



This Side of Paradise: Life and Morality of the War and Post-War America

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ABSTRACT: *This Side of Paradise* written by Scott Fitzgerald vividly observes the lives and morality of post–World War I youth presenting various aspects of the age. The present article analyses *This Side of Paradise* with respect to education, marriage, love, youth, family, alcoholism, morality, etc. as depicted in the novel with central focus on the post-war psychology. It highlights the scientific and technological advancement and weakening of religion and morality in America. It also focuses on the cynicism and hopelessness of a whole generation of 1920s America presented in the novel. The main concern of the article is the life and morality of the war and post-war America presented in the novel ‘The Side of Paradise’.

KEYWORDS: *Life, Morality, Cynicism, Hopelessness, War, Post-war.*

This Side of Paradise which was published in 1920, is the debut novel by Scott Fitzgerald. Its title has been adopted from a line of the poem ‘Tiare Tahiti’ by Rupert Brooke. Though the novel won brilliant success, it was significant in bringing personal success to Fitzgerald in the sense that it helped him win Zelda Sayre's hand for marriage due to its success. Fitzgerald not only came out of financial crisis but also got his love with the publication and subsequent success of the novel. The central concern of the book is that it vividly observes the lives and morality of post–World War I youth presenting various aspects of the age. The present article analyses *This Side of Paradise* with respect to education, marriage, love, youth, family, alcoholism, morality, etc. as depicted in the novel with central focus on the post-war psychology.

The critical reception was mainly enthusiastic and in many cases even serious. *The New York Times Book Review* said that the book was as nearly perfect as such a work could be. *The New York Evening Post* said that there are clever things, keen and searching things, amusingly young and mistaken things, beautiful things and pretty things and truly inspired and elevated things, an astonishing abundance of each in *This Side of Paradise*. Donald Heiney views that the novel, typical of Fitzgerald, was a revelation of morality of America on the edge of the Twenties. It concerns the youth and young manhood of Amory Blaine, a spoiled and egotistical young Princeton student who turns to literature and the high life when his ambition to become a football hero is pulled back.

This Side of Paradise attained great success and recognized Fitzgerald as the chronicler of the new post-war America of flappers, alcohol and the Jazz Age. The novel is primarily concerned with American youth of the 1920s. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda too enjoyed an extravagant and often jovial lifestyle in the post-World

War I era of the 1920's.

Having first-hand experience of elite life style of America, Fitzgerald congested a great deal of the material from life of his time. The content for the novel originated from his own experiences. In a number of ways, the main character Amory Blaine is implied Fitzgerald. This semi-autobiographical literary practice is one that Fitzgerald often exercised throughout his career and for which he often met strong criticism. Nevertheless, in this particular instance, the author was praised by public with open heart. Fitzgerald managed to capture a period of American history and a portrait of the new youth culture which involved drinking and casual kissing. Though in many ways a discovery and an exact portrait of his times, Fitzgerald was able to see through the glamour of the lifestyle to make insightful observations on its moral emptiness in the various contexts like marriage, love and pride, youth, addiction of drugs and alcohol, familial relation with World War I in the centre.

The novel narrates the story of Amory Blaine growing from his childhood to his twenties. His mother is a prosperous and peculiar woman who, after their travels in Europe, leaves Amory to go to school in the United States. The gorgeous protagonist, Amory Blaine, becomes a Princeton University student studying literature where he gets a social but not an academic success. He falls in love, first with the beautiful and selfish Isabelle and then with a relative he idolizes, a widow with two children, Clara. After failing his exams he leaves the university to join the army. After the war he meets Rosalind, a friend's sister and they soon fall in love and become engaged. But he is left by her for a young man richer than Amory. Amory is crushed and he spends the summer in the countryside trying cure his broken heart. He meets Eleanor, a rough young woman with a strong and independent character. They pass a pleasant vacation but Amory witnesses her self-destructiveness when she attempts to commit suicide herself. After this episode, Amory makes a journey to visit Princeton and hitches a ride with businessman with whom he debates on politics. In the end of the Amory, in a somewhat self-righteous tone, affirms that he knows himself, but that is all.

F. Scott Fitzgerald introduces the novel *This Side of Paradise* with two epigraphs. They express a sceptical attitude toward the novel's primary concern, depiction of the Great War and Post-War life and morality of the people of America which underwent a sea-change during the time. The epigraphs are as below:

“Well this side of Paradise! ...

There's little comfort in the wise.

—Rupert Brooke

Experience is the name so many people give to their mistakes.

—Oscar Wilde”¹

Rupert Brooke's manifestation has specific implication: he stands for the young men of Fitzgerald's generation who wanted to be heroes, who voluntarily offered to fight and who lost their lives in the First World War. Adopting his novel's title from Brooke and placing his name on the title page, Fitzgerald uses Brooke's poetry and

the death it recalls, to signify heroism of war. Oscar Wilde's remark traces that impression of heroism. Wilde's irony mocks the principle of development based on error and reflection. As Fitzgerald implies, one simply renames mistakes as experience. Wilde's wit suggests that wisdom comes in the form of ironic distance offering some consolation. But however consoling, Wilde's ironic pose introduces dangers of its own. Fitzgerald's epigraphs indicate the author's concern for depiction of the particular period of history of America.

The simple and obvious symbolic significance is presented by the World War I which is suggested by the epigraphs. The Great War personifies valour, nationalism, pain, patriotism, sorrow, death and hatred. It impacts the human soul with negative results such as death and the parting with family. But it can give the feeling of nationalism, patriotism and the strength of mind. The main character Amory Blaine is forced to take part in the World War I. It is very cruel, painful and pitiless event of every nation. It brings a lot of heart-breaks, deaths, shocks and disasters. But for Amory it appears as a turning point in his life. The war gives him knowledge of life. It is a symbol of experience and the changing of inner life of the main character. The war teaches him how to get the most important values, which person should have.

The novel addresses straight to Henry Adams's autobiography, *The Education of Henry Adams* – which is regarded as “one of the earliest expressions of modern nervousness”.² Both *The Education of Henry Adams* and *This Side of Paradise* describe a crisis in social, moral and psychological formation of the people. Scholars have traditionally read *This Side of Paradise* as part of Fitzgerald's preparation or as “a thinly veiled autobiographical account of college life”.³ It is usually remembered as the Princeton book. The novel can be termed as a reflection of a larger cultural, social, religious, political and psychological concern of American people in the early twentieth century, a concern impaired by World War I. Writings from the early part of the twentieth century frequently voice such concern that modern life was taking a toll on the character of the American people. People seemed nervous. In reaction to a fast-tracking pace of change, the American character appeared to be losing its determination. Fitzgerald registers this modern way of being in the world as a formal problem: his protagonist, Amory Blaine, can never achieve a coherent character and, therefore, the novel never reaches a convincing culmination.

Amory Blaine embodies American nervousness - a pandemic disorder. As Frederick Pierce writes in a 1919 issue of *North American Review*,

“Our whole continent has been growing nervous. Everywhere we have had a steady increase in all forces making for neuroticism.”⁴

Amory must connect himself to a larger history - namely the war. Amory's response to the outbreak of war points out to the limits of his self-conception which is the result of his nervousness. “Historical” ironically demonstrates his failure to imagine himself as an agent of, or a participant in, history. He perceives the war as a melodramatic spectacle.

“Its (the novel's) ability to represent history is what Fitzgerald's writing is known for: what Cowley identified, and what subsequent critics have

continued to celebrate, as a “sense of living in history”—his ability to transform his and his generation’s “actual experiences” into narrative.”⁵

Princeton, as Fitzgerald suggests, is the centre of *This Side of Paradise*. This is because, according to Andrew Hook,

Twenty-one years old, Fitzgerald had learned one vital lesson from his life at university: it was through writing alone that he could hope to distinguish himself, making a mark on the world in the way he yearned to.”⁶

While some critics are inclined to consider the text as a bildungsroman, an episodic recording of a young man’s development, this book is better understood as the author’s effort to interpret what he had personally ‘signified as the symbol of symbols’, Princeton University, according to Nancy Arsdale. She writes

“In *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald does a far superior job of developing the principal character, here named Amory Blaine; the novel also attempts to put the realm of responsibility and the significance of a social institution into a larger context than that of just the individual.”⁷

F. Scott Fitzgerald presented the institution as far more than a setting. Indeed it became his centre of the universe. Princeton must be analysed as a modernist’s paradise temporarily gained, inevitably lost, never forgotten. Fitzgerald describes Princeton as an intensely romantic setting. Its architecture is, in the eyes of the undergraduate, inspirational. Beautiful spring days transform the campus into a heavenly place, where the voices of singing seniors replace any need for choruses of angels on high. Before establishing the main character’s character and predicament, Fitzgerald devotes much attention to presenting the campus and its effect on the student’s imagination to give an idea of academic life of America.

It is symbol of scientific and technological advancement and weakening of religion and morality in America. The decade of the 1920s was the first decade in a modern America and it was considered a most glamorous period for some. Fitzgerald himself called it, “the greatest, gaudiest spree in history.”⁸ Behind the glitter, corrosive philosophies like Marxism, Darwinism and Freudianism damaged the moral fabric of society in the first social revolution. Amory quests for a modernist’s holy grail in a time when science has undermined religious faith, as Fitzgerald describes:

“Always a symbolist, and an idealist, ... he sought around him in his common life for something to cling to, to stand for what religions and families and philosophies of life had stood for.”⁹

While Fitzgerald was expanding the core of the story into the first draft of a novel-length version, *The Education of Henry Adams*, autobiography of Henry Adams was being circulated in a privately published and distributed edition. Adams’s text struggles to come to terms with the American educational experience in a period far removed from Puritanical religious conviction. In his case, Adams rejects the significance of Harvard classrooms as having any true positive influence on a young modernist’s mind.

“Fitzgerald’s novel criticizes Princeton as an institution of higher learning, but like Adams, the young writer attempts to find grounds for modern morality in a world with “all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.”¹⁰

When war breaks out and many students enlist as soldiers, they do so because that is what is expected of Princeton men, of any college men for that matter. Only Burne Holiday, the book’s true political rebel, takes a different point of view. His own choice, extremely radical for the period, is to be a pacifist. Amory has a difficult time understanding how Burne can choose this course. The Germans are such an obvious enemy, in his and most of America’s eyes. But even more important, Amory has a harder time accepting Burne’s fervent belief in his personal ability to make such a decision. Burne leaves Princeton on a humble bicycle. Amory feels he is leaving everything worthwhile because he is choosing to leave Paradise behind. Yet as Amory watches Burne depart, he doubts his own ability to make a personal decision that goes against the grain of the establishment:

“As he saw Burne’s long legs propel his ridiculous bicycle out of sight beyond Alexander Hall, he knew he was going to have a bad week. Not that he doubted the war - Germany stood for everything repugnant to him; for materialism and the direction of tremendous licentious force; it was just that Burne’s face stayed in his memory and he was sick of the hysteria he was beginning to hear.”¹¹

Just as Amory acknowledges Burne’s transformation, he is also conscious that the mood of the times is changing. Princeton has done its best to shelter its students from the modern world, but Amory nonetheless detects that even Princeton will finally have to make accommodations to modernity:

“The war seemed scarcely to touch them and it might have been one of the senior springs of the past, except for the drilling every other afternoon, yet Amory realized poignantly that this was the last spring under the old regime.”¹²

The socially conscious boy is becoming a man who recognizes that the religious beliefs and comfortable social networks of the past may no longer work in this new era. But what will replace those networks? Amory leaves Princeton in the acceptable fashion, as a soldier. But does he ever really let go of the idea of Princeton as a paradise-on-earth for the upper classes? These remain unanswered questions.

This Side of Paradise is Fitzgerald’s first novel to narrate the lives of the people of 1920s very minutely, particularly recording the change which America was undergoing. Young people caught up in the moral emptiness were called flaming youth. The young women especially began to smoke, drink, kiss young men, cut their hair, called ‘bobbing’ and shorten their hemlines. They were called ‘flappers’. As citizens lost contact with real, honest moral values, they began to crave the playful and sensational. They hunted for pleasures and adventures to fill the emptiness in their lives. Ultimately, these thrills left them jaded, tired and disillusioned. In addition to this, the First World War became the first of the modern wars where many of the

peers of the flaming youth were killed. Technology and progress had not brought permanent contentment and pleasures, but only death and destruction.

The post-war morality is represented by the flappers. Fitzgerald himself labelled his first book, *This Side of Paradise*, as a novel about flappers written for Philosophers. The girls Amory finds most interesting – Isabelle, Rosalind, Eleanor - are popular daughters: they are witty, clever, wealthy, lovely, bright, dominative, bold, assertive, spoiled, blunt and young playful debutantes. Each of the three girls introduces a particular trait of morality. In this novel, the modern young girl Isabelle's self-dramatization challenges traditional ideals of female humbleness. While a lady stayed out of public view, the flapper puts herself in the limelight and exhibits her outrageously modern self. She invites the public gaze and grooms herself accordingly. Only sixteen years old, Isabelle Borgé knows how to put on a show. When first introduced, she is compared to a leading lady on stage or to an athlete performing for a crowd. Nineteen-year-old Rosalind Connage illustrates the tendency of Fitzgerald's females to be more practical than their admirers. Although she exhibits admirable traits, such as her endless faith in the inexhaustibility of romance, her courage and fundamental honesty and although she loves Amory, she does not want to marry him and share his poverty. His flappers, generally spoiled daughters from wealthy or once-wealthy families, expect material comforts and yet are economically dependent on male providers. Young men must prove themselves financially before they can gain a rich girl's hand Eighteen-year-old Eleanor Ramilly Savage illustrates the dangerous side of women who lack identity or purpose.

In this work, the closing paragraphs express a hopelessness in that Amory

“could not tell why the struggle was worthwhile, why he had determined to use to the utmost himself and his heritage from the personalities he had passed....He stretched out his arms to the crystalline, radiant sky. ‘I know myself,’ he cried, ‘but that is all.’”¹³

This hopelessness is the result of Amory's development as a character, while the young man experiences frustrations in love, friendship, war and aspirations. Possibly, Amory signifies a vanishing, conservative social order that rejects tradition along with reason, while embracing socialism.

In addition to the above, Amory says,

“I'm restless. My whole generation is restless. I'm sick of a system where the richest man gets the most beautiful girl if he wants her, where the artist without an income has to sell his talents to a button manufacturer.”¹⁴

Amory wants change for the sake of change, not because of conviction:

“I loathed the army. I loathed business. I'm in love with change and I've killed my conscience -.”¹⁵

Amory has similarity with a rotten child who is left to his own means, with parents hoping that he will turn out all right in the end. But ironically, like most people, Amory mistakes free market economics with financial capitalism. The weakness that Amory sees with capitalism is the governmental interference with the free market.

Inequities of wealth and opportunity result when the state is controlled by big business. Not surprisingly then, Amory confuses economic systems with ethics. According to Amory, governmental intimidation is apparently required to ensure that the people will turn out all right. To have man “educated to think clearly, concisely and logically, freed of his habit of taking refuge in platitudes and prejudices and sentimentalism”¹⁶ necessitates socialism as the only resolution, according to Fitzgerald.

Of the key importance with respect to the many issues debated by the author, marriage is a kind of an agreement in *This Side of Paradise*. Amory's mother and father married for convenience rather than love and this decision has an enduring impact on his life. Amory's mother Beatrice is a fairly dejected person due to unpleasant choice:

“In her less important moments she returned to America, met Stephen Blaine and married him-this almost entirely because she was a little bit weary, a little bit sad.”¹⁷

It is during one of her funks that she travels to America and marries Amory's father Stephen. It is not a great reason to get married and it hammers home the message for Amory that marriage is not always romantic. Beatrice's lack of love in marriage leads her to devote herself completely.

Similar is the experience with Amory. He thinks after meeting Rosalind Connage that wedding her will bring solution to all of his difficulties and pleasure to his monotonous life. But when Rosalind breaks the relation off, Amory is again torn in so deep despair that it looks like he'll never get out. In the end, marriage might not solve a person's problems. But still Amory keeps thinking it will because he never gets the chance to find out otherwise. When asked whether he is going to marry Isabelle Borgé, Amory replies that she is not interested in marrying yet. But here it seems in reality that he is probably talking about himself. Second thing Amory learns from his mother is pride. Amory gets pride in inheritance. He has been brought up by his mother to be a complete egomaniac. At one point in the book, Amory even suffers from a lack of energy because he spends all his strength trying to hide how superior he feels to other people. Over the course of the novel, Amory knows to recognize his pride and to struggle with it.

Amory loves to make a decision about marrying his distant cousin Clara. But Clara has already become widow, is empty of the feeling of love and never thinks to fall in marriage again She says,

"I'd never marry again. I've got my two children and I want myself for them."¹⁸

She does not want to divide her love between them and a new husband.

Recognition of oneself is an element of this story associated with love and family. Realisation is not a simple thing and easy to achieve, but Amory proves that it is possible. One event changes him and his self-knowledge. He understands that the family and the feeling of love cannot be replaced with money. Fitzgerald teaches

readers to live in harmony with friends and relatives. Only respect can save from evil and troubles.

Alcohol dependency is a broadly and seriously debated problem in the novel. Dependency starts due to various reasons; especially it concerns family issues and love relation. Amory comes under the influence of alcohol after Rosalind breaks Amory's heart. The only thing that saves him from liver failure is prevention of taking alcohol. It turns out that Amory's alcoholism is a symptom of a deeper problem. And it's Amory's preoccupation with the problems he drowns in alcohol that Fitzgerald ponders over in *This Side of Paradise*. Beatrice Blaine seems to praise alcoholism when she talks to Amory about how much drinking she has done over the years. She almost treats it as a mark of sophistication.

Once, he put his face in his hands and covered eyes and ears as well as he could. During all this time it never occurred to him that he was delirious or drunk. For him, alcohol is something he uses to escape from the world and all its problems.

“As the new alcohol tumbled into his stomach and warmed him, the isolated pictures began slowly to form a cinema reel of the day before.”¹⁹

It is not a matter of amazement that Amory talks about fighting in World War I when he is drunk. The war has no doubt left a deep scar on his mind and it is reasonable to think that it is the war and not just Amory has broken engagement with Rosalind. That is at the heart of his drinking problem.

The character of Beatrice, mother of Amory is noteworthy to comprehend the post-World War I morality of the people. She does not come across well in this book at all. From everything the narrator describes, she sounds like a nervous and authorized woman who expects everything in life to go her way. She also believes that she belongs to high class society because of her money and education. But Beatrice is more interested in using her education for artificial show off like convincing everyone of how impressive she is. As the book tells,

"A brilliant education she had—her youth passed in renaissance glory; she was versed in the latest gossip of the Older Roman Families."²⁰

Some people would take a good education and use it to help the human race. Throughout this book, she uses her ill health as a symbol of how sophisticated and delicate she is. But when it comes to drinking, she sees her own survival as a mark of toughness. As she tells Amory:

"The doctors told me ... that if any man alive had done the consistent drinking that I have, he would have been physically shattered, my dear, and in his grave—long in his grave."²¹

Beatrice is a heavy drinker and proud of being the same.

Fitzgerald writes in the novel,

“Amory saw girls doing things that even in his memory would have been impossible; eating three-o'clock, after-dance suppers in impossible cafes, talking of every side of life with an air half of earnestness, half of mockery,

yet with a furtive excitement that Amory considered stood for a real moral let-down.”²²

The moral let-down enjoyed by the post-war generation has given the work its reputation for political and social realism. Today, the novel's young libertines, both male and female, would not shock a schoolgirl. Amory Blaine turns out to be a conspicuous moralist who takes the responsibility of kissing very seriously and disapproves of affairs with chorus girls. For modern readers it is probably better to take for granted the usefulness of *This Side of Paradise* for social historians and to admire from the distance of another age the obviously wholesome morality of the hero. The real story of *This Side of Paradise* is a report on the young man's emotional readiness for life. The only interesting morality it presents is the implied morality that comes as a part of his feelings when the hero distinguishes between an honest and a dishonest emotion.

This Side of Paradise has some qualities of a moral allegory in which Fitzgerald talks of the American Youth trapped between the forces of 'Good' and 'Evil'. Among Americans and specifically among the young, 'morality' and 'sex' are interchangeable terms. Often the judgment of 'right' and 'wrong' behaviour rests almost exclusively on sexual behaviour. Evil is identified with sex. Like many of his readers, Amory idealized women but found it difficult to maintain his noble feelings regarding women when they were tested in reality. Amory's uncertainty is dramatized early in the novel when he goes to a party and finds himself alone with Myra and on the verge of his first kiss. His first childlike relationship is with Myra St. Claire when Amory is only thirteen and this romance can be regarded as clearly sexual. Amory tries to attract Myra by his wealth and charm and quickly wants to create the romantic moment with her. The scene that Amory kisses Myra depicts his fascination of the hidden romance.

Many critics have drawn attention to the fact that *This Side of Paradise* seems odd to the readers as a novel of flaming youth and that its scenes of moral carelessness and degeneracy are contemporary virtues. Amory's early encounters with girls reveal in advance his later engagement with women and the full battle of the sexes. During his Princeton days he carries on a romantic and sentimental correspondence with Isabelle Borge. During a weekend at Isabelle's home Amory discovers that it is not the girl but his egoistic image of himself as conquering lover that has enchanted him and the romance is punctured as easily as he bruises her neck with his shirt button when he embraces her. Her simple and fleshly touch punctuates the college romance and the tiff that follows makes Amory aware that he had not a small particle of real love for Isabelle. This comic scene heightens the difference between woman as romantic illusion and woman as reality, but the theme is lightly touched here.

CONCLUSION:

As a literary and popular success, *This Side of Paradise* established Fitzgerald as a major American author. The novel depicts the cynicism and hopelessness of a whole generation of 1920s America. If this attitude sounds strangely like the youthful

generation of today, then it can be realized why F. Scott Fitzgerald is considered a genius and why is considered a classic that speaks to not the American people of a certain age only, but to all generations of all ages. However, so long as any generation rejects the precepts of the true and living God, mankind will continue to search for useless solutions to age-old problems. If an entire generation is restless, the root of restlessness is found in individuals that in turn make the society restless. This restlessness is created by the void in men's souls. This void cannot be filled by moral instruction by governmental employees who suffer from the same defects of sin and corruption. Only a filling of the spirit of God can satisfy a lost generation. In short, for all the man-made calamities, Fitzgerald blames the modern generation which emphasized the material wealth and physical comfort which, in turn, resulted into violence. The World War I entirely changed the moral, social and religious scene of America. The change has faithfully been recorded in the novel. Fitzgerald's genius lies in conveyance of the change.

Few writers are as closely associated with the roaring twenties as F. Scott Fitzgerald. The modern American writer coined the term 'Jazz Age' and immortalised the glamorous atmosphere and wild parties of the upper social classes, his writing essentially serving as historical documentation of the era, while retaining a sense of timelessness in themes and topics. While his writing can be described as almost poetic, his texts often contain underlying social criticism embedded in vivid imagery which is witnessed in the present novel. Booth, in his review of *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and his Work* by Alfred Kazin, argues that his work engaged the attention of the best critical minds of our day. William Troy in "Scott Fitzgerald—the Authority of Failure," writes,

"The book is interesting today as a document of the early twenties; nobody who would know what it was like to be young and privileged and self-centered in that bizarre epoch can afford to neglect it. But it can also be read as a preliminary study in the kind of tortured narcissism that was to plague its author to the end of his days."²³

The many layers in Fitzgerald's work allow for analysis on several levels and from differing perspectives, functioning as a mirror through which to view society and creating a space for discussion on the current values and ideals.

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