Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is an attempt to establish that F. Scott Fitzgerald, in all his novels, was preoccupied with the theme of the American dream and its concommitant corollary, disillusionment. No doubt, it is not an entirely new idea in relation to the literary criticism of one of the greatest creative celebrities of the twentieth century whose recent revival and revaluation and consequent tremendous gain in reputation and stature has once again exposed the fallacy of judging the merits and vision of a writer on the basis of merely contemporary criticism. It is, in most cases, myopic and lacks the detachment and objectivity which are very essential for gauging the intrinsic worth of an artist; it is particularly true of a writer who, pitched in the cross-currents of a significant period in history, interprets his times in terms of historical and cultural streams. After an undeserved critical and popular neglect during the thirties and forties, the belated reassessment of Fitzgerald's art began during the early fifties, and, perhaps in "excessive repentance" of the earlier "critical errors", he was more than compensated by the voluminous criticism that appeared during the following two decades. In the present decade his significant position as a novelist has been further established. Once again efforts have been made, as happened in the twenties after the "Byronic success" of his first novel, This Side of Paradise (1920), to present him as a literary
phenomenon. Fitzgerald suffered the worst ignominy of unjustified neglect because of various legends and fantastic stories woven around his personality. His bohemian and unpredictable behaviour, his eccentric and irresponsible pranks and romantic escapades with Zelda, his vigorous participation in the gorgeous twenties, his uninhibited candour about himself and his affairs, the notorious irregularities of his life, his hunger for self-advertisement and that fickle and capricious deity, fame, earned him the titles of 'the laureate of the Jazz Age' or 'The Pied Piper' of the glamorous era. In a way, he encouraged the lesser critics or the gossip-columnists to project his image as its "historian and exemplar" and marvelled, without recognising the damage it would do to his literary career, at being identified with the golden age and its reckless flappers. Unfortunately for Fitzgerald and equally for the literary criticism, he was applauded for non-literary reasons during the 1920's and, again for wrong reasons, neglected during the 1930's. The earlier criticism of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *Tender Is The Night* (1934) tends to suggest that his novels were never analysed apart from his personality. The most favourable contemporary critics could go only thus far that he was a genius, a writer with great potentialities, but instantly qualified their appreciation with the regret that he was wilfully and recklessly wasting his talents in slick stories and pot-boilers for the sake of money; they could only regard him as a promise
unfulfilled. Edmund Wilson led this tendency in Fitzgerald criticism when he pronounced that "it is true that Fitzgerald has been left with a jewel which he doesn't know quite what to do with." The legendary posture that he had acquired after his immediate success with *This Side of Paradise* always stood in the way of an unprejudiced aesthetic appraisal of his art. We may not wholly agree with Peter Monro Jack's opinion that Fitzgerald might have been the Proust of his generation had he not lacked constructive and helpful criticism, but it cannot be denied that Fitzgerald's achievements would have been certainly far more impressive. The haunting emotional appeal and the depth of his vision in *Tender Is The Night* were, more or less, ignored by the critics merely because he had taken nine years in bringing it out after *The Great Gatsby*, and they had already declared him exhausted and finished as a creative writer.

Several great writers, however, are known to have taken a fairly long period in publishing the next book, and the delay on

---


Sklar observes: "The nine-year gap between *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is The Night* has often been considered (Contd. on next page)
Fitzgerald's part, therefore, did not warrant such an unsympathetic critical judgement. Serious critics associated him with The Saturday Evening Post stories calling it his literary prostitution, and blinded themselves to his mature artistic achievements. They failed to appreciate how a man with all his eccentricities and emotional imbalances could possibly be a great writer. Some of the perceptive critics, while admiring his imaginative profundity, found him wasting his gifts on trivial and transitory material. They felt that since he lacked "intellectual control" and a controlling aesthetic vision, he could never be regarded as a serious literary artist. Cardwell sums up the attitude of the journalistic critics towards Fitzgerald in these words:

Smug, journalistic critics viewed Fitzgerald as a broken-down alcoholic, a maniac representative of a deplorable period, a spendthrift cry-baby who had come to a satisfactory edifying end. They disparaged his work, which they rarely knew intimately, for non-literary reasons. Scott bore the stigmas of the playboy, the bohemian with money, the wise cracker without reverence for home, business, and respectability. (4)

But after his death in 1940 in tragic circumstances, the capriciousness of the American literary culture was completely exposed.

The stupendous efforts of Edmund Wilson, Arthur Mizener, Malcolm Cowley and other celebrated critics, who were infuriated by the contemptuous obituaries paid to him after his death, revived a "dead writer." The modern critics, however, barring a few sceptics, have found it a duty to atone for the sins of those who failed Fitzgerald during the thirties. But once again we find that even the criticism of the last two decades has largely failed to differentiate between his life and art. Instead of opening the broader vistas of his achievement to the critical view, much of it has conveniently taken the shape of biographical criticism. The agony, sufferings and tragedy of Fitzgerald's life have now been, more or less, glorified and even the most sympathetic critics are also found to be on the defensive, explaining his failure by portraying him as a martyr or "a sacrificial victim" to the circumstances. Instead of highlighting the depth of his great works of art and distinguishing his best work from the rest, a part of which is admittedly bad, they have striven to establish his greatness by insisting upon the personal odds that came in his way, thus transforming him into, what Piper calls, "a kind of twentieth-century culture hero."

They seem to be defending him on a wrong front. Perhaps it should be fair to call him an original artist but a weak man. Most of his failures were the result of his impulsive and

---

instinctive fascination for the glamorous charm of the post-war era to which "the romantic" in him felt intensely attracted for a headlong dive but which "the spoiled priest" in him detested and distrusted. Mizener has very brilliantly brought out this concept of "the split personality" of Fitzgerald in his commendable biography of the author.

But whatever be his personal failings, it should be worthwhile to study and analyse his novels and stories independent of his biography. For a biographer the minutia of his life may be important, but for a critic the creative explorations are more significant. Unless this process of mythicising is cast off, it is highly difficult to appreciate the literary merits and the intrinsic worth of his fiction as is abundantly clear from an anonymous review of his art: "It is impossible not to love and admire the radiant talent of Scott Fitzgerald. It is equally impossible for any educated person of stable temperament not to think him in many ways an ass." Why can we not analyse his novels without recognising that the protagonists resemble in many ways the author himself or certain other persons he knew intimately? He was certainly a romantic writer,
a highly subjective author who mostly wrote out of his felt experience, and a complete divorce between the man and his creations cannot be imagined. Admitting that he was inextricably intertwined with his own creations, Fitzgerald wrote:

"Books are like brothers. I am only child. Gatsby my imaginary eldest brother, Amory my younger, Anthony my worry, Dick my comparatively good brother but all of them far from home." But his personal experience was not the staple of his imaginative vision; he had the extraordinary ability of objectifying his experiences through the critical detachment and rigorous self-criticism that most of what he wrote transcended the isolated experiences of an individual and expressed the national predicament. He had always believed that "the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function." Possessed of an ingrained moral sense, this ability equipped Fitzgerald with the qualities of objectivity and aesthetic distance which shaped the "composite" nature of his fictional characters. Whatever he wrote was adequately filtered through his objective vision, or what Mizener calls "alien's remoteness", and thus this imaginatively recreated experience became the universal experience of

---


an innocent idealist, a believer in the American dream, pitted against the social and national milieu of the post-war era. In this dissertation, the autobiographical references and similarities have, therefore, been omitted as far as possible, and an effort has been made to make it a critical study. It is expected that by shedding the "sentimental idealization" of his personality and by discarding the biographical approach in interpreting his fictional world, we shall bring out a truly aesthetic evaluation of his novels which alone can justify the prophetic judgement of Stephen Vincent Benet: "This is not a legend, this is a reputation—and, seen in perspective, it may well be one of the most secure reputations of our time." However, some of his observations and opinions that bear a direct relation to the study have been cited to support the argument.

Thorough researches of the critics, especially those of Matthew J. Bruccoli and Jackson R. Bryer, have now belied the old myth that Fitzgerald was one of the worst educated men of America. It has now been proved beyond doubt that his vision, with all its limitations, was sharp enough to observe the implications of the destructive changes that the American society was undergoing in his youth. Far from being a mere "chronicler of the Jazz Age", Fitzgerald was deeply involved in interpreting his times in the historical and cultural context and his

evocation of that age invariably carried with it the ominous tones of impending disaster facing the national destiny. The American dream, the central idea guiding all the human and cultural experiences of the Americans, and its failure, became the predominant motif of Fitzgerald's fiction, and like other distinguished American writers dealing with the national experience, he too revealed the inherent contradictions in the American promise, and its complete betrayal. He was fully aware of and intimately involved in the dilemma of the Americans and was deeply "concerned with the generic American character, the national 'style', and the native tradition." It is in this context that his perceptive criticism of the American dream during the post-war era has to be regarded as quite different from the general talk of disillusionment and frustration which became fashionable and empty literary clichés of the inferior writers during the twenties. In one of his letters Fitzgerald pungently remarked: "America's greatest promise is that something is going to happen, and after a while you get tired of waiting because nothing happens to people except that they grow old ... because America is the story of the moon that never rose." Fitzgerald's indictment of the American dream and his cult of disillusionment

were the result of his penetrating study of American culture and civilisation. "Fitzgerald was perhaps", observes Trilling, "the last notable writer to affirm the Romantic fantasy, descended from the Renaissance, of personal ambition and heroism, of life committed to, or thrown away for, some ideal of self."

His historical imagination and social insight penetrated far beneath the superficial glitter of the reckless twenties and found that the quest of an ideal society based on the American dream had somehow been hampered by the devastating forces that ranged through the continent after America decided to join the War. The American dream which had inspired the successive generations in America to realise an ideal society in the New World and thus provide solace to the suffering humanity had ceased to direct the actions of man in the changed environment. The Edenic purity of man that had been imagined by the Founding Fathers as the ultimate goal had been molested and the corruption resulting from the exclusive commercial pursuits had turned the American dream into a horrible nightmare. The nation was at the cross-roads and the society no longer respected the traditional values. Fitzgerald found that the "green light" that the American dream symbolised proved only an optical illusion engulfing the culture and civilisation in pitch darkness. But

the individual who, steeped in the concept of the American dream and unaware of the "wolves outside the cabin door", still sought to pursue his quest of realising the Dream met his inevitable doom. Undoubtedly, this is not entirely a new concept in relation to the literary criticism of Fitzgerald. Many critics have referred to the American dream in relation to his *The Great Gatsby* and some others have vaguely hinted about it while examining one novel or the other. But no full-length study has been made of all his novels relating them to the concept of the American dream. Most of those critics who have casually referred to it in relation to Fitzgerald have not adequately elaborated the significance of the American dream as conceived by him.

During the last three hundred years of American history, the concept of the American dream has passed through different phases and many thinkers have stressed its various aspects with varying degrees. From a purely spiritual and ideal existence dedicated to the higher goals of life, it just came to stand for the success-myth of Horatio Alger towards the end of the nineteenth century. It has, therefore, been my endeavour, in the next chapter, to project a clear view of the concept of the American dream. A thorough study of the concept, as it underwent different interpretations, was found essential for the precision and definition of the premises of the present study. The third chapter deals with the social and intellectual milieu of Fitzgerald. Without a proper knowledge of the social and intellectual
environment of the period, it is hardly possible to write with authenticity about a writer who lived so intimately with his times, especially the period which marked the turning point in the national history. The twenties and thirties, described by Dos Passos as "one of the damnedest tragic moments in history", were utterly indifferent to the imperatives of the Dream or the cultural mainstream of America. An effort has been made here to probe the devastating changes that were responsible for the destruction of all the old values and virtues. The next two chapters are the central ones and have been devoted to the Fitzgerald hero whose destiny symbolises the fate of the quester of the American dream as it stood during the post-war era. An innocent dreamer, dedicated to the higher goals of life, upholding the great traditional values, is determined to realise his dream. Unmindful and unaware of the vast corruption and careless irresponsibility that have infested the American society, the protagonist with his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life", confronts the society with his traditional virtues, advocated by the pioneers. But his values seem to be outdated as the society in which he wishes to realise the Dream is totally insensitive to the aspirations of such idealists. The two chapters devoted to the protagonist are based on the assumption that there is a dividing line between the two periods of

14 John Dos Passos, "A Letter from John Dos Passos", in Crack-Up, p. 311.
Fitzgerald's literary development. The earlier phase covers the first two novels, *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) which are comparatively less mature, and the later phase covers his great and more mature novels, *The Great Gatsby, Tender Is The Night* and *The Last Tycoon* (1941). I have deliberately restricted my study only to the novels of Fitzgerald as inclusion of the stories, more than a hundred in number, would have made the dissertation unwieldy and unmanageable. The sixth chapter, "The Tragic Vision of Fitzgerald" analyses, in brief, the tragic dimensions of the protagonist and is essential to a closer understanding of the character of the protagonist and Fitzgerald's indictment of the American dream. The chapter on Fitzgerald's aesthetic vision is the final chapter of the dissertation dealing with the style of Fitzgerald.

In order to avoid unnecessary confusion, I have followed the British spellings throughout. Bibliography at the end is only selective and by no means comprehensive; only those sources have been included which have either been cited in the text or have vitally affected the process of analysis and judgement.