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FITZGERALD'S CORRUPTIBLE DREAM

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD is one of the most talented novelists that America has produced, although he was not the most careful or the most prudent. From Henry James he inherited a social perceptiveness that was often at an uneasy truce with his belief in The American Dream. Fitzgerald's art is divided between these extremes and only once, in *The Great Gatsby* (1925), does he succeed in welding them into a coherent whole. Of his other books, only *The Last Tycoon* (1941) shows the same understanding and objective grasp of material that makes *The Great Gatsby* so outstanding, but the novel is unfinished and it is impossible to say whether or not Fitzgerald could have succeeded a second time.

A concern with money is paramount in Fitzgerald; he saw it as a means of perfection, until intellectual honesty forced him to recognize its limitations. Indeed, to some extent all his novels deal with the isolating power of money and its destructiveness of personality. Because he possessed a Jamesian social conscience Fitzgerald attempted to find certainty in a moneyed aristocracy, and *Tender Is The Night* (1934) is, in part, an analysis of the uncertainty and instability of the American rich who formed, for Fitzgerald, an *élite*; to them he attributed the virtues he admired: honour, courage, and inner security. The corrupting power of money forced him to modify his view of aristocracy until it became a moral rather than a material state.

Even his earlier novels, such as *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), contain in embryo the ideas he later developed into a personal and national myth. Acutely conscious of his society, Fitzgerald was gifted with the satiric eye of a Jane Austen, but possessed neither her staying powers nor her social assurance. His works, *The Vegetable* (1923) excepted, although marred by carelessness and illiteracies, are marked by a verbal brilliance; he has an unflinching ear for language that makes his prose style the most vibrant in American fiction.

In dealing with Fitzgerald, critics have tended to over-estimate his interest in money and therefore to refuse to accept him as a serious novelist, or they have

labelled him as a second-rate novelist of manners fit only for the company of writers such as William Dean Howells, Ellen Glasgow, and John O'Hara. Either approach under-estimates his contribution to American literature. Fitzgerald's interest in society springs from and is subservient to his interest in the individual; in his view man cannot be isolated from society. Yet, he is very American in his belief that Life must be dominated and that society's rules must not be permitted to bind the individual. To Fitzgerald, Life is a game and a loss must be suffered with dignity. He held sacred no established rules of behaviour except those of consideration for one's fellows, and he tended to sympathize with social climbers if they possessed intelligence and charm, seeing in their struggle a development of natural instincts. Fitzgerald agreed with Mark Twain in feeling that personal integrity and individuality must be preserved: "Either you think—or else others have to think for you and take power from you, pervert and discipline natural tastes, civilize and sterilize you."¹

Although he had an anarchic conception of personality and believed that "Life yielded easily to intelligence and effort"², Fitzgerald was not a rebel or a reformer, perhaps because American society allowed such mobility. Despite an insistence on individuality, he longed for an absolute standard by which he could define himself, and view the world safe from doubt. In an attempt to find certainty he attributed the virtues he admired to the wealthy, but the American rich did not always measure up to his standards. His aristocrats have more than money; they have a bigness of soul and the possibility of perfection, which he thought could only be cultivated in the atmosphere of wealth. Once he began a short story in this way:

Let me tell you about the rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, and makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you are born rich, it is very difficult to understand. They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves. Even when they enter deep into our world or sink below us, they still think that they are better than we are. They are different.³

This exact difference Fitzgerald spent a great deal of his life trying to explain. His attitude to the wealthy was ambiguous; he saw in their lives the possibilities of grandeur and personal freedom, but at the same time realized the confining and isolating power of money. Tocqueville, perhaps, came nearest to explaining this contradiction when he said, "Aristocratic nations are naturally too liable to narrow the scope of human perfectibility; democratic nations, to expand it beyond reason."⁴

Fitzgerald's search for perfection led him to couple his idea of an ethical aristocracy with money. To him wealth was never bad in itself, although his established

families are presented as corrupt, self-indulgent, and callous. The Buchanans in *The Great Gatsby* are charming, but are damned by their carelessness and brutality to inferior status as human beings, and Gatsby, in spite of his roughness and underworld connections, is the "real" aristocrat. The Warrens in *Tender Is The Night* are more profoundly explored, but they do not differ essentially from the Buchanans; both have a lack of moral fibre which makes them caricatures of humanity. Their instability apparently convinced Fitzgerald that he would not find the certainty he sought in the manufacturing families of America, but he retained the idea that money was a necessary prerequisite to his "moral" aristocrat. It is ironical that the outsiders in his novels, Gatsby and Dick Diver, should without leaning on wealth, approximate his idea of an aristocrat; and it is significant that in *The Last Tycoon* he turned from the wealthy unemployed to a self-made man whose virtues are creative and tangible. Towards the end of his life he was thoroughly disenchanted with the "cosmopolitan rich", and wrote his daughter Scottie who was then in college:

They are homeless people, ashamed of being American, unable to master the culture of another country; ashamed, usually of their husbands, wives, grandparents, and unable to bring up descendants of whom they could be proud, even if they had the nerve to bear them, ashamed of each other yet leaning on each other's weakness, a menace to the social order in which they live. . . .⁵

The Warrens are all of these things; yet Fitzgerald, like Dick Diver, admired the grace and charm with which they faced disaster. The search for certainty led Fitzgerald to give the Warrens a significance comparable to English aristocrats, but he was forced by their lack of tradition and principle to create values for them, in the process of which he succeeded in demonstrating to himself how lacking in humanity they actually were.

Whether or not we accept his evaluation of American society is beside the point. Fitzgerald's importance lies in his acceptance of society, and his attempt to deal with it without recourse to non-American standards. Henry James turned to Europe because he found American society unbearably dull, but it did not occur to Fitzgerald to ignore his society or turn elsewhere for his material. Although the life and manners of America were ill-equipped to offer him the stability he wanted, he set about examining it with Jamesian virtuosity. In part, Fitzgerald's works are novels of manners which, by the intensity of his commitment to the ideal of a "moral" aristocracy of wealth, escape being novels of economic status. Without this belief in the possibility of the Warrens' and the Buchanans' superiority, their distinction depends solely on the fact that they have more money.

The ambivalent nature of Fitzgerald's heritage—a moral perceptiveness remin-

iscent of James together with a belief in The American Dream—hampered his judgments and forced him to vacillate between a social view of life and a romantic attachment to the self. As Lionel Trilling points out, “Fitzgerald was perhaps the last notable writer to affirm the Romantic fantasy, descended from the Renaissance, of personal ambition and heroism, of life committed to, or thrown away for, some ideal of self.”⁶ Fitzgerald’s most successful heroes, Stahr and Gatsby, are dedicated men following their own destiny, but their grandest plans and aspirations are presented within the framework of society, although they are allowed far greater latitude than any of James’s characters. The absence of a recognized code forced Fitzgerald to formulate a personal interpretation of Life and manners based on his ideals of courage, individual responsibility, and the recognition of another’s humanity. In his novels, this code takes the form of love, usually between a man and a woman, although sometimes it is simply communication between two individuals. Although Dick Diver and Gatsby are ruined because they love too deeply and too freely, they are never presented as over-emotional, but as unwise. Love for Fitzgerald is both destructive and healing: it is the only thing that will save Stahr’s health and restore his will to live, but it deprives Dick Diver of his integrity. Both Dick’s and Gatsby’s greatness lie in their ability to surrender to a dream and their capacity for love; Gatsby’s fate rises to tragedy, and *Tender Is The Night* haunts the reader because Dick is a brilliant miscalculation, a near tragic figure who remains so commonplace that identification with him is as easy as it is uncomfortable.

Fitzgerald’s sense of the past and association of Gatsby’s “incorruptible dream” with the first Dutch sailors to see America lifts *The Great Gatsby* from the second-rate and places it with the best in literature. The attempt to relate Dick’s fate with Grant waiting in his general store at Galena to be called upon by destiny is less successful. Fitzgerald has been accused of having no sense of the past, but this is misleading and unfair. In his unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, he attempts to relate Hollywood and its inhabitants to American society as a whole, and the result is less forced and contrived than in *Tender Is The Night*. Fully aware of the complexities and incongruities of American life, Fitzgerald tried to understand and comprehend it as a whole, but he succeeded only in *The Great Gatsby*:

France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter — it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered, it was a willingness of the heart.⁷

This “willingness of the heart” is at the core of all Fitzgerald’s major characters and causes their downfall. Although his heroes are very American, Fitzgerald never felt

impelled to celebrate America with the mystic patriotism of Thomas Wolfe; indeed, Wolfe's histrionics led Fitzgerald to exclaim impatiently in a letter to his daughter: "The stuff about the GREAT VITAL HEART OF AMERICA is just simply corny".⁸ Having no regard for mawkish sentiment for its own sake, he censured Wolfe for writing everything in the same emotional key.

Unlike his contemporaries, Fitzgerald makes little use of either violence or sexuality; love in his novels is amazingly free of sex, and reality is not only what is "external and hard, gross, unpleasant"⁹, but is social and moral as well. The implications of this duality cannot be ignored, because he was the first American novelist to attempt to cope with both elements. Fitzgerald considered as a sham the self-appointed Christlike attitude of Wolfe, who proclaimed with Blakean intensity:

. . . Life — the only thing that matters. It is savage, cruel, kind, passionate, generous, stupid, ugly, beautiful, painful, joyous — it is all of these things and more — and it is all of these I want to know, and BY GOD I shall, though they crucify me for it. . .¹⁰

Fitzgerald was willing to accept a different approach to art and writing, provided that it was honest; he admired Hemingway's "courage . . . Joseph Conrad's art . . . D. H. Lawrence's intense cohabitations", but he discounted Wolfe as "too 'smart' . . . in [the] most belittling and modern sense".¹¹ It was not that he feared Life: in fact, responsiveness is one of the Fitzgerald virtues despite his conviction that "life is essentially a cheat and its conditions . . . those of defeat."¹² The admiration for Hemingway's art did not entail accepting the "dumb-ox" philosophy; Fitzgerald differed radically from the early Hemingway and believed that "the redeeming things are not 'happiness and pleasure' but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle".¹³ He was incapable of writing about sex with the lyricism of Lawrence; when he tried to give Kathleen Moore (*The Last Tycoon*) a healthy animal sensuality he failed because he could not divorce himself from the idea that sensual love was sacrosanct. Perhaps this explains why he changed his mind about making Nicole Warren "the legendary *promiscuous* woman"¹⁴ and allowed her to be injured innocence in addition to being the symbol of a decadent society.

All of Fitzgerald's women of any importance are excessively pure, rather sexless, and their love tends to become a union of spirits; the only notably different woman is Kathleen Moore, but she is confused and inconsistently drawn. Fitzgerald seems incapable of creating a sensual woman without making her vulgar. Neither Daisy nor Nicole has much independence, although they differ in what little life they have. Daisy is a capricious flirt and Nicole is hard yet vulnerable, but both depend for their credulity and life on the intensity of a man's love; however, not

even that is sufficient to make Kathleen credible. Fitzgerald did not possess Henry James's insight into the female mind, and his heroines tend to be a series of qualities activated by arrogance and egocentricity. His men are more convincing, but suffer from a lack of cohesion; Stahr is the most consistently convincing; the others tend generally to be personifications, abstractions, or projections.

In spite of faults, Fitzgerald's novels do not fail to live. He loses nothing by rejecting the blatant sexuality of Faulkner or the unnecessary crudity of novelists, such as John O'Hara, who delight in revealing the seamy side of life for its own sake. Fitzgerald is an artist and painstakingly careful with his prose; his style is one of the most poetic, polished, and unobtrusive in American literature. Hemingway, Faulkner, and James, to cite but a few, are extremely self-conscious stylists. Beside Fitzgerald's, Hemingway's prose is spare to the point of miserliness and deceptively childlike in its simplicity and use of sentence paragraphs. Fitzgerald lacks the sophistication of James, but manages to discuss the nuances of class distinctions without descending into either obscurity or mannerisms. Fitzgerald's flowing prose often makes Faulkner appear turgid, Wolfe congested and unreadable, O'Hara nondescript and hackneyed in comparison. The poetic purity of the language in *The Great Gatsby* is matched by Hemingway only in *The Old Man and the Sea* and by Faulkner only in parts of *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and The Fury*. Even Fitzgerald's hack work, although often marred by carelessness, is verbally scintillating; his facility with language is more English than American, perhaps because it was cultivated through an admiration for Keats and sustained by the conviction that no one "can write succinct prose unless they have at least tried and failed to write a good iambic pentameter sonnet, and read Browning's short dramatic poems".¹⁵

Fitzgerald has a curious position in American literature. Although closer in spirit to Henry James, he is painfully aware of Mark Twain. Had he lived in a European society he would undoubtedly have been a novelist of manners; his equivocal position in American society forced him to create his own "manners". Partly because of this his characters transcend their society, although they never attain the objectivity of James's creations; despite the dearth of material in American society for a social novelist, Fitzgerald cannot be excused for his heroes' lack of integration. Other American writers solved the problem in various ways: James turned to England and contented himself with portraying Americans as innocents abroad or else as excessively civilized inhibited creatures such as Winterbourne in *Daisy Miller*; Edith Wharton invoked the standards of older New York and judged society by the manners and cultivated tastes of "Washington Square"; Hemingway escaped the quandary by setting his novels outside of America and dismissed class consciousness

in favour of a personal and highly formalized code; Sinclair Lewis accepted the middle class but exposed their sterility and hypocrisy; O'Hara tackled the situation with the sledge hammer, but "He didn't bite off anything to chew on. He just began chewing with nothing in his mouth".¹⁶ Faulkner was the most fortunate of the lot: he created Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi and endowed it with tradition and a history going back two hundred years. He was doubly fortunate in being a Southerner and understanding his society, which had an aristocratic tradition of its own dating from the time of the early plantations.

No such tradition aided Fitzgerald. He had to be content with a belief in The American Dream and the Mid-Westerner's yearning toward New England, with its aristocratic and puritanical standards. He attempted to weld the two into a coherent whole, but only succeeded briefly in *The Great Gatsby*. The combination of perceptiveness and sensibility of the Jamesian heritage and an innate distrust of civilization in the spirit of the Frontier and Mark Twain, produces an uneasy balance in Fitzgerald's work. Yet, he tends to lean more heavily towards James than any other American novelist and is unassailable when analyzing the nuances of American class differences, surpassing even Edith Wharton because his values are not imposed from without.

Fitzgerald's contribution to American literature was first appreciated by T. S. Eliot, who made the most relevant criticism of *The Great Gatsby* when he said that "it seems . . . to be the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James".¹⁷ Indeed, *The Great Gatsby* is so similar to *Daisy Miller* that Fitzgerald seems to have used James's novel as a model. Both are studies of innocence confronted by a society that behaves according to a set of rules with which neither Gatsby nor Daisy is acquainted. They are considered vulgar by the society to which they aspire; Gatsby's chaotic parties elicit the same response from the Buchanans that Daisy's friendship with Giovanelli produces in the American colony in Rome. Winterbourne and Carraway are not only similar in spirit: their purpose is identical. They are the consciences of the novels and they judge the actions of the characters in accordance with a code that is derived from their society, although not entirely subject to it. Both are so super-civilized that when confronted with people such as Gatsby or Daisy they find it difficult to sympathize or understand, but they are prepared to try. Fitzgerald and James are so committed to Carraway and Winterbourne respectively, that the reader's judgment is swayed by the force of the prose to concur without question.

In no other novel does Fitzgerald succeed in achieving such an intellectual grasp of his material or in comprehending it as a whole. He has not the ability to

sustain what James called "the Commanding Center." Although his debt to James is great, Fitzgerald's talent is essentially different; it is poetical where James is analytical. Even at his most sympathetic James holds himself aloof from the reader, a feeling undoubtedly exaggerated by his style; Fitzgerald, on the contrary, has the ability to get close to the reader and create an intimate atmosphere and a sense of communion.

Despite his attraction to James, Fitzgerald's allegiance is divided; his indebtedness to the tradition of Mark Twain cannot be ignored, but he brought the art of observing man in society to a new stage by making it American, whereas before him it tended to be regarded as European. He is a marker in American fiction. Had he ignored the frontier, Fitzgerald would have limited himself to the restricted social observation of Howells, but because he attempted to fuse the divergent elements of his heritage he is of primary importance.

As a novelist he is extremely readable, and although barred from the ranks of the great by the lack of cohesion in his work and a tendency to confuse his emotions with his judgments, he is a major writer. His great talent did not realize its full potential, partly through personal weakness, but also because of the division in his art, which is the direct result of being American; his was the difficult task of assessing an amorphous society which possessed no sense of tradition and could only define itself in terms of wealth. Like most writers, Fitzgerald had only one or two central ideas. The most forceful was a belief in the power of money to create a "moral" aristocracy that possessed all the virtues he admired; the second was a conception of vitality as a fixed sum that gradually declined with each emotional expenditure, until an individual reached a state of "emotional bankruptcy". This idea his own experience seemed to confirm, but knowledge of his society and intellectual honesty forced him to modify his views on aristocracy until it assumed the proportions of a moral rather than a material state. Even if his novels themselves are considered questionable measures of fame, his place in American fiction is assured. In Fitzgerald the American novel took its first step towards the union of a social conscience with the Frontier.

NOTES

1. Fitzgerald, *Tender Is The Night* (New York: Scribner's, 1953), p. 308.
2. Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up", in *The Crack-Up* (New York: New Directions, 1945), p. 69.
3. Fitzgerald, "The Rich Boy," in *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Scribner's, 1951), p. 177.
4. Alex de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley (New York: Vint-

- age Books, 1956), II, p. 35.
5. Fitzgerald to his daughter, Autumn, 1937, "The Letters," *The Crack-Up*, p. 288.
 6. Lionel Trilling, "F. Scott Fitzgerald", in *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 242.
 7. Fitzgerald, "The Note-Book," *The Crack-Up*, p. 197.
 8. Fitzgerald to his daughter, (n.d.), "The Letters," *The Crack-Up*, p. 305.
 9. Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals, and The Novel," *The Liberal Imagination*, p. 209.
 10. Thomas Wolfe, *The Hills Beyond* (New York: Pyramid Books, 1958), cover.
 11. Fitzgerald to his daughter, (n.d.), "The Letters," *The Crack-Up*, p. 306.
 12. *Ibid.*
 13. *Ibid.*
 14. Cited by Arthur Mizener in *The Far Side of Paradise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1951), Appendix B, p. 308.
 15. Fitzgerald to his daughter, (n.d.), "The Letters," *The Crack-Up*, p. 304.
 16. Fitzgerald, "The Note-Books," *The Crack-Up*, p. 181.
 17. T. S. Eliot to Fitzgerald, Dec. 31, 1925, "Three Letters about 'The Great Gatsby,'" *The Crack-Up*, p. 310.