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Political Reflection in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*

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Fitzgerald's fiction developed a more pessimistic outlook throughout his career, the transition to the vision advanced in *This Side of Paradise* is most significant. The disillusioning realization that there are limits to human accomplishment was the lesson learned by all liberals as the lasting realities of the post-war period became manifest. F. Scott Fitzgerald had reason to experience such disillusion in his personal life and to observe it in the world at large. This growing sense of pessimism is seen in his novels effectively.

General critical opinion about F. Scott Fitzgerald is called as the great chronicler of the American 1920s. But for the most part, Fitzgerald's works are seen as little more than detailed illustrations of the manners of the age. Few people Fitzgerald's fiction with any measure of political content. Even friends who knew Fitzgerald best maintain that he knew nothing about politics and had little interest in political matters.

Critic Scott Donaldson has set out to politicize somewhat the tarnished image of the American novelist. He has proposed three distinct stages in the political thought of F. Scott Fitzgerald. According to Donaldson, Fitzgerald experienced a disenchantment with politics that extended from his boyhood until the early 1930s. While the mid-thirties were marked by a well-documented interest in communism, Fitzgerald reached a mature understanding of political issues only in the final years left him before his death in December 1940. Fitzgerald's fiction, in fact is representative of life in the United States during the 1920s. It necessarily portrays many aspects of an emerging American ethic that both shaped a unique and important period in U.S. politics and was, as well, defined by it. The return to power of the Republican party in 1920 changed the course of American foreign policy and made possible the era of isolation, both diplomatic and social. It helped the fabled age of extravagance and narcissism in the 1920s America of which Fitzgerald was both an enthusiastic participant and a vehement critic.

The fundamental ideological transition experienced during the post-war years in America is seen as central to a reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's first two novels, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922). It is argued that the consistently developing sense of despair in Fitzgerald's early works can be traced back to the spiralling mood of liberal disillusion prevalent in the United States at the time surrounding the Republican ascendency. Fitzgerald's first two published novels emerged from a society that was a crucible of political change, it stands to reason that these books were colored by such a dramatic transition. In this way, the characteristic melancholy in Fitzgerald's fiction takes on a political character.

The basic ideological foundation operating in *This Side of Paradise* is liberal optimism that had abated little during the time. Matthew Bruccoli argues that 'The Romantic Egotist', a 120000-word manuscript written while Fitzgerald was in army training, should be considered a 'working draft' of *This Side of Paradise*. Certain that he would lay down his life for Wilson's ideals, Fitzgerald viewed 'The romantic Egotist' as a legacy to his youthful 'genious'. Basking in the glow of liberal platitudes of unfettered possibility, this was an optimistic time for Fitzgerald, as well as for the United States as a whole.

Fitzgerald used his first novel to give his unqualified blessing to society as he found it. But the young generation of angry American artists emerged during these years was fuelled more by impatience than despair. That such artists showed a dissatisfaction with their society should not detract from a recognition of the potential they saw in American life. It was not a question of whether the United States was capable of greatness, but more a question of when this greatness would be realized. The sense of possible achievement is developed throughout *This Side of Paradise* and eventually becomes the climax of the maturation of its protagonist, Amory Blaine.

Much of the novel is concerned with Amory's personal immaturity. Ingrained from his precocious adolescence, Amory retains 'his moodiness, his tendency to pose, his laziness, and his love of playing the fool'. He reveals that he hates 'to get anywhere by working for it' for fear that he will 'show the marks' of his labor. Always concerned with social standing, Amory strives to be one of the 'hot cats on top' at Princeton. While admitting that he is 'not a regular fellow', Amory claims paradoxically to 'loathe anyone else that isn't. The portrait of university life in *This Side of Paradise* is, for the most part,

one of intellectual stagnation. At Princeton, 'the best of Amory's intellect' is 'concentrated on matters of popularity, the intricacies of a university social system and American society as represented by Biltmore Teas and Hot Springs golf-links'. More importantly, the immature Amory embraces this narrow environment enthusiastically, gaining little more than the most superficial 'social sense' while at school.

The meagre sum of Amory's experiences his series of unsuccessful courtships, is 'hallowed by the haze of his own youth'. As time passes, Amory Blaine is unprepared for life as he finds it. He can only comprehend life as 'a succession of quick, unrelated scenes'. The deficiencies of his aimless, youthful behaviour are suggested by two events peripheral to Amory: the death of his reckless classmate Dick Humbird and the intellectual growth of his close colleague Burne Holiday. The unlikely apparition of Humbird's ghost during an evening spree in New York City renders a moral judgement on Amory's leisure activities. His intellectual pursuits are dwarfed by the realization that Holiday is developing an 'intense power' Amory lacks, an 'energy that (Burne) was now trying to orient with progress'.

Amory's personal development is hindered throughout *This Side of Paradise* by the reality behind his observation that American society is changing all around him. It records his attempts to take his bearings within the volatile social milieu of the second decade of the twentieth century. Stephen Blaine, Amory's father, 'grew wealthy at thirty through the death of two elder brothers.' But the steadily dwindling Blaine family fortune gives testament to the fact that for Amory's generation, even established birthrights cannot be assured simply as a matter of course. Beatrice is a Renaissance figure, a great international humanist who always wanted Amory to attend Eton and Oxford and confides to him, 'My regret is that you haven't been abroad'. A great admirer of European culture not yet ravaged by the First World War, presumably, she takes some solace in the hope that America may be 'The great coming nation—yet'.

But in reality, the world known to Amory's parents has been lost forever. It is revealed by Amory's eventual realization that 'modern life' has begun to change 'year by year, ten times faster than it ever has before'. Monsignor Darcy, Amory's father figure and spiritual guide observes that Amory's 'generation is growing hard'. For Amory life was a damned muddle and he takes refuge in his pose as 'a cynical idealist'. However, in Amory's increasingly astute judgement, the very cornerstones of American life are in

danger of crumbling. Amory quits his advertising position in frustration by remarking that an education that cost 'about ten thousand dollars' has prepared him for nothing more than a job that earns 'thirty-five dollars a week'. Amory's observations finally lead to the brink of utter resignation.

The war clearly occupies a central position in this assertion. Amory, who once believed that the war was like 'an amusing melodrama', yet 'tiresome' in that it prevented leisure travel abroad, concludes that war 'sort of killed individualism' for those of his generation. For Amory, seeing the world in the wake of the war, 'there were no wise men; there were no more heroes'. The war serves to confirm his belief that 'no man can stand prominence these days'. Amory singles out Woodrow Wilson as a man who is criticized both for being unrealistic and for actually going out and 'making his dreams realities'. Amory views a 'romantic person' as one who 'has a desperate confidence' that things will not last. In this way, Amory can assume 'the eternal attempt to attach a positive value to life' by taking advantage of the fact that as a developing 'personage', he is allowed 'a clean start', something Monsignor Darcy had tried to teach him years before.

Amory's principal attempt at a new beginning in *This Side of Paradise* is his tentative adoption of socialist dogma. At the end of the book, his new-found 'forte... being very poor at present'. However, others have come to place on Fitzgerald reflecting Amory's desire to take control of his life at long last. In the end, Amory's socialist stand is seen as a rekindling of the traditional liberal fascination with the ideals of socialism and it reaffirms Amory's belief in the power of 'the will of man' as a tool for reform. But on a more important personal level, Amory's hopes rest not with grand projects of betterment, with the good to be derived from the power of self-knowledge. He declares, 'I know myself...but that is all'. The necessity of self-knowledge coupled with the suggested impossibility of being certain about anything else, ultimately makes up the central idea in *This Side of Paradise*.

In spite of Fitzgerald's inherent scepticism, the message of his first novel is actually quite positive. The liberal potentials declared by Amory Blaine, are considerably different from those espoused by Woodrow Wilson. Most obviously, Wilson's liberal ideals were all characteristically expressed in conventional Christian terms, on the contrary Amory's views are decidedly secular. While Wilson's objectives were rooted in religious conviction, Amory claims to be 'a passionate agnostic' or 'rather pagan' and unable to see how

religion has 'the slightest bearing on life'. Monsignor Darcy, maintains that Amory's 'great faith' is simply 'uncrystallized' and this leaves open some possibility of spiritual redemption. Unlike traditional liberal doctrine that puts great faith in the power of education, Amory continues to reject instinctively all institutions as flawed. But Amory Blaine's conclusions are in line with the broader pre-war liberal conviction that the individual citizen could do much to help reshape mankind. Amoy's attitudes suggest that at present, it would be native for him to speculate on the reform of the entire post-war world, but he is perceptive enough to recognize that the resuscitation of the self is the first step in redeeming the world around him.

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