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THE POLITICAL REVIEW OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD *THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED*

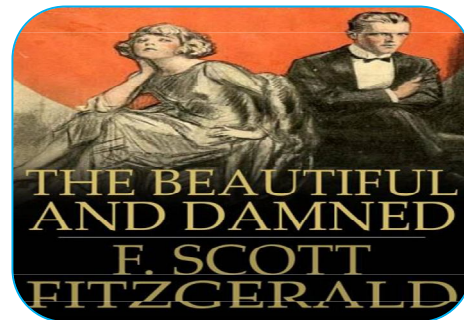
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ABSTRACT:

Fitzgerald's The Beautiful and Damned seek to chart the possible progress of individuals in the United States in the immediate post-war era. Written during a time of great personal optimism Fitzgerald attempts to vindicate with some reservations, many of the liberal ideals prevalent at the time of America's involvement in World War I.

KEYWORDS: *Beautiful and Damned, youthful exhilaration, restless generation.*



INTRODUCTION

Anthony Patch begins *The Beautiful and Damned* with the belief that he will accomplish some quiet, subtle thing. While living in Europe, Anthony has a delightful sense of being very young and free in a civilization that was very old and free. But such youthful exhilaration is short-lived and Anthony comes to acknowledge his misgivings. He exclaims, 'One minute it's my world, and the next I'm the world's fool'.

In *The Beautiful and Damned*, Fitzgerald starts identifying clearly the role played by the war in transforming society. The war is the root of the social disillusion in the novel. Originally, the conflict is notable only because it keeps the newlywed Patches from going abroad on their honeymoon. In time, the characters come to adopt a more insolent attitude towards the conflict. Maury Noble, Anthony's friend, comments that the 'restless' United States wants to have some fun from the hostilities overseas. The war gave a restless generation something to talk about—and almost everyone fully enjoyed it. Society is caught up in the pageantry of American involvement. Anthony's wife Gloria reflects on this huge red light of patriotism which is streaming across the nation.

The war is finally identified as a malignant force and it successfully shakes the country out of its leisure, it was with fearful results. Thinking about the conflict, Gloria believes that here at length went the world to inevitable and well-merited destruction. In a very curious and chilling way, Gloria expresses an equivalent of the imperialistic basis of the First World War when she claims she would sacrifice a hundred thousand...a million people, presumably for one palace full of pictures from the Old World and exquisite things. Gloria's declaration that the great mass of human life is essentially valueless to the privileged class anticipates the total massacre of the great war. The view of post-war diplomacy expressed in *The Beautiful and Damned* is also quite sardonic.

The negative picture of society in the shadow of war is echoed throughout the novel. On her honeymoon, Gloria talks about the impossibility of perpetuating a way of life and the necessity of social decay by commenting that trying to preserve a century by keeping its relics up to date is like keeping a dying man alive by stimulants. Richard Caramel, Gloria's cousin, works briefly among the 'debris of Europe', the immigrants who 'kept coming inexhaustibly..with the same wrongs, the same exceptionally ugly faces and very much the same smells'. It is observed that in the United States, 'prices had risen alarmingly' after the war and Europe has become an inept refuge, good only because one could live there cheaply. Joseph Bloeckman, a movie producer and Gloria's former suitor is compelled amidst intolerance to change his name to 'Black' and Anthony harangues him as a 'Goddamn Jew'.

In this spiral of decay and prejudice, the possibility of reform is repudiated. The figure of Adam Patch, Anthony's grandfather and a fervent reformer is considered by some as a fine example of an American. But he also displayed himself a rabid monomaniac an unqualified nuisance and an intolerable bore. Anthony's hope of overturning the amended will of old lies in the fact that the legal system will respond to the assumption that people are tired of reformers right now. More generally, the liberal ideal of 'service' is debunked.

The impression of intervention is itself a cynical revision. His experience in 'service' is short-lived. The monotony begins to weary him and he questions the expediency of his calling before rejecting it outright. More critical, is the corruption of Fred Paramour, a Harvard classmate of Anthony who is doing service work in Stamford. A lifetime teetotaler, Paramour is reduced to a crawling drunkard in the chaos of a wild party at the Patch summer home.

Individual disillusion also runs rampant. Once again, politics is seen as ineffective. Anthony concludes for himself, that 'I do nothing, for there's nothing I can do that's worth doing'. Very little seems possible and Anthony believes that even those things that may be attained become worthless.

In the absence of true lasting happiness, Fitzgerald's characters seek solace in shallow pleasures. Gloria pledges that she will never give a damn for anyone other than Anthony and herself and the couple live their lives to 'seek the moment's happiness as fervently and persistently as possible. Finally in desperation Gloria embraces her mother's belief in education and reincarnation of the soul, exclaiming, 'I don't care about truth. I want some happiness'.

An appropriate case study in the adaptability to the new realities discovered by Anthony's generation can be found in Maury Noble. He claims that 'happiness... is only the first hour after the alleviation of some intense misery'. He toasts the defeat of democracy and the fall of Christianity. Typically intolerant, Maury calls for the immediate electrocution of all ignorant and dirty people. A religious sceptic, his dolor is rooted in his belief that 'Experience is not worth the getting' and man has 'no ultimate goal'. He belittles Richard Caramel's instinctive 'urge toward truth'. Like Amory Blaine, Maury acknowledges 'the tremendous importance of myself to me' but he can find no avenue to channel his knowledge in the attainment of social good. Instead, his accomplishment is ruled by almighty 'Circumstances'. But unlike Anthony Patch, Maury Nobel forges ahead in the very face of his misgivings. In a conversation between Anthony, Gloria and her.

Fitzgerald captures quite cleverly the essence of an entire generation that embraced the Republican party and a return to 'normalcy' after the war. But while Maury is able to disperse shattered ideals in the search for personal gain, Anthony finds his disillusion paralysing. He regrets 'the collapse of an insufficient and wretched idealism'. This leads him to despair.

For Anthony, "life is so damned herd" that he wants to enlist for combat overseas just so he can die. Gloria believes that Anthony's story of kicking a helpless cat represents all 'the pain and bitterness and cruelty of all the world'. She slides towards despair, recognizing an 'existence without hope, without happiness. All this despondency precedes the success of their lawsuit and Anthony's simultaneous breakdown. Although Anthony and Gloria realize the inheritance of thirty million dollars, it comes at the cost of their basic human dignity. Ironically Anthony's 'hard fight' ironically leads only to more suffering.

Although F. Scott Fitzgerald claimed, that his 'political conscience had scarcely existed' during the twenties except 'as an element of irony in his work, his fiction seems at some level at least

concerned with problems related to the political developments of the post-war era in the United States. While it is true that one cannot readily arrange Fitzgerald's political views in any coherent, ideologically consistent fashion in his writings at this time, neither can one divorce his texts from their social context, a society disjunct and undergoing a dramatic political change. If one can accept that political policy was implicated in the complex network of social change at the time, one must conclude that what Fitzgerald uncovered is, in some sense at least, subject matter of a political nature.

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