, the establishment and

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<sup>5</sup> Bennett, 'Introduction', in *Popular Fiction*, p.61-68, p.63.



accomplishment of the Booker Prize during its first two decades need to be examined in this context of political conservatism. The rise of the Booker — with its attachment to the persuasiveness of the cultural industry — is further evidence of the formation of a contemporary British literary canon, and a literary nationhood, through the modulated voice of ‘Englishness’.

Part One examined Fitzgerald’s fiction as a ‘cultural instrument of nationing’. Chapter Two addressed the literary anachronism of Fitzgerald’s fiction in contemporary reception, by identifying her writing with postwar English fiction. I have argued that postwar novelists’ preoccupation with social realism, and moral and religious issues, is predominant in Fitzgerald’s works. In terms of theme and attitude, the ‘Englishness’ of Fitzgerald’s literary sensibility lies in her prevailing absorption with the problem between God and humanity. Fitzgerald’s works are marked for their unpretentious moral seriousness. *Offshore*, *Human Voices* and *The Beginning of Spring* are concerned with just how futile attempts to control life may be, by portraying how people are thrown together or torn apart by significant social and political events, as well as by insignificant personal decisions. In *The Golden Child* we find Fitzgerald interrogating the nature of art, and in *The Bookshop* this interrogation is expanded to accommodate the novelist’s satirical scepticism about the institutional control of art. *At Freddie’s*, *The Gate of Angels*, and *Innocence* can be read as fictive illumination of the audacity of human will, of the withering of individuality under external interference, and of the danger of wilfulness. Fitzgerald’s humanist concerns are informed by her immersion in Christianity, in the sense that human fortitude — presented compassionately, humorously and in opposition to the reasoning mind — is the constant refrain of her subject matter. Fitzgerald’s fiction internalizes the old preoccupations of the English novel with custom, humanity, and morality. It shows, as Margaret Crosland all too briefly observes in her mention of Fitzgerald’s fiction, ‘a



fascination with all that is most hypocritical but fortunately comical in English middle-class life — awareness of class and the snobbery it entails.’<sup>6</sup>

Written in the language of mimetic realism, Fitzgerald’s novels are noted for their truthful representation and penchant for minute detail. The ‘Englishness’ of Fitzgerald’s literary language, as has been argued, rests on emphasizing the efficaciousness of restraint and concision, wit and humour. The element of comedy is imparted through irony, literary jokes, moments of farce and the characters’ own words. Take *The Beginning of Spring*, for instance. The Reids find themselves wrapped in a turmoil caused by the revolutionists’ protest, economic uncertainty, and worst of all, the disappearance of Nellie, the mother of three young children. As English expatriates in Moscow, the Reids are encountering formidable difficulties regarding their personal life, juxtaposed with those of the crippling old Russian empire. But Fitzgerald’s eye for the absurd removes the weight of the sense of impending predicament; instead she makes the portrayal of the fragile English community — the cigarette-smoking wife of the Anglican chaplain, the effeminate accountant who is a Tolstoyan and poet — into a vignette of inconsequence. Her fiction is balanced by a warm, consistent humour, and a wry affirmation of life as well as the tangled perplexities of the world. Fitzgerald’s reliance on the comic mode relieves the dismal impression of humanity’s unbearable frailty. Through humourising the epiphanic import of life’s triviality, the novelist successfully recounts life as tragic-comedy.

As literature can actualise an abstraction of ‘Englishness’, so can it transmit, or indoctrinate, a prescribed cultural sensibility crucial to the conservation of the imagined nation. In Chapter Three, I examined Fitzgerald’s non-fiction works — chiefly her literary reviews. My purpose there was to reach beyond Fitzgerald’s conventions of fiction writing, and make explicit the existence of an Establishment view unconsciously embodied in the convention of literary

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Crosland, *Beyond the Lighthouse: English Women Novelists in the Twentieth Century* (London: Constable, 1981,) p.216.



reviewing, the practice of which recently has taken up most of Fitzgerald's writing time. Fitzgerald's conformity to the canon also, and most evidently, shows in her book reviews and non-fictional writing. In terms of critical perspective, Fitzgerald's biographies illustrate a universalizing humanist approach which equates biographical and historical details with truth and knowledge. In her role as a literary critic, Fitzgerald's reviewing work reflects the legacy of the missionary view of literature, an attitude dating back to Matthew Arnold and the tradition of literary studies in England, especially in the ancient universities.

The relationship between Fitzgerald and the literary canon is one of uneasy compliance. The manifestation of the literary canon she presents in her literary works is the canon which she grew up in and was trained by. The literary tradition Fitzgerald carries from her character-formative years, a tradition belonging to a white, upper-middle class literati, is frequently construed as the national tradition. In relation to this conflation, the favourable perception of Fitzgerald as an 'English' English novelist is indicative of a narrow nationalism. The need to define literary traditions in national terms might in itself be taken as evidence of cultural insecurity — an exercise in using the past to cement an uncertain present.

Secondly, a conformist view of Fitzgerald's employment of literary conservatism is problematized by the compounded issues of gender, class, and identity. The cultural conformity shown in Fitzgerald's literary works involves, as I have already discussed, principally the author's reappropriations of, and reconciliations with, the literary Establishment — which I maintain is a strategic exploitation of that establishment's conservatism. In this regard, questions arising from the uncertain present are seen to be dealt with in Fitzgerald's writing through a detour by way of the assured path of the past.

### Fitzgerald and the Postmodern Era

The fact that Fitzgerald's fiction is noted for a language of Englishness calls for an inquiry into the textual nature of *both* language and identity. Throughout the course of her literary career Fitzgerald has shown a resistance against being labelled: she prefers to be called neither a novelist of manners, a postmodernist, nor a feminist. However, the only label she has not been able to disown is that she is a novelist of 'Englishness'. On what grounds are Fitzgerald's novels-of-England defined as embodiments of Englishness, yet, for instance, John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1977) — also set in England and dealing with characteristic English mentality — is not? This label of 'Englishness' served successfully in the early stages of the novelist's career; yet, as contemporary British fiction is drawn to a range of broadened scopes, the 'Englishness' of Fitzgerald's writing tends to restrict, rather than bring to light, the multivalence of her fiction. The way to challenge the rather insular sounding and stereotyped 'Englishness' of Fitzgerald's fiction, as Part Two demonstrated, is to place the texts in the time they were written and explore the implication of their probable anachronism in the midst of late twentieth-century trends of thought and writing. By subverting the textual and stylistic Englishness of her works, we reveal the superficiality of a circumscribed image of the nation.

National identity is a problematic concept. Written from the metropolitan centre, Fitzgerald's fiction is largely read for the image of a geographical and linguistic England, and viewed as having provided an equation of literature and nation. Tracey Hill and William Hughes, talking about the intricacy of such a relation, comment on the fictional dimensions of national identity. In their words,

A nation's history *is* a fiction, a construction by means of which a nation appropriates its past in order to assert the coherence and stability of its nationhood.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Tracey Hill and William Hughes, eds., *Contemporary Writing & National Identity* (Bath: Sulis Press, 1995), p.2.



A similar opinion is also expressed in Homi Bhabha's seminal remark that the idea of a nation has — like a text — 'textual strategies, metaphoric displacements, subtexts and figurative stratagems'.<sup>8</sup> The opinion shared by these critics is that nation depends implicitly upon narration.

To interrogate the rhetoric of Englishness is to interrogate language and nationality as symbolic signification that can be written, erased, and rewritten. Ian Baucom, in *Out of Place*, cogently exposes the textuality of Englishness through a post-colonial perspective. Initiating his argument from a 1968 speech on British immigration policy — in which it was asserted that although a black man may be a British citizen, he can never be an Englishman — Baucom's book examines why such a claim was possible to advance and impossible to defend. He traces the emergence of Englishness within the institutions and experiences of the British Empire, which tends to conflate Englishness and Britishness. Emphasizing the English preoccupation with place, Baucom argues that the empire was 'less a place where England exerted control than where it lost command of its own identity'.<sup>9</sup> Baucom's point, though specifically referring to texts by writers from Britain's former colonies, is useful in making explicit England's ideological control in categorizing Fitzgerald's writing as narratives of Englishness. This exertion is accomplished, as I have argued, by stressing a circumscribed singularity of conformist values and overlooking the multiplicity of her engagement in narratives of dissent. It is my contention that Fitzgerald's covert negotiation with a contemporary intellectual critique of power — including postmodernism, feminism and class — discloses the clamorous accents beneath the superficial integrity of 'Englishness'.

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<sup>8</sup> Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Baucom, 'Locating English Identity', in *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp.3-40, p.3.



Andreas Huyssen, in his seminal essay, 'Mapping the Postmodern', suggests that we can discuss the postmodern as both an historical condition and as a particular style. 'Postmodernism,' Huyssen persuasively observes,

operates in a field of tension between tradition and innovation, conservation and renewal, mass culture and high art, in which the second terms are no longer automatically privileged over the first; a field of tension which can no longer be grasped in categories such as progress vs. reaction, Left vs. Right, present vs. past [...]<sup>10</sup>

My discussion of Fitzgerald's relation to postmodernism follows Huyssen's conceptualization. The ambiguous relationship between the postwar English novel and postmodernism is twofold. Firstly, the ongoing importance of realism in English writing reflects a cultural predisposition. English writers are generally less inclined to abandon realism entirely for experimentation. Secondly, as Lord and other critics have pointed out, a sense of reluctance 'on the part of the British critical establishment to embrace the term postmodernism to describe a particular strain of English literature' has also contributed to the false belief that contemporary English fiction shows a lack of postmodernist engagement.<sup>11</sup> The term as well as the discourse of Postmodernism may have originated in an American intellectual context; yet it should not be taken as suggesting that postmodernist fiction as constructed in America is replicated in Britain. Richard Todd, in 'The Presence of Postmodernism in British Fiction', focuses on 'stylistic proliferation and generic transformation' in the contemporary British novel. For Todd, the postmodern presence in contemporary British fiction is 'a complex and many-sided departure from straightforward naïve or mimetic realism' which responds to the problems highlighted by contemporary critical debate.<sup>12</sup> A similar

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<sup>10</sup> Andreas Huyssen, 'Mapping the Postmodern', in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp.234-277, p.237, 267.

<sup>11</sup> Geoffrey Lord, *Postmodernism and Notions of National Difference: A Comparison of Postmodern Fiction in Britain and America* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), p.10.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Todd, 'The Presence of Postmodernism in British Fiction: Aspects of Style and Selfhood', in *Approaching Postmodernism*, eds. Douwe Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984), pp.99-117, p. 105, 115.



view is shared by Malcolm Bradbury who in various sources considers literature in Britain to have been historically a combination of internationalism and realism, hence the trend of experimentation ought not to be seen as alien to English writing.

The postmodernism in Fitzgerald's fiction, as I have argued, can be investigated from two directions leading back to a configuration of the British equivalent of postmodernism. One is to illustrate the characteristics of postmodernist writing shown in Fitzgerald's fiction; and the other is to examine Fitzgerald's novels as a critique of postmodern intellectual concerns.

Postmodern fictions are recognizable for several features, among which the first is the element of intertextuality. The intertextual element most evident in Fitzgerald's fiction is found in *The Gate of Angels*, where (in chapter 17) Fitzgerald deliberately provides a ghost story reminiscent of those written by M. R. James.<sup>13</sup> The narrator of this seemingly ill-related episode in the novel is based on M. R. James himself; according to Fitzgerald, the inclusion of this imitation of a gothic ghost story is 'a tribute' to James, if nothing else.<sup>14</sup> Fitzgerald's later works are rich in terms of intertextuality; they deliberately incorporate heterogeneous sources and thus signal a contemporary, postmodernist perspective in literature that shifts playfully between genres and semiotic inferences.

The second feature of a postmodernist fiction is self-referentiality in narrative technique. Fitzgerald's later works have demonstrated this awareness of the fictive nature of language, its 'denaturalization' of the realist tradition. Fitzgerald's works can be placed within a broad postmodern rubric if consciousness of the role of language in fiction writing is taken as a postmodern hallmark. For Fitzgerald, the problematic nature of language in relation to representation is made apparent in her abandoning of lengthy dialogues between the characters, and in her substitution of dialogues with an intrusive narrator. The

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<sup>13</sup> Montague Rhodes James, 1862-1936, a Cambridge antiquarian famous for sharing his pastime — writing gothic ghost stories — with his students on Christmas occasions.

<sup>14</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication IV [3 June 1995].



narrative intervention in Fitzgerald's later works is shown in its overt emphasis on the narrating 'I' and the reading 'you'. This narrating I/you dependence signals a self-reflexive exposition of the power relations involved in the interaction of producers and receivers of text, leading to the questioning of what Roland Barthes contests as the notion of original and originating author. For Barthes, the original and originating author is the source of fixed meaning in the past, and he substitutes for it the idea of a textual 'Scriptor' who exists only at the time of the text and its reading.<sup>15</sup> This is when a single, closed work shifts to a plural, open text. For Barthes, within this textual I/you relation the reader is empowered to activate not just the literal, but also the contextual meaning.

The third postmodernist characteristic of Fitzgerald's fiction is what Peter Brookner in *Modernism/Postmodernism* identifies as 'irony' in the treatment of history.<sup>16</sup> For Fitzgerald, the past — in contrast to the present — provides unending interest. The shaping of a version of the past by way of a constructed English literary tradition is of central importance in maintaining a national/social culture as well as a common identity. Edward Said offers a perspective for viewing the remaking of history as a discourse:

The appropriation of history, the historicisation of the past, the narrativisation of society, all of which give the novel its force, including the accumulation and differentiation of social space, space to be used for social purposes.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas the modernist tries to destroy or forget the past, the postmodernist considers that the past must be revisited with irony. With her stories decidedly set in the immediate past, Fitzgerald's re-presentation of history and the past combines the use of comedy and the grotesque; and the outcome of this combination is an

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<sup>15</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), pp.142-145.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Brookner, *Modernism/Postmodernism* (London: Longman, 1992), p.227.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p.93.



ironic but sympathetic voice addressing the loss of the past and the paradoxical insignificance of history.

Umberto Eco explains the employment of irony as a double-voicing strategy. As regards his own historiographic metafiction and his semiotic theorizing, Eco maintains that the ‘game of irony’ is intricately involved in seriousness of purpose and theme, and that perhaps irony may be the only way we can be serious today. Eco’s remark that there is no innocence in our world curiously throws light on Fitzgerald’s preoccupation with ‘innocence’ either as an invocation of — sometimes terrible — childhood assurance; or as a metaphysical inquiry into human cognitive capacity. We cannot ignore the discourses that precede and contextualize everything we say and do, and it is through ironic parody that we signal our awareness of this inescapable fact. The ‘already-said’ must be reconsidered and can be reconsidered only in an ironic way.<sup>18</sup> The critique of irony is double-edged: the past and the present are judged in each other’s light.

Though rooted in the conventions of mimetic realism, Fitzgerald has embarked on a series of transgressions attempted by many postmodernist novels. The cross-weavings of (inter)textuality, the rethinking of the correlation between representation and reality, the questioning and re-appropriating of history and the subject of history — all these textual practices not only overstep the boundaries of genres, styles, periods, and of course, trends of thought, but also invite a much broader view of contemporary writing.

Sharing a similar attitude, Andrzej Gasiorek, in *Post-War British Fiction*, considers that realism is not just the point of departure for many contemporary novels, but also is transformed beyond its previous boundary. The critic maintains that postwar British novelists respond to literary realism in a variety of ways, thereby revealing a multiplicity of traditions at play in their works. Realism, seen ‘as a capacious form whose general commitment to the representation of reality

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<sup>18</sup> Rosso Stefano, ‘A Correspondence with Umberto Eco’, trans. Carolyn Springer, in *Boundary 2*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp.1-13. Cited from Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p.39.



sanctions a diversity of narrative modes',<sup>19</sup> encompasses literary conventions as well as utilizes experimentation. Realism now is polyvalent, flexible and open-ended. Gasiorek's undertaking here is to dispute the argument that a clear-cut realism/experimentalism divide has much validity in postwar writing. Conversely, the distinction should be seen as 'ambiguous and context-dependent'.<sup>20</sup>

Conforming to the conventions of the novel of manners, Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction explores the limits of realism in the full sense of Gasiorek's notion of its postwar potentiality. The similarities Fitzgerald's later works share with postmodernist discourse represent not so much the novelist's experimentation with language, but her awareness of and participation in the stylistic novelty and concerns exhibited in works by her often younger contemporaries. These stylistic deviations — mostly narratological — are not explicit and innovative enough to associate Fitzgerald with experimentalism, yet they are significant because they signify the novelist's shift of technique, and, as such, again prove the untenability of an absolute realism/experimentalism divide. Modest though Fitzgerald's postmodernist adventure might appear, it nonetheless significantly exemplifies how British writers of conventional genres negotiate cautiously the latest styles of writing.

Avoiding the blatant subversiveness so deliberately prevalent in postmodernist fiction, Fitzgerald's later fiction exemplifies a novelist confronting the problem of representation. Fitzgerald's realism starts with reflectionism, and later embraces reflexivity. It is suggestive that, whatever novelistic mode Fitzgerald chooses, she cannot but be aware of the challenge to realism posed by modernism, the avant-garde, and postmodernism, in spite of her resistance of influence registered in *The Golden Child*, where the novelist makes a French poststructuralist talk 'arrant nonsense'. (p.42) This awareness suggests that

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<sup>19</sup> Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), pp.17-18.

<sup>20</sup> Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction*, p.181.



Fitzgerald seeks to represent social reality but she also grasps that any interpretation of it is in part constituted by the discourses at the writer's disposal. Fitzgerald's awareness of the narrating factor in her later works suggests that the previous narrative suspense, humour, and understatement — characteristics that earn her literary honour and praise for verbalizing Englishness — have matured to resemble notions of indeterminacy, narrative playfulness, and narrative intervention.

### **Complicity as a Strategy of Dissent: Gender and Writing**

Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism: or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, suggests that we view postmodernism not as a style but as a cultural dominant.<sup>21</sup> He notes that the effectiveness of postmodernism is its all-pervasiveness and its ability to rapidly reproduce itself across a range of cultural and consumer products. Taking postmodernist fiction as the critical dominant of contemporary literature, as an extension of Jameson's argument, Fitzgerald's development as a novelist and the double-voicedness of her works can be seen to manifest a turn in answer to the relatively dominant in postmodern culture.

A critique of Fitzgerald's literary treatment of power and authority cannot be separated from a critical interrogation of the interrelated issues of gender, writing, class, and identity. Shunning an oppositional stance, Fitzgerald's literary treatment of gender and class appears restrained. Writing from inside the Establishment impels a collaborative politics of writing which, as I have maintained, is not an indication of complicity but one of strategy. The apparent impression of conformity seen in Fitzgerald's works is inflected with dissident accents refuting its assumed investment in an unproblematic notion of Englishness.

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<sup>21</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

The diversity of woman's writing is of particular significance in the contemporary era. In 1974 Q. D. Leavis wrote an introduction for *The Autobiography and Letters of Mrs Margaret Oliphant*; in 1988 Virago reprinted Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks*, with a new introduction by Penelope Fitzgerald. The fact that both Leavis and Fitzgerald have contributed to Oliphant's wider recognition may well be coincidental. Yet in a way the literary writings and careers of these three writers — disparate as they are — offer a rounded view of the tradition of women of letters, which comprises fiction writing, literary reviewing, and academic scholarship. Fitzgerald stands for a tradition of writing that has long belonged to the quiet female writer: she shares with her literary mothers many concerns with moral seriousness and mature sensibility, with the domestic scene, and with combining the role of a general literary journalistic critic with full-length fiction.

A good point at which to locate a sense of Fitzgerald's voice of dissent in contemporary British fiction is to look at her relationship with feminism, since most of Fitzgerald's novels are published in a time concurrent with the rise of literature and literary critique by women, on women, and for women. Fitzgerald's novels tend to startle the reader by their scant articulation of feminism, especially when compared with works published in the same decades by other women writers. If feminism, as a political commitment, does not interest Fitzgerald as literary subject matter, it is because she was brought up in the pre-1960s, and was thus arguably less liable to commit herself to explicit protest. Yet this is not to say that she was not aware of the achievements of the Suffragette Movement at the turn of the twentieth century, and the Woman's Liberation Movement in the 1960s. On the contrary, Fitzgerald acknowledges the contribution of these movements, and in return exhibits a sense of solidarity in depicting, from a woman's point-of-view, domestic chores, the effects of class and economic discrimination on women, women's position in the family and the work force, etc. *The Gate of Angels*, after all, explicitly incorporates a thin suffragist discourse and theme; as well as



presenting women's lot in an almost overtly political light. Fitzgerald's rejection of feminism is not so much a matter of disinterest and detachment, but is rather the result of a vigilance against being constrained to use feminism politically in literature, at least in too obvious a way.

Olga Kenyon, in her study of contemporary women novelists, carefully points out that the diversity of women's writing is not self-limited on the ground of bio-linguistic essentialism, and ascribes the term 'womanism' to women writers who write from inside the Establishment rather than from an explicit stance of feminism. The varying ground of feminisms is well put in Kenyon's argument that women writers' apparent collaborative literary conservatism is to be recognized as a form of feminist negotiation:

They [British feminists] maintain that women have a double vision, educated in the dominant (male) discourse, but able to use subordinate discourse, which is now being revealed and freed from taboos. The diversity of feminist literary criticism is even more apparent in women's fictions, from those who refuse the label 'feminist', to those who use it to proclaim their intentions.<sup>22</sup>

In keeping with Kenyon's warning of a feminist essentialism, Fitzgerald's feminism can be seen to arise from the fact that she rejects the idea of essential difference between male and female — a hypothesis frequently addressed in essentialist feminism. Fitzgerald recognizes that politics based on an indiscriminating conflation of femaleness and feminism risks leaving gendered social difference entrenched. Hence, by refusing to be ghettoized, Fitzgerald maintains that sexual difference is a matter of biological fact which does not prevent her from appropriating conventions of literary writing in a male-centred milieu.

The term 'womanism' has aptly described the literary language and preoccupations of postwar — older — women writers and their reservation towards

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<sup>22</sup> Olga Kenyon, *Writing Women: Contemporary Women Novelists* (London: Pluto Press, 1991), pp.9-10.

confining literature to the ghettoization of a political movement. Fitzgerald's hesitancy towards being interpreted in the light of feminism, on the one hand, allows more thematic exploration without restricting the writer ideologically. On the other hand, it inevitably marks Fitzgerald as the odd one out among her fellow women writers. For feminist novelists, who deliberately employ fiction to reveal the patriarchal construction of consciousness and ideology, 'woman's fiction' only reveals this construction implicitly. Writing and publishing since the 1970s, Fitzgerald's literary personality — her style and concerns as a writer — is rooted in her intellectual background and social experiences in the first sixty years of her life. She writes in her old age and she writes about the past instead of the present, and her intended reader would be like-minded or have witnessed those formative social events. A good deal of feminist criticism has been organized around the concept of recovery: the formalizing of a tradition of women's writing out of the work of 'lost' authors, past and present. This work has its value; but it is not enough simply to catalogue women's writing or to construct unitary continuities in the name of a tradition. We should consider more than the substance of such a tradition: how the tradition is arrived at, and what cultural implications it has, or under what sociological terms it can be sustained — questions like these involving a macroscopic examination of the woman writer's negotiation with convention, historicity, gender, language, race, and class.

Conventional as her works appear, I have suggested that Fitzgerald's employment of conservative literary conventions ought to be taken rather as a strategy of writing shared by many women writers born and brought up between the two feminist movements of the late nineteenth century and the 1960s. By the time Fitzgerald made her literary debut in 1975 with *Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography*, it is only reasonable to believe that at the age of 59 the author's ideas and personality had long been firmly moulded. Chronologically, Fitzgerald's literary contemporaries would have been those born around the first world war, writers such as Barbara Pym (born in 1913), Muriel Spark (born in 1918), and Iris



Murdoch (born in 1919). Yet the fact that she is a late-comer to the profession of letters makes any apparently convenient temporal periodisation problematic and arguably untenable. Being reared in the aftermath of World War One, having experienced World War Two and matured in the postwar ethos of composure and steadfastness, Fitzgerald's sense of custom, tradition, history and continuity is not undermined but reinforced by the volatility and uncertainty engendered by these events.

Toni Morrison, in an essay, speaks of the sense of rootedness which she considers necessary for women writers.<sup>23</sup> The sense of rootedness, in Fitzgerald's case, is revealing and related to the traditional world of letters in England, which she exemplifies in her works of fiction as well as her career as a biographer and literary critic. While it is arguable that a sense of nationhood could be internalized in the rhetoric of a language or a literary genre, it nonetheless calls for a re-examination of the issue of national identity and its possible connection with the values of the literary Establishment.

The context of Fitzgerald's literary intellectualism, I have maintained, ought to be seen alongside those of women writers like Spark, Murdoch, and Pym, among major postwar literary figures. These writers' works pose a different attitude towards literature and feminism in comparison to fiction by younger women authors of the 1970s onwards. The postwar women writers are the daughters of the late Victorian feminist 'New Women' who fought for women's rights in higher education and in every professional and civil sphere, so that their literary daughters enjoyed the fruit of the first-wave women's movement and can be seen to have justified in their works a sense of inclusion, acceptance, and achievement outweighing that of the alienation their mothers had felt. In time, some of the daughters of the postwar women writers became dissatisfied with the

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<sup>23</sup> Toni Morrison, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation', in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.326-332.

slow pace of social reform, expressing their discontent in stronger terms of protest in contrast to their mothers' demure attitude. Speaking metaphorically, if Virginia Woolf is the mother of Penelope Fitzgerald, then Edna O'Brian is Fitzgerald's daughter.

It is my contention that Fitzgerald's 'womanism' should be seen under the umbrella of feminism, in the sense that it constitutes a different approach, rather than an enmity. Feminism is a politics highly charged with ideological commitment, perceiving patriarchy as the prime source of restrictions placed on women. It is apparent that different approaches and possibilities have been explored to achieve the goal of the movement. What I have argued is that Penelope Fitzgerald is part of a tradition of woman's writing — a tradition that has never been separated from issues of gender and class, material constraints, moral questioning and intellectual reflection. It is a tradition that encompasses stances and perspectives that cannot be straitjacketed within the bounds of a contentious literary polemics of feminism.



## 6.2) FITZGERALD: A MINOR CLASSIC OF LITERATURE

Winner of the British Booker Prize in 1979 with *Offshore* and the United States National Book Critics Circle Award in 1998 with *The Blue Flower*, Penelope Fitzgerald is undoubtedly a significant literary voice in contemporary fiction by women in Britain — an opinion constantly reinforced by enthusiastic reviews and interviews. Curiously, the favourable reception of her fiction has not managed to spread outside the Booker and a small exclusive circle. Compared to other Booker winners, the fact that Fitzgerald's novels are less familiar to British academics, and that they have not achieved as wide a readership as such literary prize-prestige might have promised, are indications of both a degree of obscurity and of discord. In comparison to other contemporary women writers like Anita Brookner or A. S. Byatt, the academic reader's unfamiliarity with Fitzgerald's fiction suggests that, in terms of publicity and general literary awareness, Penelope Fitzgerald is a minor writer. Whether Fitzgerald's fiction is too light to be taken seriously is a matter of subjective interpretation. Yet another possible reason why Fitzgerald is perceived as mainstream, but received as a minor novelist may be that her works are not substantial enough, in terms of the sheer number of publications and bulk of the works.

To position Fitzgerald's fiction in relation to contemporary English literature, T. S. Eliot's notion of 'a minor classic of literature' is useful in immediately exposing the critical imbalance between Fitzgerald's marginal yet significant role in present-day English fiction. Eliot, defining the qualities of a classic, declared that a classic is a work of *maturity*:

A classic can only occur when a civilisation is mature; when a language and a literature are mature; and it must be the work of a mature mind. [...] Maturity of language may naturally be expected to accompany maturity of mind and manners. We may expect the language to approach maturity at the moment when it has a critical

sense of the past, a confidence in the present, and no conscious doubt of the future.<sup>24</sup>

For Eliot, the qualities of the classic include maturity of mind, maturity of manners, maturity of language and perfection of the common style. The ‘community of taste’ (p.13) Eliot alludes to is the taste and values of highbrow literature, which found incarnation previously in privileged institutions like Oxbridge, and now in prestigious literary awards such as the Booker Prize. As far as Fitzgerald’s novels are concerned, the classic elements embodied in them lie in the novelist’s acknowledgement of literary conventions and features particularly strong in Britain, and her attachment to a series of self-perpetuating notions of England and Englishness. But they lie too, paradoxically, in her devotion to a European literary form generally disregarded in Britain — the novella.<sup>25</sup> Fitzgerald’s novels embody an enlarged European scope: ‘Englishness’, in her foreign works, is seen against the weight of European cultural history of Virgil, Dante, Novalis, Tolstoy, and Gramsci, a tradition Eliot, following Matthew Arnold, invokes.

Eliot’s use of ‘maturity’ is a concept developed from what he describes, in ‘Tradition and the individual talent’, as ‘the historic sense’ — meaning that ‘the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past’ and ‘continue to develop this consciousness throughout his career’.<sup>26</sup> Given that Fitzgerald had an excellent Oxford education, given that there is a history of intellectualism in her family, then the presence of maturity as a refined cultural taste evokes a questioning of the socially privileged values and criteria of literary creativity. This sense of tradition and continuity as ‘maturity’, evidently present in Fitzgerald’s works, is moreover inadvertently complicated by the connotation of ‘maturity’ as a measure of agedness, and in the latter sense it is also tied up with the lateness of Fitzgerald’s literary career and the intellectual belatedness of her works. Classic as

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<sup>24</sup> T. S. Eliot, *What is a Classic?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1944), p.10.

<sup>25</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication III [5 May 1995], question 5.

<sup>26</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Tradition and the individual talent’ (1919), in *20th Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), pp. 71-77, -73.



her fiction has been judged to be, it is also minor. Noted for its polished slenderness, Fitzgerald's fiction is deliberately slight, concise, and in a minor key which belies its underlying toughness — her novels are minor yet classic.

Lateness, belatedness, maturity and minority therefore are all bound up in the overall reception and perception of Fitzgerald's place in contemporary British fiction.

The unfamiliarity of Fitzgerald's fiction, to some extent, is only to be expected because of the belatedness of her literary career, the fact that the novelist is relatively much older than her contemporaneous writers and readers. Most well-known 'new' contemporary writers are much younger than Fitzgerald, or are incorporating current controversial issues into their novels. Neither young nor a cult writer, Fitzgerald is usually recognized as a highbrow literary figure, a 'quiet voice' — to use her own term — which is probably a polite way of saying she is less likely to be read than, for example, Irvine Welsh.<sup>27</sup>

What 'maturity' does for Fitzgerald is that by the time she began writing at the age of 59, her world view and personal attitude, which can be supposed to have been relatively firmly formed, is somehow written into her work with a sense of belatedness. Consequently, her works of fiction would naturally attract a shrinking readership of similar age and social background, not the expanding younger audience. The temporal gap between her fiction and the present-day readership indicates a divergence of theme, style, and form — a consequence dependent on the writer's sense of position within history and tradition. Writing for Fitzgerald is a retrospective act through which she reflects upon her private and social subjecthood. It is not a political act which many feminists, postmodernists, or cult writers deliberately exploit to effect a change. That is to say, Fitzgerald's age arguably precludes her from boldly venturing into the realm of more radical or explicit politics.

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<sup>27</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 3.



The lateness of Fitzgerald's literary career means that, in terms of age-grouping of readership, her novels would often be compared to works by her literary contemporaries, a great proportion of whom are much younger and arguably more accessible to the contemporary reader. Always referring back to the recent past, Fitzgerald's novels encode a sense of belatedness which inevitably impedes her from reaching the younger part of the reading public. In this sense, Fitzgerald becomes a minority voice. The fact that Fitzgerald is generally perceived as a minor novelist in contemporary English fiction suggests a strong irony as regards the definition of minority literature. Minority literature is a term usually applied to work produced by ethnic, colonized, or socially marginal groups. In *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd define minority discourse as 'texts repressed or marginalized by a society that espouses universalistic, univocal, and monologic humanism'.<sup>28</sup>

Recent interest in the question of 'minor' literature, as David Lloyd points out in his study of Irish cultural nationalism, recognizes the emergence of a politically combative field of literature which 'calls into question the hegemony of central cultural values'.<sup>29</sup> Fitzgerald's case presents an ironic inversion: though her novels encircle a 'universalistic, univocal, and monologic humanism' which is implicitly the traditional Establishment tone and identity, yet the novelist herself is only known to a limited, specific category of readers. This point strongly reminds us of what F. R. Leavis intends by 'minority'. For Leavis, culture has always been in minority keeping. Leavis's use of 'minority' as denoting an elitist group which

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<sup>28</sup> Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, eds., 'Introduction: Toward a Theory of Minority Discourse: What Is to Be Done?', in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp.1-16, p.1.

<sup>29</sup> David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p.5. To define a minor literature, Lloyd sketches the characteristics of a major literature. The most conspicuous feature of a major literary work is that it 'should be in some manner directed toward the production of an autonomous ethical identity for the subject' (p.19). By contrast, the primary feature of a minor literature is its exclusion from the canon (20).



keeps alive the subtlest and most perishable parts of tradition directs us back to my view of Fitzgerald's achievement as a minor classic of literature.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, Britain's up-coming multicultural writers, though a minority in numbers, have enjoyed ever-increasing critical as well as popular attention. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, defining the nature of a minor literature, point out that a minor literature does not come from a minor language. Instead, it is what a minority groups construct within a major language. In Deleuze and Guattari's view, a minor literature internalizes a 'high coefficient of deterritorialisation'.<sup>31</sup> Postwar fiction in Britain — take the Booker Prize winning titles for example — in its course of witnessing a shift from cultural singularity to cross-cultural exchange and hybridity, represents a symbolic 'deterritorialisation' of English literature in Britain. Intertwined with lateness and belatedness, Fitzgerald's literary career cuts across notions of majority and minority writing.

I have used T. S. Eliot's notion of 'a minor classic of literature' to describe Fitzgerald's position within contemporary British fiction. The word 'classic' aligns Fitzgerald with a canonical status, which is affirmed by the novelist's critical acclaim as a quintessential and significant English writer. On the other hand the word 'minor' — with its various implications explored in relation to Fitzgerald's literary career and writing — leads to a notion of England at present as a new margin within the British state, with contemporary English fiction as in process of becoming a regional subculture on the changing cultural map. Fitzgerald's literary voice of Englishness — the marginal within the regional — therefore points to an awkward dilemma between the consolidation of the old canon, and the making of the new. Jacques Derrida's remark on the significance of marginal writing insightfully applies to the nature of this study. In Derrida's words:

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<sup>30</sup> F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: Gordon Fraser, 1930)

<sup>31</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 'What Is a Minor Literature?', in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp.16-27, p.16.

By rooting out minor or marginalised texts, by reading them and writing them in a certain way, one can sometimes project a stark light on the meaning and the history, on the interests of 'majoration'.<sup>32</sup>

What Derrida means by this is that marginal or fringe cases can be very useful for revealing the more general workings of a system. In other words, works or writers excluded from a canon can actually help shed light on the processes of canon formation.

Fitzgerald's literary standing is rooted within the canon of English fiction, yet received arguably without the mainstream of contemporary fiction. However, we need to bear in mind that excellence is a constantly changing, socially constructed value. Canonization is, at least in part, a process by which certain texts are privileged because they work with a normalized strategy or set of strategies. The fact that Fitzgerald's novels have been hailed by literary critics as quintessentially English reveals how effortlessly Establishment literature is equated with a make-believe national identity. The novelist's paradoxical literary status also exposes on the one hand the pervasive and formidable range of hegemonizing coercion of which the cultural industry is master, and on the other the tension within the literary establishment as a whole in promoting as well as abating prescribed literary values in different ways.

The postmodern era is one that celebrates plurality and pluralism, which is well observed in current diversities of modes, expressions, and alternatives. Fredric Jameson's work on narrative as a socially symbolic act is influential in developing theories of textuality and social process. Literature, for Jameson, is informed by the political unconscious, and as such it is an activity which 'must be read as a symbolic mediation on the destiny of community'. The function of this reading is — in Jameson's words — 'the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Points ... Interviews 1974-1994*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 85.



symbolic acts'.<sup>33</sup> What I have unmasked, in the course of this research, are the dimensions of the political unconscious beneath Fitzgerald's works.

In the Introduction to this thesis I have invoked Roman Jakobson's notion of 'the dominant' to encompass the contextuality of a literary work. Jakobson perceives the relationship between a poetic form and its embedded cultural system to be changeable and fluid. Raymond Williams's 'Dominant, Residual, and Emergent', whose opening passage is cited as the epigraph to this conclusion, offers a more cogent paradigm for cultural studies from an historical and material perspective. Williams has carefully modelled the intricate workings of the cultural machinery as three inter-related layers. The 'dominant' refers to the hegemonic superstructure, i.e., culture, which ought to be seen in terms of constantly self-transforming 'structures of feeling'.<sup>34</sup> The 'residual' of a culture is that which 'has been effectively formed in the past' but is still active in the cultural process as 'an effective element of the present'. The 'emergent', by contrast, refers to new meanings, values, practices, and relationships which are continually being created and introduced into public awareness.<sup>35</sup>

Penelope Fitzgerald's literary career in the postmodern British context offers an expressive case to Williams's paradigm. The dominant in question designates the broadly all-encompassing context of contemporary fiction in England and Britain; and Fitzgerald's 'Englishness' is the residual of a canonical mentality. The significance of the residual is most evidently shown in its being incorporated — 'by reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating inclusion and exclusion' — into the dominant, and in its contrariety to the emergent — the

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<sup>33</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p.70, p.20.

<sup>34</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Structures of Feeling', in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.128-135. By this term, Williams means the sum-total of social values and meanings as they are actively lived and felt:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and inter-relating continuity. (p.132)

<sup>35</sup> Williams, 'Dominant, Residual, and Emergent', p.122, 123.



coming to consciousness of a new multicultural literacy and the emergence of elements of a new postmodernist cultural formation — which is now ‘a form of *acceptance*’ within the dominant.<sup>36</sup> As to Fitzgerald’s style of writing — which, as Tony Bennett points out, is ‘an act of social-historical solidarity’<sup>37</sup> — what is urgently demanded, in terms of offering a critique of her fiction, is not an evaluative ranking, but a mindful interrogation of the interplay between the dominant, the residual, and the emergent in the novelist’s textual presentation. Moreover, her literary standing illustrates what Williams argues as the existence of a common process whereby ‘effective dominant culture’ is passed off as ‘*the tradition*’, ‘*the significant past*’. In Williams’s view, the ‘real social process’ upon which an effective and dominant culture depends is that of incorporation — an incorporation which selects for emphasis certain meanings and practices from a whole possible area of past and present, while neglecting and excluding all others from consideration.<sup>38</sup>

Louis Montrose, in keeping with Williams’s concern with the historical, social, and political conditions and consequences of literary production and reproduction, proposes the use of ‘Cultural Poetics’ in reference to studying a cultural document textually and contextually.<sup>39</sup> To speak of the social production of literature is to acknowledge that the text is both socially produced and socially productive. Therefore, a critical practice that ‘necessitates efforts to historicize the present as well as the past, and to historicize the dialectic between them’, in Montrose’s words, ‘constitutes a continuous dialogue between a *poetics* and a *politics* of culture’.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Williams, ‘Dominant, Residual, and Emergent’, p.125

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, ‘Introduction’, in *Popular Fiction*, p.65.

<sup>38</sup> Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), pp.38-39.

<sup>39</sup> Louis A. Montrose, ‘Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture’, in *Twentieth-century Literary Theory*, ed. Ken M Newton (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp.240-247, p.241.

<sup>40</sup> Montrose, ‘Professing the Renaissance’, p.245.



This thesis, with the benefit of hindsight, can be said to share a similar perspective to that of Montrose's 'cultural poetics' and Williams's view of the dominant, residual, and emergent. The perception of Fitzgerald as a highbrow novelist of Englishness demonstrates Williams's use of *incorporation* as selective cultural emphasis; whereas the reception of the novelist as a quiet, lesser-known literary figure imparts the ongoing dialogue within contemporary cultural poetics. By studying the production and reproduction of Fitzgerald's literary career I have examined not only the poetics of her works but also the politics embedded inside as well as outside the works. Literary studies as an integral part of studying the dominant, current culture involve more than questioning a discernible canon. They require a self-critical reflexiveness that foregrounds concern with both the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. Under such a prerequisite, academic critique — by contrast to general literary criticism— has to define its place within the flux of cultural poetics, and to rethink relations within cultural politics.

Through studying the development of Fitzgerald's novel-writing and her literary career as a whole, I have addressed questions which inevitably point to an exploration of the state of contemporary British fiction. Microscopically, Fitzgerald's literary career has demonstrated that literature is the site of a struggle exhibiting clashes, reappropriations and reconciliation between the author and her circumstances; whereas macroscopically, culture is inevitably political as it may implicitly or explicitly support the interests of the dominant group. The sociological implication of this research demands taking into consideration the elaborated intersections between the culture industry, canonicity, and the future of English fiction on a global stage. To conclude, I would like to address the cross-cultural import of my project from a pedagogic perspective on contemporary English fiction.

This thesis addresses the issues of complicity and conflict between Penelope Fitzgerald and the literary Establishment tastes at work in Britain today. ‘Complicity’ refers to the part Fitzgerald has played, consciously or not, in consolidating a prescriptive literary nationality of Englishness. ‘Conflict’ is clearly shown in her paradoxical success as far as the reception and perception of her works are concerned. The present-day literary Establishment in Britain is itself rife with territorial tensions, under which the overall standing of Fitzgerald in contemporary British fiction can be seen to have been disadvantaged. Will Self’s view of what is meant by success for a writer — offered in a recent discussion of the current condition of fiction-writing in Britain — cuttngly insinuates the state of apprehension and pressure for contemporary writers:

I’m sure there are as many measures of success as there are writers, but given the low sales most ‘literary’ writers can achieve the plaudits are just that. The only success that ever matters for a writer anywhere is sales. If you sell books you have readers — if you have readers you can tell your publisher, your agent, your publicist, the critics, the academics and everyone else to piss off.<sup>41</sup>

Factors that contribute to the success of a work of fiction, as Self points out, include not only the text itself, but also the reader, the publisher, publicity, and interest from the critical apparatus — especially the inclusion within an academic forum.

Ever since the late 1960s, English Literature is seen to have undergone an internal, irretrievable divide between ‘literary criticism’ and ‘critical theories’. The traditional, indigenous belletrism of literary studies is seen to have been sidelined by the up-coming theorization of contemporary stylistics and mindsets. On the one hand there is the general literary perspective that approaches literature through themes and attitudes traditionally associated with the reader’s moral, social, and

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<sup>41</sup> Will Self, in ‘The Man in the Back Row Has A Question V’, in *Paris Review*, Vol.40, No.146 (1998), pp.156-179. Writers who also participated in this conversation-discussion include Julian Barnes, John Bayley, Alain de Botton, Malcolm Bradbury, A. S. Byatt, Carmen Callil, Giles Foden, Paul Johnson, A. L. Kennedy, Auberon Waugh, Hugo Williams, and Penelope Fitzgerald.



experiential values. In this regard there are the biographical critics, and journalistic reviewers who conserve and continue the practice of belletristic reading, with the cultural industry backing it up with literary prizes and promotion-related interviews. On the other hand, academic literary criticism has seen a mushrooming of modules of critical theories in university teaching, the aim of which is to bring to attention the significance of contexts in the making of a text, thereby challenging the notion of literature as purely an aesthetic and moral construct.

The current tensions within English Literature are not only present between practical criticism and critical theories, but also raises the fundamental question of what makes literature — or, who the ‘gatekeeper’ of literature is. Literature is certainly more than what is simply published and read; otherwise, tons of reading materials available at airports and train-stations will soon strain even the capacity of the British Library. Rather, literature, as Terry Eagleton remarks, citing Roland Barthes, is what gets taught in university English departments.<sup>42</sup> Peter Barry, lamenting the demise of critical studies of contemporary poetry, correctly observes that the death of contemporary poetry is caused by its not being taught at university level — which subsequently brings on its decline among the younger readership. Barry also warns that the study of contemporary novels faces similar neglect in spite of the efficacy of critical approaches which are more readily applicable to prose than poetry.<sup>43</sup>

In the interests of teaching and research, academic inclusion of particular literary texts does encourage texts to be read, lectured, written about, and hopefully published as monographs or academic critical essays, and thus assists with the circulation of the writer’s reputation and works. The reason why Fitzgerald — a national and international prize-winning novelist — is excluded from academic discussion and remains familiar only to an exclusive circle of literary journalists

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<sup>42</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p.197.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Barry, ‘The Editorial Commentary’, in *English: The Journal of the English Association*, eds. Ken Newton and Peter Barry, Vol.48, No. 191 (Summer 1999), pp.143-146.



and critics suggests a conflict of between academic English and general, or literary, English. While the latter applauds enthusiastically Fitzgerald's achievement, the former remains unacquainted with her works, because Fitzgerald does not arrive on the stage of contemporary British fiction in a revealingly theory-friendly attire. The incongruity of this imbalance — enthusiasm on the one hand and ignorance on the other — rests on the shift of cultural and intellectual focus of present-day writing in English, which is more than 'English' literature, between the popular and academic literary establishments today.

'Decidedly English in setting and sensibility' and in language,<sup>44</sup> Fitzgerald's fiction fits perfectly well within a foreign academic projection of what contemporary English fiction is like. English literature in a non-English speaking environment is taught not so much from a socio-cultural perspective, as with deliberate concern for 'standard' linguistic authenticity and literary decorum. The fact that, without the help of an agent, Fitzgerald's works are being translated into various European languages — *The Blue Flower* is even available in Serbian — is arguably an evidence of how Fitzgerald is perceived as an archetypal contemporary English writer.<sup>45</sup> As I have demonstrated, Fitzgerald's language of Englishness is inseparable from a circumscribed literary sensibility. Prominently conferred by reviewers' praises and her own international success, it refers back to a cultural canon of Shakespeare and Jane Austen, T. S. Eliot and Iris Murdoch.<sup>46</sup>

Viewed from inside Britain, 'English literature' is breaking free of its imperial history, and, under a cultural and political devolution, is re-locating to

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<sup>44</sup> Bruce Bawer, 'A still, small voice: the novels of Penelope Fitzgerald', in *The New Criterion*, Vol. 10 (March 1992), pp. 33-42, p.33.

<sup>45</sup> Appendix B, Personal Communication VI [8 March 1999], in which Fitzgerald mentions that she does not have an agent, and has no idea of the sales of her novels. Also, Personal Communication V [27 March 1998], question 3, about the international availability of her works and her opinion of to whom they appeal.

<sup>46</sup> Recently Fitzgerald's fiction is also being promoted through the media of the internet. Her website offers fragments of journalistic literary reviews profuse in expressions like 'a miracle of technique' (*The Times*, Victoria Glendinning), "beautifully crafted" (*The Telegraph*, Monique Charlesworth), and 'delicate, intelligent, and readable' (*The Guardian*, Robert Nye). See the website at: <http://www.thegrid.net/dakaiser/books/fiction/fitzgera.htm>



geophysical England, the country itself. Certainly, Britain's past imperial glories around the globe have generated a blooming of 'New Literatures in English'. However, English Literature as perceived from outside Britain may still find itself entangled with England's literary supremacy. Britain has certainly lost a physical empire, yet on the global cultural stage, it can be seen to still exert a grip on one by confusing a fictional empire and an imperial fiction through the influence of cultural technologies such as the Booker Prize. Moreover, the terminological confusion between 'English' and 'British' disconcertingly adds to English literature's imperialist muddle.<sup>47</sup> In the Anglophile and Anglo-Americanized parts of the world — such as Taiwan, my original home, and China, where I currently work as a teacher of English language and literature — to introduce a non-English writer into the English literature course causes difficulty. The importance of this project in relation to pedagogic study of English is therefore twofold: it not only has made audible a muffled literary voice through a variety of critical perspectives, but has also acknowledged the potential power of shifting cultural views, contexts, and intellectual movements beneath the textuality of literature. By examining how Fitzgerald has come to be considered as a novelist of note, but has received little critical attention, I have identified the intricate forces that include a text from a canon that is both literary and critical. By showing that literature can be read in different contexts, I believe my study of Fitzgerald contributes to a rethinking of the ways in which contemporary fiction can be seen to negotiate — and reflect — the tension between various perspectives, literary and critical, cultural as well as social.

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<sup>47</sup> A few personal observations about this confusion between 'English' and 'British', 'England' and 'Britain'. First of all, the intrinsic muddle of the Booker — its para-national, para-imperialistic public image — is most innocently revealed in a website comment on Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*, where this novel is cited as 'short-listed for *England's* prestigious Booker Prize'. See Internet: <http://www.thegrid.net/dakaiser/books/fiction/fitzgera.htm>

Likewise, mails from my Chinese friends back home — quite to the annoyance of the postmen, I am sure — often put the final part of my address as 'Glasgow/ Scotland/ England'. I have been asked the question: 'Where is this Scottish city, Glasgow, located *in* England?'; or found it too dispiriting to explain why the phrase — 'a British accent' — only makes sense when it is used outside Britain.

# **APPENDICES**

**Appendix A: Exploratory Survey**

**Appendix B: Personal Communications**

**Appendix C: List of Penelope Fitzgerald's Literary Reviews**





5]. To your knowledge, which of the following might have been included in teaching (lecture/seminar/discussion) at your department?

Barbara Pym 2/61	James Kelman 4/61 [2/16 in depth]
John Berger 3/61	Beryl Bainbridge 1/61
Iris Murdoch 5/61 [1/16 in depth]	Kingsley Amis 4/61 [1/16 in depth]
Rose Tremain 3/61	Penelope Fitzgerald
Peter Carey 3/61	Muriel Spark 3/61 [2/16 in depth]
Bernice Rubens 2/61	V. S. Naipaul 2/61 [1/16 in depth]
Roddy Doyle 2/61	Ben Okri 3/61
Nadine Gordimer 2/61 [1/16 in depth]	A. S. Byatt 5/61 [1/16 in depth]
David Storey 1/61	Thomas Keneally 1/61
Salman Rushdie 8/61 [3/16 in depth]	William Golding 7/61 [4/16 in depth]

6]. Please take a few seconds to think again — which among those you have just ticked have been given a more in-depth discussion? Please underline them.  
[indicated in brackets above]

7]. Which of the following titles of fiction are you familiar with?

<i>Offshore</i> 2/91	<i>The Gate of Angels</i> 2/91
<i>Ending Up</i> 3/91	<i>The Ghost Road</i> 8/91
<i>Possession</i> 9/91	<i>Rites of Passage</i> 9/91
<i>A Disaffection</i> 5/91	<i>The English Patient</i> 9/91
<i>Waterland</i> 10/91	<i>The Old Devils</i> 8/91
<i>Confederates</i> 2/91	<i>The Beginning of Spring</i> 1/91
<i>The Moor's Last Sigh</i> 5/91	<i>The Blue Flower</i> 1/91
<i>The Dressmaker</i> 3/91	<i>The Redundancy of Courage</i> 2/91
<i>The Sea, the Sea</i> 7/91	<i>The Good Terrorist</i> 5/91

8]. Do you usually agree with The Booker Prize's choice of winner and shortlisted authors?

\*yes

\*not completely

6/10

\*no

4/10

9]. What does the Booker Prize suggest to you?

\* It enhances the public's awareness of recent novels.

6/26

\* It makes fiction a commodity subjected to the market force.

6/26



- \* It provides necessary orientation to literary standard. 1/26
- \* It is largely high-brow serious fiction. 1/26
- \* It is often conservative in scope and compromising in attitude. 4/26
- \* It seems to promote more British authors than foreign authors.
- \* It is indicative of a British cultural imperialism.
- \* It presents a middle-class literary sensitivity. 6/26
- \* It ought to focus more on its role as a national literary prize. 1/26
- \* other (please specify) 1/26

10]. Which of the following might succeed in prompting you to buy a work of fiction? Please choose only three of the options.

- \* its cover design 1/18
- \* favourable reviews on this work 8/18
- \* the plot-summary on the back-cover
- \* the fame of the novelist 5/18
- \* the fact that the work has won a certain literary prize 4/18
- \* the force of market promotion going with the work

## APPENDIX B: PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS

### Personal Communication I [18 November 1994]

1] Being from a cultivated upper-middle-class background, did you feel you're compelled to write, as under the influence or pressure of the literary success of your father and your three uncles?

=> No.

2] How much are you influenced by the works of your father and uncle?

=> Not at all, though I loved them very much.

3] During your Oxford years, which canonical literary figures did you admire most? Why?

=> George Orwell, although he wasn't 'canonical'. Politics mattered to us enormously in Oxford at that time (Spanish Civil War, 1936-9)

4] Which period or author in English literary history did you most specialise in?

=> Romantic and Victorian. (In those days 20th century authors were not studied for your final exams at Oxford.)

5] Does religion play a significant role in your life, or work?

=> Yes, I'm a Christian, and I blame myself for not having born stronger witness to Christianity. But you have to think very carefully how you're going to do this. Courage is necessary, & I'm not courageous.

6] What motivated you to write the biographies? (*Edward Burne-Jones, The Knox Brothers, Charlotte Mew*)

=> *The Knox Brothers* were my father and my 3 uncles, so this is a family book. I admire Burne-Jones' painting & design, & Charlotte Mew's poetry (about 6 of them, I believe, are great poems.) Burne-Jones had no complete biography, & Charlotte Mew had none at all, when I did my research.

7] Did you write anything literary before you started working on these biographies?

=> No.

8] What made you start writing novels in your sixties?



=> I can't answer this question.

9] Which novel of yours do you consider as your best ? Why?

=> *The Beginning of Spring*, because I'm particularly interested in Russia.

10] Which novel, if any, do you like least ? Why?

=> I'm deeply fond of them all, they are like my own children.

11] Most of the novels are literally located in pre-1950s, why? Hasn't it occurred to you to write something 'currently happening' ?

=> A few years later, you know, it's no longer current. But in my last two novels I've taken the years immediately before World War I because (although alternative history isn't in favour at the moment) it's interesting to see a crisis in public affairs and small private ones at the same time.

12] Who is your favourite novelist (male and female)? Why?

=> Kasuo Ishiguro, Anita Brookner. They understand restraint, formality, structure, understatement and silence.

13] 'Sublimity' is the word most used to describe your novels; do you agree with it? And what would you prefer to be labelled in terms of your novels ?

=> I don't want to be labelled at all.

14] You attended Oxford in the late 1930s, among the not very many women students. Do you perceive yourself — because of your upbringing, your education — to be a woman different from the previous generation, a 'new woman' perhaps ?

=> Not at all. My mother was at the same college, so was my elder daughter. I felt continuity, not difference.

15] When did you become aware of the experimental writing of the 'Modernists' ?

=> At school.

16] Did modernist writing ever cast influence upon you? What do you think of the style of writing in novels by , for example, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf ?

=> No. They've taken their own methods as far as they can go. You haven't left me enough space to answer this question.

17] What is your opinion of the suffrage movement in the first decade of this century? What is your opinion of the second-wave feminism of the 1960s which tremendously altered the socio-cultural aspect of our life ?

=> My mother was a suffragette though not an activist and I have every sympathy with the history of the movements and the failure of organised labour to support them. But the liberation movement of the 60's was followed by fragmentation and disillusionment and re-thinking of all kinds. You can't isolate the radical 1960's.

18] The Anglo-American feminist literary critics, for example Elaine Showalter, have established and recovered a history of women's writing. Did it ever occur to you to write a novel either exclusively on women's experience or from a woman-centred angle ?

=> Of course I know her work & admire it. As far as I am concerned, my novels *The Bookshop*, *Offshore*, and *Human Voices* are women-centred.

19] Literary critics have claimed a newer writing characteristic, which they termed 'postmodernist', in various younger novelists. What is your idea of the novels (for example, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*) which were published around the same time as yours and by younger authors?

=> 'Postmodernism', in my opinion, is going the way of structuralism and post-structuralism, that's to say it's fading gently away.

20] What do you read for leisure ? Do you read romances, or popular novels (those which are available in public libraries), by women novelists ?

Like most writers I have to do a lot of reviewing and by the time I've finished work for the day I usually don't want to read anything more. On holiday I read the classics (our 19th & early 20th c. classics).

21] As a novelist, what do you consider yourself in terms of a writer's literary status ?

Do you consider yourself as a high-brow (i.e. intellectual and elitist) novelist ? Or would you rather be a popular, well-received author?

=> I appreciate that as a PhD student you have to classify, and indeed it's an important part of your work, but most writers don't consider themselves in these terms. I don't know if you know Peter Keating's *The Haunted Study* ( Secker & Warbing 1989) which discusses the question so well (although it only goes up to 1914).



If what mainly interests you is feminism (and why shouldn't it be?), I feel I'm not the right study for you. I'm only concerned not with the difference between men & women, but the difference between body & soul (which is what I'm writing about in *The Gate of Angels*) and between those human beings who, however good their intentions, will always be defeated by the world as it is now, and those who will flourish, though perhaps not for ever.

## Personal Communication II [1 January 1995]

1] What made you start writing novels at your sixties? Before you started writing novels, you had already completed two of the three biographies, and presumably were more experienced in this genre than in fiction. Therefore, by turning to fiction-writing, did you see it as a tool which could better express your feelings and ideas? What I really wonder, is why you turned to fiction — do you see writing as an act (which takes time to mature) or re-evaluating the self, one's experiences, or even one's identity? Was there any hindrance that put you off writing before you turned to write novels?

=> As a matter of fact I wrote my first novel, *The Golden Child*, which the publisher called a 'mystery' because it wasn't thrilling enough to be a thriller, at the same time as my family biography, *The Knox Brothers*. I didn't write to express anything in particular but because I needed money and wasn't trained to do anything but write or teach. This was a personal question and that was why I couldn't answer it.

Fiction is much less demanding to write than biography under present conditions, when the permissions, acknowledgements, references &c have to be so much more accurate than they were in the past. I don't think I would have the energy to research a biography now.

2] Reading your novels gives me an impression that one finds some affinity, some common feature, between your works and Virginia Woolf's such as the fluidity of wording that constructs an atmosphere of time and place, or the sense of a particular moment in which the character suddenly sees through his/her own blind-spots. As you have taught Woolf and James Joyce and read much about the modernists, was there any feature of this literary movement that particularly interested you and perhaps influenced your writing?

=> When I was young I admired her immensely, and I still do, though perhaps in a different way, but I certainly don't try to write like her. *The Waves* is a warning, in any case, that her particular methods can't be taken any further (and the same is true of *Finnegan's Wake*).

3] From our previous correspondence, you said:

If what mainly interests you is feminism ... I feel I'm not the right study for you. I'm only concerned not with the difference between men and women, but of the difference between body and soul.

In your opinion, should a proper feminist literary study concentrate on issues that resulted from the biological sexual differences (such as Fay Weldon's novels),



from the vocational, socio-economic inequalities (such as Margaret Drabble's novels), or from the highly imaginative, hence deemed subversive, alternative of new writing (such as that of Angela Carter's)?

=> Surely it needn't be confined to these three? I really meant that it's easier to study a writer who has a fixed viewpoint on your own main interest, and the women in my novels are not all alike — some are battlers, some are ready to give in from the start, but all of them, men and women, are likely to be victims, in danger of extermination by human society as it is because they can't come to terms with it.

4] As I gather from your novels and reply, I don't think it is correct to literally describe you as a 'feminist writer'. However, what I am curious is, do you see yourself as a woman writer, or just a writer without any sexual undertone?

=> Writing, fiction in particular, is almost the only form of art where women can claim always to have been on equal terms with men, and I think this is a precious distinction and one we shouldn't try to throw away. Personally, when I began to write novels I turned to my own work experience, which was certainly not like a man's.

5] Continuing from previous correspondence, where you said you are concerned ... with the difference between body and soul ... and between those human beings who, however good their intentions, will always be defeated by the world as it is now, and those who will flourish, though perhaps not forever?

By that statement, are you talking about human relationships, characters flaws, or the nature of goodness, of innocence, and of evil? Or have I misunderstood you altogether? Is my impression that your view of humanity is fatalistic, even tragic, correct? And why have you been so fascinated with this idea?

=> I'm talking about the relationship between God and humanity, and I have only myself to blame if this doesn't come out clearly. I would agree with whoever it was that said that 20th century human beings have made themselves too unimportant to be tragic but too desperate to be comic. We have each other, however, and I think only in 2 books — *The Bookshop* and *At Freddie's* — have I left a main character quite alone to face the future.

## Personal Communication III [5 May 1995]

1] In our first correspondence you mentioned:

I am only concerned with the difference between [...] those human beings who, however good their intentions, will always be defeated by the world as it is now, and those who will flourish, though not forever.

Does this account for the appearance of many 'innocent' characters, such as *Waring (The Golden Child)*, Florence (*The Bookshop*), and to some extent, the DPD (*Human Voices*) and Daisy (*The Gate of Angels*), in your novels? In *The Knox Brothers* there is a paragraph (p.23) about your grandfather, Bishop Thomas V French:

[Thomas Valpy French] was a saint, holy in the noblest sense of the word, and as exasperating as all saints. A poor judge of character, he always believed the best of everyone, in spite of repeated disappointments, and was so generous that his friends did not dare mention their wants, for fear of his ruining himself.

My question here is, could Bishop T. V. French, the man with enormous generosity and simplicity, be the model of the 'innocent' characters?

=> No, I've never taken grandfather French as a model — if he hadn't actually existed I wouldn't have believed he was possible! These characters — Waring, Florence, Fred, are not so much innocent as unworldly — they are not adapted to the world and the age they were born into, but at least they put up a good fight to survive. Daisy is different. *The Gate of Angels* opens to let her into the forbidden college, so that she is to some extent, practical as she seems, a magic character.

2] Also in *The Knox Brothers* (p.89):

God speaks to us through the intellect, and through the intellect we should direct our lives. But if we are creatures of reason, what are we to do with our hearts?

Is this what you have pondered and been interested in in *The Gate of Angels*, the difference between body and soul? And now, with more experience and wisdom, what would you respond to this question you once brought out yet did not answer?

=> No, this is the difference between reason and emotion, or reason and love, which isn't of course the same as the difference between body and soul.

Certainly I have grown old, but I haven't solved the problem of being brought up to believe that reason is the highest human faculty and we should rely on it, and yet finding that when we get to life's most difficult moments, we can't and don't.



3] I particularly enjoy reading *The Gate of Angels*. Not that it is a love story, but that it is of a form never seen in your previous novels. You had given it a table of contents, and deliberately delineated the narration. You broke up the story into several fragments to be pieced up in different orders. But I can't quite make sense of the ghost story (chapter 17) — what is its importance/use in the novel? And did you have special interests or reasons to write up the novel in such a style?

=> My publisher doesn't much like these chapter headings, but I thought they would make the story clearer. The ghost story is a kind of imitation of *Ghost Stories of Antiquary*, by M. R. James, who is the original of Dr. Matthews in *The Gate of Angels*, and who was provost of King's, Cambridge in those years just before World War I. I'm afraid this is rather obscure, as James's book is still read and loved, but not, I'm sure, by students your age. However the ghost story is also there to give atmosphere to the anti-materialists of Cambridge, who don't believe that physics can explain everything.

4] Most of your novels (excluding the recent ones) are located in England and based on your previous experiences. But in *Innocence* and *The Beginning of Spring* you have taken 'a journey outside of myself' to Florence and Moscow. My question is, what other motivation — besides personal attraction to these cities and a writer's need to be beyond oneself — draws you to the stories? Are they purely imaginative works, or based, even if partially, on local stories or actual facts?

=> *The Gate of Angels*, as you say, isn't based on my own experiences, but on my uncle's — uncle Dillwyn, who I've described in *The Knox Brothers*. I did a good deal of research for *Innocence* and *The Beginning of Spring*, but I have spent a certain amount of time in Florence and Moscow and am very fond of both of them. I'm not sure I can distinguish the facts from the stories — do you think any novelist can? The 60s was an interesting time in Italy, and 1912-14 was a very interesting time in Russia, when almost anything might have happened — but the 1st world war interrupted the course of history.

5] Reading your novels, I have a feeling that characterisation of the protagonists doesn't appear to be your major concern. (I don't assert that it ought to be for every novelist and I mean no offence.) In some of your novels psychological subtlety is given to offer a brief but sharp facade of the characters' mind. But in some, like *Human Voices*, *Innocence*, and *The Beginning of Spring*, lack of deeper characterisation seems to deflate the characters. Certainly the slender size of the novels has limited further possibility to characterise. Yet I wonder if you emphasise more on thematic importance instead of characters' portrayal?

=> You'll forgive me if I disagree with you here, because I've done my very best to make what we used to call 'the characters' clear. I don't think enormous numbers of words are necessary for this, and indeed I'm a great admirer of the novella (Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*, Tolstoy's *Master and Man*). But the novella has always been more popular in Europe than in England, and still is.



## Personal Communication IV [3 June 1995]

This letter is brief and is in Fitzgerald's voice only. The following is a transcription of the letter where it is related to the research.

=> [...] *The Blue Flower* isn't a historical study, only a (short!) novel based on the sad life of Novalis and the girl he was engaged to, who died aged 15 of TB. I'm afraid it will be too depressing for anyone to want to read it.

I don't feel quite happy about the classification of novels as 'novels of manners'? Jane Austen's are surely so much more than that. They have a tremendously strong moral structure and beneath that, I believe, a religious one. As for myself, I don't set my novels in one particular time or place — (this last one is at the end of the 18th century), because I believe that fortitude in the face of the world's difficulties is the same everywhere.

I'm so glad you like M. R. James, who as I'm sure I've told you he appears in *The Gate of Angels* as Dr. Matthews. The ghost story is a kind of imitation of his style — a tribute to him, really.

In *Innocence*, I wanted to show the great differences between Salvatore and Chiara and so I made Salvatore as a small boy get a glimpse of the great Marxist thinker Gramsci and realise, too, that political leaders are mortal like the rest of us. Chiara of course belongs to a privileged family, and (although Mussolini abolished all their titles) an aristocratic one.

As to the novella, I have a great fondness for it, particularly when it's by great writers — Tolstoy's *Master and Man*, or D. H. Lawrence's *The Fox and The Captain's Doll*, which are just as fine as their full-length novels, it seems to me.

I admit that my first novel, (if you can call it that) *The Golden Child*, had eight more chapters when I wrote it, but my publisher at that time didn't care for long books, and asked me to cut down those last eight chapters. I thought, in the end, that he was right, and I went on writing short books, although they're much more uncommon in England than in the rest of Europe — (France, for instance, and Holland.) I always cut out a great deal of what I write — I suppose if I keep it all in I should end up with a novel of conventional length — but no, I think the shorter length is right for me.

## Personal Communication V [27 March 1998]

1] What is your personal political stand?

Most of your novels focus on the dispossessed and the petty wage-earning class. It is evident that the novels express concern for the underclass. Many of your novels seem to suggest a sense of reservation toward the authority, such as in *The Golden Child* and *The Bookshop*. I hope it is not intruding to ask if this sentiment expressed in your novels can justify your personal political views?

=> My novels are not in any way political, and in fact I don't take much interest in politics, because 'my' party, the Liberal party, has disappeared in this country. Liberalism ( I am quoting from the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*) 'springs from a vision of society as composed of individuals — rather than, for instance, of classes — and of their liberty as the primary social good. This liberty is to be defended in such rights as those to free political institutions, religious practices, intellectual and artistic expression.' My characters only demand a modest degree of freedom, but that degree is a necessity to them.

2] The question of power, in scales ranging from national to interpersonal, has been integral to some of your novels. You have raised many questions as to the use and abuse of power in both the public and private spheres. Is it an intentional plotting connected to your political view?

=> As I've said in my answer to 1, my novels are not political, and I'm much less interested in power connected with force and authority than with the mysterious power which one human being, often quite un-intentionally, exerts over another. For example, in *The Blue Flower*, Fritz is totally under the power of Sophie, although she has exerted it quite unconsciously and it is incomprehensible to everyone else. — That is not the abuse of power, but I did write about it in *The Bookshop*, where Florence Green and her few supporters are simply not strong enough to survive when the hostile forces of the town are united against them.

3] What type of readers do you imagine your novels and reviews most appeal to? Do you think those who read your novels are more or less identical to those your reviews speak to?

=> My novels are published in various European languages and in the U. S. A.. I must honestly say that I've no idea what kind of people read them. *The Blue Flower* has just been translated into Serbian, but I can't imagine who will read it there. I imagine, people who are not so fond of blockbusters, and are ready to listen to a quiet voice.



I do a certain amount of reviewing, but find it takes me a long time, particularly if I don't much like the book, because then I have to make more effort to understand the writer's viewpoint.

4] You have mentioned that in writing *The Beginning of Spring*, *Innocence*, and *The Blue Flower*, you had done some research. I take it that the research of fiction-writing is different from that involved in biographical writing. Would you please recall what tasks were involved in your writing the above fictions? For instance, where did you first get the idea for these novels? How did you collect materials for them, what institutions did you go to gather the information?

=> I've done nearly all my research in the British Museum Library (although I feel I shall never get used to the new Reading Room). I don't think research for biography is essentially different from research for fiction, except that with fiction you are more free, and don't need to keep exact notes and references. The idea in both cases is to transport yourself to another time and another life. Letters are very helpful, and I couldn't have undertaken any biography if I hadn't been able to read collections of letters, some of which were lent to me.

Most of my novels were based on my own experiences — I have worked in a bookshop, at the BBC, lived on a houseboat, and spent a good deal of time in Italy, but for *The Beginning of Spring*, *The Gate of Angels*, and *The Blue Flower* I had a strong image in my mind which didn't necessarily appear, in one same form, in the novels, but persisted, all the same, right through the story.

5] The problem of fiction/history

Take *Innocence* for example. The grotesque Renaissance Ridolfi legend is told, in the beginning of the novel, by a firm and authoritative narrative voice, which seems to suggest a sense of verifiability. Also the mention of documentation in the Biblioteca Nazionale (p.8) adds to the impression that this legend is based on some historical fact. Therefore, is it a historical novel, or a fictive history?

=> It's not based on historical fact, but surely it's a novelist's business to sound verifiable?

6] Another puzzling aspect in *Innocence* is where Antonio Gramsci is brought in. Apart from tincturing the novel with a political undertone — the marriage between a self-made man and a young woman of a declined aristocratic family, the bit about Gramsci seems to lack a clear function and place in regard to the whole work.

What is your opinion about this?



=> I can't agree! It's an irony, crucial to the book, that Salvatore's father takes him to see Gramsci in hospital to provide a lasting memory for him and a political inspiration, but in fact the boy makes up his mind never to concern himself with politics, and to become a doctor. 'In the end we shall all of us be at the mercy of our own bodies, but at least let me understand what is happening to them.'

7] The intricate conjunction between history and fiction in narratives is more pronounced in your foreign novels than in the English ones. While the novels of England are set in your native environs, and based on your personal experiences, the foreign novels in contrast seem less 'real' — because of the receding temporal distance between then and now — and more 'fictional' — because of the non-native subject-matters and characters. Yet the contradiction is that all your foreign novels are drawn from historical moments and include historical figures. As the boundary between fiction and history appears to blur in these works, how did you handle the element of historical truthfulness? How do you view the employment of historical materials in novel-writing? In the case of your three foreign novels, are they 'historical novels', or 'fictionalised historical accounts'? Which plays a bigger part — historical truthfulness, or literary imagination?

=> If you look back to the beginnings of the English novel you find that Walter Scott was one of the earliest (and most successful) authors, and Scott introduced historical figures (Queen Elizabeth, Richard Coeur de Lion, etc.) into his fiction whenever he wanted to. I don't mean that 20th century authors are copying Scott! But I think English (and American) novelists feel free by tradition to recreate the past, and that may mean conjuring up real people as well as real places.

*The Blue Flower*, on the other hand, is specifically based on the life of Novalis before his fiancée Sophie died, and before he became a famous poet. I've only introduced one character, Jacob Dietmahler, from my imagination. All the others existed, and I had to find out about them from Novalis's correspondence. That was a totally different matter from writing a novel and I felt it was a greater responsibility.

8] You are a novelist, literary reviewer, and biographer. In your opinion, what is the difference of purpose and role that set these practices of writing apart?

=> As a novelist you're free, as a biographer you have an absolute duty to accurate truth-telling, as a reviewer, I think you ought to do more than consider your opinion — I think you should try to see, as far as you can, what the writer's intention was.



9] In what way has your education in Oxford benefited your literary critical approach?

The methodology demonstrated in your biographies shows that biographical information and overall social backgrounds have all been carefully researched and analysed. Is this contextual approach an indispensable part only of this genre of biography, or do you think it is also applicable to literary works? That is, would you prefer your novels being read on their own, purely for their aesthetic merits, or do you think better enjoyment and understanding can be obtained if the socio-contextual information is taken into consideration?

=> First and foremost I benefited from Oxford's wonderful libraries and the tutorial system -- every student had individual teaching. We did study literature historically, but studying and writing are different things — I think a novel should be read primarily as a story, and the social and historical background should only affect the reader as part of the story. I believe this is true even with novels like Tolstoy's *Resurrection* and George Orwell's *1984* which specifically set out to 'teach'.

10] The issue of identity and writing.

In my research I am also interested in the issue of identity and writing, especially in the case of woman writers. Writing in *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf proclaims her famous quote: 'As a woman I have no country.' She means it as a protest against the social, legal and educational discrimination a woman was subject to in those days. What is your opinion about the relationship between identity and writing? Do you see your works — especially the novels — necessarily as a reflection of who you are?

=> I am not sure about Virginia Woolf's remark, and I have some sympathy with Vita Sackville West, who said that she didn't believe that any Englishwoman could feel that 'England is not her country'. Your nationality is simply a fact of your existence, which you must accept. You didn't choose it, but it's part of your humanity.

11] How do you approach the issue of a public (social) identity which Woolf found so difficult to deal with as a woman writer?

=> Virginia Woolf never went to university, and she never took a job ( I don't mean that she didn't work hard!) and she never had children — and in all these things she had to compare herself with her sister. This is what I think made it difficult for her to settle on a public identity. She had to create the structure for her own life.

12] Come back to your novels of England. What is England to you? Will you be comfortable in taking England as a synonym for Britain, or vice versa?

=> It doesn't matter to me, unless Scotland and Wales really become separate self-governing communities.

13] You have been much praised as a 'very English' novelist; what do you think of this comment? What does it mean to you to be English?

=> I have to admit that I love my country and don't want to live anywhere else for more than a short time. England has changed, but it's still a place of understatement, irony, green fields, water-colour painting, obstinacy and unexpected courage.



## Personal Communication VI [8 March 99]

This letter is short; so the following is a transcription of what is relevant to the research.

=> [...] Now I must answer your questions, and I am very sorry to tell you that over your first point — the total sales of my novels — I can't really be of any help. I don't have an agent, and I don't think Harper Collins will have records of the sales in translation. In 1998 I was given the United States National Book Critics Circle Award and this has made a great difference to my sales in the United States. I got this award for *The Blue Flower*. I have never been serialised in a magazine before publication, I'm afraid.

Your last question I can answer — I was one of the judges for the Booker Prize in 1991 and 1998. I try not to think of my own novels at all when I'm faced with the responsibilities of judging, and I make sure to read them all right through, because novels often (though not by any means always) get stronger towards the end. I try to hear the 'voice' of the novelist, which should be unmistakably individual from the very first page and should persuade me to follow him into his own world, however different it is. Sometimes, particularly on moral questions, I may not agree with the author and find myself arguing with him in empty air. The quality I look for most is the quality of pity and kindness. I don't see how this world is to be managed if we don't pity each other.

I may say that the other judges didn't agree with me, either in 1991 or 1998! Last year I should have liked the Prize to go to Magnus Mills, for *The Restraint of Beasts*. The tenderness in that book, for me, was in the friendship between the two laborers who 'see more of each other than most married people'.

## Appendix C: Book Reviews and Articles by Penelope Fitzgerald

Jean Sudrann's essay on Penelope Fitzgerald's fiction, 'Magic or Miracles', offers a list of Fitzgerald's earlier reviews from 1980 to 1988, on which the present list is based.

- 'Following the Plot', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 2 (February 1980), pp.12-13.
- 'Gringo', review of *The Colonist* by Michael Schmidt, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 2 (August/September, 1980), pp.21-22.
- 'A Secret Richness', review of *A Few Green Leaves* by Barbara Pym, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 2 (November/December, 1980), p.22
- 'Dear Lad', review of *The Simple Life: C. R. Ashbee in the Cotswolds* by Fiona MacCarthy; *Philip Mairet: Autobiographical and Other Papers*, ed. by C. H. Sisson, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 3 ( March/April, 1981)
- 'Jerusalem', review of *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*, ed. by Jack Barbara and William McBrien, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 3 (December, 1981), p.13.
- 'Christina and the Sid', review of *Christina Rossetti: A Divided Life* by Georgina Battscombe; *The Golden Veil* by Paddy Kitchen; *The Little Holland House Album* by Edward Burne-Jones, intro. by John Christian, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 4 (March 1982), pp.21-22.
- 'Lotti's Leap', review of *Collected Poems and Prose* by Charlotte Mew, ed. by Val Warner, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 4 (July 1982), pp.15-16.
- 'Sonata for Second Fiddle', review of *A Half of Two Lives: A Personal Memoir* by Alison Waley, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 4 (October 1982), p.12.
- 'Introduction', in *The Novel on Blue Paper* by William Morris, in *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays in Victorian Fiction*, Vol. 10 (1982), pp.143-151.
- 'Introduction', in *The Novel on Blue Paper* William Morris, ed. and intro. by Penelope Fitzgerald (London, Journeyman: 1982)
- 'Keeping Warm', review of *Letters of Sylvia Townsend Warner* by William Maxwell; *The Portrait of a Tortoise* by Gilbert White, with introduction and notes by Sylvia Townsend Warner; *Sylvia Townsend Warner: Collected Poems*, ed. by Claire Harman; *Scenes of Childhood and Other Stories* by



Sylvia Townsend Warner, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 4 (December 1982-January 1983), p. 22-23.

'Dear Sphinx', review of *The Little Ottleys* by Ada Leverson, intro. by Sally Beaman; *The Constant Nymph* by Margaret Kennedy, intro. by Anita Brookner; *The Constant Nymph: A Study of Margaret Kennedy 1896-1967* by Violet Powell, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 5 (December 1983), p.19.

'Introduction', in *The Root and the Flower* by L. H. Myers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)

'The Real Johnny Hall', review of *Our Three Selves: A Life of Radclyffe Hall* by Michael Baker, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 7 (October, 1985), p.19.

'Introduction', in *Chronicles of Carlingsford: The Rector and the Doctor's Family* by Mrs Margaret Oliphant (London: Virago, 1986)

'Introduction', *Chronicles of Carlingsford: Salem Chapel* by Mrs Margaret Oliphant (London: Virago, 1986)

'Holy Terrors', review of 'Elizabeth': *The Author of 'Elizabeth and her German Garden'* by Karen Usborne; *Alison Uttley: The Life of a Country Child* by Denis Judd; *Richmal Crompton: The Woman behind William* by Mary Cadogan, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 8 (December 1986), p.18.

'Vous etes belle', review of *The Lost Domain* by Henri Alain-Fournier, trans. by H. Davidson; *Henri Alain-Fournier: Towards the lost Domain: Letters from London 1905*, ed. and trans. by W. J. Strachan; *Alain-Fournier: A Brief Life 1886-1914* by David Arkell, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 9 (January 1987), p.12.

'Various Women', review of *A Voyage Out: The Life of Mary Kingsley* by Katherine Frank; *Marilyn* by Gloria Steinem, with photographs by George Barris; *Joe and Marilyn: A Memory of Love* by Roger Kahn; *I leap over the wall* by Monica Baldwin, intro. by Karen Armstrong; *Diary of a Zen Nun: A Moving Chronicle of Living Zen* by Nan Shin (Nancy Amphoux), in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 9 (April 1987), pp.15-16.

'Kay Demarest's War', review of *The Other Garden* by Francis Wyndham; *The Engine of Owl-light* by Sebastian Barry; *A Singular Attraction* by Ita Daly; *Cold Spring Harbor* by Richard Yates; *The Changeling* by Catharine Arnold, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 9 (September 1987), p.22.



- ‘Dame Cissie’, review of *Family Memories* by Rebecca West, ed. by F. Evans; *Rebecca West: A Life* by Victoria Glendenning, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 9 (December 1987), p.17.
- ‘Introduction’, in *Chronicles of Carlingsford: The Perpetual Curate* by Mrs Margaret Oliphant (London: Virago, 1987)
- ‘What he did for his inlaws’, review of *The Memoir of Marco Parenti: A Life in Medici Florence* by Mark Phillips, in *New York Times Book Review* (7 February 1988), p.19.
- ‘Introduction’, in *Chronicles of Carlingsford: Miss Marjoribanks* by Mrs Margaret Oliphant (London: Virago, 1988)
- ‘Big Books’, review of *William Morris: An Approach to the Poetry* by J. M. S. Tompkins, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 10 (September 1988), p.23.
- ‘Megawoman’, review of *Olive Schreiner: Letters, Vol. 1: 1871-1899* ed. by Richard Rive, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 10 (October 1988), p.11.
- ‘Introduction’, in *Chronicles of Carlingsford: Phoebe Junior* by Mrs Margaret Oliphant (London: Virago, 1989)
- ‘Do You Have the Courage to Cry?’, review of *The Pilgrim’s Rules of Etiquette* by Toghi Modarressi, in *New York Times Book Review* (13 August 1989), p.7.
- ‘The Man from Narnia’, review of *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* by A Wilson, in *New York Times Book Review* (18 February 1990), pp.11-12.
- ‘White Nights’, review of *In the Beginning* by Irina Ratushinskaya; *Goodnight* by Abram Tertz; *Comrade Princess: Memoirs of an Aristocrat in Modern Russia* by Ekaterina Meshcherskaya, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 18 (October 1990), p.20
- ‘The Great Encourager’, review of *Ford Madox Ford* by Alan Judd, in *New York Times Book Review* (10 March 1991), p.7.
- ‘Luck Dispensers’, review of *The Kitchen God’s Wife* by Amy Tan, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 11 (July 1991), p.19.
- ‘Good as Boys’, review of *The Type of Girl: A History of Girls’ Independent Schools* by Gillian Avery; *There’s Something About a Convent Girl* by Jackie Bennett and Rosemary Forgan, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 11 (August 1991), p.23.
- ‘Fried Nappy’, review of *The Van* by Roddy Doyle, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 11 (September 1991), p.16.



- ‘Children’s Children’, review of *Grandmothers Talking* by Nell Dunn, in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 11 (November 1991), p.7.
- ‘Lasting Impressions’, review of *The Kelmscott Press: A History of William Morris’s Typographical Adventure* by William S. Peterson, in *The New York Times Book Review* (15 December 1991), p.19.
- ‘The Last Artist’, in *A Cézanne in the Hedge: and other memories of Charleston and Bloomsbury*, ed. by Hugh Lee, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1992)
- ‘Confessions of a Pretty Monster’, review of *Antonia White’s Diaries 1926-1957* ed. by Susan Chitty, in *New York Times Book Review* (28 June 1992), p.7.
- ‘Time’s Wounding Arrow’, review of *Sacred Country* by Rose Tremain, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No.4666 (1992), p.19.
- ‘From Waterloo to Watermelon’, review of *The Death of Napoleon* by S. Leys, in *New York Times Book Review* (1 November 1992), p.3 et seq.
- ‘100 years after: 12 writers reflect on Tennyson achievement and influence’, by P. Fitzgerald, T. Paulin, K. Amis, T. Eagleton, A. S. Byatt, S. Heaney, A. Motion, P. Rogers, G. Ewart, P. Muldoon, A. Hecht, and I. Armstrong, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4670 (1992), pp.8-9.
- ‘The Great Importance of Small Things’, review of *The Collected Stories* by J McGahern, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4671 (1992), p.21.
- ‘The Only Member of His Club’, review of *Evelyn Waugh: the Later Years 1939-1966* by M. Stannard, in *New York Times Book Review* (13 September 1992), p.1 et seq.
- ‘The Death of “Punch”’, in *The New Criterion*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (September 1992), pp.82-86.
- ‘The Grass is Singing to a Different Tune’, review of *Songs of Enchantment* by Ben Okri, in *The Spectator*, Vol.270, NO. 8593 (March 1993), p.33.
- ‘A bomb on board’, review of *The Picador Book of Contemporary Irish Fiction* by D. Bolger, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4693 (1993), p.19.
- ‘The life of a questioning child’, review of *Imagination of the Heart: the Life of Walter de la Mare* by T. Whistler, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4705 (1993), pp.12-13.
- ‘Doers and Viewers’, review of *The Invention of Truth* by M Morazzoni, in *New York Times Book Review* (23 May 1993), p.3.



- ‘Edward Burne-Jones: Watercolors and Drawings’, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4725 (1993), p.18.
- ‘Mrs O’Fiaich’s Underclothes and the Romanov Jewels’, review of *Safe in the Kitchen* by A. Foster, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4730 (1993), p.21.
- ‘Really, one should burn everything’, review of *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985* ed. by Anthony Thwaite, in *The New Criterion*, Vol.11 (March 1993), pp.6870.
- ‘To Remember is to Forgive’, review of *Excursions in the Real World: Memoirs* by William Trevor, in *New York Times Book Review* (13 February 1994), p.7.
- ‘Far North, Far South’, review of *The Debatable Land* by C McWilliam, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4757 (1994), p.23.
- ‘One of Their Kind’, review of *The Colour of Her Hair* by S. Mitchell, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4766 (1994), p.17.
- ‘A Worldly Education’, review of *Grand Days* by Frank Moorhouse, in *Book World*, Vol. XXIV, No. 13 (March 1994), p.5.
- ‘Distant Sheep’, review of *Alice* by John Bayley, in *The London Review of Books*, Vol.16, No. 14 (1994), p.14.
- ‘Hug me, kiss me’, review of *Such Devoted Sisters: An Anthology of Stories* ed. by Shena Mackay; *When the World Was Steady* by Claire Messud, in *The London Review of Books*, Vol.16, No.19 (1994), p.19.
- ‘It Never Rains Indoors’, review of *London* by John Russell, in *New York Times Book Review* (6 November 1994), p.3.
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**Bibliography B: Writings About Penelope Fitzgerald**

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