

F. SCOTT FITZGERALD AND THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES

All of F. Scott Fitzgerald's five novels and most of his large collection of short stories are centred on a romantic love relationship, which is frequently portrayed as a struggle for dominance, and which almost inevitably ends in failure. However, Fitzgerald does not develop the full implications of the relationships he portrays, as his sympathies lie with his male characters to a greater extent, and, although he shows that many of his women characters are aware of their economic and social dependence on men, he does not acknowledge the consequences of that awareness. His female characters have a highly developed instinct for self-preservation and are ruthless in selecting a partner, and Fitzgerald repeatedly attributes this to their innate selfishness and cold manipulative natures, rather than to the logically developing consequences of their socialization in a patriarchal society.

Fitzgerald presents his female characters largely in terms of their roles as daughters and wives. For example, in his last and uncompleted novel *The Last Tycoon*, he portrays the central female character, Kathleen, as defining her identity through her father and then through her future husband. She tells Stahr, "I was nobody. My father was shot by the Black-and-Tans . . . when I was a child."¹ Soon after this, she also tells him that "she was going to be a good wife, a real person."² Her roles as daughter and as wife define her solely in terms of her relationship to men. She does not have an autonomous identity.

Fitzgerald's sense of the struggle between male and female was inevitably heightened by the social climate of the twenties and thirties. His writing career exactly spanned these two decades, when women were becoming increasingly independent. Leslie Fiedler, a prominent American critic, claims that "Fitzgerald apparently never managed to accommodate to the fact that he lived at the moment of a great switch-over in roles,"³ and Fitzgerald's attitude towards women's new freedom, as he expresses it in his fiction, bears this out.

Andrew Turnbull reveals, in his biography of Fitzgerald, that Fitzgerald emphasized the concept of male superiority and believed that "women are so weak really – emotionally unstable,"⁴ and that "this is a man's world . . . all wise women conform to the man's lead."⁵ Fitzgerald portrays his female characters conforming to masculine concepts of what they should be, denying their full humanity and individuality. The increased sexual freedom of women, which strengthened their independence and power in heterosexual relationships, made many men, including Fitzgerald, feel threatened, and Fitzgerald expresses his uneasiness through portraits of women as destroyers, without acknowledging or sympathizing with their position.

In *This Side of Paradise* (his first and immensely popular novel, published in 1920), Fitzgerald describes the typical "New Woman" of the twenties as the flapper, "deep in an atmosphere of jungle music and the questioning of moral codes."⁶ He later portrays Rosalind, a rich debutante who is aware of what women's new sexual freedom means. When Howard Gillespie, her rejected suitor, says, bewildered, "I had an idea that after a girl was kissed she was – was – won," Rosalind replies, establishing her independence and new-found power, "Those days are over. I have to be won all over again every time you see me."⁷ She explains the implications of this new equality in sexual matters, telling Gillespie:

There used to be two kinds of kisses. First when girls were kissed and deserted; second, when they were engaged. Now there's a third kind, where the man is kissed and deserted . . . Given a decent start any girl can beat a man nowadays.⁸

Rosalind is confidently laying claim to the formerly exclusively male prerogative of sexual conquest without emotional commitment.

Leslie Fiedler also comments on this aspect of Fitzgerald's character portrayal; he relates Fitzgerald's reluctance to recognize women's emergence as more independent beings, and his refusal to acknowledge the significance of the struggle between the sexes, to his confusion of identities based on gender. He asserts:

Thematically, archetypally even, such chief male protagonists as Gatsby and Dick Diver [from Fitzgerald's novels, *The*

Great Gatsby, and *Tender is the Night*] are females; at least, they occupy in their stories the position of Henry James' Nice American Girls. It is they who embody innocence and the American dream, taking up the role the flapper had contemptuously abandoned for what was called in the twenties freedom; but they do not know this, projecting the dream which survives only in themselves upon the rich young ladies whom they desire.⁹

This ironic reversal of the gender-based roles is well illustrated in *The Great Gatsby*, in a situation with similar implications to that previously described from *This Side of Paradise*. Fitzgerald describes Gatsby's seduction of Daisy:

He took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously — eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand . . . He had intended, probably, to take what he could and go — but now he found that he had committed himself to the following of a grail . . . She vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving Gatsby — nothing. He felt married to her, that was all.

When they met again, two days later, it was Gatsby who was breathless, who was, somehow, betrayed.¹⁰

It is evident from Fitzgerald's fiction that he saw the new self-assertion of women as a misplaced masculine trait, instead of an equally valid feminine need or characteristic. For example, Fitzgerald describes the central female character of his second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, Gloria, and her success in the field of romantic conquest without emotional commitment, as "loving it with a vanity that was almost masculine — it had been in the nature of a triumphant and dazzling career."¹¹ Later in the novel, Gloria's husband, Anthony, considers the possibility of Gloria being unfaithful to him and decides that, "since she would act entirely for her own satisfaction she could go through such an affair unsmirched . . . her reaction would be the masculine one, of satiation and faint dislike."¹² In fact, Gloria says explicitly, "I've got a man's mind,"¹³ a remark which echoes Rosalind, who tells Amory, "I'm not really feminine, you know — in my mind."¹⁴

In *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald emphasizes the choice between a career and marriage, which underlies the definition of roles by gender, as Mrs Speers implies to her daughter, Rosemary:

You were brought up to work — not especially to marry. Now you've found your first nut to crack [She refers here to Dick Diver.] . . . — go ahead and put whatever happens down to experience. Wound yourself or him — whatever happens it can't spoil you, because economically you're a boy, not a girl.¹⁵

This unspoken advice from mother to daughter encapsulates the dilemma of Fitzgerald's women characters. Rosemary's upbringing at the hands of her twice widowed mother is completely different from that of Nicole, Dick Diver's wife and rival to Rosemary for his affections. Rosemary's economic independence lessens her vulnerability (because her need for masculine protection and support is lessened) and also provides her with an identity quite separate from that as her father's daughter or as a wife. Her female self is defined through her work, as an actress in films, rather than through her filial or matrimonial connections. In contrast to this, the value of Nicole's economic independence from her husband, Dick, is lessened because she has been too thoroughly socialized into the role of possession. Nicole, like Rosalind, Gloria, Daisy, and Kathleen (the central female characters of Fitzgerald's novels), was "brought up . . . especially to marry,"¹⁶ and all are extremely vulnerable in this position. Although Fitzgerald refuses to sympathize openly with this uniquely female dilemma, he unwittingly reveals the precariousness of woman's position in society, through Dick Diver's thoughts. Dick reflects on a conversation with Mrs Speers, Rosemary's mother (who acts as a kind of procuress for her daughter):

Women are necessarily capable of almost anything in their struggle for survival and can scarcely be convicted of such man-made crimes as 'cruelty.'¹⁷

In her doctoral dissertation on the American fictional heroine, Judith Howard Montgomery makes points which are both generally and specifically relevant to Fitzgerald's work. She claims that the American woman is regarded and portrayed in fiction as a male creation and possession, lacking all useful capacities except that of tastefully displaying her husband's wealth, or initially, her father's. She cites Thorstein Veblen, who, in his work, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, asserts that the American woman is regarded as "the perfected economic possession." He claims that wealth is displayed through women, whose idleness and expensive vanities exhibit the prestige and wealth of their proprietors, their husbands and fathers. Mont-

gomery points out the need for women to become capable of independent survival, as in their present condition (that is, as portrayed in the novels of the period), they are both self-destructive and destructive of others. She specifically refers to *Tender is the Night* as an example, and recommends that the American ethos of possession, which lies at the very core of the American dream of material success, be modified to exclude the possession of human beings.¹⁸

Fitzgerald writes that "Nicole was the product of much ingenuity and toil;"¹⁹ she is the product of a capitalist-consumer society, the economic possession of her father, a means of conspicuously displaying his wealth and social position, until she is bargained for by prospective wealthy husbands. The image of Nicole, with "her brown back hanging from her pearls,"²⁰ conveys this idea perfectly. The pearls are wearing Nicole; she is beauty displayed by wealth, which the pearls symbolize. This idea also applies to Daisy, in *The Great Gatsby*, and to Tom Buchanan's "gift" to her of a string of pearls worth three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. He is buying himself a wife to decorate and display his wealth. The pattern is flawed in Nicole's case, when, at the age of sixteen, she is seduced by her father. The father's incestuous act develops the ethos of possession to a sinister conclusion, and Nicole's schizophrenia, her fractured self, results from the definition of her identity completely through her relationships with men. She has a father who becomes a husband, physically, and a husband who must be a father to her, emotionally.

Rosalind, in *This Side of Paradise*, is partly aware of her role as a product, of herself as "Rosalind, Unlimited,"²¹ especially when this is reinforced by her mother's admonition, "Rosalind, you've been a very expensive proposition."²² Amory, who supposedly loved her, thinks of her in this way too, as he "had wanted her youth, the fresh radiance of her mind and body, the stuff she was selling now once and for all."²³ Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda, was also aware of this concept, which she believed necessitated "an application of business acumen to femininity; you created yourself as a product and you showed yourself with all the flair of a good advertising campaign."²⁴

When a woman cannot function as an independent being,

but only as a product and possession of men, the standards of relationship between men and women become closely allied to the standards of the market place. Fitzgerald unwittingly reveals the limitations imposed on women's potential for development, with his description of the three central women characters, Nicole, Rosemary, and Mary North, of *Tender is the Night*. He writes:

The trio of women at the table were representative of the enormous flux of American life . . . Their point of resemblance to each other, and their difference from so many American women, lay in the fact that they were all happy to exist in a man's world — they preserved their individuality through men and not by opposition to them. They would all three have made alternatively good courtesans or good wives, not by the accident of birth but through the greater accident of finding their man or not finding him.²⁵

Despite her declaration of female autonomy, Rosalind too is realistic and shrewd enough to realize that her independence is still severely curtailed by the fact that, in the 1920s, it is socially unacceptable for her not to marry, and that if she is to enter a materially secure marriage she must conform largely to masculine concepts of her role. Such conceptions are embodied in Fitzgerald's attitude, as expressed in the former quote from *Tender is the Night*. Rosalind acknowledges this by rejecting Amory and marrying the wealthy and conventional Dawson Ryder. The "decent start,"²⁶ which Rosalind knows is essential if she is to achieve freedom and self-definition, is negated by the concepts of a male-oriented society. Later in *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald presents one of his most independent and daring female characters, Eleanor Savage. After consummating her relationship with Amory, and almost immediately before a reckless suicide attempt, Eleanor launches a tirade against her subordinate position in a male-dominated society:

"Rotten, rotten old world," broke out Eleanor suddenly, "and the wretchedest thing of all is me — oh, *why* am I a girl? . . . Look at you; you're stupider than I am, not much, but some, . . . and you can play around with girls without being involved in meshes of sentiment, and you can do anything and be justified — and here am I with the brains to do everything, yet tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony. If I were born a hundred years from now, well and good, but now what's in store for me — I have to marry, that goes without saying. Who? I'm too bright for most men, and yet I have to descend to their level and let them patronize my intellect in order to get their attention."²⁷

Eleanor rages against the injustice of her subordinate and dependent position in a society where her ambition has no outlet, and where she must submerge it in order to attract a marriage partner. The unmarried male is not stigmatized, so Fitzgerald's fictional heroes can unrealistically devote themselves to the women who have rejected them. By idealizing the unattainable woman the hero precludes the possibility of marriage to another woman. Fitzgerald's female characters, on the other hand, are ruthlessly pragmatic, driven by the awareness that "I have to marry, that goes without saying."²⁸ Fitzgerald repeatedly interprets this pragmatism as an innately female fickleness. For example, he condemns Daisy without sympathizing with her bitter awareness that "that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool."²⁹

While Fitzgerald sympathizes with his fictional heroes, he refuses to explicitly acknowledge the claustrophobic boredom of the rich woman's role as a product and possession. In *Tender is the Night*, however, he reveals occasionally the emptiness of Nicole's life. Through her stream-of-consciousness, he presents the idea that fulfilment through work provides a safeguard against the deterioration of the personality, as Nicole declares:

When I get well I want to be a fine person like you, Dick — I would study medicine except it's too late . . . I'll look over the whole field of knowledge and pick out something and really know about it, so I'll have it to hang on to if I go to pieces again.³⁰

Nicole tells Dick, "You've taught me that work is everything and I believe you."³¹ Nicole's life, by this definition, is inadequate and unfulfilled, and indeed Fitzgerald reveals its horrifying emptiness as "always when he [Dick] turned away from her into himself he left her holding nothing in her hands and staring at it, calling it many names, but knowing it was only the hope that he would come back soon."³² The emptiness of a life lived almost entirely through another person is evident in Fitzgerald's fiction and in his own life. In her biography of Zelda Fitzgerald, Nancy Milford writes, "Scott had his writing, Zelda had Scott — and she didn't have very much of him when he was working."³³

The fictional heroine completely lacks opportunities for personal fulfilment, apart from romantic conquest, and conse-

quently becomes self-destructive and destructive of others; Fitzgerald emphasizes the latter and often avoids a deeper exploration of feasible motivation, merely attributing her treatment of the hero to innate selfishness and fickleness. He does not develop the full psychological possibilities of realizations such as that in one of his short stories, "A Woman With a Past," where "Josephine was abruptly aware that here a girl took on the importance of the man who had brought her,"³⁴ or in "First Blood," where he writes that "Josephine loved to dance, but the field of feminine glory, the ballroom floor, was something you slipped away from with a man."³⁵ Fitzgerald portrays his fictional heroines in a society where they are defined through the men they attract, and whose only individual fulfilment is through those men, and yet condemns his heroines as fickle, refusing to acknowledge that this fickleness is merely an undesirable yet unavoidable development of "the charming adaptability that she . . . reserved for men."³⁶ The female protagonist realizes how much her status is dependent on men, so she becomes ruthless in her selection of a successful mate.

The most specific reference which Fitzgerald makes to the struggle between the sexes, in the female's bid for increased freedom and greater opportunities for fulfilment, especially through work, is in *Tender is the Night*, in Dick Diver's conversation with one of his psychiatric patients, a woman artist. She introduces the subject, telling Dick:

"I'm sharing the fate of the women of my time who challenged men to battle."

"To your vast surprise it was just like all battles," he answered, adopting her formal diction.

"Just like all battles." She thought this over. "You pick a setup, or else win a Pyrrhic victory, or you're wrecked and ruined — you're a ghostly echo from a broken wall."

"You are neither wrecked nor ruined," he told her. "Are you quite sure you've been in a real battle?"

"Look at me!" she cried furiously.

"You've suffered, but many women suffered before they mistook themselves for men." It was becoming an argument and he retreated.³⁷

This conversation reveals that the woman artist blames her collapse on her struggle against male domination in society, while Dick is unwilling to acknowledge that any such conflict exists, or at least he is determined to minimize its significance.

Fitzgerald portrays his heroines as destructive women, who gain supremacy in their limited field, that of romantic conquest, at the expense of the male protagonist, but he does not acknowledge what the woman artist expresses, the loneliness and hollowness of these triumphs, these Pyrrhic victories. Dick refuses to acknowledge the reality of the struggle between the sexes and its consequences, and argues that the female alone is at fault; she is merely mistaking herself for a man, that is, she is trespassing on male arenas such as sexual freedom, art, business, and the professions.

It is significant that Fitzgerald belittles Nicole's creative achievement:

Nicole had designed the decoration and the furniture . . . She had worked with so much imagination — the inventive quality, which she lacked, being supplied by the problem itself.³⁸

Nicole is thoroughly socialized into her role of being attractive to men, so that she also belittles her achievement: "Complimented, she referred to herself brusquely as a master plumber."³⁹ Fitzgerald identifies his male protagonists with aspiration, ambition, and "its upward trend"⁴⁰: in *This Side of Paradise*, Amory feels an affinity with the masculine atmosphere of Princeton University, whose "dreaming peaks were still in lofty aspiration towards the sky."⁴¹ In "A Woman With a Past" Fitzgerald describes the same atmosphere at Princeton: "the night had a quality of asceticism, as if the essence of masculine struggle were seeping everywhere through the little city where men . . . brought their energies and aspirations for winnowing."⁴² Fitzgerald's heroes have a sense of purpose and direction in life, at least to the extent that they are identified with the upward trend of aspiration, while his heroines seem to live their lives like Dick Diver's mental patients, "not in a line . . . but in the same circle. Round, round, and round. Around for ever."⁴³ In such futile existence Nicole eventually realizes what her dependence on her husband means, and her thought carries the seed of the struggle which makes the "battle of the sexes" more than a cliché:

If she need not . . . be for ever one with Dick . . . she must be something in addition, not just an image on his mind, condemned to endless parades around the circumference of a medal.⁴⁴

NOTES

Below are details of the first publications of each of Fitzgerald's novels. References in the article are to later editions.

This Side of Paradise, New York: Scribners, 1920.

The Beautiful and Damned, New York: Scribners, 1922.

The Great Gatsby, New York: Scribners, 1926.

Tender is the Night, New York: Scribners, 1939.

The Last Tycoon, New York: Scribners, 1941.

¹ *The Last Tycoon* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 135.

² p. 134.

³ Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960), p. 302.

⁴ Andrew Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald* (London: Bodley Head, 1962), p. 234.

⁵ p. 235.

⁶ *This Side of Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p. 61.

⁷ p. 164.

⁸ p. 165.

⁹ Fiedler, *op. cit.*, pp. 301-302.

¹⁰ *The Great Gatsby* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950), p. 155.

¹¹ *The Beautiful and Damned* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 70.

¹² p. 280.

¹³ p. 114.

¹⁴ *This Side of Paradise*, p. 159.

¹⁵ *Tender is the Night* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), p. 107.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ p. 182.

¹⁸ Judith Howard Montgomery, "Pygmalion's Images: The Metamorphosis of the American Heroine" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of English, Syracuse University, 1971).

¹⁹ *Tender is the Night*, p. 122.

²⁰ p. 83.

²¹ *This Side of Paradise*, p. 159.

²² p. 162.

²³ pp. 227-228.

- ²⁴ Nancy Milford, *Zelda Fitzgerald. A Biography* (London: Bodley Head, 1970), p. 92.
- ²⁵ *Tender is the Night*, pp. 120-121.
- ²⁶ *This Side of Paradise*, p. 165.
- ²⁷ pp. 213-214.
- ²⁸ p. 214.
- ²⁹ *The Great Gatsby*, p. 24.
- ³⁰ *Tender is the Night*, p. 67.
- ³¹ p. 68.
- ³² p. 200.
- ³³ Milford, *op. cit.*, p. 107.
- ³⁴ "A Woman With a Past," *The Bodley Head Scott Fitzgerald Short Stories. Vol. 6* (London: Bodley Head, 1963), p. 153.
- ³⁵ "First Blood," *The Bodley Head Scott Fitzgerald Short Stories. Vol. 5* (London: Bodley Head, 1963), p. 133.
- ³⁶ "A Woman With a Past," p. 149.
- ³⁷ *Tender is the Night*, p. 204.
- ³⁸ p. 202.
- ³⁹ p. 203.
- ⁴⁰ *This Side of Paradise*, p. 56.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴² "A Woman With a Past," p. 156.
- ⁴³ *Tender is the Night*, p. 201.
- ⁴⁴ p. 295.