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The Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression seen through the eyes of F. Scott Fitzgerald

Bachelor's project in English

Supervisor: Domnhall Martin Eoin Mitchell

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background. The dream of material success, the constant quest for the Dream Girl, the pursuit of wealth and social status, all these things represent Fitzgerald's fiction during the 1920s (Hearn). In the 1930s, America was struck by the stock market crash, and the situation in the country as well as his personal life made him change his focus and style. In this thesis, we look further into the short story collection *Babylon Revisited and other stories* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. By studying this collection, I intend to look at the context in which the collection was written, and examine how my selected short stories depict the time they were written.

Fitzgerald is best known for his romantic rhetoric, settings, characters, and input on social issues. As we will see later on in this paper, the style and subjects of his stories change notably during his life. His work disclose a pattern of development which can be divided into groups: the golden Jazz age of the early twenties, his depiction of "sad young men" and the problems they meet in the 1920s, and ultimately his struggle to find a new style that fit the emotionally and devastated man of the 1930s (Prigozy).

1.2 Research focus. This thesis looks at the collection in its entirety, but it will primarily focus on three stories, and how each of them reflects the time they were written. Each of the selected short stories is from different periods; one of them is written at the beginning of the 20s, one from the middle of the 20s, and ultimately one from the beginning of the 30s. From respectively each of these periods, I picked "Winter Dreams", "The Rich Boy", and "Babylon Revisited". I intend to examine how the topics and contents of the stories develop.

In the short story collection *Babylon Revisited and other stories*, how does F. Scott Fitzgerald describe the 1920s and the early 1930s in the United States?

2. THE LIFE AND CAREER OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota (Prigozy, *F. Scott Fitzgerald 1896-1940*). He began writing short stories in 1908 when he attended St. Paul Academy. Growing up Fitzgerald always felt that he did not belong. He was dependent on his mother's family, and was admitted to the St. Paul's social world but he was never a respected member. Later on in his career, it is evident that this estrangement was something that continued to characterise both him and his fiction (Prigozy). He fell in love with Zelda, and they married in 1920. His first novel was published that same year, and the success that followed made the newlyweds icons of the "Jazz Age" (Prigozy).

As a writer, his style changed throughout the 1920s and 30s. While his earlier work was about sad young men living in the roaring twenties, his later work showed a new fictional form that suited the emotions and needs of his audience in a tragic time (Prigozy). Although Fitzgerald was not directly affected by the crash, he had a personal crisis that would influence his later work. A few months after the crash, his wife, Zelda, was admitted to a French sanitarium after being diagnosed with schizophrenia. Zelda's mental and emotional collapse corresponded to the collapse of the Jazz Age, which caused Fitzgerald to associate and compare narratives in his fiction (Hess 78-79).

3. SUMMARIES OF THE SHORT STORIES

3.1 Winter Dreams (1922). This narrative is considered as one of Fitzgerald's most moving stories from his early period as it was published in 1922. The narrative follows the young middle-class protagonist Dexter Green who is working as a golf caddy for the wealthy inhabitants of Sherry Island. One day he meets the stunning Judy Jones, daughter of one of the members at the club, and she becomes the focus of his dreams. The beautiful, but cold and imperious Judy Jones is Fitzgerald's embodiment of the very rich. Dexter wants her, but she is unattainable. His efforts to attain her is a constant reminder of the struggles of entering her glittering world (Prigozy). However, Judy's world symbolises the beauty and the meretriciousness of Dexter's dreams. His memories of Judy in the summer saved him throughout the winter, and all he wishes for is to relive the ecstasy of the moment with her at the lake. The ecstasy Dexter felt that

summer's day is linked with the vision of the beautiful Judy, and it is his perception of immortality. He believes that he could have preserved his youth and beauty if he had succeeded in getting Judy Jones. Eventually, Judy marries another, and her beauty starts to fade, and Dexter's hopes fade with it (Prigozy).

3.2 *The Rich Boy (1926)*. This short story follows the protagonist Anson Hunter who was born into the American upper-class. The narrator quickly emphasises that he is rich and because of that, "different from you and me (Fitzgerald 152)". He is privileged and wealthy, and he knows it. He falls in love with Paula Lagendre, and they plan to spend their lives together. However, a drunken night leads to Paula reconsidering their plans. Anson's alcoholism and his life on Wall Street take hold of him, and he loses Paula. Shortly after, Paula informs him that she will marry another man and Anson is crushed. In order to distract himself from losing his true love, he initiates a physical relationship to the social climber Dolly Karger. However, this relationship fails as well, but that does not stop him from advising others about their relationships. He discovers that his Aunt Edna is having an affair, and he threatens the man and as a result he commits suicide. Anson takes no responsibility for his actions. Near the end, Anson reunites with Paula, and she tells him that she was unhappy in the relationship with him. Shortly afterwards, Paula dies in childbirth, and Anson turns his attention to another pretty lady (Fitzgerald 152-187).

3.3 *Babylon Revisited (1932)*. One of Fitzgerald's most critically acclaimed short stories is "Babylon Revisited", and it depicts the aftermath of the crash of 1929. The story is about Charlie Wales who lived his best life in Paris during the boom years but was affected by the Wall Street crash and simultaneously made a horrible mistake that caused the death of his wife. Now, a few years after the shock, he has become sober, has a job that pays well, and has come back to reclaim his daughter, Honoria, who has lived with his in-laws, Marion and Lincoln Peters. Charlie must convince the Peters' that he is stable and is capable of taking care of his daughter. Marion has not forgiven him for the mistake that killed her sister, and she continues to punish him for his past behaviour (Prigozy). Nevertheless, Marion eventually agrees to let him have his daughter back, but shortly afterwards she sees Charlie associated with his old drinking buddies and she changes her mind. Charlie returns to the bar and hopes that he will get

a new chance in six months, all the while wondering how long he will be punished for his past mistakes.

4. DISCUSSION

According to Ghasemi and Tiur, the twenties was a complicated time of disillusionment and frenetic excitement, but also an age of intellectual development and vital creativity (118). By taking on the role as the face of the era, Fitzgerald reported his perception as honestly and faithfully as he could. During the early twenties, he made protagonists with similar traits, and they all symbolised his own conflict and confusion in some way. In addition to portray his personal conflict, he commented on a distinctive period in America as well (118). The writers of this time attempted to be faithful to the inner experience of the American people, and they hoped that it would lead to appreciation of their work. Fitzgerald's career and work depicted that he was indeed a part of the new world that he portrayed in detail in his work, in fact, he had such a significant role in this world that he proclaimed himself king of it. Even when he saw his world being torn to pieces, he broke down with it (120).

According to Ghasemi and Tiur, people have always been fascinated by the conflict within Fitzgerald's character and work (120). This fascination has led to many using him to explore how the American dream came to be and its fate. At this time, his life influenced his fiction, and what he experienced has intensified the implication of the dream being an essential factor in all of his fiction. The things that Fitzgerald adopted from the American dream was, according to Ghasemi and Tiur, "the promise and possibilities, violations and corruptions of the ideals of nationhood and personality (121)". In more ways than one, Fitzgerald was the living proof of the contrasts of this particular era. He witnessed and portrayed the success and failure, the illusion and disillusion, and ultimately, the dream that turned out to be a nightmare. Furthermore, the Jazz age, as it was called, represented to many Americans hope and romance, which made it even more devastating when it all crumbled. About Fitzgerald and the American dream, Ghasemi and Tiur write: "Fitzgerald, as a writer, looked beyond his circumstances and saw the American Dream not as a personal matter and no longer a nostalgic, romantic possibility but as a continuing defining characteristic of the

American nation and its people (121)”. The fact that he was capable of looking beyond himself and more on how the dream influenced the nation might be the reason that he is now considered to be one of the most important voices of his generation.

During the twenties, Fitzgerald attempted to base his plots around how he perceived the new world. The American dream or the pursuit of happiness was all about escaping time, reality, normality, fate and even death. Fitzgerald strove to expose the corruption of the shared dream in the new world. He finally discovered that the pursuit is always damned and that the people who are driven by the dream will be destroyed in the process (Ghasemi and Tiur 124). Fitzgerald created characters like Dexter and Anson, who had similar fates although they had different upbringings, and used them to demonstrate his point. Fitzgerald was a known despiser of class difference; however, he was fascinated by the rich, and many of his short stories and novels include themes that are associated with money and wealth (123). “Winter Dreams” focuses on a young protagonist from the middle class and his conflict with the very rich. These differences are carefully depicted in both “Winter Dreams” and “The Rich Boy” (Prigozy). In the former, the theme of society and class is portrayed through Dexter’s portrayal of Judy’s other lovers:

“He knew the sort of men they were – the men who when he first went to college had entered from the great prep schools with graceful clothes and the deep tan of healthy summers. He had seen that, in one sense, he was better than these men. He was newer and stronger. Yet in acknowledging to himself that he wished his children to be like them he was admitting that he was but the rough, strong stuff from which they eternally sprang (Fitzgerald 122)”.

In this passage, Fitzgerald demonstrates the distinction between old money and people like Dexter who work their way up. Dexter is self-made, and what he refers to as “new and stronger” than his rivalries from wealthy families. Although he seems proud to be “self-made”, he also wants his children to be like these men, the elite. For him, the money is not enough; he also wants everything that comes with the money, the social acceptance by the upper class. However, later on in the narrative, it becomes evident to Dexter that none of these things matters if he is not happy:

“For the first time in years the tears were streaming down his face. But they were for himself now. He did not care about mouth and eyes and moving hands. He wanted to care, and he could not care. For he had gone away and he could never go back any more. The gates were closed, the sun was gone down, and there was no beauty but the gray beauty of steel that withstands all time. Even the grief he could have borne was left behind in the country of illusion, of youth, of the richness of life, where his winter dreams had flourished (Fitzgerald 135)”.

This passage is from the part where Dexter has been made aware of Judy’s dwindling beauty and that she is ageing. He sees this as proof that nothing lasts forever, least of all, dreams. All the success and material things he dreamed of in his adolescence have come true, and he has achieved everything he wished for, but in the meantime, he has lost contact with his emotions. He cannot even grieve because every emotion he had is “left behind in the country of illusion (Fitzgerald 135)”. He realises that the only thing he has left is “the gray beauty of steel that withstands all time”. He got the “glittering things” and was in the presence of “glittering people”, but suddenly he does not care (Fitzgerald 118). Dexter has been so occupied by making money and pleasing everyone with his success that he has completely lost his ability to feel. Fitzgerald wanted to depict the consequences of achieving success as it may influence other more critical aspects of life. More importantly, Dexter does not even care for Judy anymore - the love of his life - because he does not care about anything.

The search for eternal youth and beauty was, according to Fitzgerald, a big part of the Jazz Age. The essence of this was to stay in the illusion of eternal youth and happiness. In this search, they would find that the source of their satisfaction lied in their aesthetic needs, and they would be seduced by people who had the superficial qualities they were looking for, but these people would be fatuous and irresponsible (Ghasemi and Tiur 124). Beautiful women seduce both Anson and Dexter, but they do not make them happy. Judy Jones makes Dexter miserable even though he loves her. In his pursuit, he is convinced that she is the kind of woman that he needs in order to fulfil his dreams, but no matter what he does, he is not good enough for her. Anson gets cynical after being rejected by Paula and initiates a physical relationship to Dolly. She

is beautiful, but she is also a social climber, and Anson quickly realises that she does not satisfy him.

The search for wealth is embedded in the American dream, as well as in Fitzgerald's fiction, and it is based on the presumption that everything can be bought for money (Ghasemi and Tiur 124). We can see examples of this in both "Winter Dreams" and "The Rich Boy". Although Dexter has the means to buy what he desires, he cannot buy Judy's love, and he cannot use his money to regain what he has already lost - his ability to feel. Anson is an example of how large amounts of money affect a person. The following quote is from "The Rich Boy": "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me". This quote is from the beginning of the narrative, and it is accurate in terms of "the very rich" being arrogant and complacent, at least that is what money has done to Anson. His wealthy upbringing has caused him to lose contact with reality, and it will in time become his downfall. His character is self-destructive as it prevents him from fulfilling a relationship to Paula, or any other woman for that matter. Anson can buy many things, but he cannot buy human affection so maybe "the very rich" are not so different from others after all.

Fitzgerald wrote one of his most celebrated short stories in December of 1930: "Babylon Revisited" (Hess 82). The story is the earliest of his work in which the consciousness of the Depression is evident, and themes such as alcoholism, transformation, memories and the past are essential. In many ways does the story demonstrate the downfall of the life of the twenties, and simultaneously a recognition of the Jazz Age being a life on borrowed time and money. The roaring twenties are over - a time associated with drinking, partying, sex and money, and now, everyone has to deal with the massive hangover.

Although the main focus was the financial struggle at the time, Fitzgerald continues to focus on the emotional state of his characters (Hess 83). While sitting at a bar at the Ritz, Charlie feels insecure due to his lack of buying power. His confidence and other's confidence in him become an important factor in his hopes to regain his emotional life, and his daughter, Honoria. The term "confidence" keeps appearing throughout "Babylon Revisited", and shows that the success of the protagonist is measured by the confidence that others have in him. This can be compared to the confidence that the

consumer is dependent on having in order to prosper. It is possible to draw parallels to how President Hoover's handled the crash, and his hope to give the Americans the "confidence" they needed in order to restore the American market. It is likely that Hoover's speeches regarding confidence somehow inspired Fitzgerald during this period because it is a term that is repeated in his later work (Hess 83). According to Hoover, consumer confidence was the key to restore a sustainable economy. Fitzgerald has adopted this perception through the confidence of Marion and Lincoln, which Charlie is dependent on in order to regain his guardianship of his daughter, Honoria. Marion is still hesitant of Charlie due to the Wales family crash which resulted in the death of her sister. Charlie can be viewed as an uncertain market that Marion is aleatory of investing, which ultimately gives her the power of influencing his emotional market (Hess 84).

The financial look at this story is also evident through the name of Charlie's daughter: Honoria. Her name resembles the term "honorarium", which means that she can be seen as the prize Charlie receives by regaining Marion's confidence. This way Honoria represents Charlie's lost emotional market (Hess 84). Furthermore, Honoria can also be a representation of the honour that he lost in the crash.

Charlie has hopes and dreams for his daughter and wishes her all the happiness in the world, but the words he uses to describe it - "fortune" and "value" - are a visible indication of how he perceives happiness, which is in connection with wealth. However, he does not seem to believe that wealth is a necessity for happiness since he has experienced time again that money cannot buy what a person truly desires. More accurately, he is under the impression that his emotional collapses were the result of the crash, and he hopes that a financial recovery ultimately will lead to an emotional recovery as well (Hess 84).

"Babylon Revisited" is constructed around contrasts. Primarily the contrast between Charlie and his in-laws, the past and the present, illusion and reality, Paris and America, but most importantly the world lost, and the world gained (Prigozy). These contrasts are more apparent in his later works because the contrasts in American society were more evident at this particular time. Fitzgerald's stories changed after the crash, which resulted in the name post-"Crash" style. "Babylon Revisited", along with the two short stories "Emotional Bankruptcy" and "Crazy Sunday", represent a critical

transition in Fitzgerald's style (Hess 88). The Depression heavily influenced these short stories in terms of Fitzgerald's use of economic language, and how he structured his texts in order to highlight the moments of collapse or crash, and also the consistent theme of emotional bankruptcy (Hess 89). Nevertheless, they all represent some of the best and most important stories he wrote following the Wall Street crash and his wife's emotional collapse (Hess 91).

"Babylon Revisited" is one of Fitzgerald's fictions that displayed the development of his emotional psychology, as well as his shift toward cynical awareness of the "lows" in life. These short stories became the image of the "Crash!", and simultaneously helped shape his later fiction. The structure and content of his later works set him apart from the rest and made him a brilliant writer of the Depression-era (Hess 92).

5. CONCLUSION

F. Scott Fitzgerald is seen as both the face of the roaring twenties as well as the following Depression. He was able to capture the things that defined each period and put them into words. In "Winter Dreams" and "The Rich Boy", he gave attention to the pursuit of happiness and demonstrated that the search through success required sacrifice. Fitzgerald showed how "the very rich" and the ones that struggled to become them were not content in the end; on the contrary because although money can buy many things, it cannot buy human emotion. He depicts the glamour, festivities and irresponsibility associated with this period, but he always had an underlying message to his readers which was to hold on to the fundamental aspects of life - love and affection.

"Babylon Revisited", and the other works he created in the aftermath of the crash, are seen as complicated stories, but shows how the writer matured and developed as a result of the country's crisis as well as his own. The short story has an important message, and that was to show what the successful man lost during the twenties and somehow regained in the thirties. Strip away all the success, money and glamour, and then, see what is left. The crash is a wake-up call for Charlie Wales as he rediscovers what he truly values in his life.

Although Fitzgerald's style changed after the crash, his underlying message stayed the same. He wanted his readers to reflect on the importance of money and success in order to achieve happiness.

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