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Fitzgerald and the South: The Poetry of a Northern Man's Dream

In an essay entitled "The New Provincialism," historian Allen Tate fashions a cogent characterization of the term Southern Writer. His definition eloquently looks beyond the diverse styles of literary giants like Faulkner and O'Connor and captures the similarities that lie at the heart of their message. The preservation of the more noble aspects from this region's heritage is a unifying theme among these canonized Southern writers. Tate surmises that the people of the war-ravaged South wanted to again possess a voice in the events that were shaping the early 20th Century. As the South forever left the past Tate remarks some gave "a backward glance as [they] stepped over the border. This backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present" (545). However, there is a voice among these twentieth century authors that, although born in St. Paul, Minnesota, writes about this region in a manner that easily compares to Wolfe or Welty. Because of his decidedly past-conscious style, F. Scott Fitzgerald should be considered a Southern writer. Fitzgerald critic C. Hugh Holman writes that Fitzgerald casts a "backward glance at what seemed to him a lost world of tradition, graciousness, and beauty. Out of the resulting nostalgia and the sense of loss, he develops the strongest emotion [that his] stories evoke, for they are all tales built around the backward glance"(56). Through investigating Fitzgerald's familial connections with the South, deconstructing his Southern settings and characters, and exploring major themes in his writing, his reader is given an insightful look into the dream of "Old South" that in Fitzgerald's words is "Northern man's poetry" ("Last Belles" 251).

During his life, Fitzgerald had two important relationships with Southerners who greatly influenced Fitzgerald's preoccupation with the land below the Mason-Dixon Line. First, his father, Edward Fitzgerald of Maryland, preeminently shaped Fitzgerald's attitudes toward the South. The elder Fitzgerald's influence was so great that upon his death, Scott wrote that his father was his "only moral guide" and developed in him a "sense of [life's] fundamental decencies" (qtd. in Donaldson 13). Fitzgerald critic John T. Irwin states that the author's father filled young Scott's head with romanticized tales of Southern chivalry. Irwin writes, "Fitzgerald's father...was every inch a gentleman—gracious Southern manners, impeccably groomed, a natural storyteller with a taste of Romantic poetry, and a highly developed sense of honor that he tried to instill in his son" (5). To say that the Fitzgerald family were Confederate sympathizers during the Civil War would be an understatement. Biographer Andre LeVot notes that Edward told young Scott of instances when his family "led rebel spies across the Potomac, helped a sniper to escape, and watched General Jubal Early's troops march past the family farm in Montgomery County on their last attempt to seize the Federal capital" (qtd. in Irwin 2). Biographer Fred Mizner remarks that Fitzgerald was so fascinated by American history that he could remember small details about the Revolutionary and Civil War. Before his high school graduation, Fitzgerald began to write his own history of the United States (qtd. in Donaldson 15). The writer took great pride in his father's heritage and seemed to find his identify. He sympathized with the lost cause of the Confederacy and the morality that depended upon a code of honor that best expressed itself in manners and gracious living. Fitzgerald admonished his daughter Scottie in 1940 to understand the importance of comparing her actions in social situations to those of her mother because, the author wrote, "Southern manners are better..." (Letters 76).

Scottie's mother and Fitzgerald's beloved wife Zelda Sayer was also an important influence on the author. He describes his wife as "the very incarnation of a Southern belle" (qtd. in Donaldson 4). She was a girl from a well-placed family in Montgomery, Alabama whom Fitzgerald met while he was stationed at Camp Sheridan near the city. Nancy Milford, author of the definitive biography of Zelda, claims that says that many who knew the pair felt that Scott fell in love with Zelda's image as much as her own self because she brought "glitteringly alive" his own preoccupation with the South (56).

Milford also writes that Fitzgerald remarked on one occasion, "I married the heroine of my stories" (77). Zelda herself shows up in many of his stories through character or through inspiration. Her vivacious yet regal personality is reflected in many of his female protagonists including Daisy in The Great Gatsby, Sally Carrol in "The Ice Palace," Nancy Lamar in "The Jelly-Bean," and Ailie Calhoun in "The Last of the Belles." In Tender is the Night, perhaps Fitzgerald's most autobiographical work, Zelda's declining mental health is detailed in the character of Nicole. Zelda also served as an adviser to Scott. He wrote in the preface to "The Jelly-Bean," "It was the first story in which I had a collaborator. For, finding that I was unable to manage the crapshooting episode, I turned it over to my wife, who, as a Southern girl, was presumably an expert on the technique and terminology of that great sectional pastime" ("Jelly Bean" 1). Editor Andrew Turnbull states that "Fitzgerald admitted to [publisher] Alexander McKaig that [Zelda] was 'entirely responsible' for the creation of ['The Ice Palace']" (Letters 115). Zelda's love for her homeland is best illustrated in an incident that is also told by Turnbull. He writes, "To celebrate their engagement, [Scott and Zelda] strolled past the headstones of the Confederate dead, and Zelda told him that he would never understand how she felt about those graves..." (Letters 87). Surely this relationship filled with romantic incidents such as this fueled the fire of Fitzgerald's idealistic notions toward the region.

The influences of his father and wife resound when one deconstructs Fitzgerald's use of Southern settings and characters. This exploration is an important part of understanding his link to Southern writers. Robert Roulston, critic of Fitzgerald's later works, remarks, "Not only do his earliest juvenile works and many of his mature short stories deal with the South; all five of his novels contain southern characters and scenes set in the region... These writings express an attitude toward the South that often epitomizes for [Fitzgerald] glamour and romance" (157).

In his novels, the South serves as a secondary setting for several important episodes. It is the background for the important Dorothy episode in Beautiful and the Damned, and the setting of Daisy and Gatsby's courtship in The Great Gatsby. In addition, the South is the locale of many forgotten short stories written in the 1920's that were published in magazines and later anthologized. Among these are the Tarleton trilogy consisting of "The Ice Palace," "The Jelly-Bean," and "The Last of the Belles." C. Hugh Holman, in his criticism on the Trilogy rightly claims, "In this trilogy Fitzgerald said the most about the South and the contrast of North and South that he was to say, and there the Southern belle and her role are most clearly delineated" (55).

The trilogy cannot be classified as a piece within the local color genre. Rather, Fitzgerald creates a Southern ambience instead of a specific place with streets and comparable landmarks. Even the name Tarleton is fictional. Rather than focusing his reader's attention on street signs and the location of the local post office, Fitzgerald creates memorable scenery and glowing landscapes. In the opening of "The Ice Palace", the author paints a gilded portrait of the region:

The sunlight dripped over the house like golden paint over an art-jar, and the freckling shadows here and there only intensified the rigor of the bath of light.

The Butterworth and Larkin houses flanking were entrenched behind great stodgy trees; only the Happer house took the full sun, and all day long faced the dusty

road-street with a tolerant kindly patience. This was the city of Tarleton in southernmost Georgia, September afternoon. (61)

This gleaming depiction of the region with its protective trees and white-columned houses creates a romantic vision of the antebellum age. Through imagery like this, Fitzgerald's depiction of the South clearly marks a nostalgic backward glance.

In addition to the setting of many of his stories, Fitzgerald's treatment of the southern belle in the trilogy demonstrates the investment of his romantic notions in his golden girl image. Anne Goodwn Jones, Professor of Women's Studies at the University of Florida, writes that one of the ideological functions of the Southern girl, as late as the 1920's, was to "to provide a container for the conscious that would perpetuate ideals without danger of contact with reality" (1528). By creating characters that symbolized revered Southern ideals, Fitzgerald keeps the Southern myth alive through his women. The women become his cultural representations of the South.

In "The Ice Palace," protagonist Sally Carroll Happer and her double Margery Lee. Both of these characters embody Fitzgerald's southern belle mystique. He writes of Sally Carroll, "Hanging around [her was] not at all difficult; a crowd of little girls had grown up beautifully, the amazing Sally Carroll foremost among them; and they enjoyed being swum with and danced with and made love to in the flower-filled summery evenings[The girls] were brought up on memories instead of money" (Ice Palace 62). Sally Carroll herself is intrigued by the past as evidenced in her infatuation with the deceased Margery Lee. As she is looking over her headstone, Sally Carroll describes her mental recreation of this dead young woman: "Oh, she was sweet, Harry! And she was the sort of girl born to stand on a wide, pillared porch and welcome folks in" (Ice Palace 65). Critic John Kuehl writes in a psychological criticism of this story, "...Fitzgerald intended his heroine [Sally Carroll] to be the reincarnation of an archetypal

predecessor [Margery Lee]...”(178). This criticism plays itself out in a climatic scene of the story. The ghost of her deceased double visits the protagonist, close to death, literally and figuratively, lost in an icy labyrinth in the North. It is the warmth of the South that she carries within herself, embodied by Margery Lee that keeps Sally Carroll alive during her imprisonment in the icy palace. Fitzgerald records:

A long single file of minutes went by, and with a great weariness [Sally Carroll] felt like closing her eyes. Then some one seemed to sit down near her and take her face in warm, soft hands. She looked up gratefully. ‘Why, it’s Margery Lee,’ she crooned softly to herself. ‘I knew you’d come.’ It really was Margery Lee, and she was just as Sally Carroll had known she would be, with a young, white brow, and wide welcoming eyes, and a hoop-skirt of some material that was quite comforting to rest on. (“Ice Palace” 80)

Both Sally Carroll and Margery Lee serve the myth of the Southern belle as created by Fitzgerald. These women both serve for Fitzgerald as archetypal figures for the society that perpetuated the ideals that he found lost in his world.

A similar depiction of the Southern Belle can be found in “The Jelly-Bean.” This story’s belle is Nancy Lamar. She is not the protagonist but serves an important purpose in the story nonetheless. Outwardly, Nancy is demure and beautiful and with her beauty attracts attention everywhere she goes. The author writes:

[Nancy] was dressed in yellow organdie, a costume of a hundred cool corners, with three tears of ruffles and a big bow in the back until she shed black and yellow around her in a sort of phosphorescent luster. She had a mouth like a remembered kiss....The Jelly-bean’s eyes opened wide and a lump arose in his

throat...For the first time in his life [Jim] felt a vague and romantic yearning. A picture of her began to form in his imagination...("Jelly-Bean" 6)

Through these thoughts, Fitzgerald constructs for his reader the process of making an ideal. He freezes the creation of Nancy's belle persona in Jim's mind and in the mind of his reader. Just as Sally Carroll, Nancy serves Fitzgerald's agenda to maintain the southern myth because she contains the mythical images of the southern belle.

The final golden girl of the Tarleton trilogy is Ailie Calhoun. Fitzgerald captures her essence brilliantly when he writes:

There she was—the southern type in all its purity.... She had the adroitness sugar-coated with sweet, voluble simplicity, the suggested background of devoted fathers, brothers and admirers stretching back into the South's heroic age, the unflinching coolness acquired in the endless struggle with the heat. There were notes in her voice that ordered slaves around, that withered up Yankee captains, and then soft, wheedling notes that mingled in unfamiliar loveliness with the night. ("Last Belles" 241)

Because of this strong representative description, Fitzgerald creates Ailie to be, more than any of his other characters, a cultural representative for her region. In this story, the author's protagonist, an unnamed narrator, falls in love with Ailie but must go North after his military stay in Tarleton is finished. Six years after he leaves, he wistfully reminisces about his love. The belle has made a lasting impression on his mind just as the South has left its memory etched on Fitzgerald's consciousness. The narrator wistfully reminisces, "Ailie Calhoun was something that blew a little in my mind on warm nights when I remembered the magnolia flowers" (Last Belles 250). The narrator is reminded of his past love as he watches a "girl in stiff pink organdie, [throwing] her arms around a man...It seemed to me that she was bearing him off into the lost

midsummer world of my early twenties, where time had stood still and charming girls, dimly seen like the past itself, still loitered along the dusky streets. I suppose that poetry is a Northern man's dream of the South" (Last Belles 251). The narrator comes back to Tarleton to find his lost love, but notices profound changes in his beloved. These changes within the representative figure of Ailie symbolize the differences that Fitzgerald recognized in the South during the turn of the century. In his characteristic style, Fitzgerald glances lovingly to the past in this description of Ailie. The narrator says, "At once, I saw she had a different line. The modulations of pride, the vocal hints that she knew the secrets of a brighter, finer antebellum day, were gone from her voice; there was no time for them now as it rambled on in the half-laughing, half desperate banter of the newer South" (Last Belles 251). On this return, critic Holman aptly states, "In going back, he knows that [Ailie] and all she represents has already been lost through the passage of time itself....The Southern belle has her greatest value as a symbol of that time arrested in the emotions (64).

For Scott Fitzgerald, all of his Southern belles possess a potent aura, one that his readers feel through description, action, and patterns of idealistic memories. The Southern belle, at least in Tarleton, was wistful nostalgia made flesh. Sally Carroll, Nancy Lamar, and Ailie Calhoun all represent societal ideals that Fitzgerald greatly valued.

In addition the familial connections and depiction of Southern characters, Fitzgerald's romanticism appears in themes that he employs within many of his stories. The first of those themes is voiced by critic Holman, "The plot lines in each of the Tarleton stories rest upon a contrast between the North and the South, and the central figure in that contrast is to a certain extent a Northern outsider who finds in the South an attractive beauty and order" (60). This beauty and order that the foreigner finds is contained not only in the landscapes but also in the actions and the personalities of the society. Of course, it is not the New South that the non-native

is attracted to, but the noble Old South that still lives within some—a place where manners and civility ruled. This is the South that Fitzgerald wanted his reader to be captured by. In “The Ice Palace,” the warmth and beauty of the land warm the heart of Sally Carroll’s Minnesota fiancé Harry Bellamy. The outsider of “The Jelly-Bean,” Ogden Merrit is taken romantic captive by Nancy Lamar, who represents the charm of the region. The South that is manifested in the character of Ailie Calhoun continues to haunt the narrator of “The Last of the Belles”.

Another theme found within Fitzgerald’s work is the eternal struggle between money and class. This theme is one that was inspired by Fitzgerald’s life. In a letter to John O’Hara, Fitzgerald wrote:

I am half black Irish and half old American stock with the usual exaggerated ancestral pretensions. The black Irish half of the family had the money and looked down upon the Maryland side who had, and really had, that certain series of reticence and obligations that go under the poor old shattered word ‘breeding’ ...I developed a two-cylinder inferiority complex. (Letters 503)

Given Fitzgerald’s tendency to incorporate autobiographical and historical events within his writing, it seems probable that these two families took on an important meaning in his life. As Fitzgerald editor and scholar John Kuehl states, “His financially inept but ‘Old American stock’ came to symbolize the pre-Civil War southern aristocracy while his mother’s financially successful but ‘black Irish’ relatives came to represent post-Civil war northern *nouveaux riches*” (35). This theme manifests itself in the relationships of the main characters of several of his novels including The Great Gatsby, This Side of Paradise, and Tender Is The Night as well as within the Tarleton trilogy. “The Ice Palace” uncovers the money and power of the North but also reveals the lack of warmth and love that it has for its visitors. In “The Jelly-Bean,” Jim is a poor man, never able to win the affections of Nancy Lamar because of her attraction to wealthy

Northerner Ogden Merritt. This struggle is also seen in “The Last of the Belles” in the poverty of the South in comparison with that of the narrator’s physical experiences in the North. Because of its repeated incidence throughout Fitzgerald’s work, it is easy to recognize the importance of Northern money versus Southern breeding in his body of works.

In “The Ice Palace,” Sally Carroll makes a statement that perfectly imitates what became Fitzgerald’s role of writer and details his reasons for preserving the history of the South. She eloquently states:

I’ve tried to have the old time live in me....I’ve tried to live up to those past standards of noblesse oblige—there’s just the last remnants of it, you know, like the roses of an old garden dying all around us—streaks of strange courtliness and chivalry in some of these boys an’ stories I uses to hear from a Confederate soldier...There was something. There was some thing! (Ice Palace 66)

Perpetuating the history of the South is important to Fitzgerald whether living up to a standard instilled by his father or by his romantic imagination. Because he preserves the roses from the dying garden of the Old South, he memorializes a way of life that no longer exists. His readers experience Fitzgerald’s love for the area and its ideology. Because of these tender portrayals, Fitzgerald can easily be counted as a Southern writer. The past is always a part of the present in the author’s depictions of this region. Editor and author John T. Irwin sagaciously states, “Fitzgerald, consciously or not, is a Southern writer....because he believed...in this century [,] breeding, good instincts, reticences, and obligations...[would] lose in the struggle [between money and breeding,] so that his loyalty, in true Southern fashion, was to a lost cause and to the past” (23).

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