

A Critical Survey of the Social Relations and Cultural Ethos of the American Society as Reflected in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Abstract:

The various artistic works of Fitzgerald are brilliant at analyzing the implications of diverse social relationships of America. He proved beyond doubt that the dark, deeper realities of America preponderate over the outward gloss and glitter. These discordant aspects have to be thoroughly examined for a lasting solution to mitigate the American predicament.

In the vast corpus of his fictional world and especially in his novels to plunge beneath the outward glitter of modern American life and come out with invaluable observations of and laudable insights into the socio-cultural realities of America and the various nuances of its cultural ethos. Such insights assumed a timeless aspect in his artistic rendering of the issues he addressed in his novels. Since his literary works are born not merely of his personal experiences but also of the socio-cultural milieu of his times, this paper aims a close study of his works to throw considerable light on the societal conditions and cultural ethos that prevailed at the time of writing his works and which fashioned the inscape of his works. The various artistic works of Fitzgerald are brilliant at analyzing the implications of diverse social relationships of America.

Key words: Social Relationships of America, American Cultural Ehtos, Fitzgerald's works

Fitzgerald, like any other great American writer, did admirably well in the vast corpus of his fictional world and especially in his novels to plunge beneath the outward glitter of modern American life and come out with invaluable observations and laudable insights into the socio-cultural realities of America and the various nuances of its cultural ethos, Such insights assumed a timeless aspect in his artistic rendering of the issues he addressed in his novels. Since his literary works are born not merely of his personal experiences but also of the socio-cultural milieu of his times, a close study of his works will throw considerable light on the societal conditions and cultural ethos that prevailed at the time of writing his works and which fashioned the inscape of his works.

The various artistic works of Fitzgerald are brilliant at analyzing the implications of diverse social relationships of America. He proved beyond doubt that the dark, deeper realities of America preponderate over the outward gloss and glitter. These discordant aspects have to be thoroughly examined for a lasting solution to mitigate the American predicament. His foresight as well as his premonition is evident in the following observation he makes:

All the stories that came into my head had a touch of disaster in them – the lovely young creatures in my novels went to ruin, the Diamond Mountains of my stories blew up, my millionaires were as

beautiful and damned as Thomas Hardy's peasants. In life these things hadn't happened yet, but I was pretty sure living wasn't the reckless, careless business these people thought – this generation just younger than me. (*The Crack-Up*...pp. 59-60)

Hence he plunged into this task with a kind of missionary zeal. The outcome was the production of numerous excellent short stories and a few brilliant novels.

Scott Fitzgerald's literary career started with great public accolade soon after the publication of his first novel: *This Side of Paradise* in 1920. But his later novels – *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), *The Great Gatsby* (1925), *Tender Is the Night* (1934), and *The Last Tycoon* (1941) - did not attract so much popular attention as the first one did. These novels he wrote later were all different from one another with varied techniques and themes which the reading public including the critics in general failed to recognize. These novels were highly experimental in nature with different techniques and themes clearly indicative of the artistic maturity and creative genius of Fitzgerald. All these novels are remarkable and unique in their own way. *The Great Gatsby* is generally evaluated as a modern classic. Of late *Tender Is the Night*, by general consensus, is held as an exquisite novel which did not receive the due recognition at the time of its publication. The less enthusiastic reception of his later works was anguishing to a sensitive writer like Fitzgerald. It was after the

writer's death that a 'Fitzgerald Revival' took place bringing to the fore the real greatness of Fitzgerald from several angles. Fitzgerald's fame has been rising over the years as more and more studies have been undertaken to gauge the depths of his writings. The present study undertakes to explore how adroitly Fitzgerald incorporated in his writings the diverse issues of social relationships and cultural ethos of America of his times.

A writer is the product of not only his genius but also his times and the tradition he has inherited. T. S. Eliot underscored the necessity of defining the individual talent of any literary writer in terms of the literary tradition which he has inherited. He rightly grasped the pivotal role tradition plays in fashioning the genius of a writer. In his opinion, a sense or awareness of tradition is a prerequisite for any critical approach: "No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him for contrast and comparison among the dead..." (Eliot, p. 23)

As a corollary to this is the need for any writer to be judged in the socio-cultural milieu. It is this second approach that has been adopted in this study. Effort has been made to place Fitzgerald in the right historical context and view his works as the products of the interaction between his own genius and that of the socio-cultural milieu of which he was a part. Further, the study also tries to bring to light the admirable way in which Fitzgerald has treated the social relationships and the subtle American ethos.

To have a deep understanding of the American cultural ethos and to perceive the intricacies of the American relationships certain determining factors that have gone into the making of the American psyche and the *moment* have to be considered - the so-called historical and cultural factors. Again, a close study of the works reveals how Fitzgerald has artistically treated these social, historical or cultural factors in the fictional world he has created. Of the various determinants of the American sensibility and literature, the more notable ones are:

Soaring idealism based on and propelled by Transcendentalism, the frontier spirit, individualism (which led to the growth of free market economy with its principle of competition and fed the 'American Dream' of unlimited success), the romantic self (as an offshoot of individualism with its conception 'self' with unlimited possibilities), the naiveté of romanticism (leading to disenchantment or disillusionment) and the haunting spectre of Puritanism (which constricted the American imagination). All these bestowed on American literature an incipient and inevitable tragic sense and a dichotomy of 'double vision'. All these influences, like those in other writers, were clearly mirrored in the writings of

Fitzgerald, and perhaps to a greater extent (Sivaramakrishna, pp. vii-x).

When we survey the twenties, particularly the early part of the twentieth century to which Fitzgerald belonged, there is another set of significant and crucial factors by which the writers of the period and people were influenced. These factors not only conditioned the sensibility of writers like Fitzgerald but they also found an artistic transformation and aesthetic expression in their writings to give a fine picture of the contemporary reality. No other writer, it is generally agreed, so beautifully expressed the multifarious aspects of the period as Fitzgerald had done in his diverse writings - novels, short stories, and miscellaneous writings. These developments were: the World War-I, the rise of existentialism, the Boom followed by the Great Depression, the Jazz Age, the disillusionment, the rise of Hedonism or Epicureanism, rebellion of the youth against tradition and conventions, subversion of moral values, alcoholism, rise in underworld activities, growth of racism, onset of sexual anarchy, ennui, loss of faith in God and religion, rise of materialism, consumerism, craze for fashion and show off, exhibitionism, snobbery, lack of political interest, and so on.

When we subject the novels to a microscopic study, it becomes evident that Fitzgerald had made profound studies of the social relationships of his era in his novels (and of course in his other shorter fictional and non-fictional writings also). He had skillfully encoded the ethos of American culture in his numerous writings whether they are novels or short stories or pieces like *The Crack-Up*. Here we limit our studies to Fitzgerald's five novels for greater focus.

In *This Side of Paradise*, his very first novel, what we see is a complex network of social relationships that centres round the egoistic but sensible hero, Amory Blaine - his dubious relationships with his various girl friends, his male friends, and ambivalent relationship with his parents, particularly his mother, his attachment to Monsignor Fay, and so on. From a narrow egoist, he slowly emerges as a more mature person towards the end of the novel, when we see him progress himself from a 'personality' to a 'personage' under the salubrious influence of his vast reading and sensible social interactions. His efforts through persistent reading to reach a higher level of existence at the social sphere of relationships with his fellow beings enables him to be a so-called 'personage', imbued with a better vision. His quest for a better life is gradually and partly fulfilled. The novel is also a fine criticism of the social relationships of the period, as also other issues. The last chapter of the novel has in it a fine description of the contemporary social scenario of America. Amory articulates his view and impression of the society of his times quite

unambiguously in the following words: "Here was a generation, shouting the old cries, learning the old creeds through a reverie of long days and nights.... A new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all gods dead, all was fought, all faiths in man shaken." (p. 282)

In his second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, what we see is a highly complex and shocking web of relationships often abysmally degenerated and startlingly repelling. It shows the vulnerability of human beings to sink to the bottom of depravity, selfishness, and callousness. The predominant relationship explored in the novel is the queer man-woman relationship especially between a newly become-rich person or rather a *nouveau riche*, Anthony Patch, the protagonist of the novel, and his snobbish but charmingly seductive, arrogant wife, Gloria. The novel also explores the disastrous implications of this peculiar relationship between a man and a self-obsessed woman. The novel sheds light on the changing American social ethos spurred by the unprecedented prosperity and the unlicensed freedom which brings about attitudinal changes in society. A precipitous fall of the new generation from the dizzying heights of transcendentalism, which the older generation of America had aspired for and strove for, occurs to the characters in the novel adumbrating the rapid degeneration in social relationships and shocking changes in traditional ethos. This is quite embarrassing and revolting. Anthony Patch, the protagonist of the novel feels the emptiness, fear, and lassitude of the generation of his period. He himself follows a life style opposed to that of his own grandfather, Adam J. Patch, who personified Victorian values. In the novel while observing the carnival of New York City, he senses the hollowness and meaninglessness of the glamorous city life:

The soft rush of taxis by him, and laughter hoarse as crow's, incessant – and loud, with the rumble of subways underneath – and overall, the revolutions of light, the growing and receding of light – light diving like pearls forming and reforming in glittering bars and circles and monstrous grotesque figures out amazingly on the sky (p. 515).

His next novel, *The Great Gatsby*, is charged with the American ethos such as the transcendental idealism, American Dream of unlimited material success, frontier spirit, especially the conquest of the psychic geographical frontier, individualism, infinite possibilities of the self, double vision, superiority feeling, etc. Similarly, the novel is an excellent study of diverse social relationships. It explores the consequences of love-relations between Jay Gatsby, Daisy Fay and Tom Buchanan - the major characters and the relationships between minor characters like Wilson, Myrtle Wilson and their crucial relationship between the major characters, the

relationship between Nick Carraway, the narrator, and Miss Jordan Baker. The novel also exposes the underworld connections of Gatsby and the nefarious activities of the active underworld dons of the America of the times pursuing the material dream of unlimited success by hook or by crook, worship of money being the newly emerged religion. Towards the end of the novel, the myth of the new materialistic social relationships explodes, when not a single person except Nick and Gatsby's father turns for the burial of Gatsby. It is to be remembered that a large number of people used to have sumptuous dinner in Gatsby's palatial mansion every now and then. Opportunists that they were, none of them appeared at the time of Gatsby's death or burial, leaving him in the lurch at the time danger. Here the novelist reveals beyond doubt that most relationships existing in the superabundant, rich America is shallow, utilitarian and opportunistic. Hardly anyone appeared to have genuine love, or concern for others. Nick's observation is right: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – They smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together and let other people clean the mess they had made..." (*The Great Gatsby*, p. 143)

The society has degenerated into a kind of waste land symbolized by the 'Valley of Ashes' in the novel. This creates in the narrator, Nick, contempt for the whole 'bunch' of so-called friends of Gatsby representing the upper class of America. They are 'callous, brutish and nasty'. They, like Daisy and Tom Buchanan, are a 'careless' set of people. Compared with them Gatsby was a thousand times better with his sensitive, loving, and transcendental mind, 'full of the milk of humanity', despite his bootlegging activities to enrich himself so as to woo the rich girl, Daisy and marry her. Since he knew that the worship of money has emerged as the new religion, he was sure that to win the heart of his golden girl whose 'voice was full of money', there was no other way but to become rich at the earliest in one way or the other. It was this situation that made this humane person travel along the bootlegging path. But he did not allow his illicit activities drain away his humanity and metaphysical aspirations. He yearned for the 'green light', throbbing with enthusiasm, hope and 'heightened sensitivity to the promises of life'. Here lies his greatness. He reminds one of the nobility of Sonia in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* despite the involvement in a crime and yet remaining untainted by it to a great extent.

Tender Is the Night is a shocking study of how a pervert father could go to the extreme of having an ignominious sexual relationship with his own daughter, Nicole, in an unguarded moment, turning her into a mental-wreck. This is also a study of how susceptibility to female fascinations and love of money by several talented Americans

could land them in deep trouble and degenerate them to suicidal levels. It is a fine picture of the great dismal changes happening to American society during the early part of the 20th century. Fitzgerald artistically and quite effectively draws for the readers a world that is quite shuddering and repulsive to the morally sensitive people. The novel points out how and why social relationships crumble to dust in America, the materially most powerful nation of the world. The study of such relationships occurring in the novel is deeply psychological. Dick Diver, the talented, famous psychiatrist, degenerates irrevocably after his marriage with Nicole, the schizophrenic lady. Further, the easy money from the Warrens has a demoralizing and malicious influence on him. Female charms and lure of money can cause great rupture in social relations and marked degeneration in the personality of an individual. The magic web that money and female influence weaves cannot be easily overcome by men of weak will and frivolous nature. Even the powerful persons can at times fall easy victims to them bringing about their ruin eventually. The novel is an indirect moral exhortation to the readers to be on guard against the magic spell that may be cast by such forces in society and to be braced up by moral armour to protect themselves from such diabolic influences. The American cultural ethos of materialistic pursuit to achieve the dream of unlimited success is also evident in the story of Dick Diver. In *Tender Is the Night*, according to Milton R. Stern,

the corrupt new world of soulless wealth becomes identified with the new America as the new

America spreads over the World, is internationalized, and loses its old unique identity.” Here, “the destroyed old world of our Gatsby youth, Dick Diver’s lost ‘safe, beautiful world’ of promise, hope, passion, charm, virtues, and graces, is identified with an older America that is forever buried, as with Dick, we say goodbye to all our fathers. (p. 116)

The Last Tycoon, Fitzgerald’s last and unfinished novel, is also an exceptional study of American ethos and social relationships especially in the world of cinema in the Hollywood. The glamorous film stars and others moving about in the film industry are neither really glamorous nor worthy to be emulated. That indeed is a world of cut-throat competition and culpable disloyalty. Here there is neither human concern nor any moral principle to be guided by. Only the fittest survive here. Fitzgerald also explores the American ethos of individualism, capitalism, and competition. The relation of those employed in the film industry with their producer eventually comes under the socialistic influence expressed through the trade unions that emerged after the Great Depression and the traditional loyalty to the boss gives way to suspicion, defiance and disloyalty defeating the noble aspirations of Munroe Stahr, the brilliant and ideally inspired producer and ultimately paving the way for his tragic death. Thus the dark hidden world of the glittering Hollywood with all its horrors is exposed to the reading public in a rare attempt by Fitzgerald.

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