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F. S. FITZGERALD'S WORLD - WASTE  
LAND OR ARCADIA?

"Do what you will, this world's  
a fiction  
And made up of contradiction".

William Blake

Three best sellers /"The Disenchanted" by Budd Schulberg, "The Far Side of Paradise" by Arthur Mizner and Andrew Turnbull's "F. Scott Fitzgerald/, a fairly successful Broadway play and later a film based on Schulberg's novel as well as the first posthumous edition of "The Crack-Up" in the early fifties reopened Fitzgerald's "case". It was only then that critical reconsideration transformed the legend of his life into a literary reputation. Yet none of the critics could entirely follow the principles of the New Criticism, so popular a tendency in the early fifties. It was impossible in the case of Fitzgerald to put the primary emphasis on the individual work as such regardless of its author's personality. None of the critics could afford to separate Fitzgerald's forty-four hectic years from what he had created. His life like his fiction is filled with adventurous and romantic elements, a combination which few are able to experience and then

communicate to the reader.

Both in his life and fiction Fitzgerald dealt with opposing elements and points of view. Throughout his literary career he played with "the double". Fascinated by wealth and the luxurious life of the rich, he expressed the sense of disillusion and disappointment by making the rich of his novels spoiled, vulgar and careless. Money and success were for him the most important means to live a better kind of life. On the other hand this fascination did not blind his eyes. Money was also the main root of all evil. Probably realizing that conflict in his nature Fitzgerald wrote in "The Crack-Up": "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function". /Fitzgerald, 1974:39/. Indeed, it is a great art to be able to see certain aspects from contradictory points of view and even a greater art to present it to reader without resulting in chaos. Fitzgerald found his life disorganized and could not cope with his personal problems. He died a bitter and early death not completing the novel which was to redeem him in the eyes of the public.

It was with the posthumous edition of the unfinished "The Last Tycoon" that Fitzgerald has once again risen to literary prominence and now is placed together with Edith Wharton and Henry James as a shrewd observer of American society. Basically, Fitzgerald was concerned with the world of the Americans in the 1920's and 1930's. His interest shows itself in two predominant patterns: pursuit and resignation. This pursuit stems out of a romantic belief in the goodness of fate. It is escape from

reality and time, most often it is an idealized search for an outward position and social success. Resignation appears when those values are being realized in real life. Here comes capitulation to all these ideals. In the social realm this pattern may be named as "the American Dream".

Fitzgerald always begins by exposing the goodness of the American Dream - this romantic assumption that all the magic of the world can be had for money or that even a poor boy may become a millionaire or a President. He ends in realizing that although the dream is essentially good and beautiful, the pursuit is perpetually doomed. The search for wealth and social success is the familiar Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideal of personal, material success embodied in American culture already in the saga of Benjamin Franklin. Wealth was Fitzgerald's central symbol and around it he built a mythology. His generation more than any other entertained impossible dreams for the future and was totally dedicated to the worship of success. Those young people wanted to believe in their lucky, ever-shining star. So did Fitzgerald. Having achieved success at twenty one everything that happened later served as an anticlimax. He was very famous, and popular with the public since the edition of his first novel "This Side of Paradise". But ironically enough, he was destroyed by that fame and the desire to make money. In this private life he aimed all the time at the rich and comfortable kind of life. That was his dream to live in the world of the rich - in this idealized earthly Arcadia. In order to have money and share the life of the rich he wrote lots of well paid popular stories for magazines and devoted less and less time to writing really good

but not profitable literature. Thus, it is difficult not to accuse Fitzgerald of some second-rate literary achievements. Some critics even go as far as pointing out that there were two different personalities within Fitzgerald.

Ernest Hemingway regarded him as the Stevensonian figures of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. /Mizener, 1965:5/. Accordingly, it was Dr Jekyll who wrote "absolution", "The Rich Boy", "The Great Gatsby" and Mr Hyde wrote "Berenice Bobbs Her Hair", "The Pat Hobby Stories" and many other popular stories. However oversimplified this view is, there is some truth in it as far as Fitzgerald's duality goes. In these two different kinds of writing he expressed two totally different worlds. But as there is no Mr Hyde without Dr Jekyll there is also one Fitzgerald, no matter how complex his character was. These two, as it may seem, contradictory worlds constitute in fact one. The world of our dreams and the real one always create one, complicated whole. It is so both in life and fiction.

The popular short stories describe this idealized, happy world of our dreams. The desire to live a comfortable and luxurious life is easily realized and then enjoyed by the heroes. In this world there are no obstacles for the protagonist. Money wins everything and hence, all the promises inherent in the American Dream most often come true without any problem. The life of the rich is glamorized everywhere in Fitzgerald's works and the only difference is that in the popular writings it is only and exclusively the beauty and glamour that is presented to the reader. In the serious literature this gorgeous glitter is perpetually contrasted with the other side of the coin. Yet, for

the popular reader Fitzgerald was for a long time the one who wrote how beautiful the life of the rich could be. He was praised as the creator of the Jazz Age and identified with all the nonsense and absurdity of the twenties. He was considered to be a spokesman for the happy, careless, young rich people. "This Side of Paradise" was a bible for the flapper and college boys of those days. There the young people could read the enchanting legend of glitter and success. It seemed so easy to demonstrate in their own lives. Everywhere in his popular writing Fitzgerald presents the happy, unconcerned atmosphere of the gay twenties describing the adventurous and romantic lives of the flapper and sheik. The rich are models of an idealized experience. Fitzgerald knew it was not so in real life. He realized that the earthly Arcadia did not exist. It was but a dream which would never come true. Yet he did not want to live without that dream, clinging to it more and more.

This stubborn tendency to stick to some dream of meaningful existence did not overshadow the materialistic world. In his serious writing Fitzgerald presented this world with a rare gift of observation. It was a different world from the one of "The Saturday Evening Post" stories not because Fitzgerald suddenly was against those values and romantic assumptions that he was all for in his popular stories. Those were untouched and he still believed in them. At the same time, though, he had more mature vision of the world. It was no longer a vision of a happy, comfortable and above all rich life but a tragic vision of a world approaching its catastrophic end. It was not out of the blue that Fitzgerald discussed Spengler so much in the late

twenties. Spengler provided him with the idea that civilization was doomed and was going to an inevitable end which T.S. Eliot described as a waste land. A country where only possessions are important, people pursue their false dreams and all that is left is a sense hopeless drift, desintegration of life.

In Fitzgerald's good fiction the real values and dreams are always in conflict with the world. They can never be fully realized. They are either impossible to achieve at all or they are ironically distorted. This world is full of human tragedy both individual and this implied, social catastrophe. This conflict with the world can be explored if we take into consideration Fitzgerald's concept of time. Everything happens in time and time is this destructive force that swallows everything. Time destroys Gloria Patch in "The Beautiful and Damned" taking away from her beauty and youth. Time decides upon Dexter Green's tragic ending in "Winter Dreams". Time weakens romantic love as it is in "The Sensible Thing" and changes people and their attitudes as it does in "The Great Gatsby". All that happened in the past cannot be repeated in the present or future. People cannot copy their past. Gatsby tries to do it and he must fail. Monroe Stahr in "The Last Tycoon" also wants to repeat the past. He will not achieve his aim, either. Time is the main source of decay. Life is subject to decay. Old values and systems of culture cannot survive in the materialistically oriented world.

Fitzgerald assumed that our human culture was coming to its end. It already transformed itself into what Spengler called civilization. Hence, comes dehumanization of our lives. Dick



Diver from "Tender is the Night" is a personification of all those old, good values that Fitzgerald believed in. Dick is a pathetic figure in his surrounding. The world in which he and Gatsby live belongs entirely to the Buchanans and Warrens. They own the world and they make the laws that govern it. It is also a world of people like the Wilsons who seem to be among the ash heaps; people who devote their lives to pursuing some undefined dream. This world is definitely a waste land, both in the literal and psychological sense of the word. Fitzgerald's vision here is that of an everlasting fall. Here also comes the idealized past which is to contrast the present and to discredit it. That is the reason for so many recollections of the wonderful American history.

In his recollections Fitzgerald went as far back as 1492 and expressed most often ironically what had happened to that promised land since the days of Columbus. He tried to present all the valuable assumptions of the American Dream. He also knew, however, that the dream could never materialize but neither could it accept failure. In this sense Fitzgerald ironizes the whole legend of Benjamin Franklin. In "The Last Tycoon" a Danish prince visiting Hollywood suddenly sees Abraham Lincoln. He watches the President absolutely fascinated and then, unexpectedly Lincoln is jamming a sandwich in his mouth. The prince soon realizes that it was only a dressed up actor. What Fitzgerald probably suggests in this scene is the fact that neither Lincoln's nor Stahr's ideals could be entirely realized in this new world. Hollywood goes to decline in Fitzgerald's last novel and so does America.

In one of the final passages in "The Great Gatsby" Nick, the novel's narrator is trying to realize what has happened to all those unfulfilled dreams. The vision of the possibilities offered by the new world discovered by the Dutch was no doubt promising but absolutely defenceless before the equally American world populated by the Buchanans. The American Dream is stretched between a wonderful past and a promising future and unfortunately, it is most often destroyed in the clash with the cruel present day reality. That materialistic pursuit destroys everything and what has been left of that beautiful, green continent is a waste land, a valley of ashes. What Fitzgerald is almost certainly trying to say is: we are at the end of Columbus dream. This desintegrated world was the one Fitzgerald watched and experienced. The world from his popular stories was the one of his dreams. It was the world he wanted to believe in at all costs. But Fitzgerald was also well aware of the frightfull waste land with its soul-less society. He did not see life easy but he wanted to see it beautiful.

That was the world he lived in and described in his works. If we distinguish between two tendencies in the novel, one tending toward a romantic novel based on the author's own experiences, the other tending to a documentary and collective representation of reality, Fitzgerald's fiction is a unique combination of these two. He was "within and without" the period, he wrote about. This characteristic feature links him with Hemingway and Faulkner. Hemingway was dealing with universal human problems and conflicts, with the everfleeting image of reality and conquest. Faulkner found his south



fertile in motives for tragedy. Fitzgerald was content with a much more ordinary reality, the only one he knew. He was its interpreter with a modesty of approach and close observation. It was not his nature to deduce from his understanding of the social situation that American society needed reconstruction. He was too much obsessed with avoiding the reality of failure to be fascinated with its sociological causes. He tried to sort out his private life but there were so many contradictions that he could hardly cope with them. Fitzgerald wanted to write excellent books and make money at the same time. He wanted to be famous and yet nobody scorned and regretted this fame more than he himself. His life was full of unfulfilled dreams and this impossibility of their realization made his life look tragic, and unsuccessful. His real success and greatness, though, are constantly present on the pages of his books. His writings prove Shakespeare's words that "life is but a dream" and the whole world often has to be looked upon as mere fiction.

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