

Treatment of social relationships in Francis Scott Fitzgerald's novels

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Abstract

Fitzgerald's treatment of the social relationships was highly insightful adumbrating the future changes of the dynamic society he dealt with. He had the foresight to see several things in advance like any other great writer. From the tendencies of the youth and the old alike he knew what dreaded things were going to happen in the imminent future. He was apprehensive of such a situation and wished to avoid it as far as possible. He knew that the Americans were heading towards a disastrous plight from which they would find it almost impossible to extricate themselves. He did not want his country men to be entrapped like that. So through the realistic as well as romantic portrayal of the would be society with all its dangerous implications Fitzgerald gave a shock-treatment to the reading public and helped them disentangle themselves from their perilous occupations and preoccupations.

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Introduction

Relationships are central to the sustenance and survival of any society and the American society is no exception to this rule. 'Society' itself is generally defined by sociologists as a 'network of relationships'. But for these relationships, society and human life itself cease to have any meaning. Social relationships bring about solidarity in society and fulfillment in individual lives, for, man is 'a social being'. Gregariousness is a major attribute of man. Social relationships strengthen the bonds among different individuals and enable them to work together and involve in diverse activities. Relationships, particularly positive and healthy relationships, stimulate progress and well-being in any given society. It is good relationships that all our moral principles and spiritual values centre around. Hence literary writers, intellectuals and religious people always give a lot of importance to social relationships and their proper maintenance. Literary writers subject social relationships to a searching scrutiny to see if the existing state of affairs is beneficial or harmful to a given society.

Fitzgerald being a sensitive writer endowed with deep psychological insight treated the social relationships of America with exceptional brilliance and pointed out their weaknesses and created great awareness among readers about the seamy side of the degenerating American society which was badly in need of regeneration. In the American society of the times 'dissociative social processes' were predominant and threatened to tear to shreds the very fabric of society. Fitzgerald wanted to strengthen the 'associative processes of society' which would hold the members of society together and unify them. In his comparative study between Frank Norris and Scott Fitzgerald as moralists, S. S. Moorty pertinently remarks:

The surfaces of *The Beautiful and Damned* and *The Great Gatsby* do display the glitter of the twenties; but beneath the surface of the two novels can be seen the writer's disillusionment with the moral degeneration of Anthony and

Gloria Patch, and Tom and Daisy Buchanan's moral indifference, their spiritual sterility and rottenness and everything related to their money and its values. It does less than justice to Fitzgerald's moral vision to remark that he was more concerned with delineating the garishness and tomfoolery of the rich than with making a moral commentary on some of the failures of postwar American society. Fitzgerald was a serious novelist with a moral consciousness and not merely a refined spokesman of the Jazz Age.^[1]

According to sociologists like Leopold Von Wiese there are two kinds of fundamental social processes in human society. First, the associative process concerning contact, approach, adaptation, etc, and secondly, dissociative processes like competition and conflict. The American society lacked the associative processes. It lacked vibrant contacts, positive approaches, and healthy adaptations. What in fact existed was a 'subversive' tendency rooted in conflict and unhealthy competition. These conflicts and competitive spirit bred numerous social issues posing a great threat to social stability. Fitzgerald fiercely criticized the decadent tendencies of the social relationships in the American society and minced no words in this matter, for he was obsessed with a moral mission as he himself had once affirmed in a letter to his daughter, Scottie: "I am too much a moralist at heart, and really want to preach at people in some acceptable form, rather than to entertain them."^[2]

The Mode or Manner of Treatment

When we consider the first question of mode or manner of treatment of social relationships, his art of treating social issues comes to the fore. Fitzgerald was basically a romantic writer, but he tempered his writings with sufficient realism also. Hence his mode of treatment is in an exquisite blend of romanticism and realism. The reason for this artistic equilibrium is his emulation of the Keatsian objectivity. Keats was his artistic model throughout his chequered writing career. Fitzgerald's eyes were fixed at the social realities of the day

and he was deeply pained by the sickening tendencies overwhelming the American society. Through Cecilia, the main narrator of the *The Last Tycoon*, Fitzgerald reveals the striking change coming over in relationships in the America of the post-depression period and the great stature of Stahr, the protagonist of the novel:

He spoke and waved back as the people streamed by in the darkness, looking, I suppose, a little like the Emperor and the Old Guard. There is no world so but it has its heroes, and Stahr was the hero. Most of these men had been here a long time – through the beginnings and the great upset, when sound came, and the three years of depression, he had seen that no harm came to them. The old loyalties were trembling now, there were clay feet everywhere; but still he was their man, the last of the princes. And their greeting was a sort of low cheer as they went by.^[3]

In this way, he was a realist in the full sense of the term, but in his treatment of the matter he wanted the issues to be read as an experience for the reader. He wanted the readers to feel and imagine the intensity of the experience. So he wrote both imaginatively and emotively making his writing both a romantic and realistic experience for the readers. Such a rendering has made his writing basically romantic. Nevertheless, beneath the romantic apparel is the solid reality without any distortion or mutilation. Behind the façade of romanticism is the shining gem of reality in all its fullness and entirety. Here lies the ability of Fitzgerald. Further, very often he refrained from making any sort of value judgments. He used his unique technique of ‘double vision’ or artistic and philosophic ‘ambivalence’ and thought it to be the sign of a first rate artistic genius, and quite rightly too, for to achieve an artistic balance between two opposing claims was to remain like an objective observer of both the sides of the reality and yet distancing oneself from any sort of bias. Even Cecilia’s relationship with her father, Brady, smacks of ambivalence and at the same time the fact observed – of his cunningness, hollowness and suspicious nature that stand in striking contrast to Stahr’s brilliant, noble nature – is quite true:

I loved father – in a sort of irregular graph with many low swoops – but I began to see that his strong will didn’t fill him out as a passable man. Most of what he accomplished boiled down to shrewd. He had acquired with luck and shrewdness a quarter interest in a booming circus – together with young Stahr. That was his life’s effort – all the rest was an instinct of hang on. Of course, he talked that double talk to Wall Street about how mysterious it was to make a picture, but Father didn’t know the ABC’s of dubbing or even cutting. Nor had he learned much about the feel of America as a bar boy in Ballyhegan, nor did he have any more than a drummer’s sense of a story. On the other hand, he didn’t have concealed paresis like --; he came to the studio before noon, and with a suspiciousness developed like a muscle, it was hard to put anything over on him.^[4]

He saw the pros and the cons of the situation but sided neither, leaving the matter to the judgment of the readers. Hence, Fitzgerald’s treatment or rather the handling of his raw materials was really artistically superb and highly skillful.

An important point in question is his charming and admirable style in which he wrote about the diverse aspects of social relationships and other matters. It was generally quite pellucid and translucent. Brevity and economy are two important aspects of his charming style. The style which Fitzgerald used

in various novels differed to some extent depending upon the technique he adopted and thematic content. From this perspective all his novels differed one from the other. Even then his style in general had some common characteristics. It was blankets of poetic prose using a highly emotive and imaginative language making use of plenty of images and appropriate figures of speech. His descriptions were very often graphic and the expressions and phrases well-chiselled. For instance:

On the centre of the lake, cooled by the piercing current of the Rhone, lay the true centre of the Western World. Upon it floated swans like boats and boats like swans, both lost in the nothingness of the heartless beauty. It was a bright day, with sun glittering on the grass beach below and the white courts of the Kursaal. The figures on the courts threw no shadows.^[5]

Wherever he had to express the abstract he did it through the concrete, a fine literary device which all the great writers judiciously used from time immemorial. His style is also noted for the symbols and archetypes and tropes he used in order to bring about the desirable effects on the readers. *The Great Gatsby* is the supreme example incorporating all these fine aspects of his brilliant and graceful style. There is a highly level of economy and concentration in his style in *The Great Gatsby*. A detailed examination of the diverse aspects of his style will be undertaken in Chapter Five. But his alterations in style in different fictional works were in consonant with the change in the subject matter and techniques adopted as also the types of characters introduced. Fitzgerald had to strike a balance between the genteel tradition and the challenges of the changed times like the World War-I that protested the genteel tradition. But he did well in this regard and adopted a style that was classic. Sklar aptly remarks:

“Of the important American novelists, F. Scott Fitzgerald was the last to grow believing in the genteel romantic ideals that pervaded late nineteenth-century American culture. Santayana said of the brothers William and Henry James that one, the novelist, overcame the genteel tradition in the classic way, by understanding it, the other, the philosopher, overcame it in the romantic way, by continuing it into its opposite. Overcoming the genteel tradition was also, in Fitzgerald’s case the prerequisite for creating lasting art. The genteel tradition was a mode of order; by criticizing the genteel tradition, adapting it, and finally transforming its values, Fitzgerald more than any other American novelist of the present century attained in his fiction the power to create an alternative vision of order, an Apollonian vision of moral order and measured beauty.”^[6]

Fitzgerald’s treatment of the social relationships was also highly insightful adumbrating the future changes of the dynamic society he dealt with. He had the foresight to see several things in advance like any other great writer. From the tendencies of the youth and the old alike he knew what dreaded things were gong to happen in the imminent future. He was apprehensive of such a situation and wished to avoid it as far as possible. He knew that the Americans were heading towards a disastrous plight from which they would find it almost impossible to extricate themselves. He did not want his country men to be entrapped like that. So through the realistic as well as romantic portrayal of the would be society with all its dangerous implications Fitzgerald gave a shock-treatment to the reading public and helped them disentangle themselves from the perilous occupations and preoccupations.

Another aspect his writing was his comprehensive treatment of the social relationships. The multifaceted aspect of the social relationships in America found a ready and beautiful artistic treatment in Fitzgerald's writings. There is hardly any aspect of the relationships in the American society that did not get a suitable and critical presentation in Fitzgerald's fictional world. His searching eyes penetrated social fabric in all its complexity and diversity. He wanted this to be subjected to a grave treatment for the edification of the general public in addition to the aesthetic pleasure it afforded. Novel, as he himself once declared, was his first passion and he held it to be superior to other forms like short stories.

He took to novel writing not for money but for the fulfillment of his artistic ambition to write the best novel in the world. This implied great art and weighty themes which would include a faithful picture of the society of which he was a part. This he rightly did, and the *The Great Gatsby* turned out to be one of the best novels of America (as he had intended) scaling classical heights and immortalizing the writer himself. There is a vast repertoire of social issues dexterously handled within the limited compass of this superbly compressed great classic. The other novels too have an equally good number of social problems but the treatment was different, though not much inferior.

References

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