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What Did F. Scott Fitzgerald Lose? The Beginning of the Rootless Writer

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Introduction

Why did American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald dwell on the theme of the dead? Nobody doubts that the novels and works of F. Scott Fitzgerald look to the lost or dead. In other words, Fitzgerald was entranced by an unforgettable blank to be filled. He naturally pursues this theme, critical to him as a writer.[1]

"Babylon Revisited" presents a typical example of a lost thing that shadows Fitzgerald's protagonists. The protagonist, Charlie Wales, is preoccupied with memories of his wife, whom he lost to a heart attack and yet dwells on. He knows, of course, that he cannot regain her, but he cannot escape her shadow, having also lost his daughter due to her mother's death. He will see the details later.

Another short story, "Winter Dreams," follows the same theme. This masterpiece's theme is also a lost thing. A beautiful girl, Judy, captures the heart of protagonist Dexter Green, and they grew up close. He eventually has a romantic opportunity with Judy, but he does not pursue it. Instead, something he does not understand drives him to leave her. After years, he realizes that Judy lost her beauty and understands his loss of something that he never caught.

Tender is the Night is in the same category as the previously mentioned stories. At the beginning of this novel, the protagonist Dick Diver has not lost anything; he is an affluent man with a beautiful wife. However, he gradually chases something. What is it? Here, we have no idea, but he finds something in a young girl and, finally, loses everything. And, of course, we cannot exempt *The Great Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby loses Daisy and pursues her so as to fill a blank past that overshadows the rest of his life. As we observe at the end of this novel, this vanity and pursuit literally lead to his death. Why does he chase Daisy? Why are not only Gatsby but also the other characters overshadowed by what is lost? What did they lose? I presume this is a crucial point through which to understand Fitzgerald's works.

Critics have pointed out that the lost thing is a kind of vanity, such as the American Dream and insular wealth. At first sight, these critics seem to be right, as these works focus on women

and the blight times of his world and country. Certainly, the age in which the author lived was full of vanity, but is this alone enough to decide on the great author's theme? Once we see his autographical works and those resembling his personal history, our idea may change. Thereby, this paper will discuss the author's beginning, or sources. Let us dig into the base of the source together and find what drove the great novelist.

Who or what drove Fitzgerald?

Before we start to read Fitzgerald's text, I need to address his autographical information. Fitzgerald left a trilogy of short and simple autobiographical stories, including "Author's House." But they contain critical information that elucidates his novels.[2] In this story, Fitzgerald gets an interview as an anonymous writer, in which he shares his motivations:

> "Not a bad cellar — as cellars go," the
> author says. "You can't see it very well and I
> can't either — it's mostly forgotten."
> "What do you mean?"
> "It's everything I've forgotten — all the
> complicated dark mixture of my youth and
> infancy that made me a fiction writer instead of a
> fireman or a soldier." (133–134)

As we can see, cellars hold something important to the writer —— some existence. Following the interview, he goes on: "Well, three months before I was born my mother lost her other two children and I think that came first of all though I don't know how it worked exactly. I think I started then to be a writer" (134).

The interviewer presses the writer for more comments, but he refuses:

> "What's that?" you demand.
> "That?" The author tries to change the
> subject, moving around so as to obscure your
> view of the too-recent mound of
> dirt in the corner that has made you think of
> certain things in police reports.
> But you insist.
> "That is where it is buried," he says.
> "What's buried?"
> "That's where I buried my love after —"

he hesitates.

"After you *killed* her?"

"After I killed *it*."

"I don't understand what you mean."

The author does not look at the pile

of earth.

"That is where I buried my first

childish love of myself, my belief that I would

never die like other people, and that I wasn't the

son of my parents but a son of a king, a king

who ruled the whole world." (134–135)

Here we can see that the author is caught by something lost — correctly, the dead. In another entry of the autobiographical trilogy, "An Afternoon of an Author," Fitzgerald again refers to the dead. In a bus, a writer imagines a story in which a father remembers his son who is dead and buried under the ground:

On the college football field men were working

with rollers and a title occurred to him:

"Turf-keeper" or else "The Grass Grows,"

something about a man working on turf for years

and bringing up his son to go to college and play

football there. Then the son dying in youth and

the man's going to work in the cemetery and

putting turf over his son instead of under his feet.

It would be the kind of piece that is often placed

in anthologies, but not his sort of thing — it was

sheer swollen antithesis, as formalized as a

popular magazine story and easier to write. Many

people, however, would consider it excellent

because it was melancholy, had digging in it and

was simple to understand. (144–45)

Of all places for the author to consistently ask the dead to appear — why his autographical writings? Here, we can tentatively conclude that Fitzgerald was long concerned with the dead and that, for them, he created his many works. Did he create them for the dead? That is the next question: escaping to forget the dead or to fulfill their existence? Later, I hope that we will reach a

concrete conclusion. Regardless, Fitzgerald's eyes look to the dead. As we have seen, the deaths of his sisters motivated his novels.

Like Fitzgerald himself, Charlie Wales in "Babylon Revisited" writes a novel in which a protagonist, who has lost his wife to heart attack, is ever aware of the dead and trapped by moral culpability.[3] We know this to be a serious disease, but his sister-in-law does not think so. She blames Charlie for her sister's death and has custody of his daughter. Naturally, he cannot help but think of his wife.

> "How much you were responsible for Helen's death, I don't know. It's something you'll have to square with your own conscience."
>
> An electric current of agony surged through him; for a moment, he was almost on his feet, an unuttered sound echoing in his throat. He hung on to himself for a moment, another moment.
>
> "Hold on there," said Lincoln unfortunately. "I never thought you were responsible for that."
>
> "Helen died of heart trouble," Charlie said dully.
>
> "Yes, heart trouble." Marion spoke as if the phrase had another meaning for her. (627)

Charlie's greatest and unavoidable problem is not his daughter, but how to make peace with his wife —— an impossible mission in which he must nonetheless take part. Jonathan Schiff argues that the dead surround Charlie:

> Her grief serves as an aspect of her nostalgic yearning to recapture her family's aristocratic past. It is similar to Tom Buchannan's grief for a "more white" civilization in The Great Gatsby. Like Ailie Calhoun and Stella Walker, Charlie Wales in "Babylon Revisited" compares the living with the dead. In that story, Charlie feels guilt over the death of his wife (52).

Moreover, he must also notice that Charlie's past friends from Paris breathe down his neck —— "ghosts of the past." After he had lost everything, he had a change of heart and cut his friends off. However, they do not mind his absence and finally destroy Charlie's hope.

As we saw, many of the dead appear in Fitzgerald's works. Here, we doubt whether Fitzgerald experienced death and knew people who had died, his sisters' influence notwithstanding. There was, however, a great war in which many died during his lifetime. Although Fitzgerald did not fight in the war, he had hoped to, but the war ended before he could realize this hope. Can we separate the author from the war? I do not think so. I suspect that although he did not belong to the war, he felt some responsibility or discomfort over its death toll. He may have felt guilty that so many young people belonging to his generation were killed while he remained home. Fitzgerald wrote, "I didn't get over," a curious story, in 1936, during the time that he wrote his

autobiographical trilogy. In this story, a man blames himself for a huge mistake he made during the war, resulting in a friend's death. After the war, he is reluctant to confess to another friend but, in the end, he does confess. Why would Fitzgerald write a short story on death and guilt in war, having never been to war, if he did not feel guilty and responsible for the dead of his generation? One possible answer is that he felt a guilt or moral culpability, like Charlie Wales in "Babylon Revisited." Fitzgerald wrote a story about the dead or the lost and aimed to prevent decay. The beginning point of his aim may have been his sisters. Their death was the beginning of his life as a writer, as he suggests in the autographical story. That starting point expanded to the other dead year by year. They were ever present to him, and so he may have responded to them in stories.

Writing stories as requiem

Fitzgerald seemed to keep his distance from war and see it from another perspective. In the titular essay, "My Lost City," Fitzgerald describes the American boom: "New York had all the iridescence of the beginning of the world. The returning troops marched up Fifth Avenue and girls were instinctively drawn east and north toward them — we were at last admittedly the most powerful nation and there was gala in the air" (109). He here oversees the world and war. After the war, much of the world entered a time of boom and brightness; Fitzgerald, however, was not happy. He seems to have reached an end or achieved something. From his point of view, the world is filled with happiness that, on the other hand, has lost or is missing something. Fitzgerald describes this in "My Lost City": "And lastly from that period I remember riding in a taxi one afternoon between very tall buildings under a mauve and rosy sky; I began to bawl because I had everything I wanted and I knew I would never be so happy again" (111). Fitzgerald and his world were struck by the end of something, or a blind passage. Yes, literally, he lost something. However, it is not only a city but the people lost to war. Both Fitzgerald and the world had lost something after the war: the dead, their absences triggering vanity or blind passage, like Gatsby's gorgeous champagne party. Its atmosphere and guests are bright. After, there is only death. Gatsby is dead and nothing remains in the East Egg except vanity and emptiness. The party is over. Fitzgerald knew this emptiness or absence. So, he wrote stories to fill it. His stories, then, are songs for the dead, a requiem.

Conclusion

This paper does not insist that Fitzgerald's guilty conscious made him write, but suggests that he felt an unconscious responsibility for the lost or dead; unconsciously, he wrote a requiem to fulfill the blank left by the dead. Of course, their goal or purpose is never achieved. Despite

knowing that, they do not give up. Like Jay Gatsby, they believe in the green light, they hold to hope until the last minute.

Notes

1. Matsuura has already focused on this theme in his papers. He argues that short stories written by Fitzgerald emphasize the theme of death, as in "Winter Dream," "Babylon Revisited," and "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." Moreover, he reveals how *The Great Gatsby* shares this theme. This paper advances the discussion by studying Fitzgerald's other short stories. As a result, the paper attempts to reveal the author's motivation or unconscious goals as a writer.
2. Breitwieser greatly emphasizes the importance of the trilogy for understanding Fitzgerald and his motivations as a writer. He also points out that Fitzgerald's lost sisters influenced the author more than other critics acknowledged. However, his critique is not enough, because his study cannot escape the need for investigation of Fitzgerald's autography. This paper focuses on Fitzgerald's works based on Breitwieser's study. Sakane also pays attention to the importance of the trilogy based on the discussion of Breitwieser. As a result, this paper attempts to reveal the relationship between the dead and the author. Thus, the discussion may go forward.
3. Matsuura points out that moral culpability is described as debt in the story. According to him, Charlie Wales is a man with debt, both monetary and moral. The latter one is especially serious for him, being rooted in his wife's death. Thus, after he succeeds in overcoming his monetary debt, he struggles to understand the moral one.

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