

Fitzgerald's Tender Is the Night: The Idea as Morality

Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*: The Idea as Morality

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I wish to regard *Tender is the Night*¹ as a crucial novel, not in terms of its being the last completed long work of Fitzgerald which can be judged in reference to the directions his writing was taking, nor merely as the traditional dualistic object lesson (*Commerce vs. Art*) which plagued a large part of Fitzgerald's career. *Tender is the Night* has often been made, and well made, into a sort of critical whipping boy as far as that anomalous figure, the American expatriate writer, is concerned. My purpose is one of seeing *Tender is the Night* as a problem in the conflict of values.

Professor R. P. Blackmur has said that "Fitzgerald made of his morality a screen for his self-love."² This may well be true. But I do not think that such a habit was distinctive only to Fitzgerald. Indeed, to some degree, I find that the practice obtains in the work of most relevant creative artists. Among the critics I find that the "screen for self-love" is projected with surprising frequency when the subject at hand is the work of Fitzgerald himself. I know of no American writer about whose work the critical words have been so diffuse, nor about whose literary intentions the critical revival meetings, introspective analyses and soul-satisfying obituaries have been so rhetorically misleading. For Fitzgerald is a writer whose work seems to demand to be talked *about*. Ironically enough, Fitzgerald's major victory over those who comment with impressive bravado toward the point is that Fitzgerald himself was the best critic of his own work.

Once we acknowledge this rather elusive condition we can, understand, as most certainly Fitzgerald understood, that Fitzgerald's peculiar and far from romantic "tragedy" was his constant critical self-entrapment *during* his lifetime. His letters and his notes reveal that he knew when he was failing and what he was failing at. Perhaps, then, his worst enemy was not, as many critics would have it, subjective carelessness or a determination to run constantly with the young eagles, but rather the merciless objectivity which he imposed upon those pieces of writing in which he truly believed.

It is unfortunate, also, that many of the enterprising and often valid insights concerning Fitzgerald's work (especially in regard to *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*) stem from a desire on the part of the critics to make didactic points which have nothing to do with the revelation present in the novels themselves. Much of the criticism of Fitzgerald is oblique

in the same way that much of the criticism of Henry James has been oblique. Essential to the tonic qualities of much cogent contemporary criticism is the need for hierarchy, and certainly both James and Fitzgerald provide this need. But valid hierarchy is too often accepted in a grudging fashion by contemporary critics, and on these embarrassingly "democratic" occasions the "American" thing to do is to *punish* that sense of superiority which is, of course, a necessary integer to a legitimate hierarchical aesthetic. Thus, we find ourselves in the age of the bugs in the see-saw. Historical critics affectionately spank Fitzgerald in terms of his lack of responsibility. Analytic critics see him in terms of the qualitative failure of sensibility in most of his work. Fitzgerald himself perhaps would sit ambiguously between the two forces. Finally, I detect an ill-concealed air of sullen resentment against Fitzgerald's love of a precarious gentility. This resentment which is full of "psychological perceptions" fails to conceal what in many cases actually amounts to an envy of the often whimsical search for distinction inherent in Fitzgerald's life and work. Fitzgerald's peculiar kind of honestly romantic gentility is often a bit foreign to many of those to whom gentility is a method of criticism rather than a way of life. Especially is this true on the part of some writers for *The Partisan Review* whose gray; gay notes from the underground betray a rather frenetic eagerness both to glorify and to exploit Fitzgerald's ambition and failure in the fortifying terms of an *acquired attitude* toward literature, an attitude which stems from literary models not often endemic to the American novel or American writing. This critical practice, of course, does not confine itself to tile treatment of Fitzgerald. It directs itself toward a certain kind of microcosmic limitation which places American literature in a most special and most un-resilient frame of reference, where it can be prodded for certain intrinsic properties and *used* in professional conversations in which criticism, no longer vis-a-vis with the secular rationalization of politics, arrogates the province of imaginative literature.

Tender is the Night opens up to this reader the very real conflict between the omniscience of ideas and the many-patterned search for morality which prophetically characterizes this age in which there is the confusion between criticism and creation. In essaying a study of this novel, I intend to show that we can find posited the problem which arises when the major compelling factors which motivate character spring mainly from drives which are essentially intellectual. Certainly Dick Diver is Fitzgerald's attempt to represent a *thinker*. *Tender is the Night* then, is not simply a "hangover" novel subject to the rather soapy romantic considerations which have been given it in terms of Fitzgerald's life. Poetry reveals insight, drama energizes it, fiction exploits it. It was in the process of exploiting insight (in the best sense) that Fitzgerald was able to distinguish himself, especially when the

fountainhead of these insights was not contingent merely upon his own personal neurotic preoccupations.

For in *Tender is the Night*, we are confronted with the spectacle of abstract intellectual entities crushing against the concrete realities of self-discovery. We find that the objective act, conceived through discipline of mind and fidelity of purpose, does not always result in wholeness of heart. For Fitzgerald, the intellect too often is the loser in the arena of morality. Ideas and morality, like truth and goodness, do not always become one.

II

Let me immediately present concessions. *Tender is the Night* is, at times, a hasty book in terms of realized form. It is a grab-bag of proud fact and misdirected fancy; some of its most enlightening insights are obscured by a clumsiness of narrative detail, especially in the latter sections, some of which savour of stylistic exhibitionism or self-righteous journalese. Professor Mizener³ and others⁴ have been able to tell us much about this novel. Sadly enough, for this reason the informed reader too often approaches *Tender is the Night* as a museum rather than as a book. So let it be conceded at the outset that the virtuosity of *Tender is the Night* is often superseded by the panic and anxiety of its author, and that the occasional pathetic insistence "to tell all" denies the book an eventual completeness.

My remarks are based primarily on the original version of the novel as published in 1934. I have read with care the so-called "final version" edited with great skill and sympathy by Malcolm Cowley.⁵ Presumptuous as this may seem, and with an apparent disregard for Fitzgerald's own wishes toward the novel as based on his re-arrangement of page order in the Princeton University copy, I do not feel that the value of *Tender is the Night* is necessarily benefited by the revised edition. For what has transpired in Fitzgerald's re-arrangement and Mr. Cowley's emendations and recording of errata in the original text is simply a shift in chronology which does not, to my mind, change the intrinsic character emphasis of the novel. Indeed, as my analysis will imply, the original version, while perhaps revealing (and Fitzgerald's mistakes are so incautious that they are almost beguiling) the writer's unevenness, with chunky precocity, does manage to retain a greater variety of aesthetic distance in terms of the refractive power brought to bear upon the complications of character. Mr. Cowley feels that the writing of the Rosemary section [in the original version] "seemed to be of a lower level of intensity than the story of a hero's decay as told in the last section of the novel."⁶ To me, the original Rosemary section is epiphanous and self-contained almost to the extent of constituting a novella in itself (and was indeed subjected to closer scrutiny on Fitzgerald's part than the other sections) and serves to highlight for us not simply a traditional tale of

degeneration in the twenties, but to act as a cold contrast to the ensuing action. The Rosemary section is correlative to and prophetic of the disaster of values in flux.

To discuss the three major characters of *Tender is the Night* is to assess three kinds of American commitments to knowledge. The American movie star, Rosemary Hoyt, is typical of the American as careerist, curiosity seeker, and opportunist. Her viewpoint enables the reader to see the European scene as an "American" might see it. She has come to the Riviera to rest following the shooting of a picture and also to make solid her contacts with American movie executives abroad. Fitzgerald makes of her naiveté, a watchful weapon. "Her face was hard, almost stern, save for the soft gleam of piteous doubt that looked from her green eyes."⁷ Her vision is enhanced in terms of irony by the fact that she is the Hollywood star ("Daddy's Girl") observing the scene which Dick and Nicole Diver inhabit as *another* kind of wonderland. Carefully she watches the Divers and their friends on the beach:

Even in their absolute immobility, complete as that of the morning, she felt a purpose, a working over something, a direction, an act of creation different from any she had known. Her immature mind made no speculations upon the nature of their relation to each other, she was only concerned with their attitude toward herself-but she perceived the web of some pleasant interrelation, which she expressed with the thought that they seemed to have a very good time.⁸

Her inevitable love for Diver is based on the aura of perfection which she feels emanates from him. Her mother, Mrs. Speers, encourages Rosemary's affection, regarding the love as an almost professional project to be chalked up to "experience." Sexuality is energy which produces results through talent. Mrs. Speers tells her daughter: "Wound yourself or him—whatever happens it can't spoil you because economically you're a boy, not a girl."⁹ The philosophy of Mrs. Speers is confirmed later on in the book after a conversation with Diver: "So long as the shuffle of love and pain went on within proper walls, Mrs. Speers could view it with as much detachment and humor as a eunuch."¹⁰

Of course, Rosemary does not appreciate or even comprehend Diver for the quality of his introspection or for the latent sense of discovery inherent in his personality, or really for any part of his actual intellectual makeup. To her, he is a concept, a quantity, a special by-product. "Now—she was thinking—I've earned a time alone with him. He must know that because his laws are like the laws Mother taught me."¹¹ Interestingly enough, Rosemary is the only major American character of the novel to emerge unscathed and to a great extent emotionally untouched. Fitzgerald takes care to point out that after the affair between Diver and Rosemary is

consummated, later in their friendship, there is no mutual realization of “love.” For Rosemary, love is perhaps another conquest. For Diver it is one more step to spiritual disillusionment. Rosemary Hoyt perceives intelligently the “game” of love. She is able, in spite of the tugs at her natural sentiment (which sentiment incidentally is her major box office commodity), to make the proper divisions between emotion and reality.

The character of Nicole Diver, who is not as overtly presented as might be expected, is used analogically throughout the book as a means of representing the guilt, the madness, and the development of decay curtaining all the major scenes. In depicting Nicole, Fitzgerald has managed to overcome the temptation to present simply a one-dimensional version of his own life with Zelda Fitzgerald. Nicole’s schizophrenia keys for us the various degrees of psychological strain impressed upon the action of the novel. Her breakdown at the conclusion of Book I and her “cure” toward the end of Book III comprise the two major internal structural climaxes of *Tender is the Night*. Here, Rosemary watches Nicole shop: “She illustrated very simple principles, containing in herself her own doom, but illustrated them so accurately that there was grace in the procedure.”¹² Later on, when she is with Dick at his clinic in Switzerland, we are able to see the disjunction of her values in repose:

The people she liked, rebels mostly, disturbed her and were bad for her—She sought in them the vitality that had made them independent or creative or rugged, sought in vain—for their secrets were buried deep in childhood struggles they had forgotten. They were more interested in Nicole’s exterior harmony and charm, the other face of her illness. She led a lonely life owning Dick who did not want to be owned.¹³

Her spiritual footlessness, abetrated already by an incest trauma, thrusts her into a marriage in which father and lover are joined in a pattern of despair. To be free, she must destroy, and there is money and “logic” for the destruction. To be free, she must hate, and she must resent all the places

where she had played planet to Dick’s sun. . . . she knew at last the number on the dreadful door of fantasy, the threshold to the escape that was no escape; she knew that for her the greatest sin now and in the future was to delude herself. It had been a long lesson, but she had learned it. Either you think—or else others have to think for you, and take power over you, pervert and discipline your natural tastes, civilize and sterilize you.¹⁴

Her greatest enemy, then, was the pure intelligence which her husband represented. And Nicole’s activities and drives were certainly not based on any concept of or devotion to ideas. It was Dick’s mind that she was never truly able to buy, and, realizing this, she fought him “with empty receptacles of her expiated sins, outrages, mistakes.”¹⁵ And won. With the death of all the fathers, the new plane of understanding becomes passion.

Fitzgerald readers, some of whom have the same avidity as stamp collectors, have often remarked on Fitzgerald's intellectual limitations. Certainly, these limitations existed. I believe, however, that Fitzgerald's major preoccupation as a serious writer went in the direction of regarding mind as essentially a kind of energy. Throughout *Tender is the Night* there is evident a judgment of the quality of minds. Abe North is treated sympathetically, because at least he has at one time realized intellectual distinction. Fitzgerald, as omniscient narrator, paints the writer McKisco contemptuously. McKisco, we feel, is one of a large breed to whom critical ideas are so many merit badges. McKisco is a bird of prey, scratching for what he cannot define.

While Dr. Diver's moral defeat is to some extent over-romanticized, there can be no doubt that Fitzgerald uses Diver as the protagonist in a novel which is concerned primarily with ideas.

Diver is the most sporadically conceived character of *Tender is the Night*, a condition which can be attributed to the irregular composition of the book from its original inceptions in other versions with other protagonists through its serialized form in *Scribner's Magazine*, into its final published appearance in 1934. In terms of character, Diver is less distinctly delineated than the other major characters. Again, we can blame not only the intrusion of autobiographical interpolations on Fitzgerald's part, but also a certain indecisiveness in the projecting of a picture of mind in the process of self-evaluation. Diver, for instance, differs from Gatsby, not only because he is *really* an intellectual, but because of his infernal vacillation of spirit. He does not know what he wants. In his family and in his training, he has, we are told, been given all the codes and all the answers. And yet the world of troubles in which he moves turns out to be a relative world in which the formulae conflict and bring forth answers which are neither in the books he knows and the psychological pamphlets he has written, nor in the recesses of the spirit which lie in American graveyards abroad, or by the side of his father's grave in America. He is unable to equate his passions with his actions. Symbolically enough, in his attempt to "eliminate himself," and do the right thing by Nicole, he must love her as a doctor (the love of "truth") and *then* as a man; but the two states of love are profoundly separated. This divorcement of the intellect from the action, of the peripheral emotion from the internal reality of hard knowledge, is a recurring malady of which certainly Fitzgerald was aware. Diver's truth, which he failed to define, was an impossible truth for him. The repository of *his* true dream is in myth and in the absolute, but as a man of science, albeit a man of good will, of charm, of personal ebullience, of brotherhood, he still cannot place his trust in the absolute. This is not only the dilemma of the scientist. It is the dilemma of the artist to whom final commitment can seemingly only mean resignation. In Dick's resignation, in his forsaking of

the Riviera with its inhabitants sleeping “late in darkened rooms upon their recent opiate of dawn,” he enters into that limbo of puzzled reflection which characterizes the inability to derive creativity from experience.

It may be, as has been suggested, that Fitzgerald was playing a trick on us¹⁶ by placing his “hero” in a kind of withholding, sterile relationship to everyone around him. I don’t regard this as a trick as much as a totally conceived device on Fitzgerald’s part. For certainly, Diver’s isolation provides for us Fitzgerald’s opportunity to make moral judgments throughout the novel. Constantly, as the man of ideas, he is asked to become a man of morality, and in the Italian taxi-driver episode, which comprises Dick’s lowest fall into moral desolation, we see acted out for us the violent consequences of the critical mind at loose ends, within a pattern of values which are essentially alien, and which are based on emotion for the sake of emotion. Dick’s fate is inevitable, when he realizes that his intellectual standards and values are essentially static and capable of being concretized only within their own boundaries. “Dr. Diver’s profession of sorting the broken shells of another sort of egg had given him a dread of breakage.”¹⁷

The link between idea and morality is pride. Dick’s pride is shattered, not by any realization of having sold out to the Warren millions (whose millions are no better or no worse than anybody else’s millions), but from his realization that he has been unable to effect a ratio between the responsibility of ideas and the responsibility of action.

His marriage on the rocks, his best friends dead to him, he arises in the middle of the night to rescue an old friend and her Lesbian acquaintance, Lady Sibly-Biers, from the French police in Antibes

He got up and, as he absorbed the situation, his self-knowledge assured him that he would undertake to deal with it—the old *fatal* [italics mine] pleasingness, the old forceful charm, swept back with its cry of “Use me!” He would have to go fix this thing that he didn’t care a damn about, because it had early become a habit to be loved, perhaps from the moment when he had realized that he was the last hope of a decaying clan.¹⁸

Fitzgerald’s introspective intensions in *Tender is the Night* do not deprive the novel of a rewarding dramatic impact. The purposes of this essay have not permitted me to include some of the most telling scenes of the book. Perhaps, however, I have shown the challenge which Fitzgerald was attempting to meet by suggesting to the reader that the *idea* of action, or to phrase it differently, the weight of mind, cannot in itself, be divorced from moral considerations. Richard Diver attempted to rely on ideas as the bases of his moral conduct. His failure brings to focus the fact that the division of idea and morality can lead only to defeat. Fitzgerald knew well that victory of manner was commonly available to many. He also knew, that for him, wholeness of mind found its basis through a surrender to absolutes.

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1. *F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tender is the Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1951), based on the original edition published by Charles Scribner's Sons (New York, 1934).

2. R.P. Blackmur, "The Politics of Human Power," *The Lion and the Honeycomb* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955) p. 39.

3. Arthur Mizener, *The Far Side of Paradise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1951).

4. Alfred Kazin (ed.), *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work* (New York: The World Publishing Co., 1951).

5. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*, with the author's final revisions prefaced by Malcolm Cowley (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

6. Cowley, p. XVII.

7. *Tender is the Night* (Bantam Book) p. 26.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 179.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 316–17.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

16. D. W. Harding, "Mechanisms of Misery," in Kazin, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

17. *Tender is the Night* (Bantam Book), p. 195.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 331.