

ANALYSIS

This Side of Paradise (1920)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

“Following in general technique what we might call the Impressionistic Novel shadowed forth in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*... Mr. Fitzgerald has recorded with a good deal of felicity and a disarming frankness the adventures and developments of a curious and fortunate American youth. The book is fundamentally honest, and if the intellectual and spiritual analyses are sometimes tortuous and the nomenclature bewildering to those not intimate with collegiate invention, it is nevertheless delightful and encouraging to find a novel which gives us in the accurate terms of intellectual honesty a reflection of American undergraduate life. At last the revelation has come. We have the constant young American occupation—the ‘petting party’—frankly and humorously in our literature.

There are other things, too, though they are less typical of contemporary youth. In the attitude not only toward the war but generally throughout the book the unfortunate fetish of the marching feet and the stationary brains is avoided. This is not a book of the ‘he-man,’ of the college-poster monstrosity, of the literary slumming Pollyanna girl and the blazer athlete hero. It is not dependent for its attraction upon biological excellence or cinema badness; it is an amusing and sometimes disconcertingly realistic investigation of a sensitive mind growing up in our own present-day civilization.”

R.V.A.S.

Review of *This Side of Paradise*
The New Republic (1920)

“We have just read F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *This Side of Paradise* and it makes us feel very old. According to the announcement of his publishers Mr. Fitzgerald is only twenty-three, but there were times during our progress through the book when we suspected that this was an overstatement. Daisy Ashford is hardly more naïve. There is a certain confusion arising from the fact that in spite of the generally callow quality of the author’s point of view he is intent on putting himself over as a cynical and searching philosopher. The resulting strain is sometimes terrific.... The thing that puzzled us most was the author’s description of the violent effect of the sex urge upon some of his young folk. On page 122, for instance, a chorus girl named Axia laid her blonde head on Amory’s shoulder and the youth immediately rushed away in a frenzy of terror and suffered from hallucinations for forty-eight hours. The explanation was hidden from us. It did not sound altogether characteristic of Princeton.

There are occasional thrusts of shrewd observation and a few well-turned sentences and phrases in *This Side of Paradise*. It is only fair to add that the book has received enthusiastic praise from most American reviewers. Fitzgerald has been hailed as among the most promising of our own authors. And it may be so, but we dissent. We think he will go no great distance until he has grown much simpler in expression. It seems to us that his is a style larded with fine writing.”

Heywood Brown

“Paradise and Princeton”
New York Herald Tribune (1920)

“Among modern writers F. Scott Fitzgerald best illustrates the agonized search for the true inner self. It was in his first book, *This Side of Paradise*, that Fitzgerald began to look for the ‘fundamental’ Amory, and from then on through all his stories and novels the search continues. The essential conflict throughout all his books is that of a man divided against himself, and the tragedy lies in the theme of destruction which Fitzgerald used as the agent in his search for the real self. But the real self and all the other selves are doomed from the start, as though they had been Calvinistically determined.”

Weller Embler

“F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Future”

“Consider, for example, the novel—*This Side of Paradise*—with which he founded his reputation. It has almost every fault and deficiency that a novel can possibly have. It is not only highly imitative but it imitates an inferior model. Fitzgerald, when he wrote the book, was drunk with Compton Mackenzie, and it sounds like an American attempt to rewrite *Sinister Street*....

In short, one of the chief weaknesses of *This Side of Paradise* is that it is really not *about* anything: its intellectual and moral content amounts to little more than a gesture—a gesture of indefinite revolt. The story itself, furthermore, is very immaturely imagined: it is always just verging on the ludicrous. And, finally, *This Side of Paradise* is one of the most illiterate books of any merit ever published (a fault which the publisher’s proofreader seems to have made no effort to remedy). Not only is it ornamented with bogus ideas and faked literary references, but it is full of literary words tossed about with the most reckless inaccuracy.

I have said that *This Side of Paradise* commits almost every sin that a novel can possible commit: but it does not commit the unpardonable sin: it does not fail to live. The whole preposterous farrago is animated with life. It is rather a fluttering and mercurial life: its emotions do not move you profoundly; its drama does not make you hold your breath; but its gaiety and color and movement did make it come as something exciting after the realistic heaviness and dinginess of so much serious American fiction. If one recalls the sort of flavorless fodder of which Ernest Poole’s *The Harbor* was an example, one can understand the wild enthusiasm with which *This Side of Paradise* was hailed. The novel was also well-written—well-written in spite of its illiteracies. It is true, as I have said above, that Fitzgerald mishandles words; his works are full of malapropisms of the most disconcerting kind.”

Edmund Wilson
“F. Scott Fitzgerald” (1921)
reprinted in *The Shores of Light:
A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties*
(Random House/Vintage 1961) 27-29

“Amory Blaine, after a pampered childhood with his wealthy, affected mother, Beatrice, attends preparatory school, where his indolence and aristocratic pose set him apart, until after an unhappy year he is accepted as a brilliant though eccentric athlete and leader. Although he is never religious, he has an affectionate father-and-son relation with his mother’s friend Monsignor Darcy, a hedonist converted to Catholicism. He goes to Princeton, and then becomes a ‘literary bird,’ writing for the *Princetonian*, joining the Triangle Club, and discovering the English *fin de siecle* poets. Among his companions are Alec Connage, an unoriginal youth, and Tom D’Invilliers, whose radicalism and poetry they try to reform. Amory has a romance with a childhood friend, Isabelle; is involved in a student revolt led by Burne Holiday, an earnest radical who becomes a pacifist during the World War; nearly falls in love with his widowed cousin Clara, a beautiful ‘St. Cecilia’ who has ‘never been in love’; and goes to France as a lieutenant.

On his return he finds Beatrice dead and his wealth diminished, and he becomes an advertising writer. He has a passionate affair with Alec’s debutante sister Rosaline—his one unselfish emotional experience—but she marries another man because she believes she cannot be happy without wealth. Amory drowns his disillusion in drink, but on a visit to Maryland meets Eleanor, a vivid, nervous personality even more egocentric than himself. They love for a few ‘bitter-sweet’ weeks, and Amory continues his search for inner peace. He is penniless, and seeks employment. After Darcy’s death, Amory realizes that his own unselfishness is ‘the most living part’ of himself, and considers his total experience at 24” ‘I know myself,’ he cried, ‘but that is all’.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 753

“Though it was inconsequential enough, *This Side of Paradise* had a taste of the poignance that was to flood all Fitzgerald’s other books. To tell all was now the fashion; flaming youth was lighting up behind

every bar; but of what use was it? Behind the trivial irony of Fitzgerald's novel, its grandiose dramatizations ('Amory was alone—he had escaped from a small enclosure into a great labyrinth. He was where Goethe was when he began *Faust*'; he was where Conrad was...) lay a fear of the contemporary world, a world young men had never made. Freedom had come, but only as a medium of expression; while some of the young men licked their war wounds, others sought certainty. 'We want to believe, but we can't'.... What was there to believe in?"

Alfred Kazin
On Native Grounds:
An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature
(Doubleday/Anchor 1942) 244

"The book is interesting today as a document of the early twenties; nobody who would know what it was like to be young and privileged and self-centered in that bizarre epoch can afford to neglect it. But it can also be read as a preliminary study in the kind of tortured narcissism that was to plague its author to the end of his days."

William Troy
"Scott Fitzgerald—the Authority of Failure," *Accent* (1945)
reprinted in *Modern American Fiction*
ed. A. Walton Litz
(Oxford 1963) 133

"*This Side of Paradise* (1920) is Fitzgerald's typical novel, although perhaps not his best. Ordinary as it may seem today, the book was a revelation when it was first published on the brink of the Twenties. It should be noted that this book was not written in the Jazz Age; on the contrary it helped to create the Jazz Age. The plot is semi-autobiographical; it concerns the youth and young manhood of Amory Blaine, a spoiled and egotistical young Princeton student who turns to literature and the high life when his ambitions to become a football hero are balked.

His life is principally molded by three women: Isabelle, a sort of inverted Fitzgerald who is more interested in romance than in love; Rosalind, whom he meets upon his return from the war where he serves as an officer, and who jilts him because she cannot give up the security of her wealthy background; and Eleanor Ramilly, a young madcap from an old Southern family who lures Amory into wild escapades. At the end of the novel Amory, made thoughtful by the funeral of Monsignor Darcy, an old beau of his mother's, decides to regenerate himself into 'one on whom people can depend' as the churchman was.

The action is evidently intended to show the development of an egotist into a 'personage' or man of character and action; but since Fitzgerald at this time had not completed this transition himself, he has difficulty in demonstrating it in fiction. Autobiographical elements in this novel include the unhappiness of the brash young egotist in school and college because he is too small to play football, and the theme, recurring throughout Fitzgerald's work, of the 'popular daughter,' child of an old, usually Southern family who is surrounded by wealth and suitors but who comes to grief through an excess of success."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 142-43

Michael Hollister (2015)