

ANALYSIS

“Babylon Revisited” (1925)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

“Babylon Revisited”...is a longer and more important story [than “Winter Dreams”]; it includes a social perspective lacking even in Fitzgerald’s novels, and is one of his most mature statements on the Jazz Age and its people. The theme is the passing of the Jazz Age and the contrast with the era after 1929. Charlie Wales, the hero, returns to Paris after the stock market crash and finds everything changed; his old friends have gone away, and the scenes of his Jazz Age debauches are curiously altered. The construction of the story involves a flashback: most of the story is devoted to Charlie’s reminiscences of Paris in the Twenties. He and his wife Helen had lived a mad and fascinating life in those days; they quarreled frequently, and on one occasion he had even locked her out of the apartment in the snow, but these were things that were done in the Roaring Twenties.

Now Helen is dead, and Charlie has come to Paris to visit his daughter Honoria, who is now in custody of Helen’s sister Marion and her husband Lincoln. He hopes that Marion and Lincoln will give Honoria back to him, now that he is reformed in his personal life and lonely without Helen; but everything goes wrong. He loses his temper at Marion, a pair of high-living old friends arrive drunk at the wrong moment and make a bad impression, and at the end Charlie knows they will not let him have Honoria. Around the basic plot Fitzgerald builds an unobtrusive allegory of the contrast between the two ages. Marion and Lincoln, respectable, moral, and slightly stuffy, symbolize the new world of the Thirties; and Duncan Schaeffer and Lorraine Quarrels, whose tactless hilarity spoils Charlie’s chance to regain his daughter, are ghosts out of the vanished Twenties.

Honoria herself is perhaps associated through her name with Charlie’s desire to regain his honor and self-respect. The antitheses between the two sets of symbolic characters is adroit; Marion and Lincoln are ‘right’ in their way and the reader sees their position, just as he sees the superficiality of Duncan and Lorraine. These are no villains, and Charlie, caught between two worlds, wins our sympathy because he is the victim of social change that is not his fault. The autobiographical elements of the story are obvious.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 147-48

“In ‘Babylon Revisited,’ Charlie Wales finds that his intentions and actions are bound up with the character of his own and his generation’s past. He seeks to be reunited with his child and his honor. But the margin for redress is now thin and precarious—depressed like the economy after the Crash of 1929—and so Charlie looks forward to a future of nostalgia more than one of hope and possibility. ‘Babylon Revisited’ is noteworthy as an example of Fitzgerald’s maturity as a stylist capable of investing the world with romantic possibility, and as a moral historian sensitive to the consequences and costs of reckless acts of personality.”

John F. Callahan
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath 1990) 1334-35

Michael Hollister (2015)