“Good-bye, All My Fathers”: Modernism, Displacement, and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Fiction of the Early 1930s

A thesis submitted to the Miami University Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for University Honors

by

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May 2003
Oxford, Ohio
ABSTRACT

“GOOD-BYE, ALL MY FATHERS”: MODERNISM, DISPLACEMENT, AND F. SCOTT FITZGERALD’S FICTION OF THE EARLY 1930S

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F. Scott Fitzgerald’s fiction of the early 1930s presents meaningful attempts by male protagonists to critically examine the ideals and values of their fathers (or, America) and through this examination to arrive at affirmative self-knowledge in the face of a decaying, destructive world. My thesis identifies and explores an important shift in Fitzgerald’s portrayal of this examination and its effects on his male protagonists. Beginning with Henry Marston in “The Swimmers” (1929), I reveal a preoccupation with self-questioning that in Henry’s case leads to personal victory and moral resolution. Moving to Charlie Wales in “Babylon Revisited” (1931), I demonstrate a change in perspective in which the end products of self-examination are ambivalence and stagnation. Finally, I show that questioning his own chosen ideals and values sets Dick Diver, protagonist of Tender Is the Night (1934), on a destructive path leading only to shattered relationships and personal ruin. The three texts I analyze provide compelling evidence of Fitzgerald’s declining belief in the value of interiority as a means by which to create positive change in life. This thesis is informed by literary theory, but relies on “close reading” of the texts more than any particular theoretical framework for the construction of its argument.
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Acknowledgments

This thesis has been made possible by:

My parents, who persuaded me to come to Miami University. Many things have changed in the last four years, but one very important thing has not—never has a son been more loved.

Don Daiker, my teacher, mentor, and valued friend.

Drew Cayton and Bill Hardesty, my readers, who provided encouragement and suggestions.

Bill Wortman, who provided research assistance.

Lawrence Klein (Emmanuel College, University of Cambridge) and Nigel Leask (Queens’ College, University of Cambridge), under whose supervision I first experienced the pleasures and challenges of sustained research.

The Miami University Honors Program, which provided funding for photocopying and travel.

The students in Don Daiker’s ENG 101.H: “Americans Abroad” course, who provided valuable responses to my assertions regarding Tender Is the Night during a class discussion I guest-facilitated in November 2002.

A condensed version of this thesis was presented at the 17th National Conference on Undergraduate Research, University of Utah, 13-15 March 2003.
I. Introduction

I began this project knowing only one thing—that I wanted to study the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Ever since my first encounter with Fitzgerald’s writing (“Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” in the eighth grade) I have enjoyed reading and rereading as much of it as possible. Before beginning my research, this reading was limited to his five novels and perhaps a dozen of his short stories—enough, I thought while writing my thesis proposal, for a solid start. Joining my long-standing interest in Fitzgerald to the opportunity to study a single topic in great detail over an extended period of time appealed strongly to me then—as it does now—as both good sense and good fortune.

In choosing three texts—two short stories and one novel—with which to construct an argument, I have selected carefully from among the five novels and dozen stories that constituted my early Fitzgerald canon. I have chosen, also, from more than a hundred additional Fitzgerald stories I discovered and read in the course of my research. While relatively unfocused at first, the many weeks of primary reading with which I began my study contributed to the development of a general goal for my thesis. As I became increasingly familiar with the complete body of Fitzgerald’s fiction, his talent for imaginatively reconstructing the various worlds he experienced—and many he did not—became abundantly clear. Amory Blaine’s exploits at Princeton, Jay Gatsby’s summer parties on Long Island, Dick Diver’s carefully crafted entertainments on the French Riviera—these colorful and intricately detailed depictions of upper-class American life fascinated Fitzgerald’s contemporaries, and continue to fascinate many readers today.
But to read Fitzgerald’s fiction as little more than this, a series of wonderfully rich and allusive illustrations of one particular segment of life in the 1920s and ‘30s, is to fail to do justice both to the complexity of his thinking and to the skill with which it is consciously embedded into his narratives. Recognizing this, I decided early in the process of gathering materials and formulating an argument that my thesis would in some way attempt to reveal—and perhaps even critique—the more “literary” side of Fitzgerald’s fiction. Because this side actively engages in dialogue with the writings of many of Fitzgerald’s more publicly intellectual contemporaries—T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Gertrude Stein, for example—I feel that it too deserves serious critical attention. Thus, in this thesis I hope both to contribute to a more complete picture of Fitzgerald as writer and thinker and to provide a sense of what is lost as a result of the usual praise—that is, I hope to prove that Fitzgerald’s fiction contains much more than just a dazzling record of his own dazzling life and times.

Accordingly, my thesis explores a shift I have identified in Fitzgerald’s fiction of the early 1930s concerning the possibility of directed social and moral growth in the face of a decaying, destructive world. Examining “The Swimmers” (1929), “Babylon Revisited” (1931), and Tender Is the Night (1934), I use evidence directly from the texts to demonstrate that Fitzgerald’s male protagonists consciously engage in a process of self-examination. Henry Marston, Charlie Wales, and Dick Diver each seek to discover exactly what social and moral values they hold; more importantly, they assess these values in the hope that such an assessment will allow them to lead more sincere and meaningful lives. In the world of Fitzgerald’s fiction, this process—arriving at self-knowledge—is always possible, but its effects are not always the same. In “The
Swimmers,” Henry’s self-examination leads to emancipation from a domestic situation in which his ideals are compromised. In “Babylon Revisited,” Charlie’s self-questioning leads to a frustrated but hopeful feeling that, though the one event capable of truly improving his life fails to occur, it may yet take place at some point in the indefinite future. In *Tender Is the Night*, the most extensive realization of Fitzgerald’s theme, Dick’s critical self-examination leads to gradual but complete personal ruination.

The three texts I have chosen are connected in several obvious ways. Each is dominated by a central male figure, in his mid to late thirties, whose fortunes and ambitions have displaced him from the system of social and moral values provided by his (distinctively American) heritage. Furthermore, each is set in the mid to late 1920s and describes in lyrically evocative terms a sophisticated but lingeringly chaotic Europe in which Americans had begun to establish loose social and artistic communities. These commonalities create a shared texture among the three narratives, but connecting them on a subtler level is a group of vitally important questions: What are the consequences of nurturing one’s interiority, or capacity for self-awareness? How does one question fundamental ideals and values? Can self-questioning really bring about positive changes in life?

Because of the intensely personal nature of these questions—as Fitzgerald’s protagonists sought to answer them, so do I in my own life—I have chosen not to employ any particular theoretical framework (e.g. feminist, Marxist, poststructuralist, etc.) to shape my argument. Though I do refer often to a “Modern” world and to a conflict between individual and environment commonly associated with literary naturalism, I believe my analytical method would among literary scholars be most strongly identified
with simple “close reading,” and that the vocabulary I have used is one readily available to those with no formal training in literary or cultural criticism. Nevertheless, the following three semi-autonomous essays are offered not only as evidence of my own personal maturation, but also as polished exercises in literary analysis and original contributions to the field of Fitzgerald studies.
II. “The Swimmers”

In 1925, F. Scott Fitzgerald concluded what was to become his most well-known and critically applauded novel with an eloquent, but in some ways ironic and bittersweet, commentary on the promises of America—promises of love, contentment, and above all the achievement of the miraculous. Nick Carraway, having buried Gatsby, sold his own car, and packed his belongings in preparation for a return (or retreat, perhaps) to the Midwest, stretches himself out on Gatsby’s beach. As he lies staring at the autumn moon rising above Long Island Sound, he imagines for a few moments the intensity of feeling which, known to some as the “American dream,” had carried Gatsby within reach of his heart’s desire before finally leaving him completely alone, floating in his millionaire’s swimming pool.

And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors’ eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house, had once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder. (Gatsby 189)

Four years later, Fitzgerald published “The Swimmers,” a short story that concludes in much the same manner, though the change in the author’s attitude toward America, the past, and the possibility of individual achievement manifested in this story—an attitude that would continue to evolve in the years leading to publication of “Babylon Revisited” (1931) and Tender Is the Night (1934)—is readily observable and worthy of extended analysis.
“The Swimmers” is the story of Henry Clay Marston, a descendant of Virginian gentility, who remained in France after the First World War and married a French woman, Choupette, with whom he had two sons. The story begins in Paris, where Henry is a bank officer, with his returning unexpectedly to his apartment and surprising Choupette in the act of marital infidelity. It then moves to the French seaside, where Henry convalesces from the physical and emotional shock brought on by the discovery of his wife’s affair. While recuperating, Henry unwittingly attempts to rescue an American girl who has been immobilized by muscle cramps offshore—unwittingly, that is, because Henry himself has never learned to swim. Once each of them has been rescued, Henry and the girl, who remains unnamed throughout the story, form a loose friendship. More significantly, she teaches him how to swim.

The second half of the story occurs in Virginia, whither Henry has relocated with Choupette and the children following his recovery at St. Jean de Luz. Three years have elapsed, and although Henry has amassed considerable wealth through consistent hard work and shrewd Wall Street investments, the state of his marriage has continued to decline. Once again, Henry confronts his wife’s infidelity. This time her lover is a man Henry knows and particularly despises, and the story’s culminating scene ensues, in which Henry is forced to swim to shore from a disabled motorboat containing Choupette and her lover in order get help—the motorboat, Henry has led them to believe, will soon drift out to sea. It does not, however, and the story ends with a triumphant Henry returning alone to France, financially secure and with sole custody of his two sons, who have remained in America in order to attend St. Regis and Yale.
At the conclusion of “The Swimmers,” Henry echoes Nick Carraway’s visionary thoughts, but with a subtle twist. For Carraway, America is wondrous in its great unknowability; the mysteries it is yet to yield up, the marvelous achievements and inventions it will some day produce, the unplumbed depths of emotion to be experienced by its citizens on the “fresh, green breast of the new world”—these are America’s eternal and to some degree irrational attractions. For Henry, however, America is more a projection of one’s own interior life; its attraction lies not in mystery or inexplicability, but rather in a willful adoption and examination of its traditional values—honesty, sincerity, hard work, and personal advancement. Having examined these essential (as he believes them to be) American principles, Henry affirms and endorses them in a passage distinguished by Fitzgerald’s characteristic lyricism.

Watching the fading city, the fading shore, from the deck of the Majestic, he had a sense of overwhelming gratitude and of gladness that America was there, that under the ugly debris of industry the rich land still pushed up, incorrigibly lavish and fertile, and that in the heart of the leaderless people the old generosities and devotions fought on, breaking out sometimes in fanaticism and excess, but indomitable and undefeated […] all his old feeling that America was a bizarre accident, a sort of historical sport, had gone forever. The best of America was the best of the world. (“The Swimmers” 512)

Thus *The Great Gatsby* and “The Swimmers” appear to end on somewhat similar notes of patriotic eloquence; however, few other meaningful comparisons between the two works are possible. This is primarily due to the latter’s scattered, unsuccessful attempts to build and sustain a dominant theme. In a letter to Harold Ober, his agent, Fitzgerald admitted to the story’s awkwardness in this regard, describing the finished version as “too big for its space” and “not even now satisfactory” (Bruccoli, *As Ever* 142). Critical studies of Fitzgerald’s fiction—accepting the author’s negative self-
assessment too readily, perhaps—have tended, as Robert Roulston notes, to “generally ignore ‘The Swimmers,’ comment on it casually, or dismiss it.” Roulston goes on, conceivably by way of apology, to catalog the multitude of thematic possibilities the story offers:

The narrative line eventually carries Fitzgerald into subjects such as the decline of old values, the recurrence of past misfortunes, a yearning for a new beginning, the golden girl, sexual jealousy, the grand gesture, the insider versus the outsider, a longing for lost youth, the loss of illusions, the arrogance of the rich, Spenglerian pessimism, American optimism, motherhood, feminine freedom, masculine pride, French amorality, southern chivalry, parvenu vulgarity, American technology, greed, a tug between the life force and the death wish. (156)

Given a strong degree of thematic incoherence, it is nevertheless surprising that the story’s protagonist, Henry Marston, has received only passing critical attention. His final thoughts, similar to Nick Carraway’s in tone but subtly different in source, signify an important shift in Fitzgerald’s interests as a writer of fiction. Previously, Fitzgerald had been preoccupied with the manifestation of social and moral values and their consequences—returning to The Great Gatsby, one thinks of Carraway’s commenting that morally “careless and confused” people like Tom and Daisy Buchanan “smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together” (187-188). With “The Swimmers,” however, Fitzgerald initiates a period in which his primary concern as a writer of fiction is to show how social and moral values are not only manifested by the behavior of his characters, but also identified and evaluated by these characters in ways that reveal Fitzgerald’s slowly evolving views of interiority, self-examination, and individual moral agency.

Fitzgerald’s fiction of the early 1930s presents meaningful attempts by male protagonists to critically examine the ideals and values of their fathers (or, America) and
through this examination to arrive at affirmative self-knowledge in the face of a decaying, destructive world. Beginning with “The Swimmers,” Fitzgerald displays a preoccupation with self-questioning that in Henry’s case—which might represent most cases during the boom years of the late 1920s—results in personal empowerment, moral resolution, and the creation of positive relationships. In the case of Dick Diver, protagonist of the Depression-era *Tender Is the Night*, however, such self-scrutiny can lead only to dissolution and complete personal ruin.

Fitzgerald has long been praised as a consummate stylist and chronicler of the jazz age who expressed special insights into the moods and social conventions of his time. His writing, perhaps as a consequence of this praise, has often been thought of as particularly dated. In studying his fiction of the early 1930s, a more complex writer emerges—one who thought and cared deeply not only about what the newest flappers, Princetonians, Riviera-going expatriates, and Hollywood screenwriters would say and do, but also about the systems of value embodied by their words and actions. Just as Henry Marston seeks to discover “what was clean and unclean, what was worth knowing and what was only words” (501) through swimming, Fitzgerald sought similar discoveries through writing. Accordingly, his fiction remains just as meaningful today—if not more so—than it was to so many flappers and philosophers of years past.

“The Swimmers” plays a crucial role in establishing the position at which Fitzgerald’s shift in perspective begins. In his journey from middle-class mindfulness to
wealthy independence, cuckolded husband to liberated divorcee, France to Virginia and back again, Henry recognizes that he must willingly undergo a process of personal rediscovery and moral revaluation in order to function in a world increasingly governed by unscrupulous characters such as his wife, Choupette, and her American lover, Charles Wiese, and by the corrupt moral values they embrace. Henry emerges victoriously from this process: having identified and assessed the values of those around him, he rejects these values in favor of what he believes to be a more worthy moral code. Nevertheless, his victory comes at the cost of isolation from his two sons and self-imposed exile from the land of his patrician American ancestors, whose system of values he has adopted and from whose idiosyncratically refashioned image he appears to draw much of his moral strength.

The significance of Henry’s choice derives in great part from the nature of the environment in which it is made. Stephen Frosh has described the Modern social and moral environment as “a setting in which human relationships are possible, but are always being undercut and destroyed…in which personal integrity means something as a potentiality, but is always in danger of being fragmented by forces beyond our control” (11-12). An atmosphere fitting this description emerges early in “The Swimmers” as Fitzgerald reveals through visual clues the harshness of the isolating, fragmenting environment in which Henry must struggle for moral self-definition. Presumably, Henry has obtained some knowledge of his wife’s extra-marital activities, and his resulting choice as the story begins is whether to confront her about them or to allow them to continue—to hold his wife to her marriage vows or to “adopt the Continental attitude” (498). This choice, however, must be made in urban Paris, an environment permeated by
“a suspended mass of gasoline exhaust cooked slowly by the June sun,” and suggesting “no promise of rural escape…only roads choked with the same foul asthma” (495). As Henry looks out on the Place Benoît, this poisonous cloud, the “odor of the thing he must presently do,” is for him a physical manifestation of his own moral “black horror”—a frightening darkness in which he must distinguish right from wrong, true from false, with very little light to illuminate the potential consequences of his decision (495).

The harshness of the Modern environment, however, is more fully and meaningfully described by Fitzgerald in its social and moral aspects. Fitzgerald’s description of the “terrible” (495) cloud of exhaust against which Henry must struggle for physical health—he “stood panting a moment” after climbing only “two broad flights of stairs” (497)—is symbolic of the much more dangerous social and moral forces likely to overwhelm him. These forces seek to destroy Henry’s social and moral health, a precarious set of conditions he maintains only while he possesses the ability to examine the rules by which he makes decisions and accepts their consequences.

To some extent these forces of isolation and disintegration are an ineradicable element of the First World War’s cultural legacy. For example, just before confronting Choupette and her French lover, Henry is shaken by a moment of self-doubt in which he hears only “a loud, singing silence, oppressive as heavy guns or thunder,” a latent echo of the war’s social upheaval and moral confusion (497). In addition, Henry describes Judge Waterbury, an American acquaintance who offers him a job in Virginia on the morning of his confrontation with Choupette, as possessing “open kindness,” an increasingly rare quality that Henry handles delicately, with “daily appreciation, as a curator in a museum might touch a precious object removed in time and space” (496). Thus the past, for
Henry, is dual natured. It is valuable, in that its people stood firm for what they believed to be good and true in the world—the “open kindness” that was worth fighting for in the war. Conversely, it is also a burden, reminding Henry by its very passing (significantly, the clock strikes one as Henry enters his apartment to confront Choupette and her French lover [497]) that the traditional values he admires have become for most Moderns nothing more than the relics of a museum, vestiges of an irretrievable and only faintly remembered golden age.

If Judge Waterbury represents, on one hand, the best the Modern world has to offer in terms of conventional honesty and moral sturdiness, then Choupette and her second lover, Charles Wiese, provide balance at the other end of the spectrum. Choupette’s strong preoccupation with social appearances—her insistence on the value of surface identities—is clearly distinguishable from the warm frankness of the judge’s “gray and ruddy head,” to which Henry directs himself “appreciatively” (496).

Choupette excuses herself socially for her husband’s collapse during the confrontation at their Paris apartment by explaining to the doctor that it “might have been precipitated by a certain indiscretion of mine—in all events, there was a violent scene, a discussion, and sometimes when he is agitated, my husband cannot comprehend well in French” (497). The doctor, who by profession is adept at seeing past symptoms—outward signs, surface constructions—to the true causes of an illness, notes wryly that “Some things are comprehended instantly in all languages” (497).

Choupette’s dependence on image, social status, and petty distinction is further revealed by her assessments of the other beach-goers at St. Jean de Luz. Speaking from under a parasol in order to carefully protect her “peach-bloom skin,” she expresses her
distaste for the unprotected bodies of the American women passing by: “Skin that will be leather at thirty—a sort of brown veil to hide all blemishes, so that everyone will look alike. And women of a hundred kilos in such bathing suits! Weren’t clothes intended to hide Nature’s mistakes?” (498). For Choupette, appearances and the narrow indications they provide of one’s social status, financial position, and regard or disregard for propriety are the primary means by which to evaluate the people she encounters and the choices she faces. Without certain distinguishing features, she explains almost frantically, “Great ladies, bourgeoises, adventuresses—they are all the same” (498). In Choupette’s moral assessments, convictions are given little weight and even taken for granted as those things a woman “wouldn’t do because of her class, her family” (499). Consequently, her notion of meaningful self-examination is merely the process of modifying one’s behavior in response to the opinions and reactions of those belonging to the same “caste” (498).

Charles Wiese, Choupette’s American lover in the latter half of the story, expresses similar ideas. When Judge Waterbury introduces Wiese to Henry, the judge’s sense of decency—he “seemed so kind,” Henry reflects (496)—compels him to become apologetic in tone. “He’s one of the richest men in the South,” the judge explains (496), and as Wiese eventually takes on the role of Choupette’s lover, his actions become defensible only in terms of a moral code built almost exclusively upon financial authority. Although it is Choupette, not Wiese, who pleads with Henry for joint custody of the children on the grounds that, as their mother, she is entitled to a “half share” in them (507), it is Wiese who most fully believes in commoditization as a means of sorting out good from bad and right from wrong. “It’s money that harnesses the forces of
Nature,” he deprecatingly instructs, “creates the machine and makes it go when money says go, and stop when money says stop” (508). As indicated by the corrupted spelling of his name, the values Wiese puts forward—buying power over personal integrity, financial assets over moral consideration—constitute tainted wisdom. This corruption contributes to a flawed moral vision in which “money is power” (508) and one’s “personal word of honor” (510) is, as Henry notes, more a matter of humor than strict assurance.

Given the harshness of the social and moral environment that surrounds him, the individual decisions Henry makes—to confront Choupette (twice), to swim for a quickly receding shore, to move to Virginia and then back to France—naturally cohere into not just normal, though somewhat sensational, responses to common crises. Faced with a patently unfaithful spouse, a disabled motorboat containing devastating but falsified divorce evidence, and a profession offering opportunities on both sides of the Atlantic, Henry knows that collectively his responses to these distinct predicaments reflect a process of fundamental personal exploration resulting in a certain kind of judgment—affirmation or negation—of the values of those “seven generations of Virginia ancestors [that] were definitely behind him every day at noon when he turned home” (496).

Recognizing that the behavior of those around him—Choupette, Wiese, Waterbury, the swimmer girl—is a manifestation of identifiable social and moral ideals, Henry places his own behavior under self-scrutiny. Consequently, his eventual decision to adopt what he
identifies as a “Virginian” set of values—“unfailing courtesy and attention,” always “devoid of forms” and “based on kindness and consideration” (506)—is both possible and meaningful, though not without costs, as the end of the story proves.

At the beginning of this process, however, only the hint of an impending act of vague significance, the “thing he must presently do,” is known (495). Fitzgerald’s initial concern is to introduce the story’s protagonist not in the context of the unique and important series of events with which he will soon engage, but rather as a singular figure possessing a rare aptitude for analyzing both the exterior world and his own interior thoughts and feelings. Accordingly, Henry’s name, the identifier connecting him to a particular person with a particular position and particular set of social and moral concerns, is not immediately revealed. Instead, an anonymous “American man of thirty-five” stands alone in the offices of a Paris bank, gazing out at a sign advertising “1000 Chemises—Count them!” and the clothing display in the accompanying storefront (495). Both the profession indicated by the man’s location and the sight that holds his attention are carefully selected details. Without giving his protagonist a name or revealing the choices he faces, Fitzgerald nevertheless discloses Henry’s most vital and distinguishing characteristic: his capacity for meaningful self-examination and thoughtful, self-directed social and moral growth.

Although critics have readily applied themselves to the significance of location in the context of the story’s eloquent comparative commentary on America and France (and, more broadly, Europe as a whole), none have discussed the way in which location operates on a much more personal level—particularly its function in establishing Henry’s potential for carefully reasoned judgments, even in matters intimately affecting his own
social and economic affairs. Fitzgerald locates Henry in the offices of “The Promissory
Trust Company, Paris Branch” at the beginning of the story in order to establish his
protagonist’s ability to successfully identify and evaluate the risks—financial and
otherwise—of living in the Modern world (italics added, 495). Henry is a banker by
profession, someone who both safeguards the accumulated wealth of others and advises
them on how this wealth may be used to its maximum benefit, and thus is accustomed to
working within a certain set of professional rules as well as explaining the face and
function of these rules to his account holders. More importantly, Henry is “born”—that
is, introduced to the reader—in this space of financial recognition, evaluation, and
implementation; as a result, his inclination to structure social and moral encounters in a
similar fashion is strongly suggested.

The sight that holds Henry’s attention—the thousand chemises—also indicates a
propensity for personal rediscovery and principled change. His contemplative fixation on
the “shirts in question” lying “piled, cravated and stuffed, or else draped with shoddy
grace on the show-case floor” implies a natural sensitivity to the surface identities created
by outward appearances and their potential conflict with the interior identities shaped by
inner social and moral convictions (495). Choupette’s infidelity has made painfully clear
to him the possibility that a person’s outward appearance and behavior may fail to
truthfully convey the person’s inner set of beliefs concerning what does and does not
constitute acceptable behavior with regard to personal and even business relationships.

The depth to which this realization penetrates—the grave consequence Henry
attaches to it—is signified both physically and mentally. “[T]rembling just a little” when
he arrives in the washroom, after gazing at the multitude of shirts displayed in the
storefront—symbols of the potential mismatch between interior and exterior—Henry’s “trembling [becomes] a shaking”; correspondingly, he thinks to himself that “it would be pleasant if this were the end and nothing more need be done…” (495). Crucially, however, Henry’s recognition of the existence of surface identities and their potential deceptions does not lead him to abandon morality and principled decision-making in favor of fatalism and hopelessness. Instead, it empowers him with special moral agency. Understanding that outward appearance and behavior—the “1000 chemises” a person figuratively wears—are by no means reliable signifiers of inner social and moral convictions, Henry can then prepare himself to take no one’s moral code, even his own, for granted; in the case of his impending confrontation with Choupette, he can “set his face grimly toward noon” (496).

Henry builds on this knowledge while convalescing at the seaside following his collapse in Paris. The location Fitzgerald chose for this segment of the story, St. Jean de Luz, is revealing in two respects. First, it is significant that Fitzgerald situates Henry’s recovery at an Atlantic resort—that is, at the seashore but not on the fashionable French Riviera, which Fitzgerald had already described in self-consciously romantic terms⁵ and would later memorably link with decadence and dissipation in Tender Is the Night.⁶ In doing so, the author removes the beginnings of Henry’s personal self-examination from association with a social and moral atmosphere in which, in Fitzgerald’s own experience and opinion, meaningful self-evaluation was probably impossible.

Second, the town’s name, “St. Jean de Luz” (“St. John of Light”), suggests a space permitting clear thinking. Whereas Henry’s thoughts in Paris had been clouded by exhaust fumes and weakened by a glaring sun, his sensibilities are sharpened in St. Jean
by the near presence of “passing ships, and bright islands to look at, and mountains reaching into cold zones, and red and yellow villas, called Fleur des Bois, Mon Nid, or Sans-Souci...” (498). In Paris, Henry’s vision had been limited by a plethora of commercial advertisements—“Papeterie, Pâtisserie, Solde, Réclame, and Constance Talmadge in Déjeuner de Soleil” (495)—appealing to his superficial need for status-oriented consumption. Even the more solemn aspects of life in Paris had been represented, though in the form of “somber announcements,” with flatness and disinterest; billboards promoting “Vêtements Ecclésiastiques, Déclaration de Décès, and Pompes Funèbres” had stood in for such profound and unfathomable notions as “Life and Death” (495). St. Jean, in contrast, provides Henry with “le sport” (swimming)—an unsophisticated physical activity to focus on (initially as a spectator)—and a view obstructed only by the simple and utilitarian “raft and diving tower, motorboat and sand” (498).

Predictably, given his capacity for meaningful self-examination, the crisis brought on by his wife’s infidelity, and the stimulus for clear thinking provided by the peaceful natural environment at St. Jean de Luz, social and moral revaluation occupy the center of Henry’s thoughts during his time at the seashore. Henry’s leisurely but perceptive observations are imparted as they occur to him in these scenes, and Fitzgerald uses his protagonist’s silent remarks to introduce and develop the story’s dominant metaphor, swimming as personal exploration. Listening idly to Choupette’s erratic and zealously critical judgments of “tanned American girls” (498), Henry chooses to inspect one particular “target” more closely (499). Drawn to her by the “irrepressible determination of [her] features to be recognized,” he identifies the swimmer girl as “what his father
would have called a thoroughbred,” a girl whose face possesses “poise and distinction” and whose movements, even amongst the waves, are “at once exquisite and hardy” (499).

To Henry, who has so recently been shocked and humiliated by his wife’s behavior, the swimmer girl is a marvel of stability and elegance. In addition to the attraction of her unpresuming charm in comparison to Choupette’s constant scrutinizing and evident lack of repentance, Henry is susceptible to the adventurous appeal of her membership in a group of “English and Americans and a few hardy French pioneers” who playfully “voyage” through the surf (498).

More important than the respect Henry instantly bestows upon her—like his father, of whom he is reminded when searching for words to describe her, the swimmer girl represents a model for emulation—is the role she plays in Henry’s transition from spectator to swimmer. Watching her from shore, Henry acknowledges the implicit self-invention in the swimmer girl’s actions and expressions. The natural grace and simplicity of her movements affirm for Henry the existence of positive relationships and new possibilities in life. Seeing that “her arms, like flying fish, clipped the water in a crawl” and “her body spread in a swan dive or doubled in a jackknife” with perfect ease, Henry is compelled to feel “glad about her” and appreciative of the manner in which she expresses “nothing but herself,” discarding the shallowness of social conventions and not caring that, as Choupette claims, she probably “couldn’t tell you the name of the President” (499). Her social interactions, furthermore, are sincere, judicious, and rejuvenating: her attitude toward Henry is “brightly casual” (500); she gives two unremarkable men who pass by a smile “that was no more than what they deserved”; and she brings each dive to an end by “jauntily flipping the damp hair away” (499). For
Henry, the swimmer girl represents much more than just someone who “push[es] water”; it is her “deep, thoughtful face” and its promises of meaningful inquiry and discussion—a metaphorical investigation of the “depth”—that induce him to rush to her rescue, though he has never learned to swim (499).

Henry’s second encounter with the water, which takes place the morning after the attempted rescue, is both more frightening and more meaningful. It comes by way of invitation—the swimmer girl offers to teach him how to swim in repayment for his well-intentioned yet foolhardy gallantry. Henry entertains no thoughts of declining her offer, since the affinity between them grows even stronger once they actually meet. “I’ll never again eat chocolate ice cream before going in,” the swimmer girl tells him (500), having recognized the decadence of such an act as well as its disastrous effects. Henry, in turn, knows instinctively that he need not maintain distance or propriety in her presence, and consequently jokes good-naturedly that he’d been thinking kindly about swimming while floundering in the water, “just before [he] went down the tenth time” (500). As a result, her expression is “appreciative [of his openness and good humor] rather than grateful [for his selflessness and protection]”; the relationship between the two is founded on cheerful and mutual reciprocity (500).

This relationship is a key factor in Henry’s learning to swim as well as in his personal self-exploration, providing support for what is initially both physically and morally an extremely uncomfortable process. The language Fitzgerald uses in describing Henry’s first attempts at swimming is doubly endowed: it functions at face value, adding color and detail to his experiences as they are perceived on the surface of life (or, by others), but it also functions as the framework for an insightful and carefully crafted
extended metaphor comparing the external, physical process of swimming in the sea to
the internal, personal and moral process of self-examination and principled change in the
Modern world. Furthermore, just as swimming in “The Swimmers” produces pleasure,
invigoration, and valuable physical stamina over an extended period of time, its
accompanying metaphorical reassessments of the values one has inherited and chosen to
live by result in affirmative self-knowledge. Through the swimming metaphor, “The
Swimmers” demonstrates the positive value of critically examining social and moral
codes and trying to live a better life. 

To learn to swim is, as Henry immediately learns, a risky endeavor. Entering the
water, “breakers [leap] at him, staggering him” and “returning water” recedes
“threateningly around his feet” (500). As one of many “intimidated souls,” he remains
for some time only “waist deep”—frightened and uncommitted—while he gauges both
his own strength and the strength of the sea (500). Henry works up the necessary
courage, at the swimmer girl’s prompting, to fully submerge himself, but nevertheless is
punished from the water. It finds its way “into his nose” and ears, “rattling back and
forth like pebbles for hours” in addition to causing a “raw stinging” and leaving him
temporarily “blinded” (500) Even after a week of effort, he is able to swim only
“painfully, pantingly, and not very far” (500). He suffers, in addition, from exposure to
the sun: it “peel[s] long strips of parchment from his shoulders, blistering his back so that
he lay in a feverish agony for several nights” (500). Henry’s attempts at swimming are
more than just discomforting—his body is physically damaged by them. Moreover, his
spirit is sorely tried by the slowness of the progress he makes.
Beneath the surface, however, swimming brings Henry’s thoughts regarding his own behavior and the social and moral ideals it manifests into sharper focus. This change is signified both in his appearance and in his conversation with the swimmer girl. Previously “paunchy and unhealthily white” (500), after a week of swimming Choupette notices Henry “regarding his tanned face in the mirror with a mild sort of fascination” (501). The sun has removed the “parchment” from his exterior, exposing his interior convictions and making them vulnerable to critical examination. Consequently, his “unhealthily” unsullied skin has begun to darken slightly; it shows signs of adjusting to an environment that is at times openly hostile—an environment in which only the “inept and the old” would take personal integrity, moral consistency, and an exact correlation between external appearance and internal principles for granted (500-501). In his transition from spectator to swimmer, Henry has learned to critically engage with his own deepest-held values. Furthermore, he has done so fully in the belief that this engagement can lead to a more honorable, sincere, and satisfying life.

This notion, that swimming has the potential to generate affirmative self-knowledge, is developed in an important exchange between Henry and the swimmer girl. Having finally “battled his way desperately” (501) to the diving raft anchored fifty yards from shore, Henry announces to her that making it as far as the raft fulfills his promise to himself. Consequently, he plans to leave St. Jean the next morning. Swimming such a distance, however, has opened his mind to fundamental levels of self-examination, and in the presence of the swimmer girl this predisposition to question assumptions and apply moral reasoning to formerly unscrutinized habits of thought and behavior becomes impossible to disregard. “Why do you swim?” Henry asks her. Caught slightly off-guard
by the question, she yet answers with earnestness and simplicity: “To get clean” (501).

Henry, who himself is mildly surprised at the bluntness and spontaneity of his question, refrains from asking the swimmer girl “to explain a lot of other things,” but still yearns to unravel the “cool secrets” in her eyes (501). She has revealed her plans to travel on to Antibes and then Florida, following the seasons and swimming year-round, and as a result of Henry’s recent introduction to swimming and self-examination—and the glimpses of crucial insights that they have provided—he imagines that it is in her power “to say what was clean and unclean, what was worth knowing and what was only words…” (501).

Recognizing now that the solutions to these matters—questions of what to believe and how to live—must come from within himself, Henry possesses not only “a good health that he had not experienced for years,” but also the “masculine self he had handed over to the keeping of a wise little Provencal girl [Choupette] eight years ago” (502). Confident in his interiority and courageous in its expansion, Henry feels that he has reclaimed a part of himself that was buried by an unthinking reliance on the “tradition, the wisdom, [and] the sophistication of France” to provide him with a system of social and moral values conducive to personal growth and affirmative living (502). Revealing to Choupette his sudden decision to move to America, Henry asserts his new confidence by proclaiming their ability to “make a new start” (502). Though Choupette seems much less enthusiastic (“She struggled,” “stiffened,” “wailed,” and “groaned” [502]), Henry’s ability to swim and his newfound passion for critical self-examination have placed him in the position of social and moral leader. Learning to swim has given him the strength
necessary to struggle for meaningful self-definition in a world where integrity and commitment are often displaced by selfishness, fraud, and opportunism.

Three years later, swimming has become a regular and indispensable part of Henry’s life. Feeling “older, with a suspicion of grimness, and a slight irrepressible heaviness of body,” he announces to Judge Waterbury, whom he now works for in Virginia, that he is “going to the shore” to relieve himself of the “weight” that has settled upon him since his last visit to the sea (503). Henry’s marriage has deteriorated—Choupette and Charles Wiese have begun an affair—and the suspicions he entertains of being followed by agents of his wife and her lover, who hope to gain evidence for a divorce case against him, have left him feeling “a little uncomfortable, a little sordid” (504).

In a scene almost exactly echoing the confrontation in Paris three years before, Henry returns home from his office to find Choupette and Wiese sitting comfortably on the veranda. This time, however, Henry does not collapse. Instead, he immediately suggests that he and his wife divorce, but on the condition that he receive sole custody of their two sons. Henry has already begun to cut his marital ties—when Wiese’s temper flares, Henry warns him not to bother becoming excited, that his “emotions aren’t sufficiently involved” to reciprocate—and shows concern at the evidently corrupt values his sons would absorb if they were “brought up in the sort of home [Wiese’s] and Choupette’s is going to be” (504).

Henry’s ability to recognize the objectionable ideals underlying the behavior of his wife and her lover has developed in large part through a sustained effort to discover any such values structuring and motivating his own conduct. Lying on his bed following
the confrontation on the veranda, Henry reflects that swimming has become for him “a sort of refuge,” a means by which to “wash his mind in the water” (505). It provides “surcease” from the “insurmountable, inevitable” obstacles to living a socially responsible and morally self-aware life; accordingly, he has “turned to it as one man to music or another to drink” (505). Transcending the “burden of his wretched marriage” (505), Henry examines and rebuilds his personal integrity through the “buoyant tumble of his body among the swells,” carefully searching out and discarding the “stowaways of inheritance or tradition” in favor of self-instigated moral recentering (506). His three years in Virginia and repeated trips to the seashore have convinced him of the essential necessity and value of self-examination and principled change, not just for himself but for everyone: “Americans, he liked to say, should be born with fins…” (506).

Henry’s commitment to social and moral self-improvement now forms the core of his world-view, affecting him so powerfully that when swimming he “would begin to move in a child’s dream of space,” exhilaratingly launching himself “along the bright pathway to the moon” (506). Swimming and its accompanying self-examination are pleasant, inspiring processes offering opportunities for self-guided growth and development. They contrast meaningfully with the hollow, insignificant information gathering and mindless chatter of non-swimmers, which are represented by a frivolous conversation taking place on shore:

“Now, at the Lido—”
“Now, at Asbury Park—”
“Oh, my dear, he just scratched and scratched all night; he just scratched and scratched—”
“My dear, at Deauville—”
“—scratched and scratched all night.” (506)
Thus, after a day of swimming and an unexpected, brief reunion with the swimmer girl, Henry is excellently prepared to deal “coolly” with the “hard confidence” of Choupette and Wiese when the three of them embark on a motorboat that evening to discuss the terms of the divorce (507).

The crises that ensue—Wiese’s disclosure of inaccurate but ruinous evidence in the case against Henry’s gaining custody, and the stalling of the motorboat engine—provide the final assessment of Henry’s dedication to bettering himself socially and morally through purposeful self-examination. Permitting the engine to idle, Wiese allows the boat to “drift without will or direction,” figuratively creating an unbiased space in which the surface-oriented, status-seeking, “money is power” values he and Choupette espouse may meet Henry’s promise-centered, care-motivated, self-questioning code of conduct on even terms (507). As the engine dies and the motorboat appears to drift steadily farther from shore, Henry’s victory seems assured—neither Choupette nor Wiese can swim. In spite of his superior physical capability, however, Henry’s triumph remains uncertain until the moment he reaches the lighthouse.

With the French psychiatrist’s certificate and the papers granting him custody of his sons safely secured, Henry commences the “longest swim he had ever tried” (511). At first the sea “leap[s] up at him” (511) in a manner strongly reminiscent of his first swimming experience, in France. Before he possessed the courage to swim he had belonged with the “intimidated souls” (500), and even now his courage nearly fails him—the short “relaxation of strain” produced by a momentary rest generates an “alarming impulse to let go,” to slip “quickly and painlessly” into the depths (511). Henry’s hesitation, however, is brief. Guided by the “blinding light,” his goal, Henry’s thoughts
focus on the kind of life he would like to create for his sons—a life free from “self-indulgence” and the “preposterous moral farrago” of his wife’s unreliable affections (511).

The stages in Henry’s physical journey to the lighthouse are also stages in his interior self-examination. Having initially “struck out toward the light” with unthinking confidence, pleasantly observing that “it was all warm and friendly, and the small murmur of the waves was an encouragement,” Henry soon slows his efforts (511). Floating on his back, he doubts for a moment or two that the “problems of hate and bitterness” in life are surmountable (511). He questions whether the life of moral sturdiness, principled change, and “unfailing courtesy and attention” that he wishes both to have and to pass on to his sons is even a possibility (506). With a “convulsive effort” (511), however, he returns to the path he has chosen; feeling the “fate of his sons” (511) in the package of papers he carries, Henry chooses finally to affirm the values of “kindness and consideration” (506) he seeks to live by. Equally importantly, he owes the “happiness in his heart” (511) to self-examination accomplished through swimming. Learning to swim has truly opened “a new gate to life” (501).

During the swim to the lighthouse, the story’s defining moment of crisis, Henry affirms his decision to seek self-knowledge with the hope of creating a better life for himself. The story’s end, however, reveals that the costs of this affirmation are high. Judge Waterbury’s “halfway” partnership with Wiese leaves Henry little choice, given
Wiese’s relationship to Choupette, but to leave his job for a much lower paying position in France (496). Henry hints that his financial situation is well in hand—“You’ve probably heard I’ve made something in the market,” Henry “deprecatingly” suggests to the judge (503)—but it is unlikely that after returning to Paris he will again belong with the “plutocrats” who spend most of their time simply “looking important” (496). The social isolation that results from Henry’s exile is mitigated to some extent by encountering the swimmer girl on the ship that is to take him to Europe. Nevertheless, leaving the country separates him from his two sons, who have been saved from the “unendurable” (511) morality of their mother only to be deposited at St. Regis by their father, who then embarks for a country thousands of miles away.

Moreover, self-examination has been the central cause of these undesirable necessities; through the series of events it sets in motion, self-examination ultimately exacts a considerable toll. Henry leaves America with his personal integrity intact, but in doing so he abandons a “generous mother” (511) who has “given more than he asked—money, release from an intolerable situation, and the fresh strength to fight for his own” (512). His refusal to countenance a domestic situation in violation of his social and moral ideals forces him to leave just when the “lost generation” has begun to give way to the “men coming on, the men of the war,” who are making things “better” (512). As Henry stands on the deck of the “Majestic,” he is filled with “a sense of overwhelming gratitude and of gladness” for his native country, believing fully that the “best of America was the best of the world” (512). Bound for France, however, the only real benefit Henry receives from these exciting but unrealized possibilities is a last glimpse of “the fading city, the fading shore” (512).
Furthermore, the manner in which Henry’s victory over Choupette and Wiese is achieved calls his true level of commitment to moral living and honest conduct into question. As he stands safely within the lighthouse and relief for the disabled boat is requested, the lighthouse keeper informs him that in the absence of rough weather the boat will most likely drift into a nearby harbor. “Yes,” replies Henry […] “I knew that too” (511). His victory is therefore predicated upon deception, an act that in the case of Choupette and Wiese’s affair he finds repugnant and, in the case of his confrontation with Choupette and her first lover, physically unbearable. In some ways this behavior is simply a part of the game—Wiese has already demonstrated his willingness to set aside propriety and even law by purchasing a declaration of insanity from Henry’s psychiatrist. Henry’s surprising condescension to similar conduct, however, casts doubt on the efficacy of his swimming and the depth to which his self-examination has penetrated.

In telling the story of his protagonist, Fitzgerald makes a subtle but strong case in favor of constant personal rediscovery, self-scrutiny, and principled change. In revealing the costs of this process, he both complicates the decision to commit to such a life and places the responsibility for accepting its consequences squarely in the hands of the individual. The Modern environment is harsh and destructive, and accordingly Henry’s critical examination of his own ideals and values requires a persistent faith in the ability of this examination to create a better and more meaningful life. Like believing in America, bettering oneself requires a “willingness of the heart” (512).
III. “Babylon Revisited”

Several significant events occurred in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s life between publication of “The Swimmers” in 1929 and “Babylon Revisited” in 1931. “Black Tuesday,” the first in a series of devastating trading sessions on the New York Stock Exchange that have collectively come to be known as the great stock market crash, occurred in late October 1929, just days after “The Swimmers” appeared in The Saturday Evening Post. Fitzgerald generally spent the money he received—payments for stories, royalties from his novels, and advances from both Scribner’s and agent Harold Ober—as soon as it came in. Consequently, he made no serious attempts to invest his earnings, and the market’s demise had no direct effect on his personal finances. It did, however, have a significant effect on his writing. Living in Europe since the spring of 1929, Fitzgerald observed firsthand the distinct changes in America’s social climate, especially in the giddy circles he and Zelda had been known to frequent, when he returned to America briefly in January 1931 to attend his father’s funeral and when he, Zelda, and Scottie returned permanently in the fall of the same year.

In addition, in April 1930 the stress of training to become a ballet dancer contributed to Zelda’s suffering a debilitating mental breakdown, the first clear sign of a psychological disorder that doctors would later identify as latent schizophrenia. Through the immediate horrors of this experience and the long and difficult treatment it required, Fitzgerald became acquainted with the world of expensive, primarily Swiss psychiatric clinics and resorts catering to the broken rich. Correspondingly, he began to believe
that the price to be paid by his generation for its dizzying antics on both sides of the
Atlantic during the 1920s would be tremendously high.

This price is in many ways the central subject of “Babylon Revisited.” The
story recounts a brief visit to Paris in the fall of 1930 by Charlie Wales, an American ex-
spendthrift and recovered alcoholic, for the purpose of convincing his sister-in-law and
her husband to relinquish his daughter Honoria, whom they have cared for since the death
of Charlie’s wife, Helen, and his own collapse a year and a half before. The story’s
events span three days, and in this short period Charlie expresses a great deal of disgust
for the debauched life he had formerly lived in “Babylon.” He makes a sincere effort to
repent of his multitude of sins, and at first it appears that his efforts will be rewarded.
Charlie’s sister-in-law, Marion Peters, gives in to his request that he be allowed to take
Honoria back to Prague, where he has found successful employment and the mistakes of
his past have not followed him. Charlie’s hard-won victory, however, is reversed almost
immediately: two drunken acquaintances from his riotous earlier days arrive at the Peters’
apartment just as Marion has begun to show signs of reconciliation, a disaster that costs
Charlie the Honor(ia) he has come so close to regaining. At the end of the story, Charlie
has discovered the true price of his past.

Critical interpretations of “Babylon Revisited” have generally revolved around
the degree to which Charlie is responsible for the unwanted intrusion of his former
friends, and by extension the degree to which he has actually repented and been made to
pay for his mistakes. These interpretations have taken as evidence a myriad of patterns,
themes, and allusions in the story, including unconscious masochism, the inescapable
realities of time and memory, Catholic penance and redemption, financial valuation,
exile, dramatic tragedy, and even the laws of thermodynamics. Most critics have acknowledged Charlie’s ability to recognize the social and moral ideals that guide his behavior; they have also acknowledged his ability to evaluate these ideals and to identify the ones most worth keeping. However, critics have failed to understand that the conclusions they have drawn as a result of these acknowledgments—specifically, whether or not Charlie has been cheated out of regaining Honoria by a treacherous and inescapable past—are actually judgments of the efficacy of interiority. With a much tighter plot and fewer themes to elaborate, “Babylon Revisited” displays the internal life of its protagonist much more clearly than does “The Swimmers”; the questions it ultimately asks, however, are precisely the same. How does one question fundamental ideals and values? What are the effects of self-examination? Is it possible to lead a better and more meaningful life in spite of the harshness and decay of the Modern world?

As in “The Swimmers,” in “Babylon Revisited” Fitzgerald does not leave these questions unanswered. The answers he suggests in the story of Charlie Wales’s ambivalent return to Paris are considerably different than those suggested by Henry Marston’s narrative of release from a socially and morally intolerable situation. Henry’s victory, though somewhat qualified, is achieved through learning to swim, engaging in self-scrutiny, and acting with a sense of personal fortitude. Because he examines the beliefs that guide and motivate his conduct and consequently resolves to make positive changes in his life, Henry is able to overcome the forces of fragmentation and corruption that threaten to disgrace him as a husband and disenfranchise him as a father. In “Babylon Revisited,” Charlie Wales expresses regret for the time he once wasted in the transient pleasures of drink and idle mischief. Furthermore, his revaluation leads to
principled change: in just a year and a half Charlie metamorphoses from a bankrupt, institutionalized invalid to a sober, clean-living businessman with an income surpassing that of the days before his collapse.

Unlike Henry’s, however, Charlie’s efforts go unrewarded—but why? “The Swimmers” and “Babylon Revisited” are linked by a common plot: a father attempts to gain custody of his child(ren). In addition, the stories’ protagonists are linked by a common life philosophy: through a careful weighing and inventorying of ideals, each hopes to make changes in his life that will lead to greater happiness and personal satisfaction. By providing two different endings for such similar stories—Henry’s bid for sole custody of his sons is successful, Charlie’s attempt to regain his daughter fails—Fitzgerald communicates changing attitudes in relation to the power of the individual, the possibility of social and moral regeneration, and the value of self-knowledge. During his return visit to “Babylon,” Charlie does his best to correct and atone for his past mistakes. In the process he learns about both his own interior life and the cold realities of the world around him. At the end of the story Charlie sits alone at his table in the Ritz bar, staring at his empty whiskey glass and determinedly telling himself that he has suffered more than enough for his mistakes, that “they couldn’t make him pay forever” (230). There are no real signs that this is the case, however; self-examination leads neither to victory nor defeat, but rather to a feeling of painful ambivalence that undermines any true hope for a satisfying future.
Returning to Paris provides Charlie with the opportunity to reestablish intimate ties with his daughter and to persuade Marion, who retains legal custody of Honoria, that he has reformed his character and habits sufficiently to once more play the role of responsible father. It also allows Charlie to reassess his relationship to a city that, even after an absence of more than a year, contains only one restaurant “not reminiscent of champagne dinners and long luncheons that began at two and ended in a blurred and vague twilight” (215). Echoes of Paris’s many former attractions persist. Although, as Marion points out, the attitude of Parisians toward Americans has changed in recent times so that now “you can go into a store without their assuming you’re a millionaire,” the briskness and charm of the city remain (213). Riding in a cab from the Ritz to the Peters’ apartment, Charlie directs his driver to take an unnecessarily long route because he wants “to see the blue hour spread over the [Avenue de l’Opera’s] magnificent façade, and imagine that the cab horns…were the trumpets of the Second Empire” (212). Charlie responds warmly and nostalgically to the city’s lingering carnivalesque atmosphere: he passes “fire-red, gas-blue, ghost-green signs,” and the Place de la Concorde glows with “pink majesty” (211), creating an appealing sensation of “sudden provincialism” (212). In spite of the pain caused by Charlie’s former days in “Babylon,” he still feels some measure of attraction to the city in addition to recognizing its undisciplined, kaleidoscopic potential, a fact subtly indicated by his choice of the vaudeville as the primary entertainment during his outing with Honoria on the second day of his visit.

Similarly, though most of the people Charlie knew in Paris in the past are now little more than “ghosts,” he still feels a “passionate, provocative attraction” to Lorraine Quarrles (217). Charlie also tends to romanticize ruined acquaintances such as Mr.
Campbell and George Hardt, foolishly remarking to Marion and Lincoln that in the glory
days of the late twenties he and his friends had been “a sort of royalty, almost infallible”
and possessing “a sort of magic” (213). It becomes noticeable very early in the story that
Charlie is unable to completely condemn his former life, even if only for the reason, as he
later asserts, that no matter what troubles he and Helen were having (or getting into), they
“never let anything that happened touch Honoria” (219-220). Discomfited by the
“strange and portentous” (210) emptiness of the present Ritz bar, a “stillness” (210) that
makes him feel “oppressed” (211), Charlie’s opinion of his past life initially appears
mildly tinged with nostalgia. His first few hours in Paris, colored by emotional responses
to what he perceives as an abandoned, dilapidated playground, create the notion that
while Charlie may be revisiting the scenes of his misbehavior and collapse, he is not at
the same time reconsidering them.

This notion soon fades, however. Examined alone, Charlie’s mentioning his
former companions as “a sort of royalty” may be seen as a particularly revealing slip;
examined in the context of his entire discussion with Marion and Lincoln, on the other
hand, it is one among several conversational mistakes made by Charlie in the flush of
seeing his daughter for the first time in ten months and in his eagerness to make a
favorable first impression. Charlie’s nervousness is such that in spite of the “warm and
comfortably American” room, he “did not relax” and “his heart sat up rigidly in his body”
(212). Feeling that he must compensate for Marion’s “unalterable distrust” with an
engaging friendliness of his own, Charlie’s sensitivity to the social and financial situation
of his hosts suffers (212). His conversational blundering begins when Lincoln inquires as
to how his business in Prague is progressing. Charlie’s enthusiastic reply quickly
becomes mere “boasting,” which generates a “faint restiveness” in his hard-working but only marginally successful listener (213). Moments later Charlie candidly mentions his trip to the bar earlier in the afternoon, provoking signs of “dislike” and “coldness” from Marion (213). His “royalty” remark, coming between these two unthinking errors, is more an indication of social awkwardness than an expression of fully-formed conviction.

Likewise, Charlie’s journey through Paris following dinner at the Peters’ reveals the superficiality of his earlier romanticizations. Whereas before his reunion with Honoria Charlie showed a sentimental interest in the lights and glamour of the city, after this reunion he resolves to reexamine Paris nightlife “with clearer and more judicious eyes than those of other days” (214). A cursory investigation of several of his former haunts leads Charlie to confirm an earlier reflection, “I spoiled this city for myself” (212), with a more forceful and self-denigrating exclamation: “You have to be damn drunk” (214). His self-disgust is tempered by a growing realization that seeking after self-knowledge—revisiting the interior places that once held noble principles and ideals, just as he revisits the seedy nightclubs “where he had parted with so many hours and so much money” (214)—is the key to discovering the way to live affirmatively and avoid the destructive temptations of the Modern world. His choice is not, as he may have formerly believed, between either the “Café of Heaven” or the “Café of Hell” (214), but rather between measuring the value of his life in “thousand-franc notes given to an orchestra for playing a single number” (215) and admitting to himself that such “catering to vice and waste was on an utterly childish scale” (214).

The culmination of Part I of the story comes not through external events such as Charlie’s conversation with Alix in the Ritz bar, but instead through self-examination
prompted by a host of memories and associations that resurface among Charlie’s thoughts as he moves through Paris. Disappointed by the shallow vulgarity of Montmartre, he experiences a flash of bitter insight: “the meaning of the word ‘dissipate’—to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something” (214). In this moment Charlie establishes a connection between his earlier behavior and the set of social and moral values that fostered it. More importantly, he initiates a new and sustained habit of critical reflection in relation to his own actions. Because he has labeled the various acts that enabled him to “not remember the things most worth remembering” (215) acts of dissipation, he can later feel awed that “he had actually, in his mature years, stolen a tricycle and pedaled Lorraine all over the Étoile” (225). Charlie’s new understanding of dissipation lies behind his reflecting that such acts were a “nightmare” supported by a “condition of utter irresponsibility” (225), and thus contributes to his social and moral growth through the development of self-knowledge.

This growth, founded on a deepening knowledge of the consequences of dissipation, takes a character-oriented direction. In one of the story’s most frequently quoted passages, Fitzgerald eloquently reveals the shift in Charlie’s attention from the acts responsible for the wreckage and ruination of “Babylon” to the character traits most conducive to rebuilding a sincere and meaningful life and to learning how to deal with the inescapable sins of the past. Charlie “believed in character; he wanted to jump back a whole generation and trust in character again as the eternally valuable element. Everything else wore out” (214). He decides, through a process of self-examination, that the values and ideals supporting his efforts to “make months into days” (217) through unending parties and careless hedonism must not be a part of his life if he is to regain and
care for Honoria. A life consisting of one long sequence of “chocolate arabesques” (214) and punctuated with instances of “women and girls carried screaming with drink or drug out of public places” (229), Charlie comes to realize, soon wears out. Consequently, he begins to seek those qualities of character that might allow him to build positive relationships founded on personal integrity and a commitment not to “abuse each other’s love, tear it into shreds” (223). Through self-examination, Charlie comes to understand that in order to change his life—and make it worthy of Honoria—he must start by changing himself.

It is therefore appropriate that during luncheon at Le Grand Vatel, his first opportunity to be alone with his daughter, Charlie decides to reintroduce himself. His self-identification during this exchange—“Charles J. Wales, of Prague” (216)—reveals to some degree the strength of his resolve to remember what must be remembered while simultaneously moving on with his life. Charlie’s forsaking “Babylon” for Prague, a city farther east, contrasts meaningfully with Nick Carraway’s return to the Midwest at the end of *The Great Gatsby*. Nick’s purpose in going east is in many senses to journey from the “ragged edge of the universe” (*Gatsby* 2) to its very center—to discover and evaluate the roots of American experience. Following his summer of “privileged glimpses into the human heart” (1) however, Nick wants only to return to the familiar steadfastness of the Midwest; feeling disturbed by the East’s inescapable “quality of distortion” (118), he foregoes further exploration of the “abortive sorrows and shortwinded elations of men” (2).

Charlie Wales, in contrast, responds to the “foul dust” (2) of Paris, his own eastern city, and to the damage it causes him by redoubling his commitment to serve as a
“guide, a pathfinder, an original settler” (3) in his examination of social and moral values. He symbolically demonstrates this commitment by continuing even farther east, to Prague. If Nick and Charlie each search for a deeper understanding of what it means to live nobly and fully, then Charlie is the greater pioneer. Having suffered even more as a result of his own movement east than Nick, who is primarily a spectator, Charlie yet continues to probe the depths of human experience by pushing forward even eastward in spite of the misfortunes that befall him in Paris, the first leg of his journey. Thus, Charlie’s move to Prague has more personal meaning than his brusque justification to Alix, “They don’t know about me down there” (“Babylon” 211), indicates.

Accordingly, his incorporation of this new location into his own identity—the identity he announces to Honoria and encourages her to like and respect—is an indication of the dual purpose of “putting a little of himself into her” (218). On one hand, Charlie hopes that his financial resources will prevent her from ever becoming mired, as the Peters have, “in the grip of life and circumstances” (226). In addition, he hopes that his instinctive paternal understanding of the “injury that a father can do to a daughter or a mother to a son by attaching them too closely” (224), in combination with his determination to take one and only one drink each day, will afford her some measure of social and moral protection in a harsh world—a world in which the weak seek to “draw a certain sustenance” (218) from the strong. On the other hand, “Charles J. Wales, of Prague” hopes that putting a little of his reintroduced, reinvented self into his daughter will induce her not to retreat from discomforting and potentially disillusioning situations, as Nick Carraway does, when instead she may push forward into the further reaches of self-knowledge and human understanding.
However, Charlie’s decision to mold Honoria in his own image is also subtly ironic; contrary to his own belief, Charlie, not Honoria, has not yet “crystallized” as a fully formed “individual with a code” (218). In seeking to rid himself of those qualities that inevitably wear out while simultaneously replacing them with true strength of character, the “eternally valuable element” (214), Charlie looks to his daughter for assistance. Between acts at the vaudeville a particularly touching scene of fatherly longing occurs in which Charlie “watched Honoria’s eyes leave their table, and he followed them wistfully about the room, wondering what they saw” (218). The scene functions primarily as an affective reminder of Charlie’s essential humanity, whatever may have happened in the past. More importantly, however, it serves as a striking example of his resolution to see the world with “clearer and more judicious eyes.” While superficially playing the role of the responsible, sensitive, and informed father—he insists to Lorraine and Duncan Schaeffer, another old acquaintance, that they take a table rather than sit at the bar, for example (218)—Charlie sees that Honoria’s taste and discretion far exceed his own, and that she already possesses the makings of a strong character. Furthermore, he unconsciously identifies her as a model for his own social and moral regeneration.

Charlie’s attempts to emulate his daughter’s flawless conduct result in mixed success. After Lincoln confirms that Marion has given Charlie permission to take Honoria back to Prague with him, Charlie tries to “keep down his exultation” but nevertheless insists that Marion’s bitterness is unwarranted (224). Caught up in his victory, Charlie inconsiderately forces Lincoln to remind him that Marion’s feelings are justified by the Peters’ “just getting along” (224) in the years of the bull market while
Charlie was “not even working toward the end, and getting richer and richer” (225). In contrast to Charlie’s insensitivity, Honoria receives the news that she is to go with her father gracefully and diplomatically. Her perfect behavior even serves as a slight reproach to her less self-possessed father: “Charlie was glad to see that her tact made her conceal her excessive happiness”—as he had been unable to do himself during luncheon with Lincoln. “Only on his lap did she whisper her delight and the question ‘When?’ before she slipped away with the other children” (226).

Self-examination allows Charlie to identify the values he wishes to make a part of his new life, and his daughter’s compelling “presence” (216) allows him to identify her as a model of precisely those values. The efficacy of interiority reaches its limit, however, in Charlie’s attempt to completely reform his behavior. Having identified the prerequisites for a satisfying life—strong personal relationships, fiscal as well as moral responsibilities, and carefully reasoned rather than ego-driven decision-making—Charlie locates these elements in Honoria. But in spite of his best efforts, incorporating Honoria’s exemplary sensitivity into his own behavior in such a way as to provide strong evidence of interior change proves extremely difficult.

This is not to say that Charlie makes no progress at all; his growing interiority does lend a noticeably moral dimension to his acts—both the good and the bad—and on the whole Charlie’s behavior during his return to Paris is encouraging. At one point Charlie dreams that Helen is congratulating him on “being good and doing better” (224), and the story provides some evidence that supports this dream. Toward the end of his tour of Montmartre on the first night of his visit, Charlie performs an act much more typical of the new Charlie than the old: “In the glare of a brasserie a woman spoke to
him. He bought her some eggs and coffee, and then, eluding her encouraging stare, gave her a twenty-franc note and took a taxi to his hotel” (215). Charlie’s simple, generous, and uncompromising conduct during his encounter with the prostitute demonstrates that while he may not yet completely embody his new ideals, he nonetheless possesses the strength to reject destructive and abusive behavior.

This strength serves him well in his encounters with Duncan and Lorraine, who, in contrast to Honoria, provide Charlie with a model of behavior that is tactless, egocentric, and ultimately devastating. Charlie’s vow to take just one drink a day and his focus on Honoria each contribute toward an overall determination to live a more sincere and meaningful life through self-examination and principled change. This determination and its many upshots, such as Charlie’s having again reached and then surpassed the level of his old salary (213), the thought he gives to how he might try to boost Lincoln’s career (226), and his courteous exit from the Peters’ home even after the possibility of regaining Honoria has been eliminated (229), indicate that only traces of the hot-headed “old Wales” (217) remain.

In contrast, the “hilarious” (227) conduct of Duncan and Lorraine indicates their inability to recognize the corruption and wastefulness of the “lavish times of three years ago” (217). Unlike Charlie’s strong commitment to rebuilding his family, Duncan and Lorraine’s primary objective appears to be fun and entertainment at any cost. Because she and her husband did not have enough money for both of them to come to Paris, Lorraine explains to Charlie that she has come alone: “We’re poor as hell. So he gave me two hundred a month and told me I could do my worst on that…” (217). Lorraine’s pleasure-seeking is therefore directly linked to the fragmentation of the family, and her
later avoidance by Richard Peters marks the incongruity of her presence among the “eager smacks of the fire and the sounds of French activity in the kitchen” of the Peters’ exaggeratedly domesticated home (212).

For this reason, Charlie soon stops wondering where his old acquaintances have gone and begins hoping that they—particularly Duncan and Lorraine, after the tension and uneasiness of their first chance meeting—will not emerge and latch onto him simply “because he was functioning, because he was serious” (217-218). Charlie wants to be a loving and responsible father more than anything else, and Honoria’s endearingly repeated emphasis on this role, “Oh, daddy, daddy, daddy, daddy, dads, dads, dads!” (212) and “Good-by, dads, dads, dads, dads” (219), leads him to believe that she also desires that he officially resume his duties. Charlie’s paternal yearning contrasts sharply with the unpleasant memories that surface as a result of an “unwelcome encounter” (217) with Duncan and Lorraine, and the disparity serves to remind him that “his own rhythm was different now” (217). Through self-examination Charlie rejects the reckless self-interest and profligacy that led him to pursue a life of dissipation and waste in favor of a new set of values stressing stability, loyalty, and directed social and moral growth. “I’m awfully anxious to have a home,” Charlie tells Marion. “And I’m awfully anxious to have Honoria in it” (219). Charlie cannot have a home without Honor(ia), and ongoing self-examination leads him to believe that having a home, among other things, is the key to living affirmatively in the face of a decaying, destructive world.
His failure to achieve this home in the end is therefore the failure of self-knowledge to provide positive changes in life. Revisiting “Babylon” brings snatches of Charlie’s former life of dissipation both back into his thoughts—he recalls “hundred-franc notes tossed to a doorman for calling a cab” (215)—and back into his actions—he returns to the Ritz bar to settle the score with Duncan and Lorraine. “Babylon” is not just revisited, however; it is also reconsidered, and by the end of the story Charlie has repudiated his former life in its entirety. He rejoices “to think, instead, of Honoria, to think of Sundays spent with her and of saying good morning to her and of knowing she was there in his house at night, drawing her breath in the darkness” (226).

Correspondingly, by the end of the story Charlie has come to believe in the home as a space in which strong personal relationships and principled self-scrutiny may triumph over the forces of social hedonism and moral disintegration governing the Modern world—a world dominated, at least in Charlie’s past life, by Bricktop’s, Zelli’s, the Poet’s Cave, and other “bleak and sinister” Montmartre establishments (214).

The distinction between the ominous absurdity of these former hangouts and the peaceful domesticity of the Peters’ apartment is not at all lost on Charlie, and is one measure of the damage done by Duncan and Lorraine’s ruinous reappearance at the end of the story. Charlie immediately leaves one familiar club after discovering that, having merely noticed his hesitation in the doorway, “an orchestra burst into sound, a pair of professional dancers leaped to their feet and a maitre d’hôtel swooped toward him, crying, ‘Crowd just arriving, sir!’” (214). The club’s atmosphere is calculated to provide instant gratification—cheap thrills that quickly and easily wear out—and consequently Charlie shrinks away in disgust. In contrast, the security and simplicity of the Peters’
household draw him in quite willingly: “It was warm here, it was a home, people together by a fire. The children felt safe and important; the mother and father were serious, watchful. They had things to do for the children more important than his visit here” (226). Charlie Wales had once enjoyed becoming a fixture of Paris nightlife; following a period of self-examination and reassessment, “Charles J. Wales, of Prague” desires most to be a fixture of home life.

This desire, to build a strong, healthy home and in doing so to compensate in some way for the mistakes of the past, is the moral achievement of Charlie’s return visit to “Babylon.” Obstruction, frustration, and defeat, however, are its tragic outcomes. Returning to the Ritz bar in Part V following Duncan and Lorraine’s catastrophic appearance at the Peters’ apartment, Charlie experiences a flash of insight that sharpens his recognition of the meaning of the word “dissipate” in Part I in addition to framing the story with evidence of the self-knowledge he has developed. Paul, the head barman, greets him:

“I heard that you lost a lot in the crash.”
“I did,” and he [Charlie] added grimly, “but I lost everything I wanted in the boom.”
“Selling short.”
“Something like that.” (229)

Paul refers to a risky trading practice in which shares of stock are borrowed, sold, repurchased at a lower price, and then returned—a foolish strategy in the bull market of the late twenties. Charlie interprets “selling short” more meaningfully. In his mind, this practice involves abusing both one’s family and oneself—a foolish strategy at any time, and in any place.14
This exchange invests the story’s final image with a special significance. Charlie sits alone in the bar, knowing “there was nothing he could do” (229) and knowing also that “he wanted his child, and nothing was much good now, beside that fact” (230). Knowing himself—his wishes and desires, as well as the system of values from which they arise—has not led to a better life. Charlie’s decision to look at the world with “clearer and more judicious eyes” has resulted in self-scrutiny (his rejection of both his old Paris hangouts and the friends who peopled them) and principled change (his decision to recreate himself as “Charles J. Wales, of Prague,” a clean-living, hard-working family man). It has not, however, restored his daughter to him. Without her, Charlie is effectively excluded from the circle of domesticity his developing interiority has caused him to value; the old Paris haunts he has rejected are now the only places that welcome him. In addition, the new man that was to be “Charles J. Wales, of Prague” exists only in name; the daughter who was to give meaning and substance to this name and to whom it was carefully and deliberately first revealed remains in Paris—perhaps for six months, perhaps indefinitely.

Charlie’s frustration leads him to believe that “they couldn’t make him pay forever” (230). While the story’s conclusion does provide poignant evidence that Charlie has learned to question his own values and ideals, and moreover that this questioning has fundamentally changed his idea of what constitutes a sincere and meaningful life, it does not provide any significant indication that self-knowledge will lead to greater satisfaction and future happiness. On the contrary, at the end of the story self-knowledge serves only to make Charlie aware that he “wasn’t young any more, with a lot of nice thoughts and
dreams to have by himself” (230). He feels keenly the fact that he has never been more miserable.
IV. Tender Is the Night

A careful reading of Fitzgerald’s fourth novel, Tender Is the Night, reveals strong affinities between the novel and the stories “The Swimmers” and “Babylon Revisited.” This relationship is partly literal—portions of each of the two stories, in addition to more than thirty others, were “stripped” of particularly excellent passages for direct insertion into the novel. Furthermore, the three pieces form part of a chronological set—the final version of Tender Is the Night was written primarily between 1931 and 1934, a period in which Fitzgerald was reevaluating the stories he had written since publication of All the Sad Young Men (1926) in preparation for a fourth story collection to be published soon after publication of the novel. Most importantly, however, the novel and stories are linked thematically. Tender Is the Night follows the thematic precedent set by “The Swimmers” and “Babylon Revisited” through its preoccupation—or even obsession, perhaps—with the consequences of questioning one’s own values and ideals in the face of a hostile, destructive Modern world.

The novel contains three distinct sections (“books”). In Book 1, young actress Rosemary Hoyt arrives on the French Riviera in June 1925 and immediately joins a glamorous circle of older and worldlier fellow expatriates. At the center of this circle is Dick Diver, the novel’s protagonist, and his wife Nicole. As Rosemary grows closer to Dick, Nicole, and their friends, first at Gausse’s Hotel near Cannes and then later in Paris, she quickly falls in love with Dick’s charming manner and the splendor of his world. Nevertheless, the cracks in this world are not completely hidden—Abe North’s
dissipation, Nicole’s mental breakdowns, and the murders of two people in cold blood provide clear evidence that the dazzling life of the Divers is achieved only at a certain cost to themselves and to those who grow to love them.

Book 2 relates events in Dick’s life that occur both before and after the events described in the first section. Dick arrives in Europe in 1916 as a brilliant medical student, and through his advanced psychological studies in Zurich comes to know Nicole Warren, a wealthy and beautiful schizophrenic patient at a clinic on the Zurichsee. Following brief service in the war Dick returns to Zurich and, against both personal and professional advice, marries Nicole. A condensed and somewhat disjointed montage of Nicole’s thoughts regarding their subsequent life together then provides a transition into the events that follow the breakup of the Divers’ circle in Paris at the end of the novel’s first section. Dick’s judgment becomes increasingly unreliable as he becomes gradually more dependent on Nicole’s money and unable to muster the social graces he had once so perfectly executed. The remainder of the novel, including the third and final book, is largely an account of Dick’s distressing decline into ruin and obscurity.  

As Brian Way has noted, *Tender Is the Night* has received a great deal of both positive and negative criticism. In scores of books and articles over the last four decades, critics have generally attempted to isolate the individual causes of Dick’s decline, often with striking success. As often, however, critics have become frustrated in their attempts to satisfyingly explain this decline through any one particular factor. As a result, they have frequently dismissed the novel as scattered, overly complex, and lacking in thematic force. In addition, *Tender Is the Night* has proven especially attractive to critics who have sought to point out the many and varied connections between the novel
and the personal lives of the Fitzgeralds—Zelda’s letters to Scott transcribed as Nicole’s letters to Dick, and Scott’s anger over Zelda’s choice of material for her novel Save Me the Waltz, for example—without making any substantial, non-anecdotal assertions. Way claims that even the criticism that persuasively identifies one element of Dick’s life or personality as the cause of his demise is flawed in its failure to do justice to the novel’s compelling presentation of the “multiplicity of factors” that “contribute to the ruin of a human life” (141). The narrowness of this approach, he contends, results in lack of appreciation for Fitzgerald’s attempt to “explore a human life in all its complexity and variety” (141). Consequently, a more open and inclusive approach to the novel, and particularly its protagonist, is needed.

Considering Tender Is the Night in relation to the value of self-examination is one way of responding to this charge. Just as the novel vastly exceeds “The Swimmers” and “Babylon Revisited” in terms of length and narrative complexity, it also delves deeper into the consequences of discovering self-knowledge. Again, the question is asked: can self-examination, the process of questioning deeply held social and moral values, lead to a better and more meaningful life? Each of the many elements of Dick’s life and personality—his work as a scientist, feelings toward money, love for Nicole, desire to both be great and inspire greatness—contributes toward an answer to this question.

Caught between two worlds—the genteel good-heartedness of his father’s generation and the cold, unfeeling reason of his own—Dick consciously and tragically chooses the former, knowing both that he has been true to himself and that the consequences of his decision will be devastating. In doing so, he completes an ideological shift begun with Henry Marston’s realization of positive change through ongoing self-examination in “The
Swimmers.” In *Tender Is the Night*, the end result of self-examination is complete personal defeat and destruction.

The disordered tripartite structure of *Tender Is the Night*, while chronologically confusing at times, is an improvement upon the teleological mold of Fitzgerald’s first three novels. In *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned* (as well as other contemporary novels such as Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, Frank Norris’s *McTeague*, and Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*), the protagonists’ adoption of a set of values is demonstrated before actions are taken in accordance with those values. Furthermore, the consequences of certain actions are always traceable to the actions themselves, which in turn can always be seen as arising from the adoption of a certain set of values. Thus Amory Blaine’s unpopularity in prep school can be traced to his unsuitable social behavior, which arises from the adoption of egotism and overconfidence. Similarly, Anthony and Gloria Patch’s financial insecurities can be traced to overspending and frequent partying, which arise from the adoption of indolence and a sense of self-entitlement.

In *The Great Gatsby*, this process is in some ways disrupted. The values underlying Gatsby’s behavior—his belief that he can repeat the past (*Gatsby* 116), his faith in appearance as an indicator of worth (71), and his trust in the power of money to buy happiness and love (95-98) for example—trickle out in bits and pieces throughout the novel. However, the most important revelation of Gatsby’s values, his father’s
pointing out the exhortations to perfection scrawled in his son’s boyhood copy of
*Hopalong Cassidy* (181-182), is withheld until after both his subsequent actions
(attempting to make himself worthy of Daisy) and their consequences (his and Myrtle
Wilson’s deaths) have already played themselves out. Gatsby’s adoption of a set of
values does not occur at any time in the present action. The novel proceeds in
straightforward fashion from beginning to end, only reaching back into the past during
moments of reflection or retrospective explanation.

In *Tender Is the Night*, Dick Diver’s adoption of a set of values occurs in the
present action, but not, as is usual (and as is the case in *This Side of Paradise* and *The
Beautiful and Damned*), at the beginning of the story—Fitzgerald’s major novelistic
innovation is the delaying of this adoption until the middle of the novel. Its result is a
complex narrative in which values, actions, and consequences often appear out of
sequence. The reader enters the story at a point after Dick chooses a moral code but
before the full consequences of his choice become evident—a confusing way to begin a
novel, but also one which represents the structure and pattern of human life more
accurately than Fitzgerald’s earlier straightforward narratives. The maturity and insight
with which Fitzgerald structures the story of Dick Diver—his depiction of a world in
which values, actions, and consequences are often muddled or unknowable—makes
*Tender Is the Night* the most complete realization of his theme. The novel’s structural
fidelity to the realities of disordered human experience contributes to a more forceful and
engaging portrayal of the consequences of self-examination in the Modern world.

This portrayal begins with the arrival of seventeen-year-old Rosemary Hoyt and
her mother at Gausse’s Hotel near Cannes. Her impressions on the beach and at Villa
Diana, the Divers’ cliff-perched home, reveal Dick to be an attractive, sensitive, and impeccably mannered older man: “He seemed kind and charming—his voice promised that he would take care of her, and that a little later he would open up whole new worlds for her, unroll an endless succession of magnificent possibilities” (16). While possessing a kind of magic in his own right, the passion Dick evokes in others is sparked by the indications he gives through his attentions, placed carefully so that “there was never any doubt at whom he was looking or talking,” and perfectly modulated voice, which “wooed the world,” of his willingness and ability to give people the things they cannot give themselves (19). His instinct is to provide for others, especially emotionally and spiritually, and a great deal of his time is occupied in one “quiet little performance” or another for the benefit of the members of his own chosen circle (6). As a result, this circle becomes identified with the appearance of glamorous and graceful ease; and according to Rosemary, “it all came from the man in the jockey cap” (11).

Nevertheless, Fitzgerald’s omniscient narrator makes clear the limitations of the lens through which Rosemary views the enchanting world of the Divers and their friends. She is attracted to the “expensive simplicity” of the little party on the beach, appreciative of its lifestyle but “unaware of its complexity and its lack of innocence” (21). Caught up in her initiation into the affections of the Divers, she remains ignorant of the delicate balance upon which their world depends. Rosemary’s youthful inexperience and governing self-interests prevent her from perceiving that the Divers’ captivating world is the result of a “desperate bargain with the gods” and “attained through struggles she could not have guessed at” (21). Accordingly, the fascinating and charismatic Dick Diver who appears on the beach in 1925 is both appealing and inexplicable. Rosemary’s
point of view, which remains in effect for most of Book 1, allows the color and brilliance of Dick’s actions to emerge but fails both to connect his actions to an underlying set of values and to link them to either positive, negative, or mixed consequences.

One particular remark—that the Divers, as depicted in the novel’s first few chapters, exemplify the “exact furthermost evolution of a class” (21)—provides the impetus for the direction taken by the story at the beginning of Book 2. From Nicole’s mental breakdown in the Divers’ Paris hotel room the story moves backward several years to a description of Dick’s arrival in Europe in 1917. Book 2 includes revealing glimpses of Dick’s “class,” or cultural pedigree, through its gradual unfolding of his life as a medical student and the beginnings of his relationship with Nicole. Certain deeply ingrained features of his personality become apparent. Dick is naturally inclined toward intellectual decadence—feeling the war’s pinch while studying in Vienna, he “burned for fuel almost a hundred textbooks that he had accumulated; but only, as he laid each one on the fire, with an assurance chuckling inside him that he was himself a digest of what was in that book…” (116). He also conceives the idea for his second book by fixing on a title that would “look monumental in German” (146). Furthermore, Dick’s personal aspirations are impossibly high—he responds to an inquiry regarding his post-war plans with “I’ve only got one, Franz, and that’s to be a good psychologist—maybe to be the greatest one that ever lived.” Franz laughs, but perceives that “Dick wasn’t joking” (132). Illustrating the development of Dick’s personality serves to ease the tension created in Book 1 by the introduction of a man who inspires “fascinating and uncritical love” (27) for no clearly definable reason.
More importantly, Book 2 contains the death of Dick’s father. Through his reaction to this event, the moral choices Dick has faced—largely a choice between the simple gentility of the Victorian era and the rational self-interest of the Modern era—begin to emerge. After receiving the news of his father’s passing, Dick pauses to reflect on the significance of losing this earliest and strongest influence on his values and ideals: “Dick loved his father—again and again he referred judgments to what his father would probably have thought or done,” trusting completely the man who had taken it upon himself to be his son’s “moral guide” (203). Dick remembers his father, a clergyman, telling him “all he knew about life, not much but most of it true, simple things” (203) and teaching him that “nothing could be superior to ‘good instincts,’ honor, courtesy, and courage” (204). Returning to America, Dick takes leave of his father in one of the novel’s most lyrical passages:

Only as the local train shambled into the low-forested clayland of Westmoreland County, did he feel once more identified with his surroundings; at the station he saw a star he knew, and a cold moon bright over Chesapeake Bay; he heard the rasping wheels of buckboards turning, the lovely fatuous voices, the sound of sluggish primeval rivers flowing softly under Indian names.

Next day at the churchyard his father was laid among a hundred Divers, Dorseys, and Hunters. It was very friendly leaving him there with all his relations around him. Flowers were scattered on the brown unsettled earth. Dick had no more ties here now and did not believe he would come back. He knelt on the hard soil. These dead, he knew them all, their weather-beaten faces with blue flashing eyes, the spare violent bodies, the souls made of new earth in the forest-heavy darkness of the seventeenth century.

“Good-by, my father—good-by, all my fathers.” (204-5)

The passing of his father represents for Dick the end of an era—the final disappearance of an older world. It has been fading for some time—a curate, Holmes, has been the de facto rector of his father’s church for the past decade (since about the time of Dick’s marriage to Nicole); but only when surrounded by the graves of his ancestors and with
his knees resting on the “primeval” land, as if in prayer, does Dick fully realize that the world of his fathers has ended.

Dick’s profound reaction to his father’s death indicates the extent to which, even at thirty-eight years of age, he still feels connected to the “conscious good manners” that shaped his childhood in the twilight of the nineteenth century (164). Nevertheless, Dick’s rise to success is due only partly to his appreciation of this upbringing; it results more directly from his ability to observe, reason, and diagnose. Dick owes his position as an eminent psychiatrist, the “most brilliant” of the doctors recently trained in Zurich, to his ability to recognize that the standards by which he and the other members of his generation are judged are not those of the heart, but rather those of the mind (241).

Having attended Yale and Johns Hopkins, and Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, the scholarly Dick Diver extends his studies even further in the universities of Vienna and Zurich. “His publications are standard in their line—go into any medical library and ask,” Dick’s clinical partner, Franz, explains to his wife (241). In addition, Dick’s “first little book, _A Psychology for Psychiatrists_” runs through fifty editions (165). Two generations earlier the field of psychology had been just “emerging from the darkness of all time”; Dick’s scientific work serves to push back the darkness a little farther (119).

There are signs, however, of Dick’s limitations as both doctor and intellectual—signs that point to the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of reconciling the slow-moving chivalry of his father with the rapidly growing and evolving self-interest of his own generation. In spite of the success of his first book, Dick fails to produce a second. Indeed, he recognizes that his first “contained the germ of all he would ever think or know” (165). As a scientist with “only one or two ideas” (165), albeit good ones, Dick
cannot afford to ignore the emotional nourishment offered him by the professional contacts he makes. His dual needs—to find both romantic love and intellectual stimulation—lead him to consciously blur the lines between the personal and professional. Forced to “play close to the line” (99) as a condition of his own survival and sustained by “illusions of eternal strength and health, and of the essential goodness of people” (117), Dick often loses his scientific detachment in the presence of compelling emotional desire.

Most significantly, Dick goes against the professional advice of both Franz and the “venerable” (125) Professor Dohmler when he marries Nicole. Dick is not solely responsible for the formation of their relationship—Nicole begins writing letters to him during the war and, out of pity and a desire to help her get well, he responds. When asked to terminate the bond as a further step in Nicole’s recovery, however, Dick admits to being “not so straight” (139) on how he feels about her before conceding that he is “half in love with her” (140). Recognizing that “there was no home left to her, save emptiness and pain,” Dick fails to maintain the “hard brassy attitude” of the consulting physician (143). His attempt to bring about the counter-transference requested by Dohmler results not in a professional break, but rather in “feeling her unhappiness, and wanting to drink the rain that touched her cheek” (143). Nicole’s attraction proves so strong that “her problem was one they had together” long before Dick realizes it (157).

She responds equally to his dual needs, and, considered individually, she satisfies them with few complications. The sadness Dick feels when Nicole mentions her multilingual conversations—“French with two doctors, and German with the nurses, and Italian, or something like it, with a couple of scrub-women and one of the patients”
—and developing musical abilities in the hopes of gaining his “approval” (142) is grounded in a silently revised diagnosis; enticed by the “essential structure and economy” (141) of her beauty, he cannot help observing in a scientific manner that her course of treatment has resulted in only partial success. Alternately, Dick derives great satisfaction from knowing that Nicole is emotionally accessible as well as clearly responsive to his good looks, courteous manners, and masculine maturity. Reencountering Nicole after his attempt to break with her, he decides from a distance that “she was the first morning in May” (148); “My God,” he later exclaims breathlessly as he gathers her in his arms, “you’re fun to kiss” (155). However, when Dick is no longer able to identify his individual needs—when the compulsions to be lover and to be doctor merge into one indivisible and inextinguishable desire—the danger of self-destruction becomes very real.

The precariousness of Dick’s balance between loving and doctoring, between old-world consideration and new-age classification, is symbolically represented by the violence and death pervading the environment he inhabits. Maria Wallis, an acquaintance of Nicole’s, shoots a man in plain view of Dick’s party, robbing him of not only his life, but also his identity—the bullet passes through his identification card (84). Consequently, the atmosphere acquires a doubly sinister character: “The shots had entered into all their lives: echoes of violence followed them out onto the pavement…” (85). The duel following the Divers’ dinner party at Villa Diana (49-51); the murder of Jules Peterson just outside Dick’s Paris hotel room (109); the three Russian guards left dead by Prince Chilicheff and Tommy Barban, who subsequently requires the removal of “an eighth of the area of his skull” (196); and the news of Abe North’s being “beaten to death in a speakeasy” (199) provide additional evidence of the destructiveness of the
Modern environment. This environment poses a particularly strong threat to those, like Dick, whose ability to identify and evaluate competing social and moral values often leaves them “hovering between being centripetal and centrifugal” (144), a position in which they are easily torn apart.

The novel’s depiction of violence and destruction centers not only on the physical tolls of post-war life, but also on its psychological costs. Nicole’s unstable condition shapes the narrative from beginning to end, and the novel is filled with other, more discrete, instances of psychological damage and destruction. Dick’s tour of the clinic he and Franz have constructed on the banks of the Zugersee, for example, illustrates the effects of fragmentation and displacement on the fragile Modern mind. Like Dohmler’s, Dick’s clinic is “a refuge for the broken, the incomplete, the menacing” (120). It includes two specially designed buildings for “those sunk into eternal darkness” (181) and another occupied by those whose “sighs only marked the beginning of another ceaseless round of ratiocination, not in a line as with normal people but in the same circle. Round, round, and round. Around forever” (182). Dick visits a woman who is “coherent, even brilliant, within the limits of her special hallucinations” and whose psychological trauma has turned her body into a “living agonizing sore” (183). He plans visits to other special cases, as well: a girl who has “hacked off all her hair with a nail scissors,” a “frail exile from the Caucasus” suspended in medicated water, and, perhaps most chillingly, a “collapsed psychiatrist” wanting desperately to believe that he is getting “better, always better” (186). Dick’s tour of the clinic extends the menace of his environment beyond physical violence and death to include psychological disease and mental incapacitation.
His response to the violence that surrounds him is an ongoing attempt to repair the damages suffered by others. Finding both his patients and his friends broken and incomplete, Dick acts upon them as does a skilled mechanic, leaving them “worked over” (87), patched up and filled out in a way that allows them to function more perfectly. His power to heal, however, is contingent upon a belief that he can insulate himself from the madness and destruction swirling through his life—that for the great Dick Diver, at least, “there were no wolves outside the cabin door” (117). When faced with the damage wrought by the most violent and horrific event of his generation, the First World War, Dick finds himself completely unprotected. The colossal wounding of the war penetrates Dick’s self-defenses to a degree equaled only by his love for Nicole, and the insight and depth of his reaction to its ravages are measures of his capacity for self-knowledge.

Dick’s understanding of what happened during the war—not only the slaughter, but also the clash of values that precipitated it—is revealed during an excursion to the trenches near Amiens. Unlike Abe, who tosses pebbles in mock reenactment of the deadly contest, Dick “couldn’t kid” (58) about the war. His “throat straining with sadness” (56), he describes to Nicole, Rosemary, and the Norths the costs of the struggle not in terms of the lives that were lost, but rather in terms of the cultural memory and identity that made possible destruction on such an unprecedented scale:

“You had to have a whole-souled sentimental equipment going back further than you could remember. You had to remember Christmas, and postcards of the Crown Prince and his fiancée, and little cafés in Valence and beer gardens in Unter den Linden and weddings at the mairie, and going to the Derby, and your grandfather’s whiskers […] This kind of battle was invented by Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and whoever wrote Undine, and country deacons bowling in Marseilles and girls seduced in the back lanes of Wurtemburg and Westphalia. Why, this was a love battle—there was a century of middle-class love spent here. This was the last love battle.” (57)
Dick’s recognition of the values underlying the war’s tragic loss of life demonstrates his acute sensitivity to the unsteady cultural moment in which he exists. “All my beautiful lovely safe world blew itself up here with a great gust of high explosive love,” he laments (57), mourning not only the passing of this world, but also the incompatibility of “an old romantic” (58) such as himself with the values of the new world that has risen in its stead. Dick’s ability to imagine “a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward from behind” (56) reinforces his awareness of the passage of time and the evolution of cultural values.

Furthermore, his continued mourning for a bygone era suggests that his identification of the values of his father’s generation is also an identification with those values. Dining at his hotel in Paris a few days after the battlefield excursion, Dick asks a waiter to identify a large party of women at a nearby table. The waiter soon reports that they are “gold-star muzzers,” and Dick’s heart goes out to them: “in their happy faces…he perceived all the maturity of an older America. For a while the sobered women who had come to mourn for their dead, for something they could not repair, made the room beautiful. Momentarily he sat again on his father’s knee…” (100-01). Years later Dick awakens to the sounds of a veterans’ march outside his window. He observes that the men maintain “a sort of swagger for a lost magnificence, a past effort, a forgotten sorrow. The faces were only formally sad but Dick’s lungs burst with regret for Abe’s death, and his own youth of ten years ago” (200). Dick’s nostalgic grieving for the gold-star mothers and veterans—their capacity to evoke both beauty and regret—indicates that
he identifies some part of himself with them, and that this part of him shares in their tragedies.

Moreover, his grieving is rooted in the “heroic period” (116) of his life, the time in which he acted upon his emerging self-knowledge by committing himself to live according to a certain set of values. Dick’s regret for “his own youth of ten years ago” corresponds to his days as a student in Vienna and Zurich. Significantly, Dick had by that time fully achieved his intellectual potential, but not yet discovered that he had reached his limits. With a job offer from Franz’s rival, Gisler, and plans for publication of his first book, the Modern world of medical science, of symptoms, diagnoses, and treatments, appears poised to embrace him and to set him on the path to joining other “future great men” (132). And yet—“In the dead white hours in Zurich staring into a stranger’s pantry across the upshine of a streetlamp, he used to think that he wanted to be good, he wanted to be kind, he wanted to be brave and wise, but it was all pretty difficult. He wanted to be loved, too, if he could fit it in” (133). Recognizing the danger it puts him in, Dick nevertheless affirms the values of his father’s generation in spite of the opportunities afforded him by his own.

The view of his neighbor’s pantry against a background almost obliterated (“dead”) by snow serves to remind him of the need for nourishment—the need to use his medical talents in such a way as to replenish both himself and the people he loves. He imagines the single-minded pursuit of scientific truth—a highly rewarding profession, but one in which it is almost always necessary to suppress “personal reactions” (139), like Dohmler does—as “deliberately cutting life down to the scale of an inherited suit” (133). His repeated self-inquiry, “God, am I like the rest after all?” (133) indicates his
overwhelming desire to escape the narrowness of Franz’s unfeeling professionalism. Dick’s subsequent comparison of the old-fashioned values instilled in him by his father with the values of those that surround him finds the former more satisfying. Consequently, he embarks upon a career characterized not by the reaching and surpassing of scientific horizons, but rather by the expansion and perfection of human feelings.

The likeness between Dick’s father’s code of conduct and Dick’s own behavior provides further evidence of his intention to remain true to the values of his childhood in spite of his constant encounters with and appreciation for the newer social and moral ideals endorsed by the post-war world. Stunned by the news of his father’s death, Dick remembers an anecdote intended as a model for his actions as a young man:

“Once in a strange town when I was first ordained, I went into a crowded room and was confused as to who was my hostess. Several people I knew came toward me, but I disregarded them because I had seen a gray-haired woman sitting by a window far across the room. I went over to her and introduced myself. After that I made many friends in that town.” (203-204)

Just as his father locates and ministers to the most vulnerable person in the room, Dick responds to the weak and malformed who wander into his life by embracing them “with an exquisite consideration and a politeness that moved so fast and intuitively that it could be examined only in its effect” (27-28). The intensity and simplicity of his feeling for others creates an atmosphere during the dinner party at Villa Diana in which the various men and women seated round the table relinquish the burdens of their own failures and become, if just for a moment, “only their best selves” (32). Although he actively engages in the psychological challenges of his time, particularly early in his adult life, his self-knowledge leads him to trust in a simple and unwavering devotion to the emotional states
of others—a devotion first demonstrated by his father—as the best way to restore health and happiness in a decaying and destructive world.

Dick’s values contrast sharply with the values manifested by the behavior of the various members of his domestic and social circles. Rosemary’s “most sincere” insight into their relationship is “Oh, we’re such actors—you and I” (105), an almost cheerily flippant admission of her airy attitude toward him. Dick, in contrast, is disgusted by flippancy—“that one could parade a casualness into his presence was a challenge to the key on which he lived” (87). In addition, whereas Dick sustains himself through the healing of others, Tommy Barban thrives on a constant and senseless militancy:

> “Going home?” [Rosemary]
> “Home? I have no home. I am going to a war.” [Tommy]
> “What war?”
> “What war? Any war. I haven’t seen a paper lately but I suppose there’s a war—there always is.”
> “Don’t you care what you fight for?”
> “Not at all—so long as I’m well treated….” (30)

In Tommy’s system of values, violence replaces the home as a means by which fundamental relationships—in addition to a sense of self—are developed. Unlike Dick, whose instinct is to form his companions into a “unit” (52), shielding them with his infectious “interest and enthusiasm” (87) from the “derisive and salacious improvisations of the frontier” (34), Tommy’s instinct is to supplement the forces of destruction already at work in the Modern world. “My business is to kill people,” he tells McKisco (35) shortly before challenging him to a duel, which is subsequently fought using the “archaic” (46) dueling pistols Tommy normally carries in his suitcase. Even his laugh is “martial” (196). Rosemary’s inability to sustain serious feelings toward Dick and Tommy’s driving need to damage others—attitudes that complement as well as
contribute to the opportunism and violence of their environment—demonstrate the singularity of Dick’s choice of values. Wanting to believe in “things unforgotten, unshriven, unexpurgated” (91), Dick must break from the social and moral patterns of those around him.

Significantly, these patterns include those of his sister-in-law, Baby Warren. Baby’s ultimate control of Nicole’s “tragic destiny” (172) gives her a great deal of power over Dick, especially after she intentionally abandons Nicole in Caux. Baby knows Dick will not refuse to escort Nicole back to the clinic, in spite of his plans to continue traveling, and consequently she sets the hook. It is in the moment of his subsequent leave-taking of Nicole at the clinic’s “sad door” (157) that he becomes convinced of his love for her. Unlike Baby, Dick is unable to manipulate people, even “innocently as a convenience” (157); he regards others’ emotions too seriously—if not sacredly—to abuse them, and unlike Franz he makes no distinction between emotions “in the clinic” and “in the world” (138).

Not surprisingly, then, Dick resists the categorical judgments on which Baby reinforces her self-image. Their difference in social mind-set is illustrated by their contrasting evaluations of Franz, who visits them in Gstaad. “At the hotel Baby Warren made a quick examination of him, and failing to find any of the hall-marks she respected…treated him thereafter with her second manner. Nicole was always a little afraid of him. Dick liked him, as he liked his friends, without reservations” (173). Sharing an ability to identify the weaknesses of those with whom they come into contact, Baby and Dick diverge with regard to the value of these weaknesses. For the “wooden and onanistic” (152) Baby, the absence of “subtler virtues or courtesies” (173) in
someone’s personality triggers the desire to distance herself from that person—to build an impregnable wall between them. In contrast, the presence of the broken and incomplete serves only to increase Dick’s expansiveness—his own social and moral satisfaction is contingent upon “recognizing the proud uniqueness of their destinies, buried under the compromises of how many years” (27). Dick slowly and carefully strives to restore his companions to their natural perfection, just as he methodically removes the pebbles from the beach near Gausse’s Hotel (20).

As a result, he expends a good deal of his emotional stock.19 The novel lends itself particularly well to a conceptualization of the differences between Dick, an adherent of chivalric Victorian courtesies, and the Warrens, architects of emerging post-war culture, through its preoccupation with possession and expenditure. Dick values human emotion above all else. The moment in which he first senses Nicole’s honest and simple love for him—true affection, as opposed to the hopeful admiration of patient for doctor—reveals his compulsion to measure himself through the emotional responses he generates in others: “he engaged a room and found himself washing without a memory of the intervening ten minutes, only a sort of drunken flush pierced with voices, unimportant voices that did not know how much he was loved” (150). In accordance with his father’s emphasis on “‘good instincts,’ honor, courtesy, and courage,” Dick’s notion of wealth centers on feelings, rather than material possessions. To be rich, in his view, is to enjoy a surplus of emotional “nourishment” (210)—to be loved as well as to love.

In contrast, both Baby and Nicole are repeatedly identified with a fabulous rate of material consumption; while Dick struggles frantically to enrich his emotional life, the Warrens effortlessly purchase and exhaust nearly everything the Modern world is capable
of producing. Indeed, the Warrens are themselves engines of thriving post-war capitalism, a characteristic illustrated by Nicole’s buying spree in Paris:

For her sake trains began their run at Chicago and traversed the round belly of the continent to California; chicle factories fumed and link belts grew link by link in factories; men mixed toothpaste in vats and drew mouthwash out of copper hogsheads; girls canned tomatoes quickly in August or worked rudely at the Five-and-Tens on Christmas Eve; half-breed Indians toiled on Brazilian coffee plantations and dreamers were muscled out of patent rights in new tractors—these were some of the people who gave a tithe to Nicole, and as the whole system swayed and thundered onward it lent a feverish bloom to such processes of hers as wholesale buying, like the flush of a fireman’s face holding his post before a spreading blaze. (55)

The Warrens’ sense of connectedness to others is contingent upon their buying power. Through their virtually unlimited finances, they occupy a place at the center of the “system”—the post-war economy—that plays the strongest part in the creation of social and moral values in the Modern world. Baby casually mentions that she and Nicole have each recently inherited “three hundred thousand apiece” (173), an astronomical sum, and then responds to Franz’s offer to Dick of a two hundred thousand dollar clinical partnership with “We must think it over carefully” (176)—before Dick can even get a word out. Dick’s most precious possession turns out to be the “affection he gave and inspired” (116); Nicole’s is her money, the spending of which eventually becomes “an absorption in itself” (257). This difference in values reiterates their divergent generational affiliations—Dick holds on desperately to the old world, while Nicole enthusiastically makes possible the new.

The disparate values held by Dick and the Warrens are also symbolic of changing conceptions of American history. At the beginning of Book 2, the young Dick is likened to “Grant, lolling in his general store in Galena,” waiting to be “called to an intricate
destiny” (118). Then, in the novel’s final paragraph, Nicole thinks that Dick’s career is probably just “biding its time, again like Grant’s in Galena” (315). The significance of these likenings to Ulysses S. Grant is Dick’s association with a romanticized view of America’s past. Grant sought to heal the political rift in the country caused by slavery and the secession of the South through leading the union army to victory; similarly, Dick seeks to heal rifts in the social and moral fabric of the post-war environment through embarking on his own restorative crusade. Dick’s narration of what happened at the battlefields near Amiens bears a “faint resemblance to one of his own parties” (59), and Rosemary compares the exquisitely executed all-night party in Paris to a military maneuver, noting Dick’s brilliance in mastering the “technic [sic] of moving many varied types, each as immobile, as dependent on supplies of attention as an infantry battalion is dependent on rations” (77). In Dick’s mind, American history has demonstrated an unfailing loyalty to such ideals as E pluribus unum; furthermore, Dick’s destiny, like Grant’s, is governed by the need for a “hero” (118) to enact these ideals.

The post-war success of people like the Warrens, however, challenges this view. Devereaux Warren is a figurative descendant of such mythic American capitalists as Carnegie, Morgan, Rockefeller, and Vanderbilt—figures crucial to the formation of America’s economic and political legacy. Significantly, his corruption—and perhaps the corruption of his entire “American ducal family” (158)—is recognized by Dohmler even before the “handsome figure” parading a “sportsman’s ease” (128) gives up his attempt to shift the blame for Nicole’s problems onto others. Devereaux Warren’s ignoble motivations—“I’m such a Goddamned degenerate,” he exclaims, abusing himself in the hope of gaining the austere Dohmler’s sympathy (129)—are in this case ripped from
behind their characteristic cloak of distinctively American idealism. “Peasant!” (129), Dohmler’s judgment of the self-serving Warren, is an assertion of the essential baseness of American history, its material progress and moral stagnation. America, the land in which “Sid Warren, the horse-trader” (143) is nostalgically forgiven the dubiousness of his activities as, over time, his image blends with others to form the inviolable “self-made American capitalist” (53), has failed to live up to its romantic purpose.

Like Gatsby, Warren is trailed by a “foul dust” (*Gatsby* 6) arising from the sordidness necessarily involved in the pursuit of the American dream. Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, however, *Tender Is the Night* does not locate this sordidness in its protagonist; rather, it demonstrates his identification and evaluation of two systems of value—his father’s, and that of successful Moderns such as the Warrens. Dick chooses the former, silently contesting Baby’s belief that “her father would have it on almost any clergyman” (*Tender* 158). However, he discovers early on the incompatibility of his chosen values with the criteria for health and satisfaction delineated by a hostile, destructive Modern environment. In this discovery, and in Dick’s persistence in acting upon the values of an older generation, his downfall is determined. For Dick Diver, the inevitable consequences of self-examination are personal ruin and defeat.

Following the death of his father, Dick stops in Rome on his way back to the clinic. He immediately encounters Rosemary, who is shooting a film about the decline of the Roman Empire, and briefly resumes their truncated affair of several years before.
Neither feels the excitement they once shared, however, and Dick’s stint in Rome ends with his rescue by Baby after a long and drunken night spent brawling with the Italian police. Returning to the clinic, Dick’s lack of professionalism soon forces him to depart with Nicole for the Riviera, visiting and alienating the newly remarried Mary North (now Mary Minghetti) along the way. His dissipation continues on apace, and is increasingly manifested by undisguised alcoholism and open disregard for social proprieties. Tommy Barban reappears, and in Nicole’s reawakened affection for him her marital and psychological break with Dick is finally accomplished. Consequently, he leaves the Riviera for New York and does not return.

At the heart of Dick’s collapse is an ongoing process of self-examination. Having adopted the values of his father, he continually questions them in the face of their patent inaptness with regard to surviving in a world grown accustomed to—and even appreciative of—fragmentation, opportunism, and violence. Nicole, whose stability up until the final move back to the Riviera depends heavily upon the deployment of Dick’s attentions, provides the keenest observation of Dick’s earnest self-questioning. Perceiving that his “excitement about things reached an intensity out of proportion to their importance,” she surmises the cause of his subsequent “melancholy”: it “came when he realized the waste and extravagance involved. He sometimes looked back with awe at the carnivals of affection he had given, as a general might gaze upon a massacre he had ordered to satisfy an impersonal blood lust” (27). Faced with releasing his companions into an environment in which simplicity, honesty, and unflagging good-will are often liabilities, Dick questions whether the excitement he purposefully engenders actually debilitates more than it heals.
His affections are bestowed whole-heartedley and unconditionally, and his subsequent anxiety stems from the difficulty of self-evaluation under such tremendously strong compulsions. A fellow student in Vienna explains this difficulty warningly: “You’re not a romantic philosopher—you’re a scientist. Memory, force, character—especially good sense. That’s going to be your trouble—judgment about yourself…” (117). Exquisitely sensitive to the emotional needs of others, Dick nevertheless fails to discover the necessary balance between enriching their lives and sustaining his own. This failure is symbolized by both the precarious leaning of Dick’s wrecked Renault (192-93) and his inability by the end of the novel to water-ski with a man standing on his shoulders, a feat he had formerly accomplished “with ease” (283-84). The conflict between Dick’s values and his environment, in tandem with a crippling awareness of this conflict, makes his decline unavoidable.

This decline is most thoroughly demonstrated through a failure of containment. Dick chooses to believe, as did his clergyman father, in a fairly rigid, perhaps even ecclesiastical, set of values. “We must all try to be good,” Dick reminds one of his patients (185), an instruction which, when paired with his repeated early epistolic admonition to Nicole, “Be a good girl and mind the doctors” (130), takes on the quality of a litany. The narrowness of Dick’s social and moral code, its collection of simple and uncompromising rules for deportment, fails to do justice to the complexity of life in the Modern world. Moving among artists, scientists, mental patients—a “large acquaintance” (52) that even includes all of the bank clerks (89)—Dick struggles to fit the range of behaviors required by each of these different encounters into the inflexible blocks he has chosen as his set of social and moral values. In recognizing competing
values and choosing to adopt those he believes most conducive to a satisfying and meaningful life, Dick demonstrates self-knowledge; in the ruination caused by this choice, Dick demonstrates self-knowledge’s inherently destructive nature.

Thinking in terms of a failure of containment serves to connect and give meaning to the many causes of Dick’s decline (and thus responds to Brian Way’s complaint regarding typical criticism of the novel, at least to some degree—see above). Dick’s awareness of the incompatibility of his genteel values with his harsh environment lends an especially painful quality to the breakdown in moral probity of his behavior. Dick fails to contain his sexual yearnings—in addition to his affair with Rosemary, he fantasizes about a woman in Innsbruck while simultaneously admitting that “he was in love with every pretty woman he saw now, their forms at a distance, their shadows on a wall” (201). Franz’s asking Dick if he desires a “real leave of abstinence” thus becomes a particularly revealing mistake (194). Dick’s attraction to mere shadows, even in anonymity, stands in stark contrast to the personal fidelity at the heart of his father’s values—a fidelity to which Dick evidently cannot completely adhere.

Dick’s failure of containment is not limited to his increasingly wandering eye. He also fails to contain his drinking—he begins to consume “too much for his system to burn up” (254), an escalating habit that contributes to the necessity of his leaving the clinic. In addition, Tommy later declares that “there are those who can drink and those who can’t” (274); Dick’s inept behavior on Golding’s yacht, the “Margin” (268), clearly places him in the second category. Even Gausse’s Beach, whose freedom from small pebbles as well as small-mindedness is accomplished at the beginning of the novel through Dick’s constant attentions, yields to his general failure of containment—by the end of the novel
it has become extremely fashionable, “though, like the international society it
represented, it would be hard to say who was not admitted” (281). In both his drinking
and his loss of control over the beach, Dick’s failure of containment is symptomatic of
his yielding, in the face of devastating self-knowledge, to the overwhelming forces of
fragmentation at work in the Modern world.

Accordingly, his failure of containment is more than just a letting go; it is a
distinctly sinister and destructive process. Over a quiet dinner in Nice, Nicole reminds
Dick of the damage his decline has caused: “you used to want to create things—now you
seem to want to smash them up” (267). Moreover, Dick’s failure to contain his obsession
with Rosemary’s chastity, as indicated by a constant refrain of “—Do you mind if I pull
down the curtain?” (88, 89, and elsewhere), suggests that while Nicole’s mental state
grows steadily stronger, Dick’s drifts slowly toward madness. This suggestion is
reinforced by Dick’s failure to contain his laughter during his final conversation with
Mary North/Minghetti. Nicole’s outbreaks of madness are characterized by a “verbal
inhumanity” (112) that includes “laughing hilariously, unashamed, unafraid,
unconcerned” (192). Dick feels a compulsive charm taking hold of him while speaking
to Mary: “stealing over him he felt the old necessity of convincing her that he was the last
man in the world and she was the last woman” (313). The mood is destroyed, however,
as soon as “the old interior laughter had begun inside him” in a manner strikingly similar
to Nicole’s outbursts; soon, the “laughter inside him became so loud that it seemed as if
Mary must hear it” (314). The frequent interruption and disorderliness of Dick’s
thoughts demonstrate a failure to contain his own mental processes. This, in turn, both
illustrates the completeness of his decline and provides additional evidence of the deleterious effects of critical self-examination.

Dick recognizes that the consequences of his self-questioning shape other people’s lives as well as his own. After he deliberately quarrels with Rosemary over her Italian lover, Nicotera, she asks him why he feels the need to push his disappointment and frustration onto her. “I guess I’m the Black Death,” Dick responds. “I don’t seem to bring people happiness anymore” (219). Like a plague, the dissatisfaction caused by Dick’s self-questioning cannot be contained—he feels compelled to distribute “pieces of his own most personal self” (77) even after he realizes the negative impact of this intimate sharing on his relationships.

Indeed, Dick’s failure to contain this “personal self,” a quality that at the beginning of the novel adds to his irresistibility and aids in restoring social and moral perfection to others, has by the end of the novel degenerated into a gross act of violation. His intense response to strong personalities such as Rosemary, Abe, and Tommy results in a destructive blurring of the boundaries between them: “in such contacts the personalities had seemed to press up so close to him that he became the personality itself” (245). In his love for Nicole, “a wild submergence of the soul, a dipping of all colors into an obscuring dye” (217), the commingling of selves echoes Devereaux Warren’s incestual act—a suggestion that is strengthened when Dick is mistaken for an Italian who “had raped and slain a five-year-old child” (234). Dick’s reaction to this event is revealing: “I want to explain to these people how I raped a five-year-old girl. Maybe I did—” (235). Dick’s inability to contain himself provides the means of his destruction; the failure of self-examination to lead to positive change provides its impetus.
His drifting into a self-effacing obscurity at the end of the novel—Fitzgerald’s last sentence suggests that Dick can probably be found “in one town or another” (315)—is symbolic of Fitzgerald’s dwindling belief in the ability of those who practice critical self-examination to lead better and more meaningful lives than those who do not. His fiction of the early 1930s is distinguished by this change, a loss of faith made ironically explicit and complete by Dick’s drunken execution of a “papal cross” (314) as he gazes out over Gausse’s beach one final time. In Tender Is the Night, self-examination leads only to complete personal defeat and destruction.
Notes

1 West’s “Annotating Mr. Fitzgerald” provides a revealing discussion of the extent to which Fitzgerald’s fiction preserves his own cultural moment.

2 Saturday Evening Post, 19 October 1929. Fitzgerald chose not to include “The Swimmers” in his final story collection, Taps at Reveille (1935), probably because of several passages that were “stripped” for inclusion in Tender Is the Night. The story has been reprinted twice: first in Bits of Paradise: 21 Uncollected Stories by F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, and more recently in The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection, both edited by the preeminent Fitzgerald biographer and critic, Matthew J. Bruccoli. My parenthetical citations refer to the more recent reprint.

3 “‘The Swimmers’: Strokes Against the Current,” 153. Roulston, Friedman, and Moorty are the only critics who have deemed “The Swimmers” worthy of a critical essay in which it is the primary focus.

4 See, for example, Bruccoli, Some Sort of Epic Grandeur 277-278; Meyers 187; Piper 177; Roulston 161; Sklar 236-239.

5 See, for example, “How to Live on Practically Nothing a Year” (Saturday Evening Post, 20 September 1924; reprinted in Afternoon of an Author, 100-116) and “Love in the Night” (Saturday Evening Post, 14 March 1925; reprinted in Bruccoli, ed., The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection, 302-316).

6 See, for example, Callahan 178-179; Way 146; Pizer 107-109.

7 For a brief mention of this metaphor and its possible source in the last chapter of Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises, see Meyers 186-187. Disappointingly, Meyers does not elaborate on the significance of the metaphor or its potential Hemingway connection.

8 For a fictionalized and humorous but nevertheless revealing account of Fitzgerald’s early attempts to invest money, see his article “How to Live on $36,000 a Year” (Saturday Evening Post, 5 April 1924; reprinted in Afternoon of an Author, 87-99).

Fitzgerald fictionalized this world in such stories as “One Trip Abroad” (Saturday Evening Post, 11 October 1930; reprinted in Bruccoli, ed., The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection, 577-597) and “Flight and Pursuit” (Saturday Evening Post, 4 June 1932; reprinted in The Price Was High: The Last Uncollected Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald, 308-322), and most significantly in Tender Is the Night.

Saturday Evening Post, 21 February 1931. Fitzgerald subsequently made several changes to the story and collected it in Taps at Reveille. It has since been frequently anthologized. My parenthetical citations refer to the reprint of the TAR version in Babylon Revisited and Other Stories. I have chosen the later version because it was the last Fitzgerald saw through the publication process. For a detailed explanation of the story’s many inconsistencies of time and logic as well as a hypothesis concerning why Fitzgerald failed to correct them in the TAR version, see McCollum.

David Toor argues that guilt over his wild and destructive behavior during the late twenties creates in Charlie a subconscious desire to be denied Honoria, and thus the story is an exercise in self-masochism. James B. Twitchell argues persuasively against Toor’s psychologically sophisticated interpretation and in favor of a “pathetic” protagonist who deserves victory, which has only been postponed. For analyses of the role of time in the story, see Staley, who argues that Charlie’s past will always preclude future happiness, and Turner, who essentially restates Staley’s argument more clearly and concisely. For a discussion of Paris as Charlie’s allegorical Purgatory, see Hagopian. For an explanation of Fitzgerald’s dual meanings with regard to the rhetoric of finance and investments, see Eby. By far the most idiosyncratic and intriguing criticism I have encountered is David Cowart’s “Fitzgerald’s ‘Babylon Revisited’,” an article that brings together allusions to famous exiles, entropy and the dispersing properties of time, and classical five-act tragedy in order to show that Fitzgerald, like contemporaries such as Eliot and Pound and later writers such as Beckett and Camus, believed constant and unrewarded toil to be the truest expression of human life.

Toor excepted.

For a more extended analysis of this double entendre and its thematic contribution, see Eby.

See, for example, the “suspended mass of gasoline exhaust” outside the Gare St. Lazare (Tender 86) and the “piled, cravated, stuffed” shirts displayed in a window near the Films Par Excellence Studio (91)—both from “The Swimmers.” For a list of other “stripped” passages as well as a complete chronicle of the novel’s creation, including analysis of the various drafts, see Bruccoli, The Composition of Tender Is the Night: A Study of the Manuscripts.

Taps at Reveille was published in 1935.
There are two published versions of *Tender Is the Night*—Fitzgerald’s first version of 1934, and Malcolm Cowley’s revised version of 1951, which places the events of the novel in chronological order according to plans for such a version made by Fitzgerald before his death. Critical attention has centered on the original version—quite rightly, in my opinion—because it affords a wider range of interpretations. My references are to the 1934 version (republished by Simon & Schuster in 1995, with an introduction by Charles Scribner III).

See, for example, Gajdusek’s explanation of the role of water imagery and cycle logic in the novel as well as Haegert’s Foucauldian reading of the novel.


Judith Fetterley also notes the importance of this event, but identifies it as a symbol of the intersections between psychiatric remediation and the novel’s pervasive “negative attitude toward conventional masculinity” (“Who Killed Dick Diver?” 126).
Works Cited


