

## PREFACE

A JOURNEY FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE —  
A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

The present study intends to examine the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald as a whole. But the autobiographical aspect of Fitzgerald's fiction and its representative quality as related to the Jazz Age — two aspects on which there has been so much insistence — have not been ignored.

In the twenties, following the great success of his first novel, Fitzgerald had appealed to the public more for the charm of his personality and his role of spokesman for a generation than for his artistic achievement. Praised as the creator of a disenchanted, but at the same time, sentimental attitude towards experience, he was overwhelmingly present in the public's mind and in the gossip columns. In the thirties, the fallacious reasons for which he had been admired in the previous decade offered the pretext for an almost general condemnation. What had at first appeared as representative of an age was overturned by the failure and collapse of that age, and for a good span of time the writer appeared as a lonely survivor for a period that had wrecked American society with its irresponsible attitude. Relegated into the background by a wave of puritanical prudery, Fitzgerald died a bitter and early death without completing the novel that was to redeem him in the eyes of the public.

The life, too, of Fitzgerald was a sharply divided life in every sense. The years of his youth, of his first maturity and his early success in the 1910's and 1920's contrast markedly with the years full of personal and public happenings that led to his premature death in 1940. But Fitzgerald's life was divided above all in a personal and human sense. It was divided between the pursuit of the artistic ideal and the continual, too frequent concessions to the taste of the moment or to the lure of easy success. He was a victim, in so many ways, of the myth of success and money.

Fitzgerald's history, in fact, is the history of a journey — a journey from innocence to experience which has to be interpreted in the light of the alternations of these two terms and the oscillations between them. Innocence is the pristine integrity of the naive, wild-eyed childlike selfhood. And experience is the abandonment of innocence through entry into the adult sexual moneyed life. Fitzgerald's novels are a record of the strenuous journey — to and fro — from dreaming youth to maturity. In the words of Fitzgerald, '..... innocence is no end in itself and as our minds unwillingly matured we began to see New York whole.....' <sup>1</sup>

In the Introduction — 'The Man and the Artist', we have taken note of the fact that Fitzgerald's life and work are so interwoven that the distinction between them blurs. In a sense, Fitzgerald imagined and created his life and

lived in his fictional protagonists. It appears from a study of Fitzgerald's life and works that he believed that the author must live as his characters live. In living up to a dream, an ideal of dramatic selfhood, Fitzgerald merged both his personality and the society in which he lived into his artistic representation.

The American Dream is the subject of the first chapter. This dream, it has been pointed out, is so deep-rooted in American life, that its presence can be felt in almost every sphere of it, attributing certain typical characteristics to the nation. The overwhelming presence of this dream has enriched American literature and has made it unique (Chapter I).

Manifestation of the American Dream is evident as early as in Thomas Jefferson's The Declaration of Independence. And great writers like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, were prophets of this dream. They believed in the perfectibility of man and hoped for a new society of free and self-reliant individuals. They enthusiastically affirmed that the dream was both good and realizable. But there were traditionalists too, like Hawthorne and Melville, who believed in the innate depravity of man. They thought the effects of the dream to be disastrous - yielding to delusions only. They denounced the falsity of the dream (Chapter II).

But the American Dream, though it starts withering, persists in a new shape and this persistence of the American

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dream is the subject matter of the next chapter. In the two following chapters it has been pointed out that American literature has evolved under the influence of the everchanging American life. American literary scene has sensitively responded to each and every change in the social and cultural milieu of American life. Transcendental vision of the great writers of 'the golden day' could not satisfy the pragmatic realists. This realistic group was concerned with the depiction of reality as they saw it - mostly the materialistic and ugly reality of the existing society. But, it has been pointed out, these new ideas reflected merely a change of mood. While criticizing the dream as vague and impossible, some of the writers in the later ages still cherished the ideals latent in it. The indirect treatment and even the negative implications of the dream also signified the influence of the dream in the writings of the new era (Chapter III and IV).

The dream persisted, at least for a little while, because World War I, which made Europe impoverished and paralysed, made the world of 1920 richer and more comfortable to the millions of Americans. The total atmosphere was full of gaiety and recklessness. It was F.S. Fitzgerald, one of the central figures of the period, who named the era - the Jazz Age. The post-war decade in America was significant for the rise of the youth. Everyone now seemed to belong to the younger generation and the younger generation seemed to be everywhere. The new code of morals along with the new freedom were alluring and



illusive. The "new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success" were being haunted by their dream of 'success' and 'money'. " In these days," in the words of Fitzgerald, 'life was like the race in Alice in Wonderland, there was a prize for everyone.' <sup>2</sup> But it was not so easy to break with the traditional values of life overnight and the new code, which was born in disillusionment, persisted to be a disillusioning one for a decade and could not substitute the richness and the strength of the old-ordered life. So the American Adam lay disenchanted and innocence gave way to experience (Chapter V).

A typical American youth of the period is Amory Blaine (in Fitzgerald's first novel This Side of Paradise). He is, at the beginning, fresh, vital and innocent with 'penetrating green eyes' and a 'facile imaginative mind.' During his stay at Minneapolis 'the crude and vulgar air of western civilization first catches him'. (p.18) After he came to Princeton, his puritan conscience made him see the cities 'as one vast juvenile intrigue.' (p.59) He could not save himself from being entrapped into this intrigue. Amory's early skirmishes with girls and events that follow make him 'experienced' and breaks his illusion that youth is innocent, permanent and indestructible. Taken as a whole, Fitzgerald's fiction testifies to his talent for identifying the corruption and moral failure marked by the surface glitter and carnival antics of the 1920's. But Amory's experience ultimately made him wise to

realize the difference between the world of dreams and the world of reality and prompted him 'to help in building up the living consciousness of the race (p.265). He belonged to the generation, yet his faith in life kept him above, since through loss and isolation he had learnt to know himself; he had 'escaped from a small enclosure into a great labyrinth. He was where Goethe was when he began Faust'.(Chapter VI)(p.264)

This gap between the world of dreams - of expectations and the world of reality and the decay of the romantic dream is also indicated in the life of Anthony Patch in Fitzgerald's second novel The Beautiful and the Damned. Anthony's inability to adjust his romantic self with the materialistic society makes him suffer and ultimately be ruined. He is duped by his own desire. The seeds of his destruction lay within his dream. Through Anthony's decay Fitzgerald reveals another important feature of his time - the reckless life of the youth without any regard for the past. The Beautiful and the Damned is a parable on the deceptiveness of dreams, and on the impossibility of evading reality through illusion. Fitzgerald was faithful to his own vision of the world and he tried his best to express the same in his own characteristic way (Chapter VII).

Fitzgerald's third novel The Great Gatsby took him a step forward towards attaining maturity in thought as well as style and made his depiction of the withering of the American dream more vivid and life-like. This novel is a saga of an innocent abroad - an idealistic dreamer who reposes his trust on the

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unlimited possibilities of life without being aware of the tragic destiny that awaits him. His chequered career suggests the shortcomings of the American's idealized conception of himself in relation to the external world. Gatsby fails to recognize his complicity in the corrupt world ruled by Mammon of which he had become a part. And he also fails to understand the real Daisy Fay Buchanan — the American nightingale with money in her voice who has long ago 'lost her white girlhood in the moral debacle which followed the Great War.' In this he represents the naive American youth still capable of envisioning the dream of the first Dutch explorers as they viewed the "fresh, green breast" of Long Island three centuries before. Gatsby incarnates the pulls of dream and illusion, the recurrent cycles of youth's capacity for wonder by which the New World has been dominated since the very beginning. The objective rendering of the intensely personal experience of Gatsby indicates Fitzgerald's seriousness of purpose and his maturity of vision. As a result Gatsby transcends reality and time, he belongs not exclusively to one epoch of American civilization but to history in as much as all history repeats in cycle form what Gatsby represents — America itself and the hollowness of the American dream.

But the point is not so much that the dream has been corrupted, the main fact is that it always carried within it the seeds of its own corruption. Fitzgerald called his next novel Tender is the Night, "My Testament of Faith". And it is really a testament of his faith and the title is

significant. The nine years between The Great Gatsby and Tender is the Night were years of frustration and despair for Fitzgerald. Hence Fitzgerald's decision to write 'a novel of our time' inevitably meant to show the break up of a fine personality and to use insanity as the appropriate image of modern life. Gatsby had survived the onslaught of reality spiritually intact; Fitzgerald determined now to show a man who is a natural idealist and who in his attempt to rise to the top of the social world loses his idealism and talent and his dream. Dick Diver was a dreamer who had set his illusions up against the power of reality and so ultimately was doomed to failure. Diver's discovery that he simply lacks the strength and will to impose his sense of order on the flux of existence, is nothing but Fitzgerald's admission as a creative artist of his own failure to exert his will on the brutal dictatorship of American reality. Dick Diver sacrifices his work to Nicole and his will to the seductive lure of the tender night; he retracts from the hard glare of reality into the 'Verdous Gloom' where forgetfulness anesthetizes time and drugs the will. The defeat of Dick Diver, his surrender to Mammon, marks not merely the abandonment of an idealized though constructive approach to life, but also confirms the anarchic nature of human existence (Chapter IX).

That materialistic and anarchic powers would inevitably dominate, is also Fitzgerald's thesis in The Last Tycoon. Fitzgerald in this last unfinished novel records and examines

the death of a set of values — of traditional individualism defeated in part by its own contradiction and in part by a plutocracy which has lost or never known the humanistic values once associated with individualism. The Last Tycoon is the story of Monroe Stahr — a once-powerful and dominating personality, who, struggling with changing social patterns, and with personal confusions and inner conflicts, falls into moral and spiritual bankruptcy. Monroe Stahr is actually the echo of an earlier age, the last of a line; Stahr is powerless to resurrect the vigour of such an age. The past cannot be retrieved, neither can it resuscitate itself — its fate, like Stahr's, is to die. (Chapter X)

From This Side of Paradise to The Last Tycoon is a long journey. Fitzgerald in his earlier novels, while indicating the oscillation between innocence and experience had focussed upon the gradual decline of moral and spiritual values. But in The Last Tycoon, his focus shifted, or widened, to include the elements of rebirth and historical repetition. Although the actual past was irretrievable, the pattern of the past might nevertheless be expected to repeat in the future. As far as Fitzgerald's work was concerned, then, The Last Tycoon did represent a new way of looking at certain phenomena — specially 'a modified way of looking at the decline of the West.'

The unlimited possibilities of mankind, its strength and resistance against the opposing fate may provide a constant

inducement to sing; but there is little doubt that the repeated failures of dream are constantly brought into the foreground. Fitzgerald records failures and frustrations while projecting continually on that background a reaffirmation of the purity of the dream of his characters. In an ordinary and everyday dimension he repeats the parable embodying the aspiration and the lament of a whole nation. In his fiction can be found the glory and the pathos of the American experience at large.