IDEALISM, DISILLUSION AND PERSEVERANCE:
THE LIFE, TIMES AND STORIES OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

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Statement of the Problem

F. Scott Fitzgerald is considered to have been a great chronicler of his American generation. Fitzgerald’s lifetime spanned dramatic changes in American attitudes and fortunes. Born at the close of the Gilded Age, he grew up in the Progressive Era and reached adulthood during the first world war. His greatest success came during the 1920s economic boom. He spent his final decade struggling to survive professional and personal collapse amidst the Great Depression. While best known for his novels, Fitzgerald was a prolific author of short stories. Fitzgerald wrote short stories nearly continuously throughout his life. If Fitzgerald is representative of his generation, his short stories ought to reflect the evolving attitudes of the author and his generation of Americans as they travelled through periods of great change. The purpose of this paper is to examine Fitzgerald’s short stories, his life and his times to determine the extent to which this is true.

Procedure Followed

The paper is divided into three chronological periods: Fitzgerald’s youth through the war, the 1920s Jazz Age and the 1930s Depression. For each period the
historical setting, Fitzgerald’s personal experiences and the attitudes reflected in his stories are compared and considered. Sources for the paper include: nearly all of Fitzgerald’s short stories with a particular focus on the stories he wrote as a youth and his lesser known professional stories; his autobiographical essays; biographies of Fitzgerald and others close to him; critical analyses of his work; and historical accounts of America in the early twentieth century.

Conclusions

Fitzgerald’s attitudes mirrored the changes in America during this period. The stories he wrote in his youth reveal his sense of hope and aspiration. In the Twenties Fitzgerald enjoyed enormous success. While America experienced an extraordinary, if fragile, boom, Fitzgerald infused his stories with a sense of deep disillusion. The great chronicler of his age was revealing the hollow nature of the American promise. The author’s personal and professional decline presaged the country’s descent into the Great Depression. His later stories focus on perseverance and on the unglamorous yet satisfying nature of work and fulfillment of responsibility.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born in 1896 in St. Paul, Minnesota. His youth straddled the end of one century and the beginning of another. It also came at the close of one historical period, the Gilded Age, and the dawn of another, the Progressive Era. The former was a time in which wealth and power resided with the select few. In the latter, there was renewed attention to the rights and interests of the lower and middle classes. Fitzgerald’s personal ambitions and the themes he frequently addressed in his art mirrored the conflicting attitudes dominant during these respective eras.

Although in conflict, both periods represented reactions to the American promise. During the Gilded Age power was conferred upon those few who through a combination of talent, ambition, toil, family background and a certain amount of luck had amassed enormous wealth and assumed control of the nation’s most profitable assets. Economic, political and social rewards were granted to those who aggressively won them even if at the expense of others. The pendulum of social philosophies, however, tends to swing from one side to the other. In the early twentieth century Progressive Era, American social activists and political leaders modulated the focus from the rewards for the few to more egalitarian safeguards for the many.
Growing up in St. Paul, Fitzgerald glorified the rich, many of whom emerged from the Gilded Age with their fortunes. They seemed to possess a sophistication, beauty and splendor not found in his Midwestern home. But he also retained a faith in the American promise, which effectively was being defended during the Progressive Era of his youth, that every man, including Fitzgerald himself, had a chance to improve his standing. Thus, Fitzgerald believed in both central facets of the American Dream represented respectively by the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. He was certain that with his talent and ambition coupled with the American promise of a fair opportunity, he could enjoy the social éclat of the elite who win the competition.

America emerged from World War I ready to cast aside international responsibilities and turn-of-the-century progressive ideals in favor of self-focused materialism. Fitzgerald, the chronicler of his age, reflected the attitudes of his times. As the Twenties approached, Fitzgerald was ready to put his past behind him. His parents and their Midwest bourgeois background, his failures at Princeton, and his lost opportunity for combat were all to be erased. He intended to take full advantage of America’s promise of a new beginning. With romantic enthusiasm, he was ready to pursue his destined glories. He had nearly within his grasp the girl who fulfilled his romantic ideals. In his vision, they would drink in all of the glamour and fabulous pleasures afforded those blessed with beauty, youth and talent. He envisioned that the long-time outsider would be welcomed, with Zelda by his side,
into the Eastern aristocracy of the wealthy. He anticipated a world of grace, sophistication and nobility.

Both the author and his country were entering a decade in which they would reap enormous success and wealth. But they encountered a sense of spiritual loss and ultimately were disillusioned. The riches proved to be chimerical. By the end of the decade they disappeared as suddenly and unexpectedly as they arrived. Fitzgerald would come to appreciate more quickly than his country that his long-sought for glory was hollow and that the moral supremacy of the Eastern aristocracy was fraudulent. His romantic notions would be crushed and replaced with a harsher realism.

America arrived at the threshold of the 1920s with a renewed belief in its destiny to amass great fortune. Similarly, Fitzgerald approached the decade grasping to his idealized faith in the American Dream. By the end of the decade, America would have to confront the dangerous implications of unfettered capitalism. Like an exploding star, Fitzgerald’s brilliant éclat was followed by a struggle to remain aglow. His romantic ideals were crushed and he struggled to be true to his art amidst feelings of disillusion.

As America’s economy, stock market and concomitant sense of invulnerability continued to climb through the 1920s, cracks, albeit hard to discern, were beginning to appear. The financially sophisticated understood the market’s fragility and escaped in time to realize their gains. Fitzgerald, like some of his contemporary authors, similarly appreciated the shallow, ignoble social structure on
which America’s faith in itself had come to rest. Like the stockbrokers who withdrew from the market, Fitzgerald and other artists fled to Europe; but, unlike the rare, successful brokers who entered the 1930s with their wealth intact, Fitzgerald entered the post-Jazz Age broken by his high wire act of a life and the merciless realities of a society willing to take the best from others while preserving itself.

The October 1929 stock market crash not only ignited the Great Depression, which continued until the onset of another global war, but it signaled a radical change in social attitudes. The pattern of the pendulum continued, this time swinging the emphasis away from America’s pure capitalist creed that endorsed enormous rewards to the select and back toward a commitment to equality of opportunity. Perversely, as such opportunities dwindled and jobs became horribly scarce, America recommitted itself to putting as many back to work as possible. The country had suffered a blow and it returned with a humbled perseverance. It may not have been as immune to hardship as it had thought, but it was not defeated.

Similarly, Fitzgerald came to the end of the 1920s in nearly a diametrically opposite position from the one in which he had entered the decade. He was thought to be professionally spent. His novels did not sell, and he survived on the sale of stories that he denigrated. Zelda’s mental health was deteriorating rapidly and she was increasingly institutionalized. Scottie rarely lived with him. He was deeply in debt and saw no clear path out of it. His drinking had severely damaged his health. His friends were few and his prospects fewer.
Yet Fitzgerald, like his country, persevered, albeit, also like his country, with a dramatically changed belief system. The aristocracy of the wealthy was discovered to be anything but noble, and the American promise of equality of opportunity was a false myth. Fame and social éclat glittered but did not nourish. Fitzgerald, the chronicler of his age, again mirrored in his personal life the attitudes of his countrymen: “With his facility for expressing the mood of an era in his life and work, he embodied both the excesses of the Boom and the anguish of the Depression.”

The ambitions of most Americans had changed dramatically. They now wanted jobs to pay their bills and feed their families. Similarly, Fitzgerald had come to appreciate that commitment to work and fulfillment of responsibility were what ultimately mattered.

Throughout his career Fitzgerald’s short stories provided the essential income necessary to support his novel writing and his and Zelda’s lavish lifestyles. Fitzgerald’s post-This Side of Paradise novels met with little commercial success. His short stories, however, continued to command thousands of dollars each, principally from The Saturday Evening Post, throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s before declining in value.

Fitzgerald held conflicting attitudes toward story writing. He recognized how important the income was. Yet he viewed it as a necessary distraction from the more important work of novel writing: “Because of his early sales to the high-

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circulation magazines, he developed the pattern of regarding his career as divided between commercial short stories and serious novels." He did not deny the economic rationale for producing stories. As early as January, 1920, he discussed with his editor, Max Perkins, the market for a second novel, making clear that he did not want to “have to write short stories again – because I don’t enjoy it & just do it for the money.”

It was not the form of the short story, per se, that troubled Fitzgerald. By the beginning of the twentieth century the short story was a recognized literary art form that had been successfully developed by a number of serious American writers, including Hawthorne, Poe, Twain, Cather and James. The author William Dean Howells argued that American authors had improved the very nature of the short story: “I am not sure that the Americans have not brought the short story nearer perfection in the all-round sense than almost any other people.”

Fitzgerald wrote nearly 200 stories, many of which are considered masterpieces. Yet, he resented being compelled to write stories of a type that would sell magazines: “He asked his agent whether there was ‘any market at all for the cynical or pessimistic story except Smart Set, or does realism bar a story from well-paying magazines no matter how cleverly it is done?’” Fitzgerald foresaw the

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2 Ibid., 102.

3 Ibid., 106.


impending disaster of the post-war period, yet he felt that the magazines wanted a different type of story: “Basically as an artist, he chafed at having to write Saturday Evening Post potboilers with what he called ‘the required jazz ending.’”⁶ By giving the magazines what they wanted, Fitzgerald believed that he had compromised his artistic integrity. From France in 1925 he wrote Perkins: “Anyhow there’s no point in trying to be an artist if you can’t do your best. I had my chance back in 1920 to start my life on a sensible scale and I lost it and so I’ll have to pay the penalty.”⁷

Fitzgerald, however, did not dismiss all of his stories; he understood that many were first-rate. In that same 1925 letter to Perkins he recognized the distinction: “In all events I have a book of good stories for the fall. Now I shall write some cheap ones until I’ve accumulated enough for my next novel.”⁸ At the start of his professional career, in a letter to his agent, Harold Ober, Fitzgerald distinguished between his novels and stories: “Now my novels, at least my first one, are not like my short stories at all, they are rather cynical or pessimistic.”⁹ Despite Fitzgerald’s characterization of his stories, many are now recognized as among the best produced by an American author. They capture the evolution of Fitzgerald’s attitudes toward the American promise. The youth inspired by faith in the American

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⁶ Ibid., 120.
⁸ Ibid.
⁹ Ibid., 36.
Dream developed into an artist who was struggled with disillusion and a sense of despair. Like his country, however, Fitzgerald ultimately renewed his commitment to his talent, his art and his responsibilities.
CHAPTER II
FITZGERALD’S EARLY BELIEF IN THE AMERICAN DREAM

Balancing the American Dream’s Promise and Reward

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born into an America that had broken from the caste-based societies of Europe to establish a new social structure emphasizing equality and commitment to community. Coming across the Atlantic Ocean in the Arbella in 1630, John Winthrop first imagined America as a new land of destiny. Although Winthrop did not foresee America as a country separate from the Western European powers, he did anticipate a society in which men would work together on equal footing for the greater benefit of all: “For this end, we must be knit together in this work as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection.”¹ Winthrop also urged his fellow settlers to forsake accumulation of unnecessary riches in order to share with all in the community: “We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities for the supply of other’s necessities.”²

Winthrop’s sentiments presage the American promise that all men would have an equal opportunity to succeed without regard to Europe’s caste-based standards, such as family or religious background. Winthrop, however, failed to anticipate another critical element of what came to be known as the American Dream. That is, the man who is given a chance and succeeds through his talent and

² Ibid.
toil will strive to retain the rewards and not share them with others. The expectation of financial gain is a motivating force in a capitalist economy and, as such, accumulated wealth serves as a basis for what would become America’s own caste system.

Nearly 150 years later the American experiment was started with a confidence bordering on bravado that every man would be granted an equal opportunity. While the American Revolution may have been principally about self-rule, it also was a broader rebellion against tyranny and authoritarianism. The social and governmental structures that arose in the new country manifested a rejection of the royal, aristocratic and sacred dominance of the citizenry that had prevailed in Europe for centuries: “Gone was the era of rigorous, authoritarian control, whether by church or feudal lord or state, over the economic life of the community.”³ What came to be revered as the American Dream is a conviction that every man, given the ability and dedication to purpose and freed from externally-imposed limitations, would have a fair opportunity to succeed:

Authoritarian power had come into disrepute, and the thinkers on social and economic problems now bowed before the controls exerted by a semimystical force which they called ‘natural law – the counterpart in the social order of scientific law in the physical order. Man was told that he was, by nature, good, and that self-help was the great thing in his improvement of his station; that the sum total of the efforts of individuals in their own interest would be the maximum social good; that the government governed best which governed least.⁴

⁴ Ibid.
It was this conviction on self-reliance absent strong autocratic rule that serves as the foundation of the American Dream.

During the nineteenth century, Americans ventured forth from the East to explore the Western frontier. Americans believed it was their Manifest Destiny to control the continent. On the frontier, the American spirit of independence and self-help could be realized. By the close of the century, however, that frontier largely was settled and opportunities for the individual to obtain a share of the country’s prosperity by homesteading or acquiring cheap land were dwindling. Economic opportunity now was found in the rapidly industrializing population centers, principally in the East. Americans migrated back East to the cities seeking their fair chance but, with masses of labor arriving to work in the factories, the balance of power was firmly in the hands of the owners. The American Dream for the many was being undermined by the absence of an unexplored frontier on which all could begin on equal footing.

As the dawn of the twentieth century approached, America neared the end of the post-Civil War Gilded Age. It was a period dominated by big business and those select business leaders who through intelligence, cunning and seemingly insatiable greed were able to manipulate economic and political forces to their extraordinary personal reward: “A new postwar avarice was building in America, a fascination with centralized capital and bureaucratized power, and the exploitative
opportunities afforded when the two were combined." The government, founded on principles of protecting the rights of all, had become the partner of the few: "Ulysses S. Grant’s inattentive administration had opened up a scoundrel’s paradise: smart pols and speculators diverted huge reservoirs of public wealth to their private gain. . . ."

While it was a period of great prosperity for some, it was deemed gilded because the thin sheen and glossy sparkle of gold hid the underlying truth of mass poverty and misery. It was a period of great hardship for the many who did not have the social, economic or political power to access a share of the wealth that was greedily amassed by the elite:

For all the optimism, prosperity, power and scientific, technological advances, however, much of American life at the turn of the century was unworthy of celebration. Despite a general rise in the standard of living the disparity of wealth between rich and poor was enormous, and the gap was increasing.

As such, the Gilded Age betrayed the American promise to the common man who was dominated by a plutocracy and was offered little opportunity to prosper, no matter the individual’s talent or ambition.

The transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was not merely a temporal or symbolic transition:

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6 Ibid.

Thus was clearly foreshadowed the three themes which were to run through the history of the United States during the next half century. A people largely indifferent to international politics were to be pushed by events into a position of dominating power in world affairs. They were to be compelled to defend democracy not only as a way of government and of life, but to reexamine their own institutions to see whether they squared with the democratic ideal. And finally the American system of capitalism was to be subject to acid testing.\(^8\)

America’s burgeoning military and economic power involved a concomitant responsibility to defend the philosophical bases for its political, economic and social systems. It also spurred a revived faith in these underlying philosophies that had marked the separation between the American democratic experiment and the European aristocratic attitudes: “Americans toasted the arrival of the new century in 1900 with speeches, articles and books declaring a firm faith in the nation’s future. The pride and determined optimism that had long characterized Americans seemed more strident than ever.”\(^9\)

The period between 1900 and the onset of the First World War in 1914 came to be known as the Progressive Era. In reaction to the immediately preceding Gilded Age, it was a period of dramatic change marked by idealism and pursuit of social policy reforms. In many respects, these views were consistent with America’s founding egalitarian principles. They involved a renewed commitment to a systematic defense of the rights of the common man: “From the Gilded Age until America’s entrance into the First World War, people from various classes, ethnic

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\(^9\) Reeves, *Twentieth-Century America*, 1.
origins, occupations and sections of the country attempted to restrain the power of big business, bolster national morality, democratic politics, and help the underdog laying the foundation of the welfare state.”

The American promise is an opportunity for all citizens, and not just for the already powerful. For true equality, there cannot be centralization of wealth. The spreading of wealth is true to Winthrop’s dream of a community of equals working for the common good. But wealth redistribution can undermine both the American commitment to self reliance and its capitalist economic system. There can be an incompatible tension between the principle of all beginning with the same opportunity and of rewarding individual achievement. If to the victor, the spoils, then also to that victor, and his heirs, goes a long term advantage over others. The goal of an equal opportunity for all is contradicted. Conversely, however, if the victor’s rewards are transferred to the defeated, the motivation to succeed, essential to capitalism, is undermined. How this tension between conflicting ideals is balanced is critical to the integrity of the American Dream.

This challenge involves constant recalibration. After an extended period when the interests of business and the wealthy had trampled the rights of the masses, it was recognized that many, in fact, had not been given the promised opportunity. It was natural that the public would demand a renewed defense of the rights of the individual.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 21.
The enormous wealth amassed by the few during the Gilded Age provided a picture of the splendors won by the fortunate. This is the reward promised by the American Dream. But, as Fitzgerald would learn, the reward itself can prove to be a glittering illusion masking a poverty of spirit that corrodes the integrity and humanity of the individual. Although the promised rewards always seem nearly graspable, yet they only drift ever further into the distance no matter how hard one reaches.

The emphasis on egalitarian rights that emerged during the Progressive Era is founded on the principle of opportunity. This principle comprises the other component of the Dream. It inspired Fitzgerald that he too could revel in gloried social and financial success. But just as the reward proves hollow, the promise also proves false. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald, the young romantic growing up in transition between two different stages of American history, celebrating respectively reward and opportunity was a committed believer in the purity of the American Dream.

Fitzgerald’s Youth: The Outsider’s Belief

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1896 into a family that included both facets of America’s often-contradictory notions of democratic egalitarianism and the actuality of its social and economic elitism. Fitzgerald absorbed these attitudes and realities early in his life. As he matured, they became integral to his personal ambitions and to the themes to which he returned frequently in his art.
Edward Fitzgerald, Scott’s father, was descended on his mother’s side from old American nobility. The family’s roots reached back to seventeenth century colonial America in Maryland. It boasted of some of the finer and more respected names of early American history, notably including Scott’s namesake, Francis Scott Key.

Fitzgerald’s parents bequeathed to Scott a distinct and inflated pride in this heritage. Despite being relegated to the Midwest, the Fitzgerals were of the Eastern elite and believed they should carry themselves accordingly: “Scott wore a black suit because his father had ruled that blue ones were ‘common.’”11 Francis Scott Key was a quite distant relative, yet Scott’s parents saw benefit in firmly linking their son with American nobility: “The boy was named Francis Scott Fitzgerald, a choice that indicates something about his parents’ ambitions for their son.”12

Although for Scott’s mother, Mollie, the connections were derivative, she did not want others to forget her son’s elite heritage. She explained to others “. . . that Scott was related to Francis Scott Key and second to none in honor of birth.”13

Ironically, however, Edward Fitzgerald continued what had been a decline of his family’s fortunes. He was a business and, ultimately, a social failure. He was forced to abandon the East, the land of the American nobility, and move to the

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Midwest among the parvenus. Scott was bequeathed a boundless desire to return to the East to make his mark:

In regard to the man himself, there are perhaps two things worth knowing, for the influence they have had on his work. In the first place, he comes from the Middle West. . . . When Fitzgerald approaches the East, he brings to it the standards of the wealthy West – the preoccupation with display, the appetite for visible magnificence and audible jamboree, the vigorous social atmosphere of amicable flappers and youths comparatively untainted as yet by the snobbery of the East.\textsuperscript{14}

The family could cling to the Fitzgerald name and its historical associations to assuage their pride, but they relied upon Scott’s mother’s family, the McQuillans, for their financial needs and limited social status in St. Paul:

The success of his Grandfather McQuillan was the great social and economic fact in Scott Fitzgerald’s background. It was the base he had to work from. For a boy growing up in the Midwest there was more substance in it than the patents of nobility – the descent from old Maryland families – which came down to him on his father’s side.\textsuperscript{15}

During the 1800s, those Americans excluded from the established higher economic and social strata entrenched in the East moved west to discover their opportunity. Irish immigrants, like Fitzgerald’s maternal grandfather, could remain in the East and work in relative serf-like conditions or migrate west in pursuit of the fortune America promised. Fitzgerald could romanticize Philip McQuillan’s self-made success in St. Paul: “For Scott this nineteenth-century Horatio Alger always symbolized his and America’s dream of fame as well as the chivalrous desire to win


\textsuperscript{15} Turnbull, \textit{Scott Fitzgerald}, 2.
back the lost glory of his family name.”

It was not only in his art, however, that Fitzgerald embraced the American Dream and its foundation in personal responsibility and hard work: “From Grandfather McQuillan, he inherited his self-reliance and his honorable ambition. There was little of the idler and nothing of the sponge or the chiseler in Fitzgerald, who reserved his deepest respect for the self-made man.” In the two sides of his family, Scott witnessed the respect conferred upon those born into America’s nobility. In them he also saw, however, a manifestation of the American promise that one can raise oneself economically, and, consequently, socially, given sufficient talent, ambition and commitment to hard work.

But, the young Fitzgerald was, in fact, a social outsider. His grandfather McQuillan earned enough money to allow another generation to survive on the remnants of his fortune, but economic success alone did not bring social glory. Anti-Catholicism remained strong at the turn of the century (and continued throughout Fitzgerald’s life). Although in St. Paul there was limited acceptance of certain successful Catholics, that acceptance did not extend to Irish Catholics: “. . . [T]here was little anti-Catholic bias because the local aristocrats were descended from the early French Catholic settlers; but the Irish were regarded as common.”

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Fitzgerald effectively ignored and denigrated his Irish heritage: “. . . Scott had no sense of his Irish past. His Irish roots were mercantile and unglamorous.”¹⁹ For a boy who believed in his ability to rise in America, his Irish roots were worse than irrelevant; they were an obstacle.

A larger barrier to social success, however, was being mired in the middle class. Fitzgerald’s mother, with the strivings of a daughter of a self-made, relatively wealthy man who had no wealth of her own, could not conceal her pretensions: “Eternally restless, Mollie could always think of a reason why some house a few blocks away, or even in the next block, was superior to the one they had.”²⁰ Try as she might, however, “. . . Edward and Mollie Fitzgerald were on the fringes of society.”²¹

While in old European society, nobility could retain its status even after economic fortunes declined, Fitzgerald’s father represented the fragility of America’s Eastern nobility when it is unaccompanied by wealth. His daily existence served as a reminder of his shame: “In a neighborhood of imposing houses known by their owners’ names, Scott was keenly aware of his father’s failure. He was Mollie McQuillan’s boy, not Edward Fitzgerald’s son.”²² Scott’s efforts to create a higher-

¹⁹ Ibid., 35.

²⁰ Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 12.

²¹ Ibid., 25.

²² Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 22.
class persona in order to mask his bourgeois background alienated others further: “As a teenager, however, Fitzgerald was found unacceptable by most of his peers. He possessed a pseudo-sophistication they often-times found strange and unpredictable.”

The sense he had in his youth of social impairment imposed by financial limitation remained with Fitzgerald. In 1936 he looked back on his youth and remembered: “I always had a secret yen for the lovely Scandinavian blondes who sat on porches in St. Paul but hadn’t emerged enough economically to be part of what was then society.”

But Scott recognized that economic failure was merely a cause of the more serious failure of the spirit. Later in his life he reflected on the effects of his father being fired from a job:

That morning he had gone out a comparatively young man, a man full of strength, full of confidence. He came home that evening, an old man, a completely broken man. He had lost his essential drive, his immaculateness of purpose. He was a failure the rest of his days.

Fitzgerald also recognized in his mother’s family that a Midwestern grocer’s fortune – particularly a fortune in decline – does not lift one up from the déclassé bourgeoisie: “There were many things he resented about [his mother], among them

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23 Stavola, Crisis in American Identity, 38.


25 Michael Mok, “A Writer Like Me Must Have an Utter Confidence, an Utter Faith in His Star,” in F. Scott Fitzgerald: In His Own Time, 296.
that she had taste neither in dress nor in books and that she was overindulgent.\textsuperscript{26} With feelings of embarrassment, he effectively denied his family throughout his life: “Fitzgerald rarely spoke about [his parents].”\textsuperscript{27} One side of his family represented fallen nobility and the other crude parvenus. Writing John O’Hara in 1933, Fitzgerald analyzed the dual embarrassment he had of his heritage:

I am half black Irish and half old American stock with the usual exaggerated ancestral pretensions. The black Irish half of the family had the money and looked down upon the Maryland side of the family who had, and really had, that certain series of reticences and obligations that go under the poor old shattered word ‘breeding’ (modern form ‘inhibitions’). So being born in that atmosphere of crack, wisecrack and countercrack, I developed a two cylinder inferiority complex.\textsuperscript{28}

Fitzgerald was ambitious for social success. Money could be either a means or an obstacle, but it was not the end in itself. Moving steadily from town to town on a downward financial decline throughout his youth, Scott found himself to be, like his parents, a social outcast. For example, “[h]e had a birthday to which no one came. . . . He moved to Buffalo where he had a bycycle -- a girl’s bycycle.”\textsuperscript{29} Fitzgerald, while away in camp, wrote in his ledger that he “. . . was desperately

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{27} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Bruccoli, \textit{A Life in Letters}, 233.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Turnbull, \textit{Scott Fitzgerald}, 9-10.
\end{itemize}
unpopular.” He was, however, undeterred. He had confidence in himself and he had confidence in the opportunities his country guaranteed.

Fitzgerald’s self-confidence impelled him forward, but it also at times manifested itself in an arrogance that acted to further the divide between him and others: “An unspoken bravado, some cocky assurance about his destiny stood between him and his fellows. . . .” Ironically, the precocious talent that fed his arrogance further irritated others. Scott’s high school English teacher observed: “. . . He wasn’t popular with his schoolmates. He saw through them and wrote about it. . . .” Nevertheless, his belief in his abilities soared:

I had a definite philosophy which was a sort of aristocratic egotism. I considered that I was a fortunate youth capable of expansion to any extent for good or evil. I based this, not on latent strength, but upon facility and superior mentality. I thought there was nothing that I could not do except, perhaps become a mechanical genius. . . .

This confidence bred an extraordinary hunger for life:

He wanted to see, to know, to be, to experience, to explore. He wanted to do everything and have everything with an enthusiasm which made him very attractive. He was rushing out to meet life and to embrace it, unable to wait for life to come to him.
Scott not only wanted to experience all that life had to offer, he also wanted the trappings and recognition deserving of his talents: “He liked the big-time competition for power and status, certain that his talents would win their deserts.”\textsuperscript{35} Scott’s confidence in his own talents and attractiveness was so great he could not understand when others did not view them similarly: “. . . [I]ntelligence and cleverness could not inspire the admiration Scott craved from his contemporaries. . . . Like many boys with exceptional minds, he found it difficult to tolerate the unwillingness of others to acknowledge his superiority.”\textsuperscript{36} Perhaps this failure of others to grant him the recognition he craved, and believed he deserved, should have been an early indication to Scott that America’s promise of a fair chance was not quite as pure as he then so certainly believed.

If Fitzgerald’s heritage was an obstacle and his talents were not fully appreciated, then, like so many of his characters, including his best known, Jay Gatsby, Scott would re-create himself. From an early age he disassociated himself from his family: “Even as a child Fitzgerald tried to release his pent-up bitterness towards his parents by claiming he was not their son.”\textsuperscript{37} But he was not just any orphan; he was a “foundling of royal lineage.”\textsuperscript{38} In his ledger Fitzgerald wrote of himself in the third-person, creating a divide between the real and the imagined self.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{36} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 18.

\textsuperscript{37} Stavola, \textit{Crisis in American Identity}, 27.

\textsuperscript{38} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 18.
And it was through the imagined self that he could live amidst splendor. He confessed in his ledger that he “told enormous lies to older people about being really the owner of a real yacht.” \(^{39}\)

Scott could not allow his rare talents speak for themselves. He had to fabricate a past. Despite his limited athletic achievements, he lied to his new classmates: “Excuse me for bossing everyone around, but I’m used to being captain of the teams in St. Paul.” \(^{40}\) Even in areas where he had talent and some expertise, Fitzgerald was compelled to exaggerate his accomplishments. John Peale Bishop described his early conversations with Scott while at Princeton: “We talked of books: those I had read, which were not many; those Fitzgerald had read, which were even less; those he had said he read, which were many, many more.” \(^{41}\)

Fitzgerald, the ambitious outsider, “… was not a loner who withdrew into his sense of uniqueness, Scott’s drive for recognition required an audience and admiring companions.” \(^{42}\) His tales became as outrageous as necessary to shine the light on himself, including, for example, a story he told his Princeton classmates that he had “… commandeered a private locomotive to take him to Washington by telling the authorities that he had confidential papers for President Wilson.” \(^{43}\)

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., 34.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 52.

\(^{42}\) Brucoli, *Epic Grandeur*, 23.

\(^{43}\) Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 92.
Perversely, Scott’s desire to create an image extended to his drinking habits long before his descent into alcoholism: “He couldn’t hold his liquor and liked to appear more drunk than he was. . . . Thus he might say he spent the night in the gutter, when actually he had spent it curled up in a quiet corner of the campus.”\textsuperscript{44} The pretense of excessive drinking allowed Scott to protect himself by putting forth the clown as a created character:

\begin{quote}
Fitzgerald was not regarded as a conspicuous drinker. . . . When he got tight, his friends suspected him of pretending to be drunker than he really was: that it was a way of getting attention. All his life he would play the clown when he found himself in a social situation that he felt he could not handle.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

As his drinking increased and his behavior became more extravagant, it seemed as though he was consciously trying to obscure reality and to create a persona worthy of attention. His friend, Alexander McKaig, wrote in his diary: “Also his dissipation all aimed to hand down Fitzgerald’s legend.”\textsuperscript{46} In this respect, Fitzgerald seemed to be confusing attention with acclaim.

Yet, while his antics, much of them alcohol induced, and his insatiable drive for notice contributed to his failure at Princeton, for the rest of his life he resolutely maintained the fiction that he had not flunked out. Only a month before his death, in a letter to Ernest Hemingway, he insisted that he “. . . left on a stretcher in

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 65.

\textsuperscript{45} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 55.

\textsuperscript{46} Turnbull, \textit{Scott Fitzgerald}, 118.
November – you can’t flunk out in November. . . .”\textsuperscript{47} Seeking to gain acceptance, Fitzgerald created image upon image.

Fitzgerald’s efforts to recreate himself were part of a conscious effort to gain entrée to another social world. He observed how others behaved, and he sought to replicate the behavior: “He analyzed his classmates and catalogued the qualities of the most prominent undergraduates. Observing that a tenor voice seemed to be one of the hallmarks, he tried to develop one.”\textsuperscript{48} Fitzgerald acknowledged his tendency to sublimate his self while adopting the qualities of those he admired: “When I like men I want to be like them – I want to lose the outer qualities that give me my individuality and be like them. I don’t want the man; I want to absorb into myself all the qualities that make him attractive and leave him out.”\textsuperscript{49}

Scott’s concern with image creation as a necessary means to overcome the limitations of family background manifested itself in a preaching letter he wrote from Princeton to his younger sister, Annabel. He later acknowledged that this letter served as the basis for one of his first commercially published stories, “Bernice Bobs Her Hair.” He provided her specific guidance on how she should behave, dress and present herself in order to succeed socially. Developing and projecting a false but attractive image is what is important; it is not the improvement of the actual self.

For example, with an unrecognized irony, Scott urges Annabel to develop an artificial

\textsuperscript{47} Bruccoli, \textit{A Life in Letters}, 470.

\textsuperscript{48} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 55.

laugh based on her natural one: “. . . [Y]our artificial [laugh] is bum. Next time you laugh naturally remember it and practice so you can do it anytime you want.”\textsuperscript{50} He further advises her to adopt certain contrived facial expressions: “A pathetic, appealing look is one every girl ought to have. . . . The two expressions you have control over now are no good.”\textsuperscript{51} For the young Fitzgerald, creation of image and false personae is essential to social success. He had not yet come to realize that such success is as ephemeral as the created image.

Fitzgerald, the striving middle-class outsider, perceived his entree to society initially through athletic and later combat glory. In America, heroism is esteemed. Athletic and military daring, for the young and more mature respectively, provide a path to such recognition.

Fitzgerald recognized early that athletic success was essential to social success: “Although he was a small boy, he competed for athletic recognition because sports were a way to distinction or even power among friends.”\textsuperscript{52} Sports and, in particular, football continued to be an important means to greater social glory when he arrived at Princeton: “Social success was regarded with intense seriousness. The quickest way to campus recognition was on the football field. . . .”\textsuperscript{53} The problem simply was that Scott had little natural ability and, by compensating, he further

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{50} Bruccoli, \textit{A Life in Letters}, 8.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 8-9.
\textsuperscript{52} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 18.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., 41.
\end{footnotes}
harmed his social standing. Upon entering St Paul Academy, he had also sought athletic glory, but was “[q]uickly labeled a showoff, he endured the humiliation of seeing the school paper . . . print in 1909 ‘if anybody can poison Scotty or stop his mouth in some way, the school at large, and myself, will be obliged.’”

Even worse, his athletic efforts ultimately led to shame: “. . . [H]e was regarded as a coward and as a bully; he humiliated himself by running from a tackle in a football scrimmage.”

In an ironic twist, Fitzgerald wrote in his ledger of an early athletic incident that resulted in a physical scar and served as a reminder of the psychological scar left by his failure to achieve in both the athletic and combat fields: “. . . a blow with a baseball bat from . . . the son of an army officer – which left a scar that will always shine in the middle of his forehead . . . .”

Similarly, Scott dreamed of military glory: “. . . Fitzgerald went back to Princeton to begin his senior year though his one idea was to get in uniform.”

Fitzgerald’s glorified notions of combat were combined with his poetic instincts. This led Fitzgerald to admire the war romanticizing of the British poet Rupert Brooke. Reflecting on his days at Princeton, he recalled his “head ringing with the meters of Swinburne and the matters of Rupert Brooke. . . .”

54 Ibid., 23.
55 Ibid., 30.
57 Ibid., 81.
58 Ibid., 76.
Brooke’s poetry for the title of his first novel. In a letter to his editor, Max Perkins, Scott wrote: “The title has been changed to *This Side of Paradise* from those lines of Rupert Brooke’s. . . .”

Scott perceived combat service as an important factor in obtaining social standing. In anticipation of being shipped overseas, he wrote his mother with a cavalier bravado conceding the true reason for his desire to serve: “. . . I just went and purely for social reasons. If you want to pray, pray for my soul and not that I won’t get killed – the last doesn’t seem to matter particularly and if you are a good Catholic the first ought to.” As with sports, however, his quest for glory was stymied, this time by being too late: “He was disappointed because he wanted to test himself in battle, and he saw the war as a great romantic experience from which he was being excluded.” Fitzgerald wrote that his failures begat “. . . two juvenile regrets – at not being big enough to play college football, and at not getting overseas during the war. . . .”

Although he had failed to earn his own athletic or military glory, Scott, the young idealist, continued to believe in such glory and he fawned over those who had earned it. Writing of watching a school basketball game, Scott described that “. . . he
fell madly into admiration for a dark-haired boy who played with melancholy defiance.”\textsuperscript{63} Scott did not believe his own talents stacked up against those who possessed true heroic natures: “He realized, of course, that a story for the Lit or a song for the Triangle was nothing compared to a touchdown run in the stadium on a Saturday afternoon. Athletics remained the high road to undergraduate prestige.”\textsuperscript{64} He treated those who did enjoy athletic success as icons: “Fitzgerald liked to romanticize such individuals, endowing them with a background and superlative qualities which others knew perfectly well they didn’t possess.”\textsuperscript{65} Similarly, Fitzgerald, again the outsider, observed that the greatest social rewards came to the combat heroes: “The returning troops marched up Fifth Avenue, and the girls were instinctively drawn East and North towards them. . . .”\textsuperscript{66}

Despite his frustrated attempts to gain athletic and military glory, Fitzgerald’s steadfast confidence in his own unique talents and in the special promise of his country offered reinforced his belief that success was to be his: “By the time he was fifteen Scott was accustomed to hearing the drums of destiny beating for him. He knew that he was different from his friends, that he had larger – if inchoate – ambitions, and that some rare feat was reserved for him.”\textsuperscript{67} But fate is not arbitrary;

\textsuperscript{63} Turnbull, \textit{Scott Fitzgerald}, 14.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 64.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{67} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 29.
the glory of the American promise shone on those with both talent and determination: “He measured himself against personal standards of character and will, believing that ‘life was something you dominated if you were any good.’”  

The young Scott recognized that relief from his Midwestern middle-class life lay in the East, which represented both the old establishment and the excitement of a new frontier, now that the West had been settled. From an early age “. . . St. Paul began to seem dull and provincial.” Scott saw his escape route: “In contrast to his playmates, so uncertain of their futures, he had definite ideas about his own. He knew, for example, that he was going to Princeton. . . .”  

Fitzgerald sensed the biases that existed against those of his economic, geographic and religious backgrounds: “. . . [H]e was not attracted by the offer of his maiden aunt Annabel McQuillan to underwrite his education at Catholic Georgetown University. It was Princeton or nothing.” He appreciated that “. . . Princeton was regarded as a college for the sons of the rich. . . .” For a boy with Fitzgerald’s aspirations, Princeton is where he needed to be. But it also was a school for establishment Protestants: “Wilson later stated that Fitzgerald was the only

68 Ibid., 58.
70 Ibid., 12.
72 Ibid., 42.
Catholic he knew at Princeton.” Scott again was the outsider stridently forcing his way in. And, in an era when the country’s promise to all was being reaffirmed, Scott believed that his special qualities would overcome the limitations of his family and religious backgrounds.

Scott’s first foray East, however, was at the upstart Catholic school, Newman. It was not one of the elite WASP prep schools, but it was a start and allowed the precocious teenager to begin the psychological break from his past that he believed was essential to his future: “Once away at school, Fitzgerald gradually stopped thinking of himself as a Midwesterner. The McQuillan connections became increasingly remote.” While “at Newman, Scott was infected by the enticement of New York” and, thus, he had a renewed appreciation of his failed father’s Eastern background: “The family roots that mattered to him were in Maryland, and he felt an immediate affinity with New York City.”

Making it at Newman was an important step, but only a step, to being accepted among the social elite at Princeton and, ultimately, New York. Fitzgerald arrived at Princeton in the familiar position of outsider: “Although Fitzgerald was not friendless, he was up against the most complex system of social stratification he had yet encountered. . . . The boy from an unimpressive Catholic prep school felt that he

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73 Ibid., 48.
74 Ibid., 44.
75 Ibid., 31.
76 Ibid., 44.
was a member of the lower class.”77 But Fitzgerald continued to believe in his abilities and the consequent opportunities that would open themselves to him: “At Princeton the big clubs attracted most of the leaders and policymakers, and here as always he was shooting for the top.”78

Princeton was a large stage, but it was in New York where a young man of Fitzgerald’s ambitions and confidence, in himself and in his country’s promise, could envision his greatest glory. Reflecting back on his earliest impressions of seeing New York from the New Jersey ferry, Fitzgerald sounds chords reminiscent of John Winthrop arriving at the New World aboard the Arbella: “There was first the ferry boat moving softly from the Jersey shore at dawn – the moment crystalized into my first symbol of New York.”79 Like Winthrop, Fitzgerald projected his dreams on to a place. New York represented triumph, romance, and the Metropolitan spirit. His formal education brought to an end, released from military service and in love with a girl awaiting his success, Fitzgerald arrived in New York overflowing with exuberance for the city and his promise. He telegraphed Zelda: “DARLING HEART AMBITION ENTHUSIASM AND CONFIDENCE I DECLARE EVERYTHING GLORIOUS THIS WORLD IS A GAME AND WHILE I FEEL SURE OF YOUR LOVE EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE I AM IN THE LAND OF AMBITION AND SUCCESS. . . .”80

77 Ibid., 43.


To achieve the social success Scott craved, winning the right girl was both a means and an end. A beautiful, aristocratic woman opened doors to the highest tiers of society. While she validated the man socially, she also was the prize herself. Fitzgerald’s experience with his first love, Ginevra King, taught him a painful lesson about social castes in America:

. . . [S]omeone remarked that ‘poor boys shouldn’t think of marrying rich girls.’ . . . [King] belonged to the moneyed aristocracy of Chicago and as such was beyond his grasp. To her he seemed a weak reed to lean upon, and the realization that he was not what she had in mind hurt him profoundly and colored his whole outlook.81

Fitzgerald’s faith in the American Dream that everyone had a fair chance was being tested in his failure to win Ginevra.

It was Zelda, though, who became the great goal of his youth: “. . . Zelda possessed the qualities that Fitzgerald required in a girl. She was beautiful, independent, socially secure (although not wealthy), and responsive to his ambitions.”82 Like Fitzgerald, she could trace her heritage to Colonial roots in the East: “Anthony Sayre’s family took pride in having been among the early settlers of Long Island. . . .”83 The Sayres were firmly entrenched in the Southern aristocracy. Her father was a judge and her forebears included senators on both sides of the family. Unlike the Fitzgerald family, the Sayres had retained their position in society.

81 Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 73-74.
82 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 87.
While Scott was ashamed of his background and disguised it with imagined lives, Zelda had full confidence in her social standing: “I did not have a single feeling of inferiority, or shyness, or doubt, and no moral principles.”  

Zelda had many suitors and her parents had serious doubts about Scott. His extravagant attitude toward life did not comport with their image of a proper gentleman: “It did nothing to help his cause that the Judge disapproved of him because he drank too much.”  Scott lacked Zelda’s social standing and was the subject of Sayre family concerns. Nevertheless, they were well matched in terms of their ambitions and dreams: “She and Fitzgerald wanted the same things – metropolitan glamour, success, fame.”

Young Scott’s confident, albeit naïve, belief in the American promise culminated in his passionate quest for Zelda. He believed that his innate, extraordinary talents and his self-created image would be sufficient to win the girl. He left Zelda in Alabama in February, 1919 with an understanding that she would be his if he could prove himself worthy of her. He headed for the apogee of Eastern glamour, New York, where he was convinced he would find fast and great glory and, through that success, Zelda. His self-confidence and faith in the American Dream would never again be greater.

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84 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 87.
85 Milford, Zelda, 34-35.
86 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 87.
CHAPTER III

FAITH AND EMERGING DOUBT IN THE EARLY STORIES

Before writing *The Romantic Egotist*, which later was re-written to become *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald principally wrote light musical comedy and short stories. The trajectory of his early stories evidences the development of the artist. His earliest stories, written while he was in high school, are imitative first of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes mysteries and later of O’Henry’s ironic twist tales. As must be expected of a teenager beginning to learn his craft, Fitzgerald’s high school stories are heavily plot driven. They contain little character development, human insight or philosophical vision. The later stories of his early life, written before Zelda broke their engagement in June, 1919, give witness to the emerging artist. Fitzgerald begins to create more fully formed characters in richer settings and uses rhythm and imagery to develop mood and perspective. These stories, written before the fame and respect that he earned with the publication of *This Side of Paradise*, give indications of Fitzgerald’s romantic vision of a superior Eastern aristocracy living lives of sophistication and glamour. They also show signs of his faith in the American promise that this world also can be his. The later stories, however, offer evidence of nascent doubts in the glamour of the aristocratic wealth and of the foundational truth of the American Dream.

investigator upstages the government official to solve the crime. Notably, Fitzgerald sets this first story in New York, although he had no direct familiarity with the city at this point in his life. Because of that lack of knowledge, New York is mentioned only in the opening sentence and is never integrated into the story. Fitzgerald, the outsider in his own world, does not write of the towns of his experiences (e.g. Buffalo or St. Paul), preferring instead to write of the world of his dreams. It is a naively romanticized vision in which seemingly all in New York are rich, living with their servants in houses, not apartments or tenements, in the center of the city regardless of what would have been their actual incomes as city employees and newspapermen. For the young Fitzgerald, in New York everyone is fabulously wealthy. The characters speak in grand, formal tones: “. . . I think I have the honor of speaking to Mr. Egan, chief of police.” They impress with imperial gestures: “I am not here . . . to tell every newspaper reporter or adventurer about private affairs. James, show this man out,” and “I started to speak but he silenced me with a wave of his hand.” For the middle class, St. Paul native, wealth is inextricably linked to social superiority and New York is where the money is.

Now and Then published three other Fitzgerald stories, each of which signals particular personal attributes that he was to admire and glorify throughout his life. “Read, Substitute Right Half,” a brief sketch written in 1910, reflects Fitzgerald's

1 Fitzgerald, Apprentice Fiction, 20.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
fawning admiration for the football hero. As he later acknowledged, writing of his fantasy allowed him to avoid the pain of his own athletic failures: “. . . [I]f you weren’t able to function in action you might at least be able to tell about it, because you felt the same intensity – it was a back door way out of facing reality.”

In a “Debt of Honor” a Civil War Confederate private compensates for earlier succumbing to his fears in combat by acting courageously to save his comrades. The boy dies but it is a worthwhile sacrifice because he has lived in accordance with two of the virtues Fitzgerald most esteemed: bravery and honor. The final sentence of the story tersely reflects Fitzgerald’s romantic admiration for the higher calling of honor: “He had paid his debt.”

Fitzgerald had not yet overtly linked in his stories heroism and social éclat. In “A Debt of Honor” acting honorably is its own reward. In his final Now and Then story, “The Room With the Green Blinds,” the poor young protagonist comes to the South to live on an estate inherited from his grandfather. There he witnesses a Southern gentleman acting not only heroically but also honorably in killing John Wilkes Booth: “As it was, when I found him he shot first.” The tone and plotting of the story are reflective of Doyle’s stories with secret passages, a cloak of mystery shadowing an innocent new arrival and a satisfactory resolution. Fitzgerald’s association of nobility and courage with the old South is reflective of his respect for

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4 Ibid., 29.

5 Ibid., 38.

6 Ibid., 43.
his father’s Southern aristocratic heritage. Middle class parvenus may pay the bills but those from established society know how to act with grace.

The stories Fitzgerald wrote after moving east to attend Newman rely on O. Henry-like ironic twists. Fitzgerald was transitioning from Conan Doyle to O. Henry in search of his own style. These stories reflect a more knowledgeable understanding of New York. Two of the three stories he wrote while at Newman are set in New York (the third, “Pain and the Scientist”, is a trivial satirization of Christian Science). Unlike the earlier “Raymond Mortgage,” New York is fully featured with the plots playing out on the streets of Manhattan. While New York earlier had been a distant ideal, Fitzgerald was now beginning to experience the city and, although he continued to exhibit a romanticized vision of it, he now was able to more fully incorporate the city as a vital element of his stories.

From Newman in New Jersey Fitzgerald now began to experience New York directly. Nevertheless, he remained an outsider looking in with a romanticized vision upon the world of the idle rich. Both “A Luckless Santa Claus” and “The Trail of the Duke” are light comedic tales relying on the premise of the rich descending from their aeries to experience life as it is lived by the common people. In “A Luckless Santa Claus,” Harry Talbot, provoked by Dorothy Harmon, the *femme fatale* character that appears frequently in Fitzgerald’s mature work, leaves his comfortable community to enter the New York streets in order to give away $25. He
returns “... hatless, coatless, collarless, tieless and covered with snow.” He is an out-of-touch aristocrat who is literally and figuratively beaten by the brutish world. But, ironically, he also is invigorated by that world, and the story ends with Harry going off arm-in-arm with two of the street toughs he has met that evening. In Fitzgerald’s fascination with the wealthy aristocrats, he seems to begin to appreciate the sterility of their lives. As a believer in the purity of the American Dream, he accepts the value of work and engagement in life. Harry has no reason to work and he consequently is disengaged. Dorothy challenges him: “You know very well that you never earned a cent in your life. Golf and dancing – that is the sum total of your occupations.” By the end of the story, Harry still is not working but at least he has come to appreciate those who, unlike him, have to struggle.

In “The Trail of the Duke,” Dodson Garland too is bored with a directionless, idle existence. He is self-absorbed and unaware of those who serve him: “The butler ran back and forth with large consignments of juleps and soda and finally, on one of his dramatic entrances, Garland turned towards him and for the first time that evening perceived that the butler was a human being, not a living bottle-tray.” Dodson bristles with a festering anger fueled by a lack of purpose that he directs indiscriminately at those beneath him like Allen, his butler: “‘Allen... what shall I do tonight?’ Allen again essayed the grin, but failing once more, sank into a hot

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7 Ibid., 53.
8 Ibid., 48.
9 Ibid., 54.
undignified silence. ‘Get out of here,’ exclaimed Garland petulantly, ‘and bring me another julep and a plate of ice.’”¹⁰ Dodson enters the foreboding city streets determined to act heroically in order to impress a desired woman, as do so many Fitzgerald men. He fails not only because he lives apart from the reality of the city streets, but because Mirabel and he are dealing only with trifles. In a period when America is denouncing the unfair advantages conferred upon the select who have amassed their riches on the shoulders of the abused masses, Fitzgerald’s awe of the wealthy was in coming into conflict with his identification with the middle class man trying to improve his position. While he glorifies the sophistication that he believes naturally accompanies wealth, he also is beginning to sense the sterility of the lives of the rich and to recognize the intrinsic value of work not only for survival but for self-esteem. This burgeoning conflict for Fitzgerald will be developed in a more sophisticated manner as he matures.

Fitzgerald’s first non-musical comedy work after arriving at Princeton was a one-act play, “Shadow Laurels.” In this drama, Chandelle, an American immigrant, returns to Paris to find his deceased father’s past. The American promise is that everyone can have a fresh start without regard to heritage. Chandelle lived that promise, having started anew in America with no family history. He is the prototypical successful American who is described as “... a man accustomed only to

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.
success but ready and willing to work hard in any emergency.”\textsuperscript{11} Chandelle arrives at his father’s favorite tavern filled with an arrogant self-esteem and looking down on his father’s proletarian world: “My father was no aristocrat. As I remember, his last position was that of waiter in some forgotten café.”\textsuperscript{12} Chandelle’s American experience has taught him that one succeeds or fails according to one’s own abilities and efforts. He cannot understand that the old European social structure denies opportunity to those not born into the right circumstances. For Chandelle, his father’s failures must have been the man’s own fault: “The last I remember of my father was that . . . he was terribly lazy.”\textsuperscript{13} With self-pride and sneering disregard for his father, he tells the tavern owner, “Well to cut it short I prospered.”\textsuperscript{14}

Chandelle learns that his father was a talented but unrecognized poet who had been denied the opportunity to realize his potential simply because of social status established by birth. Chandelle is forced to recognize that there is no American Dream in old Europe. The father’s poetic sensibilities are longingly recalled by Destage, one of the dead poet’s tavern comrades: “You see he – how shall I say it? -- he expressed us. . . . It was everything to me. I would struggle pathetically for a phrase to express a million yearnings and he would say it in a word.”\textsuperscript{15} Chandelle’s

\begin{footnotes}
\item[11] Ibid., 69.
\item[12] Ibid., 70.
\item[13] Ibid.
\item[14] Ibid.
\item[15] Ibid., 76.
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father and his friends were not without ability, but they were denied a fair chance: “There we were – four men – three of us poor dreamers – artistically educated, practically illiterate.”\textsuperscript{16} Only his father managed to learn to read and write. Before hearing his father’s story, Chandelle had arrogantly dismissed his father’s literacy and loving commitment to his son’s future: “[T]he only good thing I ever remember his doing was to teach me to read and write. Where he picked up that accomplishment I don’t know.”\textsuperscript{17}

Upon his arrival in France, Chandelle cannot appreciate what obstacles his father had overcome to become literate. But after visiting with the others, he is beginning to appreciate his father. Destage explains: “He was bright and clever – when we worked, he worked feverishly hard, but he was always drunk, night and day.”\textsuperscript{18} His talent was wasted in dissipation but Chandelle has come to understand that his father had been defeated by a social structure that had the force of centuries. He arrives with an American sensibility ignorant of his own family’s trials and frustration. But he ends the evening toasting his father, expressing an appreciation of the limitations imposed by European society: “I drink to one who might have been all, who was nothing --- who might have sung; who only listened; -- who might have seen the sun; who but watched a dying ember – who drank of gall

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 75.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 74.
and wore a wreath of shadow laurels —.” An early exception is “The Ordeal,” written in 1915, which loosely serves as the basis for the more notable story, “Absolution,” published in 1920 in H.L. Mencken’s The Smart Set. Both stories were inspired by Fitzgerald’s visit made to a Jesuit Seminary in Maryland.

In “The Ordeal” Fitzgerald’s idealized notion of courage, normally found in combat or athletics, is realized in a Jesuit novice preparing to take his final vows: “He had his vocation – and then, because he was no coward, he decided to become a priest.” The young man views the religious world that presents him with personal challenges in romantic terms: “Then, when the bell tolled five, there were the vows and usually the novice felt better. It was this hour in the country when the world seemed gloriously apparent and the monastery vaguely impotent.”

Fitzgerald’s novice mirrors the young author’s own experiences and self-perception. Both have expectations imposed upon them by indulgent parents: “As a

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19 Ibid., 77.

20 Uncharacteristically, Fitzgerald used the image of the Christian cross in the denouement of his 1925 commercial story “One of My Oldest Friends.”

21 Fitzgerald, Apprentice Fiction, 82.

22 Ibid., 81.
favorite child he had been reared in pride and confidence in his ability, in faith in his
destiny.” But their belief in their special fates lead them to seek grander dramas on
larger stages, despite the limitations of their family backgrounds:

When three months before, he had walked into the library at home and told
his father that he was going to become a Jesuit priest, there was a family
scene and letters on all sides from friends and relatives. They told him he was
ruining a promising young life because of a sentimental notion of self
sacrifice, a boyish dream.

Fitzgerald’s dreams of Eastern glories might have been only a youthful exuberance,
but, like the novice, it required courage to overcome family opposition or middle
class limitations to pursue a personal quest, romanticized or not.

It also involved a transformation of self. One must shed the restrictive cloak
of one’s heritage to become someone new and brilliant. For the novice, it is the
fulfillment of his vows that will create the new self: “And now in half an hour he
would take the vows which pledged him to a life of service . . . where his
individuality, his physical ego would be effaced and he would come forth strong and
firm to work and work and work.” In the novice’s honest expectation of work one
notes Fitzgerald understands that the American promise offers an opportunity, not a
guarantee, and that one must have commitment to reap the rewards of that
promise. But commitment alone does not ensure success. One must have the ability.
An element of destiny is involved. One must be granted the talent and then have the

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23 Ibid., 82.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
courage and focus to develop the potential of that talent. In that effort one finds personal satisfaction, as does the novice, whose talent is in his vocation: “He was elated that he had been chosen, he from so many unquestionably singled out, unceasingly called for. And he had answered.”

Fitzgerald was emerging as an artist. He had become less reliant on plot twists and simple dialogue. He was better able to use imagery and description to create mood and psychological complexity. The novice, alone among the other novices, confronts a spiritual evil more powerful than any temporal temptation:

Something before had attacked the roots of his faith; had matched his world-sense against his God-sense, had brought, he had thought, every power to bear against him; but this was different. Nothing was denied, nothing was offered. It could best be described by saying that a great weight seemed to press down upon his innermost soul, a weight that had no essence, mental or physical. A whole spiritual realm of evil in its every expression engulfed him.

The novice must face his terrors alone: “He could not think, he could not pray. As in a dream he heard the voices of the men beside him singing, but they were far away, farther away from him than anything had ever been before.” The young Fitzgerald believes in the heroic nature of courage. The novice bravely rises to the challenge of the chilling threat: “He must look at the candle and look and look until the power that filled it and forced him into this plane died forever for him. It was now or not at

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26 Ibid., 83.

27 Ibid., 86.

28 Ibid.
The young believers, the novice in his faith and Fitzgerald in his destiny, overcome the “... one black star in the sky of despair. ...” The story ends with a promise of the future. The inevitable ongoing battles with disillusion and despair are not foreseen, as they would not be for a believer in one’s destiny.

“The Debutante” is a brief one-act play written while Fitzgerald was at Princeton. In establishing the setting, Fitzgerald introduces the lead character, Helen, as still a girl. Just as Fitzgerald urged his sister to do, Helen practices before a mirror a series of expressions. In the process she transforms herself from a girl to become a seductive, dangerous woman: “The lips seem to turn from rose to a positive, unashamed crimson. They quiver slightly—where is the ingénue? Disappeared. Good evening Sapho, Venus, Madame Du – no! Ah! Eve, simply Eve!”

Fitzgerald’s early belief that one can create a new self for social gain is evident in Helen’s self-directed transformation from innocent to seductress who draws into her web then casually discards an early admirer. The character of her suitor, John, is not fully drawn. That may be appropriate, however, as he represents the many, relatively formless men whose dreams will be destroyed by the whims of the desirable beauty. John despairingly recognizes that he is but one in what will be a string of victims:

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid, 91.
Where do I come in? This is all a very clever system of yours, and you’ve played through it, you go along your way looking for another movie hero with black hair, or light hair, or red hair, and I am left with the same pair of eyes looking at me, the same lips moving in the same words to another poor fool, the next –.\(^{32}\)

There will be many more victims of Helen’s charm but it is suggested that the real victim is Helen, the seductress, in the loss of her humanity. It appears that Fitzgerald is beginning to understand that a price has to be paid for the creation of a false self. She has transformed herself into a beauty with a “. . . sharp-tongued wit, perfect social savoir-faire, expertise and ruthlessness in manipulating men for her own ends, utter indifference to the feelings of parents and others, a conviction of her superiority to other women and to men, and a completely hedonistic set of values.”\(^{33}\) Fitzgerald adds a final ironic and sad reminder that while Helen is sacrificing much for the thrill of youth and beauty, she ultimately will be replaced by new youth and beauty. Helen will be ruthlessly discarded as she has done to others. As the play ends, Helen’s younger sister, Cecilia, is seen in front of the same mirror creating her adult self, yet another seductress. The thrills of the social game are too great to be resisted by these young and beautiful, no matter the cost to one’s humanity.

“The Spire and the Gargoyle” is a deeply reflective story of unfulfilled promise and regret. It relies on introspection and mood and less on plot.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 99.

Uncharacteristically, the only romance is between a man and a place, not a woman. The spire of the college campus represents the aspirations of the student and the opportunities provided by the school: “To him the spire became an ideal. He had suddenly begun trying desperately to stay in college.” The gargoyle is not soaring romantically in the sky with the spire but rather is grounded in reality in the form of a preceptor who is grading his exam and therefore controls his fate. The gargoyle represents the bitter truth of failure caused by lack of personal effort in contrast to the lofty aspirations of the spire. Such aspirations are grand, but without commitment, they are empty.

Fitzgerald, who idealized the greatest success at Princeton, is acknowledging through his character the price of his failure. His narrator cannot hide from his own role in his disappointment: “‘Damned gargoyle,’ he muttered. But he knew that the gargoyle had nothing to do with it.” When he returns to campus years later, he realizes that his dreams have been tarnished. He understands his own failure:

Inevitability became a reality and assumed an atmosphere of compelling and wearing down. Where before the spirit of the spires and towers had thrilled him and had made him dreamily content and acquiescent, it now overawed him. Where before he had realized only his own inconsequence, he now realized his own impotence and insufficiency.

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35 Ibid., 108.

36 Ibid., 112.
Fitzgerald believed in the opportunity promised in early twentieth century America but had come to understand that with such opportunity comes responsibility. Failure to fulfill one’s potential leads to tragic self-condemnation:

He was alone face to face with the spirit that should have dominated his life, the mother that he had renounced. It was a stream where he had once thrown a stone but the faint ripple had long since vanished. Here he had taken nothing, he had given nothing; nothing?\(^{37}\)

Fitzgerald, the middle class outsider, had desperately sought to make it on the inside and yet now, due to his lack of commitment to his work, he was on the outside: “He had cried out from a complete overwhelming sense of failure. He realized how outside of it all he was.”\(^ {38}\) A painful lesson has been learned. The narrator leaves the university wearily and full of regret; it is unknown whether he will be able to repudiate his early failure by committing to his talent. He may be always an outsider within the University walls, but will it be a price well paid? At the time of his writing “The Spire and the Gargoyle,” Fitzgerald had a clear view of looming personal failure. Throughout his life he tried to mask his Princeton failure with innuendo and false stories. While the fate of the narrator is unclear, Fitzgerald came for the rest of his life to respect the critical nature of work despite his many distractions and self-imposed obstacles.

Another Princeton story, “Babes in the Woods,” prefigures the model Fitzgerald love story. The heroine, Isabelle, is the alluring, flirtatious, self-confident

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 113.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 114.
siren that is frequently portrayed as a *femme fatale* but who also often ultimately finds that she is alone and damaged by her own indiscretions and restlessness. She has the sophistication and arrogance of those who have been granted privilege and the ability to create an image. It is this ability that the young Fitzgerald found so essential to rise in society: “She had that curious mixture of the social and artistic temperaments, found often in two classes, society women and actors.”  

At the story’s start, a new, Eastern, collegiate world of sophistication and glamour is opening to the flowering Isabelle. As with the Midwestern Fitzgerald, Isabelle finds that living in the industrial middle-American city of Pittsburgh lacks all that the East represents. It has a bourgeois sensibility that must be rejected: “How very *western!* Of course he wasn’t that way: he went to college.” Isabelle and the subject of a mutual infatuation, Kenneth, are players in a thrilling and high-risk drama:

Isabelle and Kenneth were distinctly not innocent, nor were they particularly hardened. Moreover, amateur standing had very little value in the game they were beginning to play. They were simply very sophisticated, very calculating and finished, young actors, each playing a part they had played for years.

As Fitzgerald hoped Annabel would, Isabelle creates image effortlessly. Although Isabelle knows no other college boys, when questioned she “. . . strung the names into fabrication of gaiety that would have dazzled a Viennese nobleman. Such

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39 Ibid., 134.
40 Ibid., 133.
41 Ibid., 136.
is the power of young contralto voices on leather sofas." Though fate acts to separate the two young lovers, Isabelle retains her romantic faith and easily alters the truth to be consistent with her vision: “In her eyes was the light of the idealist, the inviolate dreamer of Joan-like dreams. ‘No!’ she answered. ‘I don’t do that sort of thing anymore – he asked me to, but I said ‘No.’”

One of the last Princeton stories, “Sentiment – and the Use of Rouge,” best reflects Fitzgerald’s maturing vision. Like “The Spire and the Gargoyle,” it presents a rueful tone. Although personally Fitzgerald still longed for the chance at combat glory, artistically he senses that the war marks the death of social structure, of innocence, of virtue, and of romantic conviction.

Clay, a young British aristocrat, returns on leave from battle in France to find a decaying society. By setting the story in England, Fitzgerald is able to contrast the European and American social philosophies. In Europe, one’s past is what matters; in America, everyone is granted a fresh start. But the war is eliminating Europe’s past. Clay, whose brother, Dick, has died in the war, is reunited with Dick’s former lover, Eleanor. She explains to him: “Really, Clay, we must stop gazing at the fire. It puts our minds on the past and tonight there’s got to be no past or future, no time, just tonight. . . .” Clay despairingly struggles to accept the loss of a way of life and, if it is already lost, to understand why boys are still dying to preserve it.

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42 Ibid., 138.

43 Ibid., 140.

44 Ibid., 150.
The title directly refers to Clay’s concern that his sister, Carla, is wearing too much makeup. His concern is similar to Fitzgerald’s own concern with Annabel’s personal presentation. In both cases, the older brother wants his sister to project an image that will give access to a desired social world. The sister serves as a projection of the brother’s desires. For Fitzgerald, it is the society of the aristocratic wealth; for Clay it is the old world of castes, innocence and history.

On a broader level, the title refers to the makeup English society is painting on itself to mask its dissolution. English society is putting forward a false face of cheerful merriment. But the mask is not effective in hiding the real horrors of war. The false revelry is taking place in a relatively comfortable distance from the trenches of continental Europe. Fitzgerald, the burgeoning social philosopher, is addressing the loss of a way of life: “. . . [H]e thought that the atmosphere had fallen to that of artificial gayety rather than risen to a stern calmness.”

Clay is horrified to find that the seismic shift in social structures has been accompanied by a loss of morals: “But there was something in the very faces of the girls, something which was half enthusiasm and half recklessness, that depressed him more than any concrete thing.” Eleanor explains to Clay how the war accelerated the death of a way of life:

You see as long as there was moral pressure exerted, the rotten side of life was localized. I won’t say it wasn’t spreading, but it was spreading slowly,

45 Ibid., 146.
46 Ibid.
Clay simply isn’t prepared to accept the truth: “It started in cases where men were called away hurriedly and girls lost their nerve. Then the men didn’t come back—and there were the girls—’. He gasped.” In desperation, the women have sacrificed their virtue, and, perhaps as horrifying, have done so outside of their respective castes. Eleanor in an almost blithe, accepting tone explains the loss of her virginity to Dick without regard to love or commitment before he departed for combat. Clay cannot accept this breach of the moral code so close to his home: “He jumped to his feet astounded and her warning hush just prevented him from exclaiming aloud. . . . What could she mean? Except that in some moment of emotional excitement she had— but he couldn’t bear to think of Eleanor in that light.”

Clay aptly describes himself as a sentimentalist, but Eleanor is grounded in reality with a cynical sense of hope. When Clay asks if she too is sentimental for times seemingly gone, she replies, “No, I’m romantic. There’s a huge difference; a sentimental person thinks things will last, a romantic person hopes they won’t.”

Clay, to his disgust, is finding his own moral principles weakened in this new

\[47\] Ibid., 153.
\[48\] Ibid.
\[49\] Ibid., 147.
\[50\] Ibid., 150.
environment: “Clay was no saint, but had always been rather decent about women. Perhaps that’s why he felt so helpless now. His emotions were not complex. He knew what was wrong, but he knew also that he wanted this woman. . . .”\(^\text{51}\)

Eleanor ruefully understands that life as they knew it has changed and that the change was inevitable and is irrevocable. She is prepared to move on. Clay is angrily coming to the same realization: “‘Don’t you believe in Tolstoy anymore?’ he asked, almost fiercely. She shook her head and then looked up at him almost wistfully.”\(^\text{52}\) He desperately tries to hang on to some illusion of purity: “He felt perfectly sure that Clara was still well – virtuous. Virtuous – what a ridiculous word it seemed, and how odd to be using it about his sister.”\(^\text{53}\) But, he fails: “Well Clara, Eleanor, Dick, he himself, were all in the same boat, no matter what the actuality of their innocence or guilt.”\(^\text{54}\)

Clay must return to the war with his faith in the social and moral structures destroyed. He cannot deny that it is a new world:

Bubbles of conventional ethics seemed to have burst and the long stagnant gas was reaching him. . . . Eleanor’s voice came to him like the grey creed of a new materialistic world, the contrast was the more vivid because of the remains of the erotic honor and sentimental religiosity that she flung out with the rest.\(^\text{55}\)

\(^{51}\) Ibid., 151.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 157.

\(^{54}\) Ibid.

\(^{55}\) Ibid., 154.
The boys, however, continue to die in the trenches for a way of life that is already
dead. Back in combat, Clay’s Irish comrade starkly reveals the truth that, no matter
the romantic cloak, they are fighting only for themselves, not a way of life: “But you
ain’t disguisin’ death, not to me you ain’t. It’s a damn serious affair. I may get killed
for me flag, but I’m goin’ to die for meself. ‘I die for England’ he says, ‘Settle up with
God, you’re through with England’ I says.”

Foreshadowing the Lost Generation, which was to be the focus of so much of
post-war literature, Clay descends into a sense of disillusioned despair. He “. . .
didn’t feel sentimental – only cold and dim and mixed up.” Prior to the war, things
appeared to be as they should be, or, at least, as they always had been. People knew
their place in society and did not move from that place; they retained their proper
virtue, or appeared to do so; and there was a God that provided the system with a
certain rationale.

But in this new world there were too many Gods, and none were true:
“There were so many Gods it seemed – he had thought that Christianity was
monotheistic, and it seemed pagan to have so many Gods.” With no God, no social
order, no conventions, nothing makes sense, and yet Clay desperately seeks to find
that defining, organizing force, whether it be God or society:

56 Ibid., 157.
57 Ibid., 158.
58 Ibid.
Damned muddle – everything a muddle, everybody offside, and the referee
gotten rid off – everybody trying to say that if the referee were there he’d
have been on their side. He was going to go and find that old referee – find
him – get hold of him, get a good hold – cling to him – cling to him – ask him
–.\textsuperscript{59}

These words are used again in \textit{This Side of Paradise}. They suggest the following
about Clay and his ideals:

\ldots [His] quest for values and meaning in life ends here with the implication,
somewhat like that of \textit{The Beautiful and Damned}, that life may be
meaningless; or, at least that if there is a meaning to life, it has not been
found – a conclusion like that of \textit{This Side of Paradise}.\textsuperscript{60}

After a series of academic difficulties, including a forced leave of absence,
Fitzgerald finally left Princeton without a degree. In the last of Fitzgerald’s Princeton
stories, “The Pierian Springs and the Last Straw,” can be seen the elements of
structure and theme to be more artistically developed in \textit{The Great Gatsby}. The
story and the novel “\ldots while worlds apart in quality, bear so many and such striking
similarities that the undergraduate story seems a kind of crude template for the
masterwork. \ldots”\textsuperscript{61} The story relies upon the \textit{femme fatale} and \textit{home manqué}
characters that appear frequently in his mature work.

“The Pierian Springs” is told from the perspective of an innocent Midwestern
narrator, presaging Nick Carroway. The narrator’s Uncle George tells the nameless
narrator the story of his frustrated young love that undermined the idealism of his

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 159.

\textsuperscript{60} Higgins, \textit{A Study of the Stories}, 10.

\textsuperscript{61} John Kuehl, \textit{F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Study of the Short Fiction} (Boston: Twayne Publishers,
1991), 22.
youth and left him a bitter yet conventionally successful man. Uncle George, like many Fitzgerald characters and the author himself, makes use of created personae to manipulate circumstances and to achieve his goals: “. . . [T]his influence was [dependent on] . . . a series of perfectly artificial mental tricks, his gestures, the peculiar range of his speaking voice, the suddenness and terseness of his remarks.”

Although years later Uncle George ultimately re-wins the girl, the romantic ideal is gone and he remains a defeated man, despite the later victory.

With Fitzgerald’s departure from Princeton came a several-year hiatus from short story writing. He soon had two inextricably woven together goals of marrying Zelda and the publication of his first novel. His earlier short stories, however, were not discarded. Two of these stories, “The Debutante” and “Babes in the Woods,” appear in *This Side of Paradise*. Other elements of his stories also emerge in his novel: “. . . [I]nterected were lines and attitudes from ‘Sentiment – and the Use of Rouge.’ From ‘The Spire and the Gargoyle’ came its opening descriptive passage almost unchanged. . . .” The early stories not only contribute to his famously successful first novel, but they evidence the romantic faith Fitzgerald held in the American promise. The later stories reflect the emerging doubts he was developing with regard to the elite wealthy aristocrats of the East and the American Dream itself.

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CHAPTER IV

FRAGILE PROSPERITY AND DEEPENING DISILLUSION

Return to Yesterday

The world changed dramatically in August 1914 with the start of World War I. America did not enter the conflict until April 1917, but by its end in 1918 the war had changed American attitudes and effectively brought to an end the Progressive Era: “The war persuaded many Americans to abandon all forms of idealism that had been expanding for more than a generation. They rejected not only lofty-sounding foreign entanglements but the spirit of progressivism itself.”¹ While America was a determinative force in the final Allied victory, thereby reaffirming its relatively new global military significance, the country was anxious to retreat within its romantic notions of itself:

And so it was that, as [Americans] emerged, disillusioned, from the First World War, they looked backward to a mirage of a happier past. They were sick of war-time regimentation, and of talk about world responsibilities which isolationists warned would mean involvement in future wars.²

On November 19, 1919 the Senate failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles marking the end of the progressivism and globalism of the first decades of the century and the start of an insular, self-interested period:

U.S history covering the last hundred years has tended to fall into neat division by decade, a fate especially true of the 1920s. World War I’s end in 1918 seemed a natural break, signifying the close of one era and the

¹ Reeves, *Twentieth Century America*, 81.

beginning of a new one that in turn was closed by the stock market crash in 1929.³

In the 1920s the United States experienced an economic surge spurred in part by a government that once again turned the reins over to the business interests: “The progressive reform era (1900–14) that had preceded World War I gave way in the 1920s to a period of conservatism in which politicians and pundits celebrated Big Business as the savior of American democracy and enterprise.”⁴ On at least one level the change in attitude toward business was successful: “Business leaders were fond of labeling the 1920s the New Era, calling attention to its productivity and wealth. There was much to boast about. American industrial output nearly doubled between 1922 and 1929, and the gross national product rose by 40 percent.”⁵ In many respects America was wistfully returning to the economic and social attitudes of the late nineteenth century:

While not all reform activity was spurned, the rhetoric of laissez faire was again in style. A new America was dawning, a nation of big cities, exciting inventions, and sweeping changes in traditional social and moral standards. People were eager to get in on the prosperity and fun they thought was within everyone’s grasp.⁶

Nostalgia, however, tends to mask the more bitter realities of the past.

America seemed to forget that the Gilded Age was a period of prosperity for some

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⁴ Ibid., 7.
⁵ Reeves, Twentieth Century America, 83.
⁶ Ibid., 81.
but also one of great hardship and abuse for many. The 1920s political leaders were again espousing the benefits of unfettered business and a passive government. President Coolidge established the priorities of his administration: “. . . Coolidge made clear from the beginning that his would not be an activist presidency. ‘Don’t hurry to legislate,’ he declared. Instead his highest priority was in promoting the prosperity of business.”\(^7\) Economic growth again was unevenly distributed: “The midtwenties were a golden interlude of prosperity for a large part of the American people. . . . It was a short boom, not lasting much more than five years, and it was a precarious one, in which millions of people did not share.”\(^8\) The industrial workers who came to the cities from the farms and abroad did not profit from this skewed version of the American Dream:

In the uneven prosperity of the 1920s, corporate profits consumed the largest share of the new wealth while industrial wages remained at a standstill after 1922. A substantial part of these profits went into new plants and equipment and thus into still more production of goods that the workers could not afford to buy.\(^9\)

As America became isolationist in the post-war period, it also became more racist and distrustful of immigrants even though the country had been established and built by immigrants similarly looking for fresh opportunities distanced from the autocratic European societies. Nativism was creditable all the way to the White

\(^7\) Ronald Allen Goldberg, *America in the Twenties* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 51.


House: “Even President Coolidge echoed these statements, stating, ‘America must be kept American.’”

A series of terrorist acts in 1919 by radical groups fueled the fear of immigrants and led to a drive for deportation of aliens tied to socialist and labor groups. As an example, “. . . [T]he [Immigration Act of 1918] was so murky that it had already been used as the basis for deporting thirty-six Seattle Wobblies. . . .”

The labor movement, despite its goal of protecting the rights of the working man, had grown suspect. While certainly elements of the movement were becoming increasingly radical and engaging in terrorist acts, the repression of the movement strengthened business interests at the expense of the average American, whose access to the American Dream was denied.

In this post-war conservatism, social power was again exclusively granted to America’s long-established elite. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASPs) feared and sought to exclude those who were not like them: “[WASPS] also continued to resent the rising influence of immigrants, Catholics and Jews, and the 1920s were a particularly virulent period of nativism.” Such nativism legitimized renewed prejudices against Catholics: “After reaching a peak in 1914, anti-Catholicism faded during the war years, but with the armistice, the nativism the war helped to unleash

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10 Ibid., 112.

11 Burl Noggle, Into the Twenties: The United States from Armistice to Normalcy (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 106.

12 Dumenil, Modern Temper, 8.
included a strong dose of anti-Catholicism.” Due to the surge of immigrants from Ireland in the preceding decades, Catholics had the potential to become a political force and thus were distrusted:

Although the concern about immigrants’ political power was ubiquitous, it was especially evident in one of the major strands of anti-Catholicism . . . Anti-Catholics, insisting that Catholicism was incompatible with democracy, pictured both priests and Irish ward healers as leading ignorant Catholics, sheeplike, to do the bidding of Rome.

In the 1920s the WASPs continued to cling to political, economic and social power, and they were determined not to share it, particularly with Catholics.

Disillusion: Grabbing the Gilded Ring

In February, 1919 Scott was decommissioned from the Army and left the South for New York. Armed with a promise of marriage and an idealized vision of life in what was, for him, the most glamorous city in the world, Scott set out to deliver on his pledge to Zelda of rapid and enormous success. Fame and wealth were valuable in their own rights but, even more important, they were the key to winning Zelda. Scott understood the connection between success and the strength of Zelda’s commitment. When learning that Scribners would publish his novel, he wrote Max Perkins: “Terms etc. I leave to you but one thing I can’t relinquish without at least a slight struggle. Would it be utterly impossible to publish the book Xmas – or say by

\[13\] Ibid., 212.

\[14\] Ibid., 211-212.
February? I have so many things dependent on its success – including of course a
girl. . . .”15

Although Fitzgerald’s later Princeton stories had suggested creeping doubts,
he arrived in New York still holding onto his faith in the equality of opportunity
promised to all Americans. He had similar faith in his ability to reap the greatest
rewards of that opportunity. Disillusion, however, was quickly approaching.

Upon his arrival “New York had all the iridescence of the beginning of the
world. . . . [T]his was the greatest nation and there was gala in the air.”16 But, as
Fitzgerald rudely learned, this was not his New York: “I was haunted always by my
other life – my drab room in the Bronx, my square foot of the subway. . . .”17 He
grew up believing he would be embraced by New York, and its initial rejection
undermined his faith: “One by one my great dreams of New York became tainted.”18

New York was not only representative of the American Dream, it was foundational.
Confronting the reality that New York, without sentiment or even notice, could
reject the young dreamer caused an early fissure in the structure of his romantic
vision: “. . . I felt each time a betrayal of a persistent idealism.”19

15 Brucoli, A Life in Letters, 32.


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., 26.

19 Ibid., 24-25.
Fitzgerald had viewed the war as an opportunity for heroism— an opportunity that he would forever regret missing. Because he had not served, he could not feel the honors of combat in the same way as did others who had been sent to the trenches. Nevertheless, once Americans actually began to be slaughtered in France, Fitzgerald began to recognize the horrible realities of battle, as opposed to Brooke’s romanticized notions of glory in combat: “This insolent war has carried off Stuart Walcott in France, as you may know, and really is beginning to irritate me— but the maudlin sentiment of most people is still the spear in my side.”

His tone is self-centered and petulant, but his attitude signifies another assault on his ideals. Having failed on his first foray into New York and at risk of losing Zelda, Scott returned to St. Paul to concentrate on his novel. But it was too late for Zelda, who would not risk marrying someone who might not achieve the success she demanded. Zelda broke their engagement. Scott now needed to succeed more than ever in order to again convince Zelda to marry him. Fitzgerald was confronted with the harsh realization that without financial success, he could not have the girl. When he sold the rights to his story “Head and Shoulders” to a movie studio, he excitedly telegraphed Zelda with the good news. But, the telegram “. . . bears eloquent testimony to the fact that ‘love and money became almost inextricably entangled in his mind.’”

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20 Bruccoli, A Life in Letters, 18.

Because Zelda represented social success, he may have needed to win her more than marry her: “Although he was not corresponding with Zelda, Fitzgerald had the lingering hope that publication of his novel might win her back. About this time he told Wilson, ‘I wouldn’t care if she died, but I couldn’t stand to have anybody else marry her.’”

After their engagement was reinstated, Zelda acknowledged in a letter to Scott: “I hate to say this, but I don’t think I had much confidence in you at first. I was just coming [to New York] anyway. It’s so nice to know you really can do things – anything – and I love to feel that maybe I can help just a little.”

Zelda’s return, however, was too late – not for marriage to Scott but to save his faith in romance. Fitzgerald’s idealized concept of the purity of love was inextricably linked to his faith in the beauty and glamour of life. With the right girl believing in him, he could take full advantage of the American promise of opportunity and reward. And the love between the boy and the girl is, in his conceptualization, stronger than any differences in relative social status. This is particularly true in America where family heritage is not supposed to restrict opportunity. By breaking the engagement, Zelda taught Scott that, in truth, there are no equal chances. A poor boy, no matter how talented, charming or ambitious, could not marry the rich girl simply on promise: “He told a friend the ‘whole idea of

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23 Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 104.
Gatsby is the unfairness of a poor young man not being able to marry a girl with money. This theme came up again and again because I lived it."^24

Scott understood that Zelda’s betrayal of romance irrevocably changed him. Subsequent professional and financial success coupled with marriage to Zelda could not restore his romantic faith:

During a long summer of despair I wrote a novel instead of letters, so it came out all right, but it came out all right for a different person. The man with the jingle of money in his pocket who married the girl a year later would always cherish an abiding distrust, an animosity toward the leisure class – not the conviction of a revolutionist but the smouldering hatred of a peasant.^25

The break-up with Zelda not only wounded Scott’s faith in the capacity of romantic love to conquer all obstacles, but also his belief that the rich were nobler. It was not the only such evidence he would find, but it was an early and painful realization. He later confessed that from that point he harbored fears that the rich, by right and not by love, could again steal his girl: “In the years since then I have never been able to stop wondering where my friends’ money came from, nor to stop thinking that at one time a sort of droit de seigneur might have been exercised to give one of them my girl.”^26 He wonders where their money comes from because it is inherited; despite his youthful convictions to the contrary, Fitzgerald is learning that not everyone has the same opportunities, particularly the opportunity to win the

^24 Ibid., 155.


^26 Ibid.
greatest prize, the desired girl. Those who already have money have the advantage, despite the American promise.

Fitzgerald went to St. Paul to rewrite his novel that he believed would bring him his girl, but he went with new doubts: “Fitzgerald claimed to have three novels in his head and gave the impression of great buoyancy, though even now he was subject to despair.”\(^{27}\) Ironically, despite these doubts, the ensuing extraordinary fame and riches accompanying publication of his novel would seem to have justified his faith: “He was living the American dream – youth, beauty, money, early success – and he believed in these things so passionately that he endowed them with a certain grandeur.”\(^{28}\) With this public acclaim, Fitzgerald tried to overcome his doubts and stoke his dream: “The compensation of a very early success is a conviction that life is a romantic matter.”\(^{29}\)

But Fitzgerald quickly realized that the splendors of success are ephemeral: “. . . ['Early Success'] is about that first wild wind of success and the delicious mist it brings with it. It is a short and precious time – for when the mist rises in a few weeks, or a few months, one finds that the very best is over.”\(^{30}\) Like his country, Fitzgerald was embarking on a thrilling and harrowing roller coaster ride. He began it, however, with more doubts and his fall would come more quickly. Armed with

\(^{27}\) Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 130.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 110.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., “Early Success,” in *The Crack-Up*, 89.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 86.
those doubts, his early fall, and his unique talent for social observation, he was able to artfully describe the artificial beauty and diseased roots of the period. He recognized the nation’s new arrogance: “We were the most powerful nation. Who could tell us any longer what was fashionable and what was fun?”31 He sensed the country’s shallow quest for diversion from the obligations and horrors of life as it is, not as it is imagined:

But, because we were tired of Great Causes, there was no more than a short outbreak of moral indignation typified by Dos Passos’ *Three Soldiers*. Presently we began to have slices of the national cake and our idealism only flared up when the newspapers made melodramas out of such stories as Harding and the Ohio Gang or Sacco and Vanzetti. The events of 1919 left us cynical rather than revolutionary.32

It soothed a society drunk with new power and weary of its concomitant responsibilities simply to look for distracting amusement: “A whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure.”33 Fitzgerald joined in the fun but with a bitter underlying recognition that it was only self-deception.

With his sudden success, Fitzgerald, the outsider, appeared to be allowed inside the world of the Eastern elite: “To my bewilderment, I was adopted, not as a Middle Westerner, not even as a detached observer, but as the arch type of what New York wanted.”34 But he was only ‘adopted’; he was not truly one of them and,


32 Ibid., 13-14.

33 Ibid., 15.

as such, he retained a certain separateness that allowed him to see their world in a way that those born into it could not: “As a novelist of manners Fitzgerald was fascinated by class stratification, which he perceived from a privileged outsider’s angle.”

He was invited to glimpse in because he captured in words the glamour of their world:

In the figure of Gatsby, he had been able to objectify and poeticize his early feelings about the rich: that they were a race apart with a better seat in life’s grandstand, that their existence was somehow more beautiful and intense than that of ordinary mortals. Barricaded behind their fortunes, they had seemed almost like royalty.

Now that he finally saw their world he recognized how pale and lifeless it really was; the glamour he had long envisioned was only a false glitter: “Fitzgerald had found the rich disappointingly dull since success had opened their doors to him.”

The rich were worse than dull, however; they lacked morals, grace and nobility. These were the attributes young Scott had ascribed to them and his romantic notions were shattered:

Here we come to something that sets the American “leisure class” off from the leisure class of all other nations – and makes it probably the most shallow, most hollow, most pernicious leisure class in the world. It has frequently no consciousness that leisure is a privilege, not a right, and that privilege always implies a responsibility.

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35 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 219.

36 Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 155.

37 Ibid., 160.

As the wealthy became even wealthier through the decade and temporary riches fell upon the lucky, Fitzgerald’s disgust became more pronounced: “This was low comedy, but it was evident that money and power were falling into the hands of people in comparison with whom the leader of a village Soviet would be a gold-mine of judgment and culture.” Riches came not to those who earned them or who understood the inherent responsibility attendant to them, but randomly and absurdly: “But in those days life was like the race in *Alice in Wonderland*, there was a prize for everyone.” After growing up longing for inclusion in the Eastern aristocracy, once gaining entrée he quickly questioned why he wanted it in the first place. The wealthy elite were without moral conscience gaining their riches at the expense of others. In 1920 he wrote a childhood friend, Bob Clark:

> Who are all these ‘real people’ who ‘create business and politics’? And of whose approval I should be so covetous? Do you mean grafters who keep sugar in their warehouses so that people have to go without or the cheap-jacks who by bribery and high-school sentiment manage to control elections?

Fitzgerald’s changing attitude is reflected in his reactions to the birth of his daughter, Scottie. With transparent sarcasm he told others that “... we dazzle her exquisite eyes with gold pieces in the hopes that she’ll marry a millionaire.” In fact, though, he wanted to get Scottie away from what he now recognized as a dangerous

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40 Ibid.
42 Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 137.
environment: “It was typical of our precarious position in New York that when our child was to be born we played safe and went home to St. Paul – it seemed inappropriate to bring a baby into all that glamour and loneliness.”\(^{43}\) It was the glamour that had so long attracted him but the emptiness of the exclusive world of the Eastern elite that repelled him. Later, having abandoned New York for France, Fitzgerald wrote Mary Mannes, “You are thrilled by New York – I doubt you will be after five more years when you are more fully nourished from within.”\(^{44}\)

Despite winning the girl and gaining profound acclaim among the Eastern establishment, Fitzgerald quickly was disabused of his idealized notions of the purity of romantic love and of the noble grace of the American aristocracy. His disillusionment soon extended to the country as a whole. America had lost its vigor: “. . . I’m sick of the flabby semi-intellectual softness in which I flounder with most of my generation.”\(^{45}\) The pursuit of wealth purely for its own sake never motivated Fitzgerald and he recognized that the American economic and social engine of materialism undermined the moral integrity of the individual. In his 1920 letter to Bob Clark Fitzgerald wrote:

The Rosseaus, Marxes, Tolstois – men of thought, mind you, “impractical” men, “idealisers” have done more to decide the food you eat and the things you think & do than all the millions of Roosevelts and Rockerfellers that strut for 20 yrs. or so mouthing such phrases as 100% American (which means 99%  


\(^{44}\) Bruccoli, *A Life in Letters*, 129.  

\(^{45}\) Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald*, 130.
village idiot), and die with a little pleasing flattery to the silly and cruel old God they’ve set up in their hearts.\(^\text{46}\)

Fitzgerald, like other expatriate authors of the 1920s, fled for Europe seeking a life apart from the rank materialism of America. Although he failed to find the stability that would support his artistic temperament, he continued ruefully to observe the dissolution of American society:

‘I remember . . . a fellow expatriate opening a letter from a mutual friend of ours, urging him to come home and be revitalized by the hardy, bracing qualities of the native soil. It was a strong letter and it affected us both deeply, until we noticed that it was headed from a nerve sanitorium in Pennsylvania.’\(^\text{47}\)

Reflecting later on life on the Twenties, Fitzgerald ironically commented on the tragedies occurring in that decade of opulence and waste rather than in the later Depression Era 1930s, a decade of great poverty and loss:

By this time contemporaries of mine had begun to disappear into the dark maw of violence. A classmate killed his wife and himself on Long Island, another tumbled ‘accidentally’ from a skyscraper in Philadelphia, another purposely from a skyscraper in New York. . . .These are not catastrophes that I went out of my way to look for – these were my friends; moreover, these things happened not during the depression but during the boom.\(^\text{48}\)

Upon returning to New York in 1926 Fitzgerald witnessed the debased world he had once revered:

The restlessness . . . approached hysteria. The parties were bigger. . . . The pace was faster . . . the shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the


\(^{48}\) Fitzgerald, “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” in *The Crack-Up*, 20.
morals were looser, and the liquor was cheaper; but all these benefits did not really minister to much delight. Young people wore out early – they were hard and languid at twenty-one. ... Most of my friends drank too much – the more they were in tune to the times the more they drank. . . . The city was bloated, gluttoned, stupid with cake and circuses, and a new expression ‘Oh yeah?’ summed up all the enthusiasm evoked by the announcement of the last super-skyscrapers.49

Fitzgerald was increasingly in a state of despair; his dreams had been shattered and he simply wanted to feel the excitement of anticipation that he had once known. In 1925 he wrote his agent, Harold Ober: “I feel very old this winter. I’m twenty-eight. I was twenty-two when I came to New York and found that you’d sold ‘Head and Shoulders’ to the Post. I’d like to get a thrill like that again but I suppose it’s only once in a lifetime.”50

In his youth Fitzgerald had created a persona to access an aerified world; now, he used persona and alcohol to mask his despair. While clearly an alcoholic, his drunken sprees also allowed him to live a created image: “In his twenties Fitzgerald was partly playing a role: writers were supposed to drink.”51 Fitzgerald could now play the role of the author, even if playing that role undermined his creative output: “On the other hand, for a shy man it was nice to be somebody except oneself again: to be ‘the Author’ as one had been ‘the Lieutenant.’ Of course one wasn’t really an

49 Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 190.
50 Bruccoli, A Life in Letters, 93.
51 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 182.
author any more than one had been an army officer, but nobody seemed to guess behind the false face."

As Fitzgerald became increasingly disillusioned and suffered ever greater despair over his own perceived artistic failures he continued to create idealized heroes: “. . . Fitzgerald, a chronic hero-worshiper . . . sought in others the qualities he lacked.” These heroes, of course, only magnified his shortcomings in comparison. Most notable of his 1920s heroes was Hemingway: “He was impressed by Hemingway’s talent and awed by his inflated reputation as a war hero and athlete. Fitzgerald’s regret at having missed battle was exacerbated by what he believed was Hemingway’s record as a combat veteran.” Hemingway’s ego was fed by Fitzgerald’s admiration, but he did not feel any obligation to salve Fitzgerald’s wounded psyche: “Ernest did nothing to bolster Scott’s confidence – quite the contrary.” Fitzgerald, the disillusioned dreamer, projected his romanticized notions on others, particularly Hemingway, and the projection perversely acted to further undermine his faith in himself: “With Ernest, Scott took a stance of abject hero

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54 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 226.

worship. ‘Hemingway was now a great man,’ Wilson reported, ‘and Scott was so much overcome by his greatness that he embarrassed me by his self-abasement.’”

Fitzgerald had believed that the aristocrats by wealth were noble yet found that they were base and wasteful. In his disillusion he came to understand that work, not aristocratic manners or riches, is the basis of nobility:

He knew that the lives of the rich had great possibilities, but he recognized that they mostly failed to use these possibilities fully. He also perceived that money corrupts the will to excellence. Believing that work is the only dignity (even though he could not live up to that doctrine), he condemned the self-indulgent rich for wasting the freedom of wealth.

Ensnared in the role he played of the famous and debauched artist, Fitzgerald came to understand that he too was wasting his opportunity, an opportunity founded in talent rather than wealth: “After a ‘hell of a time’ trying to rally his creative forces, he wrote Perkins: ‘Loafing puts me in this particularly obnoxious and abominable gloom.’” His idealized world attained and the myth shattered, Fitzgerald regretted his waste: “If I’d spent this time reading or travelling or doing anything – even staying healthy – it’d be different but I spent it uselessly, neither in study nor in contemplation but only in drinking and raising hell generally. . . . So you can imagine the moral effect the whole chasm had on me.”

56 Ibid., 168.

57 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 229.


Fitzgerald wavered between despair and renewed commitment; the commitment to work was what helped him overcome his despair: “I wish I were twenty-two again with only my dramatic and feverishly enjoyed miseries. You remember I used to say I wanted to die at thirty – well, I’m now twenty-nine and the prospect is still welcome. My work is the only thing that makes me happy.” In his commitment to work, rather than glory, Fitzgerald found some solace: “This thing, both the effort and the result, have hardened me and I think now that I’m much better than any of the young Americans without exception.”

America entered the post-war period ready to put behind its immediate past. The country was anxious to enjoy the rewards of materialism and close its eyes to the concomitant hardships imposed on the less fortunate. By the end of the 1920s the illusion had been shattered. Similarly, Fitzgerald emerged from the military ready to put his middle-class Midwestern past behind him. Armed with his girl and his talent, he was ready to reap the fame and fortune he felt he would earn. Like his country, the rewards came quickly and relatively easily. But, much earlier than the country and initially spurred by Zelda’s betrayal, Scott recognized that his beliefs were glittering but fundamentally hollow. For both country and author it was a period marked by initial optimism and ultimate disappointment.

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60 Ibid., 131.
61 Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 156.
CHAPTER V

THE PEAK STORIES – DISAPPOINTED DREAMS AND DESPAIR

With his return to St. Paul to complete his novel, Fitzgerald also returned to writing short stories. Among them was “Head and Shoulders,” the first of his stories to be published in the *The Saturday Evening Post*, following several stories published for much less money in H. L. Mencken’s *The Smart Set*. The story is a farce that, like many of his high school stories, relies on an O’Henry ironic twist. More significantly, however, it presages Fitzgerald’s compromising of his talent in order to support Zelda. The story was written in February 1919 after Zelda had broken their engagement but before publication of his novel. It reflects Fitzgerald’s bitter realization that talent, confidence and ambition are not enough to win the girl; one must have money, even if it means selling one’s dreams to acquire it. Ironically, the story itself may have contributed to Zelda’s return:

> Whether one believes that Zelda married him only because of the publication of *This Side of Paradise*, literally ten days before the wedding; or because the sale of “Head and Shoulders” to Hollywood for $2,250 encouraged her to believe that by writing for the movies he could support her in the style for which she yearned; or because his self-confidence over his suddenly booming career was infectious, the fact remains that she had broken their engagement when it appeared that he would never be a financial success as a writer.¹

But, while the story appears to have been a factor in Zelda’s view of Scott’s possibilities, her earlier break with him and subsequent return forever jaded him.

The corruption of romance by self-interest and money is a theme he would

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frequently consider in his stories: “Fitzgerald understood Zelda’s reluctance to marry a man who could not support her, but he never quite forgave her for doing what he termed ‘the sensible thing,’ and he would often explore in his fiction this financial challenge to his belief in the fundamental spirituality of love.”²

The story’s comedic undertones are dark in nature and reflect Fitzgerald’s growing skepticism that talent and ambition alone are sufficient. It suggests that life can present fatalistic obstacles to the grandest of dreams. Horace Tarbox is an intellectual prodigy living among his philosophy books when he meets Marcia Meadow, a beauty of the stage with virtually no schooling. By the story’s end, Horace has abandoned his academic pursuits to perform as a vaudevillian acrobat in order to free Marcia from the stage; Marcia, having been introduced to literature by Horace, has produced a crude imitation of Samuel Pepys’ diaries which bring her undeserved critical acclaim as an artist of a new and raw style. Horace’s legitimate talent has been offered up for a glittering sham of artistic creation. Fitzgerald, who had believed in the capacity of pure romance to conquer all, now treats man’s winning his romantic ideal as a fatalistic moment signaling an eventual wasting of talent and defeat of dreams: “And then, just as nonchalantly as though Horace Tarbox had been Mr. Beef the butcher or Mr. Hat the Haberdasher, life reached in,

² ibid.
seized him, handled him, stretched him, and unrolled him like a piece of Irish lace on a Saturday-afternoon bargain-counter.”

Horace views himself as a realist, but as he gives himself over to his romantic leanings he begins his descent: “He fancied he was verging more and more toward pragmatism. But at that moment, though he did not know it, he was verging with astounding rapidity toward something quite different.” Fitzgerald’s drift is in the other direction, away from romantic beliefs, and his attitude toward the danger of romantic notions at the expense of practical commitment is clear:

To him there was something infinitely pathetic about it, and for the first time in months he began to turn over in his mind his own half-forgotten dreams. He had meant to write a series of books, to popularize the new realism as Schopenhauer had popularized pessimism and William James pragmatism. But life hadn’t come that way. Life took hold of people and forced them into flying rings.

Fitzgerald, transitioning from a dreamer of grand splendors to hard realist, feared the consequences of fate: “The vehemence with which he makes this point, over and over, suggests how personally concerned Fitzgerald was over the unpredictable intervention of forces that might undermine all that he had worked for, all that he had hoped to accomplish. . . .” Horace, confronting the tragedy of wasting his talent, reflects, “I’m still that man. I could be electrocuted for the crimes he

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 22.

6 Petry, Craft of Short Fiction, 48.
committed.”7 Marcia’s deception is more horror than tragedy, since she has no
talent to waste. The tragedy is found in the frustration of Horace’s talent: “Despite
its comedy, ‘Head and Shoulders’ seems in large measure a serious allegory about
Fitzgerald’s fear of professional failure or, what was almost as bad, professional
compromise: of ‘Trying to choose our mediums and then taking what we get – and
being glad.’”8

In contrast, Marcia creates a series of false personae to gain recognition. She
assumes a stage identity to escape the treacherous world of her youth; she becomes
the intellectual’s wife to free herself from the stage; and, finally, she becomes a
sham artist to gain public acclaim. Fitzgerald, who had believed that creation of
identity was an essential and respectable means to access high society, now
recognized that, while the false identity may or may not deceive others, it ultimately
is just that, a deception. Fitzgerald’s early belief in the opportunities created by such
deceptions are replaced by a fear of the consequences, particularly when, as in
Marcia’s faux-intellectual, author persona, it is undiscovered: “But the other part of
the message is more subtle and perhaps more frightening for Fitzgerald: it is the
semiliterate Marcia who achieves the success, fame and critical respect that Horace
might reasonably have expected.”9

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7 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 22.
8 Petry, Craft of Short Fiction, 48.
9 Ibid., 19.
During this same period Fitzgerald wrote “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” a story that reflects his more mature attitudes toward social cruelty and survival in contrast with his earlier romantic notions. He acknowledged that “Bernice” is based in part on the letter he wrote to his sister, Annabel, in 1915. At that time he believed that she could successfully create a socially-acceptable image. Five years later, he understood that those who have social power will savagely defend their turf and that no *parvenu* will be accepted. Bernice fails in her attempt to recreate her image in order to rise socially. In another story of this period, “The Ice Palace,” Sally Carrol attempts to transform herself: “And as she said this she had the feeling for almost the first time in her life that she was acting a part.”

Even though Sally Carrol comes from the highest order of her Southern society, she cannot change her ‘self’ in order to be received into the comparable elite of another culture, the northern Midwest. Fitzgerald had come to appreciate the animalistic nature of society; a chameleon outside of the pack must be rejected, like Sally Carrol, or destroyed, like Bernice.

At the time he was writing “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” “May Day” and other stories after Zelda had crushed his dreams by breaking their engagement, Scott had become interested in naturalistic Social Darwinism explored in the works of Emile Zola and others: “Fitzgerald was then under the influence of naturalism – the deterministic strain of realism that he had found in Frank Norris and Theodore

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Dreiser.” Bernice arrives as the outsider at the home of her cousin, Marjorie, who is a social queen possessing beauty, wealth, charm – and the man. Bernice makes the dangerous mistake of challenging Marjorie’s position. At first she is patronized, but once the seriousness of the challenge is noted, the stakes are raised treacherously high. For Bernice, her ability to walk among the elite is tied to the American promise of equality of opportunity: “This was the test supreme of her sportsmanship; her right to walk unchallenged in the starry heaven of popular girls.” It is an opportunity for Bernice but for Marjorie it is a threat to her dominion. Marjorie’s response is savage. She must destroy Bernice, her own creation. Only one can survive. Fitzgerald portrays the battle in feral terms:

. . . Marjorie’s mouth curling in a faint ironic smile as if to say: “Give up and get down! You tried to buck me and I called your bluff. You see you haven’t got a prayer.” And some last energy rose up in Bernice, for she clinched her hands under the white cloth, and there was a curious narrowing of her eyes that Marjorie remarked on to someone long afterward.

The fought-over lover, Warren, is brought into the battle. He chooses sides with similar survival instincts:

. . . Marjorie turned swiftly and with serpentlike intensity to Warren. “Would you mind running me down to the cleaners?” she asked. . . . Warren stared abstractedly at some infinite speck out the window. Then for an instant his eyes rested coldly on Bernice before they turned to Marjorie. “Be glad to.” he said slowly.

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11 Bruccoli, *Epic Grandeur*, 139.
12 Fitzgerald, *Short Stories*, 42.
13 Ibid., 43.
14 Ibid., 44.
Survival among the social elite has a jungle-like danger like life on the streets for Dreiser’s Carrie or Zola’s Therese Raquin. Fitzgerald’s Edith in “May Day,” while walking the New York streets, encounters similar threats:

Pulling her cloak close about her Edith darted across the Avenue. She stared nervously as a solitary man passed her and said in a hoarse whisper – “Where bound, kiddo?” She was reminded of a night in her childhood when she had walked around the block in her pajamas and a dog had howled at her from a mystery-big back yard.¹⁵

The howling dog is as dangerous as the solitary man, and neither is more dangerous than the young, beautiful and anointed defending their social positions, as Bernice cruelly learns: “… Bernice had all the sensations of Marie Antoinette bound for the guillotine in a tumbrel.”¹⁶

Bernice, like Fitzgerald coming east, arrived at her sophisticated cousin’s home with a romantic notion of the grandeur of the select. They were thought to be more sophisticated, charming and noble. Yet, just as Scott had his dreams shattered by Zelda’s rejection and his early experiences in New York, Bernice appreciates a new reality. She responds with a commensurate savagery: “‘Huh!’ she giggled wildly. ‘Scalp the selfish thing!’”¹⁷ The law of the jungle requires Marjorie to destroy Bernice, but it also demands that Bernice respond with her full force. This is not a

¹⁵ Ibid., 126.

¹⁶ Ibid., 42.

¹⁷ Ibid., 47.
social game with rules of etiquette; this is a battle for survival. And it is a disillusioned Fitzgerald who, like Bernice, had come to understand that.

Another story Scott wrote in that early professional period after Zelda’s break-up with him is “The Cut-Glass Bowl,” one of his rare forays into the supernatural. Fitzgerald wrote best when focused on his present time and setting, hence his reputation as the chronicler of his age. His attempts at historical fiction and the fantastic generally fail, with the exceptions in the latter genre of a few stories, including “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” and “The Cut-Glass Bowl.” He wrote each of these stories between 1920 and 1922. Matthew Brucolli speculates that “Fitzgerald was probably attracted to this form for its tension between romanticism and realism.”

Fitzgerald wrote Mencken in 1920 indicating that “The Cut-Glass Bowl,” “Benediction,” “The Ice Palace,” and “Dalrymple Goes Wrong” are among his better early stories.

“The Cut-Glass Bowl” begins in the 1890s, a period economically and culturally similar to the 1920s. The bowl, a gift to Evylyn from a dismissed suitor, is the *femme fatale* character frequently present in Fitzgerald’s stories. Her suitor tells her: “Evylyn, I’m going to give a present that’s as hard as you are and as beautiful and as empty and as easy to see through.” Like a woman whose seductive beauty and selfish harshness brings ruin to talent and purity of romance, the bowl is a

\[ 18 \] Ibid., 159.

participant in a series of tragedies befalling Evylyn. They include the bowl revealing a trust-destroying extra-marital affair, disastrously cutting her daughter, supplying the liquor that destroys her husband’s business and, finally, revealing her son’s death in combat. Evylyn’s beauty fades with the passage of time and the burden of personal tragedy: “If Evylyn’s beauty had hesitated in her early thirties it came to an abrupt decision just afterward and completely left her.”20 And yet, in a reversal of the Dorian Gray construct, Evylyn ages while her symbolic counterpart remains dangerously alluring: “… [T]his cold, malignant thing of beauty, . . . never ageing, never changing.”21

While initially Evylyn is the young temptress, she evolves into the victim, a role more often reserved for the man in Fitzgerald’s stories. The story’s bitter tone suggests desired vengeance toward women, like Zelda, who tarnish hope and romance with their cruelly attractive sharp edges. The cold and beautiful bowl destroys Evylyn as she destroyed others. Fitzgerald takes no chance that his message of vengeance will be missed; the bowl ‘speaks’ to Evylyn telling her, “You see, this time I didn’t have to hurt you directly. I didn’t bother. . . . You know how cold I am and how hard and how beautiful, because once you were just as cold and hard and beautiful.”22

20 Ibid., 24.
21 Ibid., 28.
22 Ibid.
Like Mr. Washington in “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” brashly offering to bribe God in a desperate attempt to retain his riches, Evylyn tries to grasp hold of fate in the form of the bowl and destroy it. God and destiny are too powerful, however, no matter how rich Washington may be or beautiful Evylyn may have been. As Evylyn matures and her beauty fades, she conscientiously tries to be a good mother, wife and person. She works to amend her early destructive behavior and yet she is unable to stem the continuing tragedies: “The answer comes down to the question of free will versus fate.” Washington dies on his exploding diamond mountain and the shattering glass bowl kills Evylyn. In “The Cut-Glass Bowl,” “. . . most of the associations Fitzgerald makes between the bowl and disaster are coincidental, forced and arbitrary.” Yet “. . . Evylyn is blaming the bowl for something inevitable, the loss of youth and beauty. . . .” Fitzgerald, the young romantic who had moved east believing that talent, ambition and commitment were sufficient, came to appreciate the powers beyond the control of the individual. He recognized that the qualities he had associated with a higher social caste, wealth and beauty, are, in fact, ultimately doomed.

In a more commercial story published a year later in Metropolitan Magazine, “Two for a Cent,” Fitzgerald looked at the role of fate from the angle of success rather than from failure and finds it to be equally indiscriminate. The destiny of two

23 Petry, Craft of Short Fiction, 50.

24 Higgins, A Study of the Stories, 18.

25 Ibid., 19.
men turns on a coin lost and found, respectively, decades earlier. Other than that moment of arbitrary luck, the two are no different: “As the blue drew down upon the dust the outlines of the two men had become less distinct, so that it was not easy for any one who passed along the walk to tell that one of these men was of the few and the other of no importance.”

In each of these stories, there is a superior force, whether it is God, fate or simply luck, that controls; the individual’s efforts to overcome the force are useless.

“The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” explores the position of the outsider in society. It considers not only the effects of being an outcast on the individual, but also the fears and insecurities that the outsider stirs in those associated with him. As a youth Fitzgerald experienced the pain of being a social outsider, but he always had been able to overcome any feelings of rejection that he might have had by his steadfast belief in the American promise of opportunity. Ironically, as he achieved the fame and success that he hoped would be his path to the rewards of the American Dream, he came to recognize that admission to the world of the Eastern wealth elite not only is not as grand as he had imagined but also that it is effectively denied to those not born into it. In this sense, Benjamin Button presages Jay Gatsby. Both are born outsiders and find themselves cruelly rejected by those on the inside.

Benjamin, born already an old man, is a freak. Instead of finding compassion, he engenders callous, self-centered responses. Dr. Keene, the doctor who brings him

into the world, is concerned only with how this bizarre birth will affect his career: “Do you imagine a case like this will help my professional reputation? One more would ruin me – ruin anybody.”

Similarly, Benjamin’s nurse cares not for the forsaken man-child but for the perceptions of others: “It’s perfectly outrageous! The hospital will never have the ghost of a reputation after –.”

His father, Roger, cruelly rejects him and does not want to bring him home: “‘My heavens!’ he murmured, in an ecstasy of horror. ‘What will people say? What must I do?’”

Even later in this life lived in reverse, Benjamin is rejected by his son due to concerns about social appearances: “Roscoe was married now and prominent in Baltimore life, and he wanted no scandal to creep out in connection with his family.”

Others are concerned with Benjamin’s external appearance and its implications for them; they do not care about Benjamin as a human being or the painful conflicts he must be experiencing as he grows younger while everyone else grows older. Fitzgerald is portraying a self-centered society concerned only with image and self-preservation and the innocent is the victim.

Like Fitzgerald as a boy and so many of his characters, including Gatsby, Roger tries to create an image to overcome the outsider status he fears will be imposed upon him by virtue of his freak son. He purchases children toys for his aged

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27 Fitzgerald, *Short Stories*, 160.

28 Ibid., 161.

29 Ibid., 163.

30 Ibid., 177.
son to, “. . . perfect the illusion which he was creating – for himself at least.”\textsuperscript{31} As Fitzgerald had learned, efforts at creating persona ultimately fail. Roger is unable to fool others or himself.

Both Roger and Roscoe attribute fault to Benjamin. They want to believe that he has some control over who he is. For example, Roscoe yells at his father, who increasingly looks younger than the son: “‘As a matter of fact’ he added, ‘you’d better not go on with this business much longer. . . . [Y]ou better turn right around and start back the other way. This has gone too far to be a joke. It isn’t funny any longer. You – you behave yourself.’”\textsuperscript{32} Like Evylyn and Washington, Roger and Roscoe cannot control their destinies which, in their cases, are to be linked with a freak. The American promise is conditional on free will. Fitzgerald came to question whether America delivers on its promise of opportunity. If life’s path is determined, by social position or other forces, then the question of whether there is equality of opportunity is moot.

Fitzgerald, the young dreamer, had matured into a man who had lost faith in his dreams. The dreams of youth are founded in naiveté and purity. With experience, dreams fail, leading to a disillusionment that cannot be cast off. Benjamin’s life is lived in reverse. Yet he too begins life with a purity that is spoiled by the reactions of others who willingly sacrifice Benjamin to preserve their own

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 177.
status and self-perception. Benjamin drifts into a perverse death of the unborn
liberated from his dreams: “When the sun went his eyes were sleepy – there were
no dreams, no dreams to haunt him.” 33 Ironically, Benjamin achieves a satisfaction
with life rarely seen among Fitzgerald’s characters:

[...] though he dies at the end of the story, Benjamin Button is arguably the
happiest character in the Fitzgerald canon. At the age of seventy (i.e. at his
birth) he had experienced nothing and thus was not tormented by the
disillusionment of most elderly people, while at the time of his death seventy
years later, he simply cannot remember the few unhappy events of his life.
And without memory, there is no sense of disillusionment. 34

Fitzgerald had believed passionately in the American Dream, and the realization that
it is essentially false haunted him. He wrote wistfully of Benjamin who, freed from
memory and dreams, is incapable of disillusionment.

In the mid-1920s Fitzgerald wrote several stories during the time he was
working on The Great Gatsby. Some, like “The Rich Boy,” are considered among
Fitzgerald’s best short work. Others, like “One of My Oldest Friends” and “John
Jackson’s Arcady,” are more commercial and less critically respected. Nevertheless,
these stories too provide insight into Fitzgerald’s evolving attitudes.

“One of My Oldest Friends” contrasts the hard-working noble Michael and
the social-climbing dilettante Charley. While at a young age Fitzgerald had glorified
the aristocrat, he increasingly sided with the dutiful. In “The Rich Boy,” written two
years after “One of My Oldest Friends,” Anson Hunter is a far more complex

33 Ibid., 180.
34 Petry, Craft of Short Fiction, 79.
character than Charley, but both emerge from the same strains. They are committed to social stature and are egocentric. And they sacrifice those closest to them in pursuit of their social goals.

Both stories reveal the base and often cruel side of man, individually and collectively. Anson grows up among the rarefied of New York’s aristocrats by virtue of wealth. He believes in their – and, consequently, his – natural superiority. But, with his mother’s death and the diminishment of their family estate, Anson’s position in his class is changing. With that change, he should be able to see the truth of his class more clearly, but he is unable to do so:

Yet, he himself was part of that change, and his strong instinct for life had turned him in his twenties from the hollow obsequies of that abortive leisure class. He did not see this clearly – he still felt that there was a norm, a standard of society. But there was no norm, it was doubtful if there had ever been a true norm in New York. The few who still paid and fought to enter a particular set succeeded only to find that as a society it scarcely functioned – or, what was more alarming, that the Bohemia from which they fled sat above them at table.35

Fitzgerald, who had ‘fought’ and ‘paid’ with his talent to enter Eastern society was disappointed. Anson does not realize, as Fitzgerald did, that admission to this class was not worth the cost. And, with a rare hint of Christian sensibility, Fitzgerald suggests that the last, the Bohemians, shall be first.

Michael, in “One of My Oldest Friends,” is on the outside. He is no aristocrat; he has to work diligently to support his young family. His friend, Charley, seemingly has been admitted to the rarefied world of the social aristocracy. He is a socially

35 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 341.
acclaimed artist who travels in the most admired circles. Although he and Michael are the ‘oldest friends,’ Charley effectively rejects Michael for the glamorous life among the elite. But, as Fitzgerald and Gatsby both would learn, true inclusion is denied. The outsider can be an amusing diversion but remains the outsider who can be easily discarded whenever he becomes inconvenient. After being cast aside by his social superiors, Charley returns to Michael in desperation. Michael, who had been cruelly betrayed, has many reasons to deny Charley. Instead, in a heroic moment, Michael saves Charley from committing suicide.

Michael echoes Nick Carraway’s final observations. He recognizes the intrinsic moral corruption of a class forsaking others in order to preserve itself: “It’s because hate’s cheap in this world. Everybody’s got it for sale. My God! What do you suppose I think of myself now?” Michael flees to the Midwest to save himself; Michael needs to save Charley in order to save himself.

Anson abandons his wife during her pregnancy. By the time he returns, it is too late. She dies in childbirth. Anson continues to live in his sense of social superiority and, absent a revelation like Michael’s, is unable to truly give of himself. In a bitter coda, Anson’s narrator-friend observes the inherent loneliness of the man whose identity lies in his sense of superiority:

I don’t think he was ever happy unless someone was in love with him, responding to him like filings to a magnet, helping him to explain himself, promising him something. What it was I do not know. Perhaps they promised that there would always be women in the world who would spend their

36 Fitzgerald, The Price Was High, 121.
brightest, freshest, rarest hours to nurse and protect that superiority he cherished in his heart.  

Michael is one of the Bohemians Fitzgerald placed at the head of the table. That is because he has come to understand that personal salvation comes from one’s generous relationships with others. Using Christian imagery, Michael saves Charley from suicide by hanging on a cruciform:

An unusual theme for Fitzgerald is that of the power of Christian charity to conquer the world’s prevalent hate. The story actually becomes a moral tale in the Chaucerian sense, complete with the climactic miracle. The cruciform pole emphasizes the Christianity of the theme. The pull of the Church that Fitzgerald renounced is still strong, and the goodness-greatness conflict still of utmost concern to him.

It is not just the desperate other who benefits from the giving, the giver is redeemed by the act and the moral sinew of the society also is strengthened:

He realized all this in the space of a second with a sense of shock and instantly he understood the reason why he should have helped Charley Hart. It was because it would be intolerable to exist in a world where there was no help – where any human being could be as alone as Charley had been alone this afternoon.

Fitzgerald’s commercial stories, by his own admission, were more neatly resolved with optimistic endings. “One of My Oldest Friends” fits that structure. Nevertheless, it serves as a sentimental counterpart to themes caustically addressed in his more acclaimed story, “The Rich Boy.”

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37 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 349.

38 Higgins, A Study of the Stories, 73.

Many of the stories Fitzgerald wrote in the first years of his success and before completing *The Great Gatsby* address issues also explored in *Gatsby*:

Nearly all of the thematic elements of *The Great Gatsby* can be found in the stories. The romantic dream and the American Dream of success, and the disenchantment inherent in both; the corruption and callousness of the established rich; reality vs. appearances; the attempt to recapture the past; the West-East movement – all are there.⁴⁰

“John Jackson’s Arcady” was written in 1924 and its publication helped Fitzgerald earn the money necessary to allow him to return to *Gatsby*. Although it relies on the maudlin emotionalism that distinguishes Fitzgerald’s weakest work, the heart of the story more successfully explores themes of disillusion and search for rekindled hope: “Although this story is marred by its patently sentimental ending, it is interesting as a treatment of Fitzgerald’s roots-pilgrimage theme – reflecting his increasing sense of deracination and estrangement from his Midwestern values.”⁴¹

The first paragraph of the story artfully establishes a mood of bored despair that overwhelms the protagonist, a wealthy, landed businessman. The reader has yet to be formally introduced to John Jackson but we feel his anguish. Having been asked to give a civic speech on ‘What I Have Gotten Out of Life,’ he is compelled to confront the roots of his despair. He confesses to himself “. . . that life had stripped him clean of all happiness and all illusion.”⁴² Jackson has won the fruits of the

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⁴² Ibid., 144.
American Dream and yet finds them unfulfilling. He is empty, without genuine loving
relationships.

Jackson returns to his home town in search of serenity. It is in the world of
his youth that he hopes to find his ‘arcady.’ There he rediscovers a moral nobility
that he lost amidst the splendors of the American Dream:

This was his own house, as no other house would ever be; within these plain
walls he had been incomparably happy. Here he had known and learned that
kindness which he had carried into life. Here he had found the secret of
those few simple decencies, so often invoked, so inimitable, and so rare,
which in the turmoil of competitive industry had made him to coarser men a
source of half-scoffing, half-admiring surprise. This was his house, because
his honor had been born and nourished here; he had known every hardship
of the country poor, but no preventable regret."43

He also briefly rediscovers romance with the love of his youth, but, like Daisy, she is
unable to sever the ties with her present to plunge into her past. In this brief
romantic reunion, however, Jackson finds the promise in life that he had been
lacking: “For twenty hours he had recaptured the power of seeing things through a
mist of hope. . . .”44 Fitzgerald had grown up on hope and later was deeply
disillusioned when the promised failed him. Through Jackson, he suggests that
America’s true nobility – its grace, sensitivity and kindness – is founded in the
Midwestern middle class culture he had so thoroughly rejected in his youth.
Fitzgerald, like Gatsby, dove ever deeper into the world of the Eastern wealthy yet,
more like Nick, he looked west for a moral foundation.

43 Ibid., 150.
44 Ibid., 156.
“Jacob’s Ladder” was written after Scott’s and Zelda’s return from Europe and Scott’s flirtation with Lois Moran in Hollywood. Similar to the relationship between the Gatsby-cluster stories and The Great Gatsby, “Jacob’s Ladder” and other stories from later in the 1920s explore motifs that would be developed in Tender Is the Night. Specific passages from “Jacob’s Ladder” were later included in the novel: “Yet ‘Jacob’s Ladder’ . . . is not just a precursor of Tender Is the Night, but an independently effective creation.”[^45]

At this stage in their lives, Zelda’s health was deteriorating; Scott’s alcoholism was increasingly debilitating; both had had extramarital romances; and, like the promise of their country at the start of the decade, individually and as a marital couple, Scott and Zelda were in decline. They are no longer young, exciting and famous. In fact, they are nearly forgotten and financially depleted. Scott’s path to disillusion and despair is complete. “Jacob’s Ladder” captures Fitzgerald’s attitude as he reluctantly confronted a new stage of life – a stage without hope and promise to buoy his spirits: “Full of regret, loss, and loneliness, ‘Jacob’s Ladder’ is a projection of Fitzgerald’s feelings at thirty.”[^46]

“Jacob’s Ladder” considers the familiar Fitzgerald themes of the femme fatale and homme manqué but from a different perspective. In his earlier stories, the ambitious man aspires for the grandeur of a higher society on the arms of the...
desired beauty. He is victimized by that self-concerned woman, who often already
has social éclat (Marcia in “Head and Shoulders” is a notable exception). In “Jacob’s
Ladder” the man is not only older but also has achieved financial and social power.
The woman is the young aspirant. Jacob feels the emptiness of his life and, like John
Jackson seeking serenity by returning to his childhood home, he believes he has
found his ladder to heaven in the rough hewn natural beauty, Jenny. For Jacob,
Jenny is young, untainted and moldable. By giving himself to her development, he
hopes to infuse his life with purpose: “He rode away in a mood of exultation, living
more deeply in her youth and future than he had lived in himself for years.” 47 Like
Fitzgerald writing to Ober in 1925, ruing the lost excitement that comes with young
dreams and first success, Jacob desperately seeks to rekindle such dream-based
enthusiasm in the youth of another.

Returning from several years roaming Europe and struggling to remain
commercially viable and artistically relevant, Fitzgerald’s disgust with American
materialism is evident in Jacob: “Like so many Americans, he valued things rather
than cared about them.” 48 Jacob, representative of a dissipated American society,
spent the decade pursuing wealth only to find that acquisition without emotional
attachment is empty. It leads to a sense of personal disgust: “During a desperate

47 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 357.

48 Ibid., 353.
attack of apathy he was like a gruff white bird, ruffled and annoyed, and disliking mankind with all his heart.”

Redemption is sought in the purity of young beauty. Fitzgerald frequently associates the terms ‘beauty’ and ‘clean.’ In the eyes of the romantic dreamer, for one to possess the former, one also must be the latter. Jacob senses the empty filth that has enveloped his life and projects upon the street-tough Jenny a clean palliative veneer.

While dreams provide hope, fate dashes it. Jenny is destined to move beyond Jacob, no matter how dependent upon him she initially may be: “Her dark eyes under a yellow straw hat were as full of destiny as though she had not just offered to toss destiny away.” It is not that Jacob or Jenny actively chooses to abandon one another; the particulars of life require it: “Circumstances were stiffening into a career which went on independently of her casual hours.”

He is old and valuable to her only at a certain point in time but she is young and will be moved on by the tides of life as he drifts behind. While Jacob had hoped she would be his ladder to a calming sense of purpose in life, in fact, Jacob has served as a rung in Jenny’s climb to fame and fortune in the world of illusion, Hollywood.

In his youth Scott had believed true romance would allow him to ascend a path to social reward and personal fulfillment. He found in Zelda’s treatment of him

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid., 358.

51 Ibid., 360.
before he achieved professional success that romance is not pure and that there is no real equality of opportunity. In Jacob, he is revealing a view that romance is no more real when the man possesses the requisite wealth and social connections. Though he is not the striving outsider, romance fails nonetheless. Youth and beauty progress at their own pace in a self-interested manner, and the ageing man is left behind.
CHAPTER VI
SURVIVING AMIDST THE WRECKAGE

The Promise Defied

The widening disparity between the wealthy and the middle and poor classes which developed through the 1920s was a major factor in the dramatic economic devastation that occurred at the end of the decade:

The most serious problem for the economy was an insufficient market for the vast quantity of goods being produced, a result of the poor distribution of income. During 1923 – 29, the share of the national income earned by the wealthy increased from 22.9 percent to 26.1 percent. . . . The wealthy did not spend most of their income on ordinary consumer goods, preferring instead to spend on investment (or speculation) and luxury goods.¹

Nevertheless, political leaders, including President Hoover, denied that the rich were becoming richer at the expense of the average American and that a climate of exclusion and elitism contributed the breakdown of the economy and social structure:

Hoover labeled the current depression itself a ‘transitory paralysis.’ He chose to sidestep less-flattering instances of Americanism, including racism, and employers who relied on professional strikebreakers and undercover agents. He paid scant attention to a concentration of wealth confirmed that same year by a landmark Brookings Institution study.²

¹ Goldberg, America in the Twenties, 135.

Many in the country maintained a misguided optimism founded on a belief that the American system could not fail: “. . . [T]he prosperity of the twenties had led millions to believe that want and deprivation were things of the past.”

It was not just the rich who were able to access the credit which then could be used to make temporarily lucrative but risky investments: “Speculation, both in real estate and stocks, further undermined the economy; it also served as the catalyst for the stock market crash. . . . Such unchecked speculation in both real estate and stocks led to potential dangers for the economy.” In a perverse sense, the country was running a national Ponzi scheme:

As the real estate boom grew around the country, real estate operators took their paper profits and bought stocks. The rise in stocks helped to stimulate a wave of average Americans buying stocks on credit or margin. . . . So extensive was this buying trend in the late 1920s that the vitality of the entire system came gradually to depend upon the steady rise of stock prices.

The economy had become like the proverbial ‘house of cards.’ It was doomed to fail with devastating consequences, particularly for the middle class who had taken on unwarranted levels of debt as they pursued their version of the American Dream, and for the workers and farmers who were left respectively without jobs when the factories closed and without markets for their crops.

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4 Goldberg, America in the Twenties, 136.

5 Ibid.
The Great Depression also dealt a severe blow to the American psyche. Americans believed that, given the chance to work, they could demonstrate their worth and prosper. Work itself was important to one’s psychological and moral well-being. Suddenly, though, there was no work to be had:

Unemployment was the single most important manifestation of the depression throughout the 1930s. . . . Behind the cold statistics lay the human problem – the families with inadequate food, the frustration of young men fresh out of high school or college with no jobs available, the deadening experience of men spending day after day in idleness in a culture that had always stressed the nobility of toil.  

In the post-War period Americans focused on the element of the American Dream that promised great rewards. In the period after the Crash the focus turned toward America’s promise of equal opportunity. Poverty was rampant and the poor were desperate. Ironically, while Hoover epitomized the American Dream by arising from the masses to acquire enormous wealth and achieve extraordinary professional success, he failed to understand the depth of American’s belief that all deserve the chance to be productive. He could not appreciate that the laissez-faire policies of the past decade would be no longer accepted when there were not jobs for the many. In contrast, Roosevelt, a scion of the Eastern aristocracy born into wealth, better understood the sociological need for work. In the American ethic, work has intrinsic value that is deeper than the fortunes of unearned wealth.

In the 1930s Americans set aside their earlier grandiose ambitions and their sense of superiority. The proverbial taxi driver, who had speculated and won in the

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6 Divine, Age of Insecurity, 90.
market only to subsequently lose it all, was now glad to again have his job as a driver and to be able to feed his family. Americans, by virtue of great want, re-learned the satisfactions of meeting one’s responsibilities. The American promise to a significant extent is that each will have an opportunity to provide for self and family.

**Rising from the Ashes**

Fitzgerald’s disillusion had grown though the 1920s, and he had long despaired of the American Dream, well before that reality was shockingly visited upon the country as a whole in October, 1929:

> As the Twenties lurched or sprinted forward, Fitzgerald’s warning notes became clearer. . . . By 1929 Fitzgerald knew he had lost something. Not his genius, not his capacity to feel intensely, not even his capacity for work. He had lost his belief that ‘life was something you dominated if you were any good.’

Fitzgerald wrote of the similarity between his and his country’s shattered illusions:

> “. . . [A]nd I think my happiness, or talent for self-delusion or what you will, was an exception. It was not the natural thing – unnatural as the Boom; and my recent experience parallels the wave of despair that swept the nation when the Boom was over.”

This statement, “implies the lifelong identification he made between autobiographical and historical phenomena.”

The bitter realities of life – declining health, lost opportunities, increasing responsibilities – were closing in on Fitzgerald, just as they were for his country, and

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he no longer had the luxury of living a persona: “The man I had persistently tried to be became such a burden that I have ‘cut him loose.’”\(^{10}\) Fitzgerald may have wanted to shed the image, but his audience would not allow him to do it so easily. He personified an era of glamour and profligacy that led to overwhelming national economic loss and personal suffering. By being associated with the former he was forced to share in the blame for the latter: “With his capacity for becoming identified with the moods of his times, Fitzgerald came to symbolize the excesses of the boom decade. The Twenties had spoiled and rewarded him. The Thirties would disparage him.”\(^{11}\)

Fitzgerald understood the extraordinary and tragic waste – his generation’s and his own: “. . . Fitzgerald had lived the Jazz Age and paraded it in his writings, and now he was living its aftermath, the wave of despair which followed.”\(^{12}\) The American Dream had proved to be illusory. Life’s real value lay in integrity, work and fulfillment of responsibility – to others and to oneself.

The inherent conflict between fulfilling his responsibilities to others and to his talent rested heavily on Fitzgerald. He found himself nearly constantly in debt and the only way out was through second-rate stories: “Since he was now writing to raise fast money for pressing debts, Fitzgerald was submitting what were really


\(^{11}\) Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 286.

\(^{12}\) Turnbull, \textit{Scott Fitzgerald}, 278.
working drafts. Consequently his stories became harder to sell, forcing him to write more stories hastily.”

Fitzgerald’s precarious financial position, exacerbated by his commitment to support Zelda in her hospitalization and to assure the best schooling possible for Scottie, grew more serious through the Depression. In 1937 he wrote his agent, Harold Ober: “The situation is terrible. One check has just come back to the hotel. Threats of suits come in daily from all over hell – not big sums but enormous now. Some matters as buying razor blades & even cigarettes have grown serious.”

Fitzgerald, though, worked doggedly through the decade and at great sacrifice of his artistic sensibility to repay all of his debts to his principal creditors, Ober and Perkins. To do so was a matter of honor for Fitzgerald and it always was honor, not money, which intrigued and motivated him. In 1936 he wrote Hemingway: “Riches have never fascinated me, unless combined with the greatest charm or distinction.”

Scott’s relationship with Zelda had long since deteriorated beyond repair. By the time of their final return from Europe in 1931, Zelda had been hospitalized several times and was never again to regain full mental health. The strain of Scott’s drinking, Zelda’s instability and their flamboyantly irresponsible way of life had taken its toll: “[Zelda’s] relationship with Scott violated all rules of human conduct. Their

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15 Ibid., 302.
marriage had now completely turned from collaboration to vicious competition. Often it was no more than a bitter contest that paralleled the Divers at their worst.”

And yet, “until the end of his life he felt a deep need to ‘protect’ Zelda. . . . They loyally clung to one another, oftentimes an unbearable pairing amid harrowing situations.”

Scott’s loyalty was founded in one part in nostalgic respect for the past, but he recognized that the past could not be recaptured: “He wrote in his Notebooks: ‘I left my capacity for hoping on the little rocks that led to Zelda’s sanitorium.’” Nevertheless, he maintained a respect for what their relationship had meant to him: “Although Fitzgerald’s behavior with Zelda was sometimes harsh or irrational, he retained a fidelity to their past, a sense of regret that was not always distinguishable from self-pity. . . . In grieving over her insanity, he was also mourning the loss of his happiness.”

Scott’s loyalty in another part was derived from a mature sense of responsibility for another who is not only dependent but also to whom one has made a commitment that must be honored. Scott came to the end of the 1920s stripped of his illusions, bitterly aware of their consequences and fearfully cognizant of his obligations. He recognized that Zelda had not correspondingly matured and

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16 Stavola, Crisis in American Identity, 61-62.

17 Ibid., 62-63.

18 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 362.

19 Ibid., 391.
wrote of her: “... [B]ut her dominant idea and goal is freedom without responsibility which is like gold without metal, spring without winter, youth without age, one of those maddening coo-coo mirages of wild riches which make her a typical product of our generation.”

He knew that his love for her had dried up; he wrote Zelda in 1930: “Toward the end nothing much mattered. . . . [B]ut now whatever you said aroused a sort of detached pity for you.” He understood that it was obligation, not continuing love, which tied him to her:

Certainly . . . the outworn pretense that we can ever come together again is better for being shed. There is simply too much of the past between us. When that mist falls – at a dinner table, or between two pillows – no knight errant can traverse its immense distance. The mainsprings are gone.

Although the love was gone, the loyalty remained and, like so many Americans after the Crash, there was no time to pursue dreams. Bills had to be paid and debts satisfied. While often severe, even cruel, in his interactions with Zelda, he was committed to paying for private treatment, no matter how hopeless the prognosis. And the only way he could earn the necessary funds was through writing increasingly hackneyed stories: “Despite the worry and distractions of the Prangins period (where Zelda was hospitalized), Fitzgerald wrote Post stories to pay for Zelda’s treatment and his residence in Switzerland.”

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20 Ibid., 318.

21 Bruccoli, A Life in Letters, 189.

22 Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 299.

23 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 305.
Generating these stories, however, came at great personal cost: “The magazine work he had done dependably – if grudgingly – had become hellishly difficult for him; his stories became labored and unconvincing.” 24 His sacrifice was rewarded not with professional respect or public acclaim – both were increasingly denied him in the later Twenties and through the Thirties. Instead, the reward was found in Zelda’s lucid appreciation of his sacrifices expressed after his death:

He was . . . as spiritually generous a soul as ever was. … In retrospect it seems as if he was always planning happiness for Scottie and for me. Books to read – places to go. Life seemed so promising always when he was around. . . . Although we weren’t close any more, Scott was the best friend a person could have to me. . . . 25

Similarly, Scott became a more engaged parent as the Twenties came to a close. Zelda’s failing health prevented her from having a meaningful influence on her daughter. Scott necessarily tried to fill the role of both parents: “Fitzgerald tried to compensate for Zelda’s absences and withdrawal from family life by devoting attention to Scottie, who was approaching eleven. Concerned that she might be influenced by exposure to her parents’ weakness, he endeavored to train her to be disciplined.” 26 Fitzgerald’s parenting was unconventional -- Scottie rarely lived with her father -- and often ineffective. Nevertheless, with a practical maturity absent during his years of peak production and fame, he recognized that sacrifices must be

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24 Ibid., 397.


made for the vulnerable child: “[Scottie] was part of his sense of obligation towards life, and her importance grew as Zelda waned and became a child.”

In his romantic youth, Fitzgerald instructed his sister to create a persona in order to gain admission to the hallowed world of the social elite. In his post-Boom maturity, he demonstrated a reversal of attitude. He often advised Scottie to disregard image and to focus on substance. For example, in 1933 he wrote Scottie: “. . . Things not to worry about: Don’t worry about popular opinion; . . . Don’t worry about triumph; Don’t worry about failure unless it comes through your own fault. . . .” And, in the same letter, he wrote: “I feel very strongly about you doing duty. . . . All I believe in life is the rewards of virtue (according to your talents) and the punishments for not fulfilling your duties, which are doubly costly.”

In an era when his country’s illusions had been shattered and the hard work of survival remained, Fitzgerald’s sense of duty to his daughter flourished. He feared that she would make the same mistakes as her parents, chasing romantic dreams while talent atrophied: “He wrote [Scottie] a tirade, citing her mother who had idled through life until she realized ‘that work was dignity and the only dignity. . . .’” He was determined to provide Scottie the best education possible and to ensure that she grew into a woman of substance and virtue. His letters to his daughter condemn

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27 Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 231.

28 Bruccoli, A Life in Letters, 234.

29 Ibid.

30 Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 300.
her moral failures, laud her talents, and implore her to meet his expectations.

Despite all of his personal failings, he sought to be an engaged, responsible father.

Providing for Scottie, even from a distance, required money, which was something that Fitzgerald always lacked. In the same manner as he supported Zelda, Fitzgerald generated story upon story to raise funds to pay for Scottie’s education. He did so with less regard to artistic quality and more for quantity and mass appeal, which translated into higher payments. His highest responsibility now was to his wife and daughter, higher than to his art. In 1936 he wrote Perkins:

I certainly have this one more novel, but it may have to remain among the unwritten books of this world. Such stray ideas as sending my daughter to a public school, putting my wife in a public insane asylum, have been proposed to me by intimate friends, but it would break something in me that would shatter the very delicate pencil end of a point of view.  

Nevertheless, Fitzgerald was painfully aware of the toll writing these second-rate stories took. He wrote Scottie: “You don’t realize that what I am doing here is the last tired effort of a man who once did something finer and better.” But it was a bargain he knowingly made with an understanding of both the terrible cost and, paradoxically, the great personal reward: “Through it all Scottie had been a reason to keep struggling. ‘Seeing her,’ Fitzgerald wrote Oscar Kalman, ‘you will see how much I still have to live for.’”

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32 Ibid., 363.

During the final years of his life, Fitzgerald became involved with Sheilah Graham. Although his continuing struggles with alcoholism were complicating, it was a more sedate, less flamboyant relationship than those of his youth. Graham was a *parvenu* in Hollywood who had masked her lower class background with a created persona. Fitzgerald welcomed the opportunity to help mold her: “Subjected to Fitzgerald’s endless curiosity about her background, Sheilah tearfully told him the truth. Instead of being appalled as she had feared, he was fascinated by her efforts to rise and immediately volunteered to take over her education.”  

As with Scottie, Fitzgerald felt a responsibility to help develop a woman of substance, rather than one of merely image, as though to compensate for the flawed priorities of his youth: “In spite of his weaknesses the apex of life for Fitzgerald was caring. Driven by the need to be needed and the need to teach, the mature Fitzgerald took great pleasure in educating [Sheilah] in the ways of life and literature.”

In Fitzgerald’s Princeton years excessive drinking was in part an act, in effect, a harmless game. In the days of critical and public acclaim, it became more real but remained an element of a desired image, that of the glamorous artist. But in his deferred maturity, it was a destructive need which Fitzgerald fought to control: “That autumn the stock market crashed, but Fitzgerald had more immediate concerns; his own life seemed to be crashing around him as his drinking, long a

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35 Stavola, *Crisis in an American Identity*, 68.
problem, got completely out of hand.” 36 Zelda’s doctors repeatedly told Scott that his drinking harmed her chances of recovery. It placed a barrier between him and his few remaining friends, including Sheilah. In the post-Boom phase of his life, his drinking was a major obstacle to psychological, financial, and creative recovery: “. . . [T]o get a job in Hollywood, which now seemed the only way of paying his steadily accumulating debt, he would have to stay sober.” 37 Recognizing the linkage between sobriety and meeting obligations, Fitzgerald fought determinedly to remain sober. The fact that he often failed is evidence of the seriousness of his illness; it does not, however, undermine the point that Fitzgerald desperately sought to avoid the alcohol which had destroyed so much of what was now noble and important in his life. He now understood that when times were good, an alcoholic binge could be an amusing diversion, but that when serious obligations had to be met, it was his responsibility to fight to remain sober: “Yet Fitzgerald was now a different, wiser man, a man of integrity, as his nurse noted in the fall of 1936. ‘He wasn’t devoid of self-pity, yet he viewed life with detachment and blamed himself for his plight.’” 38

By the time of the Crash, America had failed to take advantage of its post-War strength and self-confidence. It had allowed itself to be fooled by chimerical ‘good times.’ Similarly, as the 1930s approached, Fitzgerald was painfully aware of

36 Turnbull, Scott Fitzgerald, 192.

37 Ibid., 292.

38 Stavola, Crisis in an American Identity, 68.
the enormous waste. He no longer was able, as he was in his youth, to delude himself:

At this stage of his career he doubted his ‘immaculateness of purpose.’ Heretofore, despite his self indulgences, he had believed in his destiny and in his ability to preserve the best part of his genius. Now, struggling with his novel and grinding out unfelt stories, he came to feel that he was starting all over again without the confident illusions that had sustained him in 1920.39

He understood that his chronic insomnia was rooted in the tragedies of his youth: “—Waste and horror – what I might have been and done that is lost, spent, gone, dissipated, unrecapturable.”40 He feared not only the loss of opportunity, but also the loss of talent: “In 1933 he was concerned that he had used up his emotions – not just his material, but his capacity to invest his characters with authentic feeling.”41 When he was young, the stories flowed relatively easily: “His best story ideas came to him as complete structures, and by writing them in concentrated bursts of effort he was able to preserve the spontaneity of the narrative.”42 The stories on which he now relied for essential income were becoming increasingly difficult:

Structure and plotting became a problem in Fitzgerald’s stories after 1934. They no longer came to him as 5000-word units, and he had to fill them in with nonfunctional incidents or scenes. He observed in his Notebooks: ‘It

39 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 355.
41 Bruccoli, Epic Grandeur, 354.
42 Ibid., 109.
grows harder to write because there is much less weather than when I was a boy and practically no men or women at all.\textsuperscript{43}

But while he often wrote of his frustrations with his writing and sense of despair for all that had been lost, in fact Fitzgerald did not give up:

A decade before [Fitzgerald and Lardner] had met when they were both at their peaks. Now at thirty-seven, after years of waste and tragedy, Fitzgerald was attempting to reestablish or justify himself so as not to die with too much of what was in his own mind and heart unwritten.\textsuperscript{44}

It was a time of perseverance, and Fitzgerald again was emblematic of his country’s mood. It was an era of desperation: “After ‘The Crack-Up’ Fitzgerald still had to struggle very doggedly to survive.”\textsuperscript{45} In his twenties he had written Harold Ober about the loss of youthful excitement and his willing acceptance of an early death. He now wrote Anne Ober: “There is nothing left, girls, but to believe in reincarnation and carry on.”\textsuperscript{46} For Fitzgerald, it was the carrying on that had become so important. Ironically, it was in the very struggle itself that he found the fortitude to continue: “Vitality . . . shows in not only the ability to persist but the ability to start over.”\textsuperscript{47}

In his effort to start anew, Fitzgerald reflected back on the causes of his failures. In a letter to Scottie, he places perhaps too much blame on Zelda, but he also now recognizes that it is in work that one finds nobility: “But I was a man

\textsuperscript{43} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 393.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 356-357.

\textsuperscript{45} Stavola, \textit{Crisis in an American Identity}, 68.

\textsuperscript{46} Bruccoli, \textit{Epic Grandeur}, 421.

\textsuperscript{47} Turnbull, \textit{Scott Fitzgerald}, 217.
divided – she wanted me to write too much for her and not enough for my dream. She realized too late that work was dignity and the only dignity. . . .”

Writing Wilson in 1940, he presciently expressed the sense that there was no time to be wasted: ‘I’d rewrite it except for a horrible paucity of time. Not even time to be bitter.”

Virtue lay in fulfilling duty. For Fitzgerald his duty was to his talent and to his family: “All I believe in life is the rewards of virtue (according to your talents) and the punishments for not fulfilling your duties, which are doubly costly.”

A man who, like his country, had allowed his promise to slip away understood that failure in itself was not shameful. It was the failure to strive that is to be condemned: “I never blame failure – there are too many complicated situations in life – but I am absolutely merciless toward lack of effort.”

Unaware that he was very near a sudden death, Fitzgerald wrote a sort of valedictory statement to Scottie: “By this I mean the thing that lies behind all great careers . . . the sense that life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat, and that the redeeming things are not ‘happiness and pleasure’ but the deeper satisfaction that comes out of struggle.”

During the Depression, Fitzgerald


50 Ibid., 286.

51 Ibid., 302.

committed to meeting obligations – to Zelda, to Scottie, to his creditors, to his art – and he strove to meet those responsibilities. In that struggle he found a renewal of purpose.
CHAPTER VII

AFTER THE BOOM – DISILLUSIONED PERSEVERANCE

By 1928, Fitzgerald’s financial and critical fortunes were, to his great despair, nearly fully linked to his production of short stories for the magazines, particularly *The Saturday Evening Post*. *The Great Gatsby* had been published three years earlier and, although it received some critical praise, it was not uniformly acclaimed and it failed commercially. He had made little progress on what would later become *Tender Is the Night*, and it would not be published for another six years. America’s stock market crash and ensuing Great Depression were a year away, but Fitzgerald already had begun to suffer his own personal crash and depression in terms of both his career and his attitude.

In an effort to earn the money necessary to meet his growing obligations and to allow him to concentrate on his novel, during 1928 and 1929 Fitzgerald wrote a series of thinly-veiled autobiographical stories centering on Basil Duke Lee: “The identification between Basil and Fitzgerald is close; the chief episodes were drawn from the author’s experiences. . . .”¹ The stories also represent a return to subject matter that had first brought Fitzgerald his great success. They concern the romantic dreams of youth and the belief that, in America, a boy can attain them.

But the stories evidence the author’s more mature perspective: “What makes the Basil stories different from the parallel episodes in *This Side of Paradise* is

the comic irony which Fitzgerald can bring to the stories from the vantage point of age thirty-two.” Fitzgerald writes affectionately of his fictional alter-ego: “... [I]t is clear that the series shows a good boy, moral and above all, imaginative, coming to grips with a world that does not always cherish such qualities.” The stories, however, are written from the perspective of a man who understands that, no matter how much one might cherish one’s youthful dreams, those dreams are ultimately shattered by the harsh realities of adulthood: “What further complicates the issue of dreams and disillusionment in the late Fitzgerald is his mature understanding that even admirable, self-generated dreams can lead to disillusionment.” The older Fitzgerald, though, does not lash the young Basil with a severe rod; instead, with a soft and often comical touch, he guides the boy through the maturation process: “The single overriding quality of the whole series ... is Fitzgerald’s ability to capture ‘the way I was.’ ... The stories contain not merely nostalgic reminiscence but rather the essence of the maturation of imaginative youth, objectified by gentle irony.”

It is as though Fitzgerald appreciated that it was his extraordinary capacity to dream and his ability to express those dreams artistically that had made him the man he was. No matter how much he had lost faith in the dreams themselves, he

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1 Higgins, A Study of the Stories, 108.
2 Petry, Craft of Short Fiction, 159.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
was not condemning the dreamer. In the Basil stories, Fitzgerald looks back with a wistfully ironic eye on the anticipation of youth:

This summer he and his mother and sister were going to the lakes and next fall he was starting away to school. Then he would go to Yale and be a great athlete, and after that—as if his two dreams had fitted into each other chronologically instead of existing independently side-by-side—he was due to become a gentleman burglar. Everything was fine. He had so many alluring things to think about that it was hard to fall asleep at night.6

The disillusioned, given-up-for-wasted author retains an evident fondness for the young dreamer even though he knows the pain of failed faith that inevitably must befall the young believer.

This doomed faith is founded in the American promise that talent and commitment will be rewarded: “He believed that everything was a matter of effort—the current principle of American Education—and his fantastic ambition was continually leading him to expect too much.”7 But Fitzgerald recalls that the young man aspiring admission to the elite believed in the importance of image too: “The question of long pants had not seemed vital to him—he wanted them, but as a costume they had no such romantic significance as, for example, a football suit or an officer’s uniform. . . .”8 The stories act as a progression from romantic belief to mature understanding. Basil, like Fitzgerald, must learn that the idealized world he has created in his imagination is merely a fiction that must be let go:


7 Fitzgerald, “He Thinks He’s Wonderful,” in Basil and Josephine Stories, 111.

8 Fitzgerald, “A Night at the Fair,” in Basil and Josephine Stories, 76.
He did not understand all he had heard, but from his clandestine glimpse into the privacy of these two, with all the world that his short experience could conceive of at their feet, he had gathered that life for everybody was a struggle, sometimes magnificent from a distance, but always difficult and surprisingly simple and a little sad.  

Fitzgerald is reflecting on his young self and observing how he might have maturely accepted life’s harsh realities and committed to his talent rather than to the frenetic and self-destructive behavior that, in fact, he did adopt: “The Basil stories thus offer collectively a scenario of what Fitzgerald should have done, how he should have learned to accept and grow from whatever disillusionments – whatever their sources – he experienced in his career and personal life from the very outset.”

Fitzgerald, writing in 1928, no longer lived on his grandiose dreams and now appreciated how his faith in a romanticized vision had undermined his talent, career and personal life. Basil is not, “… a photographic autobiographical portrait of the young Fitzgerald, but . . . he is a portrait of what Fitzgerald wished he had been – accepting, stable, functional.”

After the Basil stories, Fitzgerald published in 1930 and 1931 the Josephine Perry stories. The central character is modeled on Fitzgerald’s first love, Ginevra King, who acknowledged that as a young girl she had closely resembled Josephine. Josephine’s blithe willingness to sap the strength of her male prey also reflects Scott’s view of Zelda and their relationship. Broadly, Josephine serves as the femme

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10 Petry, Craft of Short Fiction, 162.

11 Ibid., 161.
fatale character that appears in much of Fitzgerald’s fiction. But written after the repeated crushing defeats he had experienced as the Boom came to an end, Fitzgerald portrays Josephine with an almost savage ferocity. While he had written of Basil with a wistful tone reflecting on what might have been, Fitzgerald writes bitterly of Josephine’s destructive-to-others and, ultimately, self-destructive behavior: “The Josephine stories are harsher than the Basil stories, probably because they were written during a time of personal and professional anxiety.”

Basil’s and Josephine’s socio-economic backgrounds and Fitzgerald’s treatment of them, respectively, reflect his hardened opinion that greater nobility of character and commitment to responsibility rise from America’s social and economic core: “. . . Basil embodies the insecure American middle class; . . . Josephine embodies the insulated American upper class. . . . [T]heir author thought class even more a psychological than an economic condition.”

Josephine is rich, beautiful and self-absorbed. Her principal interest is shallow, romantic love: “. . . the only thing she cared about in the world was being in love and being with the person she currently loved.” By inserting the adverb “currently,” Fitzgerald makes clear that Josephine’s notions of love are ephemeral and selfish. In many of his earlier stories, including, as examples, “The Cut-Glass Bowl,” “The Ice Palace,” and “Jacob’s Ladder,” the femme fatale character has a measure of sympathetic humanity.

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12 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 531.

13 Fitzgerald, Basil and Josephine Stories, 16.

14 Fitzgerald, “A Nice Quiet Place,” in Basil and Josephine Stories, 245.
though, is feral, seeking prey for her personal satisfaction: “There were two kinds of men, those you played with and those you might marry.”

Evidencing Fitzgerald’s increasingly bitter resentment, in particular toward Zelda, Josephine is a woman who uses and destroys men: “While Josephine always recovered, the men frequently didn’t. . . .” Josephine is not redeemed by her humanity; her ferocious behavior can be excused only by acknowledging that it is instinctive and animalistic:

There would have been no use saying the simple truth – that she could not help what she had done, that great beauty has a need, almost an obligation, of trying itself, that her ample cup of emotion had spilled over on its own accord, and it was an accident that it had destroyed him and not her.

Accidental or intentional, the man is destroyed nonetheless, much as Fitzgerald saw himself after his world had crashed around him.

While Basil learns from his experience and moves on productively, Josephine continues her self-centered pursuits and ultimately is destroyed. As the title of the last story of the series, “Emotional Bankruptcy,” suggests, Josephine has used herself up and is drained of her charms and emotions. As such, Basil and Josephine are contrasts in their responses to the disillusioning experiences of youth: “There the similarity ends, however, and nothing could be less accurate than the relentless

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critical assumption that Josephine is ‘a female Basil Duke Lee.’ The two characters are completely different in their temperaments and their responses to life crises.”

Josephine is Fitzgerald’s *femme fatale* character, but she also represents an aspect of Fitzgerald’s vision of himself as a youth, particularly in contrast to Basil. Fitzgerald had commented that all of his female characters were in part made up of himself, and Josephine serves as a prime example. Basil represents how he should have reacted; Josephine represents what he actually did: “. . . Josephine Perry seems to be a double portrait limning partly what Fitzgerald had been, but primarily what he could see himself becoming: an emotional bankrupt.” At this point, Fitzgerald believes himself destroyed in part by Zelda, the *femme fatale* in his life, and in part by his own actions. Josephine represents both and, like the author, is empty and alone: “And the Josephine series conversely offers a chilling scenario of what did happen to Fitzgerald, including what Bruccoli identifies as ‘self-destructive’ behavior. Working so close to himself spiritually that he had to present his fictional counterpart as a female.”

Written during a period in which Fitzgerald was struggling with *Tender Is the Night*, “The Swimmers” deals with the corrupting influences of European society and the lost American expatriates, themes which were more fully explored in the novel.

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19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., 162.
It was the last story Fitzgerald published before the stock market crash. It calls into
question America’s preoccupation with money.

Henry Marston, a young American living in Paris with his Provencal wife, is
catched between two cultures. Named after the revered, stately Southern Senator of
the early 19th century, Marston is deeply rooted in his Southern heritage: “Henry
Clay Marston was a Virginian of the kind who are prouder of being Virginians than of
being Americans.”21 There is a civility to the culture. Reflecting on the judge urging
him to return to America, “Henry Marston respected that open kindness – in the
bank he touched it with daily appreciation, as a curator in a museum might touch a
precious object removed in time and space. . . .”22 At the moment, though, he feels
alienated from his home: “. . . [B]ut there was no help for him: the questions which
Henry Marston’s life propounded could be answered only in France.”23

Marston discovers, however, that the ancient nobility he had sought in
European society is illusory. In fact, “pre-Civil War values counter European
corruption throughout ‘The Swimmers. . . .”24 Marston’s wife, Choupette,
repeatedly betrays him. Yet she finds her behavior restricted not by a sense of
morality, or even just human decency, but only by the perceptions of her class:

21 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 498.

22 Ibid., 496.

23 Ibid.

24 Kuehl, A Study of the Short Fiction, 110.
“. . . I have certain things I wouldn’t do because they wouldn’t please my class. . . .”

Although she has no underlying moral foundations, she denigrates the American women who, in Choupette’s view, foolishly strive to climb a social ladder based on money rather than heritage: “But that young lady may be a stenographer and yet be compelled to warp herself, dressing and acting as if she had all the money in the world.”

Marston had come to France seeking to find an alternative to what he senses is the moral deterioration of his own country: “For eight years, by a process of ceaseless adaption, he had lived her life, substituting for the moral confusion of his own country, the tradition, the wisdom, the sophistication of France.”

Ironically, however, Choupette’s betrayal enlightens him to the hypocrisy of European society and frees him to return to America: “It had released him. For all his sense of loss, he possessed again the masculine self he had handed over to the keeping of a wise little Provencal girl eight years ago.”

Marston returns to America with his family and confirms that the noble code of his heritage is corrupted. He has, for the moment, accepted the American notion that money has an intrinsic importance: “I’ve got to make money. American men are incomplete without money.”

But, reflecting Fitzgerald’s attitude at the time, he

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25 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 498.
26 Ibid., 499.
27 Ibid., 502.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 501.
comes to recognize the destructive influence of money. Marston, like so many in the Twenties, makes money in the stock market. But, unlike so many in America, Marston does not perceive money as an end in itself. Rather, it can provide the means to allow him to live according to his principles and in a decent manner with regard to others. Ultimately, money, coupled with a moral code, allows him to save his children from the combined corrupting influence of new American riches, represented by his wife’s lover, Weise, and old European decadence, represented by Choupette.

Marston’s attitudes are put to the greatest test by Choupette and Weise, a member of the new, dominant Southern wealthy class. Weise, and the other parvenus, has replaced the Southern aristocracy of which Marston is so proudly respectful. Weise believes that wealth, the country’s new power base, can conquer integrity: “Do you happen to realize that at this moment I’m one of the richest men in Virginia? . . . Well, money is power, Marston. I repeat, suh, money is power.”

Marston had faith in the grace of the old Southern gentility and traditions; Weise serves as evidence that they have been corrupted by greed and venality. In an ironic turnabout, however, Marston triumphs. This contrived ending may have been included to make the story more saleable to the Post, a matter of great significance to Fitzgerald at the time. Nevertheless, Weise is taught that money, in fact, is not all-powerful. It shrinks in the face of nobility.

30 Ibid., 507.
Marston is on a search for honor. He believes that it is the foundational value of his Southern ancestors, and he is determined to infuse it in his children. He looks for it in old Europe, but finds it decadent. He looks for it in America, but finds it corrupted. Marston’s first noble act is to risk his life saving a drowning American girl, even though he himself cannot swim. The symbolism is clear. The girl represents what America might be in its purity. She is vitally important to Marston because of “what she represented of his ever-new, ever-changing country.”\(^{31}\) She remains nameless through the story because she stands for her country as a whole. Marston is saving a country, not just an individual.

As he does frequently in his fiction, Fitzgerald identifies beauty with cleanliness. The girl explains to Marston that she swims, “[t]o get clean.”\(^{32}\) To be clean is to be pure, but in America it is no longer clear “what was clean and unclean.”\(^{33}\) Marston recognizes that the American ideal is no longer pure: “Americans are too particular about [being clean]. . . . I mean we’ve got too fastidious to even to clean up our messes.”\(^{34}\) To be fastidious is to be orderly, but it is not necessarily to be clean in the sense of purity. By learning to swim with this girl, in effect to be truly cleansed, Marston, in an ironic and symbolically transparent act,

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 501.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Ibid.

\(^{34}\) Ibid.
is able to later turn the tables on his blackmailers, Choupette and Weise. In that act of purification, he rescues his children from their rot and corruption.

Living with a refined sense of nobility and honor requires commitment to an ideal and perseverance in pursuit of that ideal. To act accordingly becomes even more difficult in times of desperation, like in the post-Boom period; simply giving up becomes an easier, but ignoble, alternative:

He was very tired. If one let go – and, in the relaxation from strain, he felt an alarming impulse to let go – one died very quickly and painlessly, and all these problems of hate and bitterness disappeared. But he felt the fate of his sons in the oiled-silk pouch about his neck, and with a convulsive effort he turned over again and concentrated all his energies on his goal.\(^35\)

As Fitzgerald wrote these lines, he increasingly felt responsible for the ailing Zelda and the young Scottie and, like Marston, he was struggling desperately to survive for them. To continue the struggle would be consistent with the most hallowed American principles, which Marston recognizes when he is finally reunited with the clean American girl after he himself has been purified:

France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter, 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.\(^36\)

The American promise may have been corrupted, but its values remain important in the heart of the individual.

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\(^35\) Ibid., 511.

\(^36\) Ibid., 512.
Between October, 1930 and July, 1931, Fitzgerald published four stories, “One Trip Abroad,” “The Hotel Child,” “Babylon Revisited,” and “A New Leaf.” Each is part of the *Tender Is the Night* cluster and explores similar themes. Like “The Swimmers,” they consider the effects of post-war European society on American expatriates: “In contradiction to the fashionable Twenties view that life was richer abroad, Fitzgerald’s Americans are damaged by Europe. . . .”\(^{37}\) These stories also explore the corrupting influence of unearned wealth on the American ethic which is founded on resolve. And each deals with the response of the individual to the dissolution that comes from a long period of frenetic dissipation, idleness and irresponsibility. Like his country and himself, Fitzgerald’s characters have awoken from an extended party with a massive hangover. How each will proceed interests the author, just as he too is struggling with these same issues in his personal life.

In “One Trip Abroad,” Nelson and Nicole are young innocents, filled with expectation, travelling in Europe: “They were in their twenties, and there was still a pleasant touch of bride and groom upon them.”\(^ {38}\) Despite their beauty and promise, however, their story is one of gradual destruction: “The motivation in “One Trip Abroad” is predictable, echoing other *Tender* cluster stories: as in the fiction of Henry James, European decadence corrupts American innocence.”\(^ {39}\) Like Scott and Zelda, whose drunken jaunts through Europe left them alone in Switzerland where

\( ^{37}\) Ibid., 577.

\( ^{38}\) Ibid., 578.

Zelda was hospitalized, Nelson and Nicole find themselves empty and wanting in Switzerland: “Switzerland is a country where few things begin, but many things end.”

Europe may be poisonous, but Nelson’s and Nicole’s decline cannot be blamed solely on the Continent: “What Fitzgerald adds to the international theme centers on the conflict between work and pleasure, responsibility and irresponsibility, character and emotional bankruptcy.” Europe provides the setting and it drives the couple further toward their wasted end, but the roots are found in the plague of America in the 1920s – unearned wealth: “Inheriting a fortune hastens their deterioration. . . .” Fitzgerald contrasts European society, which masks its sad decline in revelry, from America, whose great promise is undermined by abandonment of its commitment to work:

It’s all right for the English . . . because they’re doing a sort of dance of death – you know, gayety in the doomed fort. . . . They know it and they want it, and they don’t see any future. But you Americans, you’re having a rotten time. If you want to wear the green hat or the crushed hat, or whatever it is, you always have to get a little tipsy.

Nelson has come to understand that their problem is that they are without purpose: “His growing discontent that he wasn’t getting anywhere ought to explode

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40 Ibid., 594.
41 Kuehl, A Study of the Short Fiction, 107.
42 Ibid., 108.
43 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 586.
into a new life for both of them, or rather a new hope and content with life.”

Like Fitzgerald, Nelson feels a new sense of responsibility, which he identifies with his role as the protective male: “That secret should be his masculine contribution.” But, unlike Fitzgerald, he does not act on the instinct and they do not return to America or to a more productive way of life. Ironically, the “One Trip Abroad” is no trip; it is a permanent relocation. They continue to flounder in Europe, looking externally, rather than within themselves, for the solution to their ennui. Nicole plaintively looks forward without energy or direction:

We can have it all again. . . . It’s just that we don’t understand what’s the matter. . . . Why did we lose peace and love and health, one after the other? If we knew, if there was anybody to tell us, I believe we could try. I’d try so hard.

Nicole fails to understand that it is not for someone else to tell them; they are their own responsibility. By having been given great wealth, they never learned the intrinsic value of personal resolve.

In “The Hotel Child,” the contrast between European aristocracy and American honor of wealth is drawn: “In America one has money or hasn’t; in Europe the heir to a fortune may be unable to stand himself a haircut until the collapse of a fifth cousin, yet be a sure risk and not be lightly offended.”

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 596.
47 Ibid., 606.
mother live in a European hotel on their declining funds amidst the rotten wreckage of European society. Fifi is drawn to the glamour of European society but is deceptively sensitive to its decaying foundation: “But Fifi kept looking at the alien sky, knowing that she could pierce it and find her own way through envy and corruption.” It is this innate sensitivity that ultimately saves her. Fifi perceives the threat as external, from the deceitful and grasping Europeans, and not from within herself. In fact, though, the threat stems as much for her romanticized vision of life. Thus, like Nicole and Nelson, she is responsible for her own rescue. It must come from a clear-eyed perception of the internal, as well as external, threats to her future: “... [T]he denouement involves a mockery of the romantic view of life. ...”

Fifi is drifting rudderless in a world filled with impoverished European heirs who are desperately seeking to attach themselves to American wealth and promise. Fifi is vulnerable prey:

But the Furies were after Fifi now – after her childish complacency and her innocence, even after her beauty – out to break it all down and drag it in any convenient mud. When she shook her head and walked sullenly into her bedroom, they had already taken something from her forever.

Fifi, though, is shocked into a new sense of self-preservation. She escapes the clutches of Count Borowski, while exhibiting unexpected cunning and insight beyond her years or experience. She will continue to live amidst decadence and waste, but

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48 Ibid.


50 Fitzgerald, *Short Stories*, 606.
she may not be a victim: “They had not got her yet – not yet. The Furies had withdrawn a little and stood in the background with a certain gnashing of teeth. But there was plenty of time.”\textsuperscript{51} Fate is determined and patient; the odds are stacked against her. Nevertheless, the only hope lies within the self, not in the allure of society. Fifi is no longer the innocent and she is wounded, but she also is more self-reliant and better aware of the risks and promises that lie in the future:

Yet, as Fifi tottered out through the lobby, her face gentle with new hopes, as she went out looking for completion under the impression that she was going to the couturier, there was certain doubt among the eldest and most experienced of the Furies if they would get her, after all.\textsuperscript{52}

Fitzgerald’s classic story “Babylon Revisited” is a story of regret, but also of re-ordered priorities and perseverance. It reflects the author’s personal attitudes in the post-Boom period. Although the story should not be read as strictly autobiographical, its association with Fitzgerald’s personal circumstances at the time of the writing is evident. While Charlie Wale’s wife Helen is dead, Scott’s Zelda is losing her mind and, in that sense, is increasingly dead to him. Both husbands feel responsibility for what has happened to their wives. Charlie, unlike Fitzgerald, has legally transferred his responsibilities for his daughter while Fitzgerald frequently asked others to assume day-to-day responsibility for Scottie. The connection between the fictional and real fathers is subtly drawn as both refer to their daughter as ‘Pie.’ And both seek to re-assert their roles as caring fathers.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 615.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
The Catholic themes of sin, atonement and redemption are present in the story. Charlie feels guilt for the enormous pain he has inflicted on others, notably upon his dead wife and abandoned daughter. He accepts that he must suffer penance for his sins: “One of the big differences between Charlie – together with many other Fitzgerald protagonists of the 1930s – and most of the earlier sad young men is his attitude of accepting responsibility and adversity rather than avoiding them through self-pity.”

Charlie, like other characters of the Tender Is the Night cluster, had been corrupted by European decadence and by American unearned wealth. He and Helen came to Paris during the Boom and lost their way in a frenetic and dissipated life. Charlie’s decline began when he no longer needed to work and moved to Paris: “You know I never did drink heavily until I gave up business and came over here with nothing to do.” He had the misfortune of being able to abandon the American work ethic: “Money was the cause of Charlie’s temporary corruption in the pre-Depression years; success in the market turned his head from work to revelry.”

Charlie’s Depression-era plight is reflective of his country’s decline: “The disillusion and failure that Charlie has already experienced before the story opens reflect the disillusion of the entire country struck by the Depression.”

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53 Higgins, A Study of the Stories, 122.
54 Fitzgerald, Short Stories, 625.
55 Higgins, A Study of the Stories, 122.
56 Ibid.
In order to atone, Charlie must accept his penance, and he must change his sinful behavior. He has brought his drinking under control and he has returned to work. The very act of earning his money is redemptive: “Money is evil then, only if unearned (for example during the boom or with the rich), since under that condition people abandon the actual to seize the fantastic. . . .”\(^\text{57}\) Honest work and genuine commitment to obligations give rise to character, a sort of character seen to be true to America before the Boom. Charlie yearns to recapture that character: “He believed in character; he wanted to jump back a whole generation and trust in character again as the eternally valuable element. Everything wore out.”\(^\text{58}\)

Charlie is on the path to redemption. He will persevere in his quest to regain his daughter and control of his life. A basis for hope is found in faith in the power of redemption with a perseverance grounded in reality. As the story ends, Charlie reassures himself: “He would come back some day; they couldn’t make him pay forever. But he wanted his child, and nothing was much good now, beside that fact. He wasn’t young anymore, with a lot of nice thoughts and dreams to have by himself.”\(^\text{59}\)

“A New Leaf” presents a character, Dick Ragland, who in many respects mirrors Charlie Wales. Unearned wealth has led Dick, like Charlie, to atrophy and

\(^{57}\) Kuehl, \textit{A Study of the Short Fiction}, 85.

\(^{58}\) Fitzgerald, \textit{Short Stories}, 619.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 633.
alcoholism: “About the time I came into some money, I found that with a few drinks I got expansive and somehow had the ability to please people, and the idea turned my head.”

Alcohol allows Dick to delude himself into thinking he is developing meaningful connections with others when, in fact, it is creating barriers, in particular with the woman he loves, Julia Ross. While Charlie takes control of his addiction and begins to live a life leading to redemption, Dick remains mired in his alcoholism. Dick’s precipitous decline continues and, remaining idle and dissolute, life comes to have no meaning for him: “He knew himself. His will had given out; he didn’t want life anymore.” While Charlie is determined and finds hope in that determination, Dick cannot maintain the struggle and takes his own life. In the end, Charlie is noble while Dick is sadly pathetic.

As Fitzgerald became more conscious of his obligations to Scottie, his concerns became more evident in his stories. In a story written in 1932, “On Schedule,” Fitzgerald describes the concerns of a single parent. Like Charlie, Rene du Cary’s wife is deceased, having, “. . . faded off in Switzerland.” Zelda was alive but she too had faded off in Switzerland and was in no position to assist with the parenting of Scottie. Just as Fitzgerald worried about Scottie’s education, so Rene frets: “Lately she had become as robust as any American child and his anxieties were concentrated upon her education, which, he had determined, would be as good as

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60 Ibid., 637.

61 Ibid., 646.

62 Fitzgerald, The Price Was High, 441.
that of any French girl." But Rene recognizes the very real limitations on how much he can do for Noel: “My relations with my daughter . . . are becoming what you call the Electra complex. If a man was an adaptable animal, I should develop a lap and a very comfortable bosom and become a real mother to her, but I cannot.” He is committed to provide for Noel financially, even if his work is neither original nor rewarding: “He felt that after another year he would be able to provide for Noel far better than could his wife’s shrunken trust fund.” The earned money from his work has more value than the unearned money in the trust fund. Rene has passed through mourning his wife’s death and recognizes that his daughter cannot always fill that void. There is a value to fulfilling his parental obligations, but there also is intrinsic value in work itself: “So, for a thousand days he wore his grief down, and eventually he found that his daughter was growing up and that work really was the best thing with which to fill a life.”

Fitzgerald had made complete reversal from his youthful infatuation with the wealthy. At the close of a 1932 story, “Six of One –,” he reflects piteously on the shallow lives of the idle rich and affirms his hope that America will attain the greatness of its promise:

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63 Ibid., 438.
64 Ibid., 441.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
Only it was too bad and very American that there should be all that waste at the top; and he felt that he would not live long enough to see it end, to see great seriousness in the same skin with a great opportunity – to see the race achieve itself at last.\textsuperscript{67}

Like his country during the Depression, Fitzgerald had abandoned the frivolous ways and romantic notions of his youth and had come to value the redemptive power of work and seriousness of purpose.

\textsuperscript{67} Fitzgerald, \textit{Short Stories}, 679.
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

As America arrived in the twentieth century it could not have known that it was embarking on what later would be called the American Century. It was a century in which the American Dream would be alternately embraced and reputed. Unlimited optimism and belief gave way to despair and doubt.

The first four decades of the twentieth century constituted an arc of economic consequences and social attitudes. Each segment was in part a reaction to its predecessor. The Progressive Era responded to the \textit{laissez faire} policies of the Gilded Age by placing restrictions on business and advocating social reforms designed to provide aid and opportunity for the average citizen. The conclusion of the first world war introduced a renewed isolationism and took Americans on to a path of insular, even selfish, attitudes. The plutocracy regained control of the levers of government. Notions of social reform were cast aside and, instead, Americans primarily looked out for their own interests, whether it was economic gain through debt-fueled speculation or by ensuring that outsiders continued to be excluded from the social and economic contract. The Great Depression served as a brutal reminder that financial fortunes do not come easily but through work. Yet, ironically, there now was little work to be had.

Throughout this period, faith in the American Dream rose and fell. Early century progressivism, in a sense, was intended to ensure that the Dream was
available to the many, not just the few. On a superficial level, the economic surge of
the 1920s suggested that the Dream was real but, in fact, in hindsight it was seen to
be a false myth. The new wealth primarily was made available only to those who
were already socially and economically established, and the outsider found that the
doors remained effectively closed. The Great Depression further demonstrated the
hollow nature of the Dream as many who had temporarily profited were cast back in
society without financial resources or employment.

Fitzgerald’s attitudes, as evidenced in his short stories, mirrored the changes
in America through this period. The stories he wrote in his youth reveal his sense of
hope and aspiration. The world in his early Princeton stories is filled with glittering
opportunity for those with talent and confidence. As the realities of the war began
to be evident, creeping doubt appeared in his later ones. In the Twenties, enjoying
enormous success while America experienced an extraordinary, if fragile, boom,
Fitzgerald infused his stories with a sense of deep disillusion. The great chronicler of
his age was revealing the hollow nature of the American promise. Fitzgerald’s
personal and professional decline presaged the country’s descent into the Great
Depression. His stories of the late 1920s and 1930s focus more on the need to
persevere amidst great hardship and on the unglamorous but still satisfying nature
of work and fulfillment of responsibility. In his personal life and his art Fitzgerald
travelled a long and perilous path to maturity. That path can be traced in his stories.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


