

A Study of Fitzgerald

— The Social Background in His Literature —

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INTRODUCTION

Born in the afternoon on September 24, 1896, F. Scott Fitzgerald came to prominence in the Jazz Age of the 1920's; his career paralleled the early decades of the century; its most glamorous and flamboyant excesses of the twenties and the Lost Generation, and the sobering thirties of darkening toward the forties and the end of his own life. In a curious way, Fitzgerald's life mirrored the decades of his nation. That Fitzgerald took it upon himself to be a scribe of the times is evident throughout his writing.

Fitzgerald always had, as he once said of himself, "a more than ordinary tendency" to identify with the things outside him. He was forty-four when he died and the story of the early rise and abrupt fall of his literary reputation can be fitted with neat symmetry into those two dramatic decades of the American twentieth century, the twenties and the thirties. The true greatness of Fitzgerald as a writer depends on the fact that he had personal experiences of the 1920's and he himself felt keenly the vitality of the time. That is to say, while living through the 1920's as a pleasure time, Fitzgerald was passing judgment on the time. In this sense, concerning his world of literature, the most important thing is that he lived through, what is called, the 'Jazz Age', and accordingly it is very helpful for understanding the characteristic of his literature to have a clear picture of the age, from which he got his subject matter. The Jazz Age in which he lived is just the 1920's in America, and in other sense, the 1920's after World War I is the time of 'wealth' and 'beauty' because of the economical boom in American society. Not only wealth and beauty, but also youth are the main subjects of Fitzgerald's literature.

The Twenties have been called a decade of confidence, of cynicism, of disillusionment, of ebullience, of moral upheaval. "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of satire," Fitzgerald wistfully proclaimed in 1931. America emerged from the Great War as the most powerful nation, but the war left a sour aftertaste as the ideals for which Americans fought — or had been told they were fighting for — were sacrificed to expediency and European corruption. On the one hand, the war generation was supposed to feel embittered, betrayed, lost, on the other hand, the Twenties produced an American Renaissance. Some of the younger writers who achieved recognition in the Twenties are Ernest

Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, Eugene O'Neill, E. E. Cummings, and so on. After the Twenties, it seems that Fitzgerald's brilliant time was over. He was the symbol of the Twenties and also it can be said that he was an existence of symbolizing its collapse.

Fitzgerald's main theme lies in the widespread moral corruption of the 1920's that he drew on for the background of his novel. Therefore, in the case of considering his setting of novels, we must understand the distinction of the Jazz Age, and the Jazz Age is another name of the 1920's when 'the mood of prosperity' was floating in America after World War I as Arthur Mizener mentions :

The truth is that the 1920's was a time of great cultural change in America marked by an outburst of creative activity so vigorous that we are still a little stunned by it.¹⁾

Also Alfred Kazin says that "the Twenties were in fact a time of great prosperity and liberty, a spendthrift and footloose time."²⁾ The 1920's was the time when a new generation took the place of the last in the situation of American society, and it was the time of the fashion of wild jazz musics and the time when American young men and women enjoyed themselves in drinking, singing, and dancing. Acclaimed overnight as the spokesman of a rebellious post-war generation — 'the Laureate of the Jazz Age' — at the height of his success he contrived to live like one of his own heroes.

Fitzgerald, in short, did not have to exaggerate the behavior of his heroes or heroines in order to create a brand-new popular American literary convention. The older generation, lulled into false complacency by a Puritan glossing over of sex, was shocked and then angered by Fitzgerald's realism, and accused him of being immoral. But Fitzgerald's contemporaries knew, or at least suspected, that he was merely telling the truth.

Much has been written and even dramatized about the Jazz-Age personas and syncopated lives of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. It seems that it is only Fitzgerald who has depicted the sadness and delight of the time. *This Side of Paradise* occupies an important place in Fitzgerald's career. Its lively reception and commercial success launched him as the "Prophet of the Jazz Age," the spokesman for his generation, and *This Side of Paradise* is one of the major reasons for his fame today. The novel was very much a product of its own times — the first chronicle of American youth in transition from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. Fitzgerald recorded carefully the current fads of speech, behavior, dance, dress, and literature; and the novel is a period piece, in the best sense of that term.

This Side of Paradise was the first novel to tackle with any degree of seriousness the problems confronting youth in post-war America, and through Fitzgerald's glowing

romanticism there sounded clearly for the first time those notes of disillusionment and rebellion that were to become dominant in the literature of the next twenty years. It issued at once a challenge to the old order and a manifesto for the new. As spokesman for his generation Fitzgerald dared to question the moral assumptions of the established order, and loudly proclaimed the emancipation of twentieth-century American youth from the inhibiting restrictions of the past.

Fitzgerald keenly observes the moral corruption of the 1920's in *This Side of Paradise*, which is the first popular example to be published in this country of that already well-established European literary form, the Entwicklungsroman — the novel of youth's coming of age. He describes in *This Side of Paradise* that Amory, the young hero of the novel, "saw girls doing things that even in his memory would have been impossible: eating three-o'clock, after-dance suppers in impossible cafés, talking of every side of life with an air half of earnestness, half of mockery, yet with a furtive excitement that Amory considered stood for a real moral let-down." The "moral let-down" enjoyed by the postwar generation has given the work its reputation for scandal as well as for social realism.

World War I had pulled many young men and women out of their customary surroundings, and resulted in giving them a taste of *laissez-faireism*. In this respect, *This Side of Paradise* had heralded for American youngsters the beginning of the postwar revolution of youth, and remains one of the most important social documents of the 1920's. That is to say, the real story of *This Side of Paradise* is a report on a young man's emotional readiness for life. During the novel Amory has adopted, one after another, various creeds and philosophies, always in search of a system that will explain reality to him. All these systems — Catholicism, the Princeton social system, American-Dream capitalism, and socialism — have failed him, and by the end of the book he is bitterly disillusioned. He has learned that no system can make sense out of the world he has seen and experienced.

After World War I, many young people thought that human beings had rights to enjoy themselves, being liberated from the restlessness of mental conditions sprung from the absurd situation of war. Such mode of life among young men and women in America is depicted in *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, and *The Great Gatsby*. An American picture scroll of the 1920's is vividly displayed in *This Side of Paradise*, especially. Under the social situation of America in the 1920's through his works Fitzgerald tried to burn 'the torch of idealism that had kindled the revolt of the American conscience' by means of creating the romantic heroes in his novels and vividly depicting the mental conflicts between a romantic idealist and the merciless materialists in the American society of civilization.

We are familiar with the history of that revolution in the manners and morals of American young people that occurred so dramatically during the World War I decade. Its roots went back far into the national past. During most of the country's history, the problem of securing

a living had obliged American boys and girls to pass quickly from childhood into the adult responsibilities of pursuing a calling and raising a family. Besides, the prevailing Puritan philosophy hardly favored the leisurely enjoyment of a carefree youth.

Fitzgerald rejoiced in life's blessings of the 1920's and aligned himself with the current idea of the nineteen-twenties. On the other hand, however, he was a severe moralist and he criticized exactly not to overlook the vulgarity lurking in the heart of the prosperity of the material civilization. It is important that the words 'disillusioned' and 'disenchanted' are often used to characterize the 1920's. In this connection, Fitzgerald was enamored of the gorgeous aspect of American life at first, but it is evidently visible in *The Great Gatsby* that the narrator of the novel Nick Carraway, that is to say, Fitzgerald's *alter ego*, is disgusted with the heartless manners of life of such American materialists as the Buchanans.

Fitzgerald became aware that American youngsters found their new faith in the early success on business, acquirement of a wealth of experience and the rejoicing in life's blessings. *The Great Gatsby* is the book to which historians of America in the nineteen-twenties inevitably refer --the apotheosis of Jazz-Age New York, brightly-lit playground of irresponsible millionaires darkened by the sinister shadows of bootleggers, racketeers, and the subtle insidious corruption that goes with money -- yet in distilling the very essence of a particular time and a particular place Fitzgerald re-created the myth of the tragic plight of mankind at all times, everywhere.

To Fitzgerald, the 1920's was, that is to say, the period of 'disillusionment' and 'disenchantment' as I mentioned before. Also it was the period when all Gods were already dead and all traditional conventions among young people were shaken large. In this connection, J. W. Krutch says exactly about the social situation of the 1920's as follows :

Most of the faiths which we received from the Victorians had already by then been shaken. Certainly the church which majority of their dogmas had become gradually so much attenuated new generation to make them vanished away.³⁾

In this meaning, Fitzgerald also is one of writers in the 'Lost Generation' like his contemporaries. For American young idealists, it seems to be evident that this side of the 1920's -- in the sense of mental aspect -- is barren in comparison with the economical prosperity. That is to say, this time is what we call 'waste land' as the social situation in America.

In this corrupted situation of morality, however, for Fitzgerald, to build up his brilliant life on the gorgeous stage of the 1920's was his faith of success as a kind of his view of life, and he detested the ugliness of poverty. The fact is that his main characters, for example, Amory, Gatsby and so forth, detest poverty and long to become rich, and also Fitzgerald himself disliked poverty and wanted to become rich, too. In this connection, he describes

through Amory's state of mind in *This Side of Paradise* :

I'm restless. *My whole generation is restless. I'm sick of a system where the richest man get the most beautiful girl if he wants her*, where the artist without an income has to sell his talents to a button manufacture.⁴⁾ (Italics mine)

In brief, Fitzgerald felt that this social system represented clearly the outstanding characteristics of the 1920's in America.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald depicts the full flavour of the 1920's in the realm of the jazz music as follows :

All night the saxophones wailed their hopeless comment of the Beale Street Blues, while five hundred pairs of gold and silver slippers shuffled the shining dust. At the gray tea hour there were always rooms that throbbed incessantly with this low sweet fever, while fresh faces drifted here and there like rose petals blown by the sad horns around the floor.⁵⁾

Fitzgerald felt keenly that youth is such a transient moment as the wail of the saxophones. He describes the aimless and wild behavior of American youngsters in the 1920's. In fact, the necking party, the murder, the neurosis, and the mental derangement were the social and mental phenomena among American young men and women at that time. They had no ideal and dream in their hearts. In this respect, Fitzgerald's romantic heroes have the ideals and dreams for their lives, and therefore his heroes attract American young men and women.

The American society of the 1920's is an unmoral one deserted by God. All the sad young heroes in Fitzgerald's stories are disillusioned, destroyed and broken down by a state of nervous stimulation. On this subject, the mental situation and the way of life, through Amory's sensitive observation for life, are clearly depicted in *This Side of Paradise* :

'Well,' said Amory, '*I simply state that I'm a product of a versatile mind in a restless generation*—with every reason to throw my mind and pen in with the radicals. Even if, deep in my heart, I thought we were all blind atoms in a world as limited as a stroke of a pendulum, I and my sort would struggle against tradition; try, at least, to displace old cants with new ones. I've thought I was right about life at various times but faith is difficult. One thing I know. *If living isn't a seeking for the grail it may be a damned amusing game.*'⁶⁾ (Italics mine)

Fitzgerald once remarked, "I really believe that no one else could have written so searchingly

the story of the youth of our generation.” His remark is obviously backed up with the quotations put above, and as Fitzgerald describes through his works, the truth was that his whole generation was restless, and therefore that living in youth should be a seeking for ‘the grail’. The grail, for Fitzgerald himself and young men in the 1920’s, symbolizes to get sufficient wealth and to marry beautiful girls.

Fitzgerald depicted the restlessness in which the younger generation could not bear the stillness and solitude behind the vogue of jazz, and also the empty feeling in which they lost hierarchy of value. He outwardly harmonized with the gaiety and hedonism of the 1920’s but on other side, he fixed a steady gage on the gloom and emptiness of the other side.

Fitzgerald’s masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* is the novel in which he grasps very dexterously the gloomy shadow approaching behind the gorgeousness. The extraordinary life and the ruin of Gatsby who lived on the vain dream to try to get back his former lover are empty as if they symbolize the mental sterility of the 1920’s, and at the same time seem to foretell the coming death of the boom. Fitzgerald pointed out the emotional instability, restlessness and emptiness of American society itself in the 1920’s.

The emergence of the 1920’s, that era, as Fitzgerald noted, when “America was going on the greatest, the gaudiest spree in history,” brought a completely different perspective of manners and morals with it. His writing during this period mirrors the general disillusionment with social causes which, in turn, prompted the recklessness and the rhetorical query, “Aint we got fun?” Just as he skillfully took hold of the moment in his earlier fiction, Fitzgerald was also successful in capturing the various moments of the Twenties, portraying them in all of their splendor.

Since we read Fitzgerald’s stories of the rich in a more affluent American society, in which the rich have become less shocking because they are now less removed from middle-class mores, we should more easily detect the moral and cultural confusions in Fitzgerald’s fiction if they are really there. Americans living through a new postwar society can no longer feel superior to Fitzgerald’s interest in the American greed for fine cars, the right clothes, and the pleasures of the best hotels and off-beat entertainment. The American people now seem to be less embarrassed than they once were at the snobbery of large parts of their social system. Contemporary social analysis has shown them how far ahead of his times Fitzgerald was in describing the rigorous systems of status that underlie that rather contradictory American term, the Open Society.

Fitzgerald wrote during two decades when an American social revolution seemed more probable to thoughtful people than it does today. Nowaday we are more ready to accept as he did the final complexity of our society and to recognize that we create a large part of our moral selves as we become engaged in that society. This is the theme that runs through his fiction and through his life. That is to say, Fitzgerald unified his existence with the 1920’s.

We can have a feeling that contemporary senses are in his works. It can be said that he was worshipped even as the heaven-sent child of the Twenties.

CONCLUSION

Historically speaking, the nineteen-twenties is the Indian summer days after World War I. Puritanism and the Victorian morality were disregarded far and wide among the young men and women in America. During the 1920's, the postwar generation reproached the old one for sticking to their traditional conventions and morality. That is to say, the younger generation set its face against the old way of thinking and of life and the genteel tradition of Victorian morality in the prewar generation. In this connection, Merle Curti mentions very relevantly as follows:

Many who did not share in the new prosperity had doubts about the beneficence of large-scale business organization. Others, especially the so-called intelligentsia, expressed cynical disillusionment with the whole American way of life, middle-class respectability, acquisitiveness, commercialism, the genteel tradition in letters, and the assumption of national superiority. Many among the younger generation tended to share the intellectuals' revolt against Victorian manners and morals and noisily insisted on the right to defy conventions and enjoy life. Thus the 'twenties, in spite of the prevailing complacency, were not without contradiction and confusion.'⁷⁾

In the nineteen-twenties, young men and women reversed the accustomed manners of life in American society.

Fitzgerald depicted vividly the way of life in the nineteen-twenties of America, and also he felt that his own life was not merely typical but also representative of the new generation. He presents the turbulent emotions of his generation—a generation whose adolescent years were shaped by the war, whose coming of age coincided with that unprecedented phenomenon in American history, the 1920's.

In brief, as Fitzgerald lived through the 1920's, the heroes of his fictions are also those who lived through the same time with him. However, it was the time when the traditional morality came to naught and all Gods were dead. America at that time was, in reality, the so-called 'waste land' for Fitzgerald's heroes where they could find nothing traditionally good and valuable. Fitzgerald said in Edmund Wilson's conversation, "My slogan is that I am the man who made America Younger-Generation-Conscious."⁸⁾ The 1920's had had the wild rising generation and a heady middle age. There was the phase of the necking parties, the Leopold-Loeb murder and the John Held Clothes.

Fitzgerald began as a spokesman for the 1920's and became its symbol. With his capacity for becoming identified with his times, he came to represent the excesses of the Twenties. By the mid-thirties Fitzgerald already served as the symbol of the Flappaer Age. All the complicated social changes of the postwar decade, the altered relationships between parents and children and the loosening of sexual mores, were simplified and condensed into one comprehensible image: the female heroine of F. Scott Fitzgerald's popular stories. Half a decade after their passage into history the twenties were recalled as the F. Scott Fitzgerald era, and the high-living, audacious young people who had vanished into a dull and serious maturity were remembered as the F. Scott Fitzgerald generation.

Fitzgerald embodied almost too perfectly the psyche of his own generation. We learn that the aspects of himself that he continually made into the characters in his fiction are imaginatively re-created American lives. He often wrote that high order of self-revelation that reveals humanity. He lived riotously and died a failure, as the legend has it, yet to impose the pattern of his life upon his work as most critics do is less justifiable than to view it as symbolic of the plight of the writer in modern America.

It seems that no one could describe the glory and fever of the 1920's and its ruin more splendidly than Fitzgerald. He died at the age of forty in 1940, and also he was the writer who had lived at the depths of despair during the last twilight decade of his short life. After all, Fitzgerald was a typical American of the Twenties.

NOTES

- 1) Arthur Mizener, *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (Twentieth Century Views, 1963), p. 5.
- 2) Alfred Kazin, *F. S. Fitzgerald: The Man and His Works*, (World publishing Co., 1951), p. 124.
- 3) Joseph Wood Krutch, *The Modern Temper: A Study and A Confession* (A Harvest Book), (Harcourt, Brace and Company), New York, 1956, p. 65.
- 4) *This Side of Paradise*, (A Penguin Book), p. 230.
- 5) *The Great Gatsby*, (A Penguin Book), p. 157.
- 6) *This Side of Paradise*, p. 250.
- 7) Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought* (New York, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1951), P. 686.
- 8) Edmund Wilson, "Imaginary Conversations, II," p. 249.

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