

A Study of Fitzgerald

—F. Scott Fitzgerald's Life Philosophy in His Works—

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INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born on September 24, 1896 in St. Paul, Minnesota. The life of his childhood was not so good. The lack of the settlement in his boyhood affected his own life and the lives of his fictional protagonists. In 1911, Aunt Annabel McQuillan provided school expenses to send Fitzgerald to the Newman School which was founded by Catholic laypeople, Dr. and Mrs. Jesse A. Locke, a select Roman Catholic academy. Consequently, Fitzgerald was an Irish Catholic, in fact. And after that, he was admitted into Princeton University to which the rich people go. At twenty-two he fell in love with beautiful Zelda Sayre. He was a stocky, goodlooking young man with blond hair and blue eyes, too. Fitzgerald got married to Zelda in Rectory of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York At April 3, 1920.

Fitzgerald created his own legends in his life. His life overshadows his works as he has become an archetypal figure—or a cluster of overlapping archetypes : the personification of the Jazz Age, the sacrificial victim of the Depression. The glamour, the triumph, the heartbreak and the tragedy of his life were genuine. Fitzgerald was one of most personal authors in American literature.

Zelda Fitzgerald was the strongest influence on his life after 1919, and the conditions of their marriage shaped his career. F. Scott Fitzgerald's life has some sort of epic grandeur. He was a here in the 1920's of America. His life was a quest for heroism similar to the heroes of his works. Fitzgerald in his life and writings epitomized all the sad young men of the *après-guerre* generation. Their marriage coincided with the beginning of the Boom, the Era of Wonderful Nonsense, the Roaring Twenties, what Fitzgerald named the Jazz Age and described as the greatest, gaudiest spree in American history. He began as a spokesman for the Jazz Age and became its symbol. With his capacity for becoming identified with his times, he came to represent the excesses of 1920's in the American society.

The Twenties have been called a decade of confidence, of cynicism, of disillusionment, of moral *let-down*. As Fitzgerald said, it was an age of miracles and also an age of excess. America emerged from World War I as the most powerful nation in all over the world. The war generation was, however, supposed to feel embittered, betrayed, lost in the mental situation. Fitzgerald's generation also believed in great heroes.

The popular image of Fitzgerald, something of a combination of the youthful Lord Byron (1788-1824) and the romantic John Keats (1795-1821), became fused with images of his young protagonists Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise* (1920). Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), Jay Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Dick Diver in *Tender is the Night* (1934). America took Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald to its heart, following the first wave of the Fitzgerald revival culminating in *The Far Side of Paradise* by Arthur Mizener.

Fitzgerald's novel is animated by and makes its impact through a writer's intensely devoted attempt to understand a portion of human experience, the personal dimensions of that experience that reach into the hearts of human beings. He ironically stared at the materialism of American society and materialistic dream of success through the eyes of his romantic heroes. It was the singular period the Jazz Age that he lived in. Materially, it was the time of 'economical prosperity,' but in the meantime, spiritually it was surely a 'waste land' in human mind. The traditional morality, common sense, and sense of value were all denied by young men and women after World War I. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, Jordan amuses herself with Nick as Daisy amuses herself with Gatsby. Therefore, while aligning himself with the current of the Jazz Age, Fitzgerald liberally spent his youth, dream, and wealth for his wife Zelda. Andrew Turnbull mentions about Fitzgerald's way of life clearly and concretely as follows :

Fitzgerald was living the American dream—youth, beauty, money, early success—and he believed in these things so passionately that he endowed them with a certain grandeur. He and Zelda were a perfect pair, like a shepherd and shepherdess in a Meissen.¹

Among the young men *This Side of Paradise* attracted much attention to become best-seller at a single bound in America. In *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald delineates the struggle of a young man to achieve an identity in a rapidly changing society and to experience an existence unprescribed by social norms which had directed his youth.

Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise* examines older American traditions and the Victorian morality, and finally rejects them in favor of an American pragmatic modern philosophy. By the time Amory is fifteen, he has formulated his life philosophy, "a sort of aristocratic egotism". The modern philosophy of American pragmatism influences Amory more than the platonic ideal. Arthur Mizener mentions in *The Far Side of Paradise* as follows :

Fitzgerald "really created for the public the new generation," as Gertrude Stein said, by quite innocently being it ; he was as surprised as anyone else to discover that in *This Side of Paradise* "he had written a 'bible of flaming youth.'" 2

And then A. Mizener mentions about the resemblance between Fitzgerald's life and his works as follows :

Fitzgerald's life has, apart from its close connection with his work, a considerable interest of its own ; it was a life at once representative and dramatic, at moments a charmed and beautiful success to which he and his wife, Zelda, were brilliantly equal, and at moments disastrous beyond the invention of the most macabre imagination. Just as his life illuminates his work, so his work does his life. 3

Thus, the curious point of similarity between Fitzgerald's life and his works emits unique light in his literature. The sharp insight based on personal experiences of his life enhances the value of his literature so as to touch the heart of the younger generation after World War I. Fitzgerald's way of life manifests, above all, the quintessence of the Jazz Age in America. In fine, he depicted vividly America of the Jazz Age, entrusting his heroes with his romantic dream.

In *The Beautiful and Damned*, the threat which Anthony Patch feels in the city emanates from his philosophy that 'life is meaningless', and from his inability to differentiate between the reality of how wealth is obtained in America and the illusion that one may remain free of its taint. In the "Symposium" scene, Gloria's apprehension of reality—"There's only one lesson to be learned from life anyway.... That there's no lesson to be learned from life"—is received by the men as the new gospel.

Among Fitzgerald's sad heroes, above all, Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* was the greatest

young man who does nothing but seek after the American Dream even at the risk of his life in his precious adolescence. For a long time, *The Great Gatsby* which is Mr. Fitzgerald's most carefully devised story was considered as a book about the Roaring Twenties of America. Gatsby was foolish enough to be unable to realize that in modern American society spiritually changed into a 'waste land' the American Dream had no longer any habitant. While looking down upon Gatsby's manner of life in which he thought he could repeat the past, Nick speaks highly of Gatsby's fabulous romantic illusion, appreciates highly his extraordinary gift for hope, praises highly his romantic readiness, and affirms his way of life. It was not only because Gatsby was sincere but also because his dream brimmed over with the endless energy which he envied to have, and also because it seemed to Nick that Gatsby's dream and its ruin implied a greater meaning for young American people. *The Great Gatsby* is a tale of present-day life on Long Island. Gatsby is an enormously wealthy unknown, who takes a vast house, stocks the cellar, hires innumerable servants, and gives a sort of continuous party to which people of all kinds flock in droves.

Gatsby's gorgeous life might be a fairy tale of the rich which Fitzgerald dreamed, and Gatsby's love which he sacrificed himself for one woman might be an ideal of Platonic love which Fitzgerald supposed. Gatsby's dream turns the green light at the end of Daisy's dock into the most important of his enchanted objects. His dream invests his life with meaning as Nick recognizes when he learns of Gatsby's love for Daisy. Nick found out profounder significance in Gatsby's romantic dream than the splendid life and love as I mentioned before. That is to say, to Nick Gatsby's dream is equivalent to 'the last and greatest of all human dreams.' To a great extent, Gatsby hears the drums of his destiny as defined by a version of the American Dream of success that applies to men. In other words, Gatsby's dream is identical with the American Dream which innocent Dutch sailors ceaselessly searched for and of which the unlimited possibility of progress they believed. Nick's view that America has destroyed its dream in the attempt to make that dream a reality contributes to his belief that the vision of the Dutch sailors brought humanity face to face for the last time in American history. Gatsby, however, did not know that this kind of dream was already lost, and also he ruined himself, believing the existence and possibility of romantic dream. In this respect, as A. E. Dyson says, the fact is that "the squalor and splendour of Gatsby's dreams belong to the story of humanity itself ; as also does the irony, and judgment, of his awakening."⁴ That is to say, the American Dream no longer exists in the present age. Thus, Nick shifts his focus from Gatsby to a more universal one and allies Gatsby's lost dream to American Dream and to his own.

Nick takes away from his experience in West Egg what he seems to believe is also the lesson of the American experience : that moment of hope and promise and wonder can be found only in the past, that the past is irrecoverable, and that the present brings with it only the betrayal of dreams. The dilemma that Nick, Daisy and Gatsby face is a human one as well as an American one : whether to embrace the dreams of youth and keep alive the hopes bred in innocence or to face the reality that such dreams are inevitably elusive and illusory because they are part of the past. Nick perceived the loss of the American Dream and the character of the modern dream in Gatsby's way of life.

Fitzgerald is only too ready to be regarded as a post-war writer who had a personal experience of the life of new generation in America of post World War I where the new sense of value was not yet fixed, and who lived in his own dream and sacrificed his life to his own one, revelling away in his youthful days. Malcolm Cowley mentions about Fitzgerald as follows :

Fitzgerald remains an exemplar and archetype, but not of the 1920's alone ;
in the end he represents the human spirit in one of its permanent forms. 5

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald suggests us that while Gatsby's dream died, spirit should live on to search after the American Dream. In the American society of the Jazz Age in which people have lost ideals and passions, Gatsby alone has the immortal will and the single-minded passion for his own dream which should be to become the source of humanity. In this respect, the fact is that Gatsby is the great man as the title of the novel, but he took the wrong means and tried to get back his past lover by the influence of money. However, now, even the lover Daisy was not such an unsophisticated woman that Gatsby wanted, but only a flapper who was the feminine type of the Jazz Age in America.

Thus, the American Dream was revived through Gatsby's way of life in the Jazz Age, that is , the waste land which symbolizes a broken society, but it was nothing but the withering American Dream. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald poignantly criticized America in the Jazz Age. He has in *The Great Gatsby* written a remarkable study of certain phases in the life of today. Fitzgerald poses the philosophical conflict of *The Great Gatsby* with Tom's and Gatsby's struggle for possession of Daisy, symbolically the grail prize. If Buchanan's philosophical theory of his own superiority is correct, then he, the practical result of American pragmatism, will have Daisy. If his theory is incorrect, then the romantic *parvenu* Gatsby will triumph. That is to say, Daisy chooses materialism over romantic idealism.

I want to think about the Fitzgerald's view of life. He confesses to in *The Crack-Up* as follows :

Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don't show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick—the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed. 6 (Italics mine)

Fitzgerald regarded life as 'a process of breaking down' and also he believed that a 'dream' was the only rescue that would conquer 'the process of breaking down,' and therefore Fitzgerald wanted to think that the dream could get back 'lost youth.' As Milton Hindus says, the fact is that "what emerges as the essence of his personal philosophy at the low point in his spiritual life is a sort of existentialism or nihilistic despair resembling that which became fashionable in Europe in the wake of World War II." 7

Dick Diver in *Tender Is The Night* attempts through the force of his will to create a life which is in opposition to the force of American pragmatism. Diver must accept the flux and flow of life, the conflict between reality and illusion and exert his will to master both. Rejecting the process of experience and change, the flux and flow of life which is the essence of the New World Dream, Diver is the apostle of the willingness of the human spirit to exist in the creative, imaginative world of the American Dream.

Fitzgerald mentions about his philosophy of life in *The Crack-Up* as follows :

Life, ten years ago, was largely a personal matter. I must hold in balance the sense of the futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle the conviction of the inevitability of failure and still the determination to 'succeed'—and, more than these, the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future. If I could do this through the common ills—domestic, professional, and personal—then *the ego would continue as an arrow shot from nothingness to nothingness* with such force that only gravity would bring it to earth at last. 8 (Italics mine)

'From nothingness to nothingness' is Fitzgerald's view of life and also his philosophy of life. In *The Great Gatsby*, the narrator Nick recognizes that Daisy has betrayed the sad hero Gatsby and that Gatsby's illusions have been shattered, that he now is watching over nothing. That is to say, the path of Gatsby's life is the sad and tragic journey from nothingness to nothingness, and in this respect, Fitzgerald ironically regards the real society of America in the Jazz Age as the world based on 'nothingness' in the mental situation.

The philosophy Fitzgerald developed generated, in turn, a hero who is a dreamer of the paradoxical American Dream who seeks to transcend time, to turn American history back into dreams. The conflict between the polarities of the American Dream—the platonic conception of the New World as a reflection of the ideal form and the materialistic acquisitiveness of a pragmatic society—became the basis of Fitzgerald's life philosophy.

"Winter Dreams" and "The Rich Boy" are of especial merit in indicating the influence of Fitzgerald's life philosophy. These short stories juxtapose the romantic philosophy of life as illusion to the realistic pragmatism of the materialistic world.

Throughout his career, Fitzgerald tried to turn his own life into works, to observe reality from a distance. In Fitzgerald's life philosophy and his works, he looks toward the real. Both his thought of life and his own works must be considered in light of his intellectual understanding of his milieu. Fitzgerald was, really, a man with the splendid power of abstract and intellectual thinking described in these lines : "Man is that creature who is constantly in search of himself, a creature who at every moment of his existence must examine and scrutinize the conditions of his existence. He is a being in search of meaning." These lines, although written by Plato (427?-347? B.C.), Greek philosopher, describe Fitzgerald's life philosophy and his life works. Fitzgerald can be said to respond in his life and in his works to the intellectual currents of his own time, that is to say, the *après-guerre* generation.

NOTES

- 1 Andrew Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald : A Biography*. New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962. p.103.
- 2 Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1951. p.XV.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.1.
- 4 *Modern Fiction Studies*, p.38. See A. E. Dyson, *The Great Gatsby : Thirty-Six Years After*, pp.37-48.
- 5 Malcolm Cowley, *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald : A Selection of 28 Stories with an introduction*, p.xxv.
- 6 *The Crack-Up*, p.39. (A Penguin Book)
- 7 Milton Hindus, *F. Scott Fitzgerald : An Introduction and Interpretation*, New York : Brandeis University, 1967. p.91.
- 8 *The Crack-Up*, p.40.

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