

ANALYSIS

The Beautiful and Damned (1922)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

“In *The Beautiful and Damned*...we feel that he is moving in a vacuum; the characters have no real connection with the background to which they have been assigned; they are not part of the organism of New York as the characters, in, say, the short story ‘Bernice Bobs Her Hair’ are part of the organism of St. Paul. Surely F. Scott Fitzgerald should some day do for Summit Avenue what Lewis has done for Main Street.... Where a satirist like Sinclair Lewis would stew ‘the Problem of Salesmanship’ in acrid rancorous fumes, Fitzgerald, in *The Beautiful and Damned*, made of it hilarious farce. His characters—and he—are actors in an elfin harlequinade; they are as nimble, as gay and as lovely—and as hardheaded—as fairies: Columbine elopes with Harlequin on a rope ladder dropped from the Ritz and both go morris-dancing amuck on a case of bootleg liquor; Pantaloon is pinked with an epigram that withers him up like a leaf; the Policeman is tripped by Harlequin and falls into the Pulitzer Fountain. Just before the curtain falls, Harlequin puts on false whiskers and pretends to be Bernard Shaw; he gives reporters an elaborate interview on politics, religion and history; a hundred thousand readers see it and are more or less impressed; Columbine nearly dies laughing, Harlequin sends out for a case of gin....

Since writing *This Side of Paradise*...Fitzgerald has become acquainted with a different school of fiction: the ironical pessimistic. In college he had supposed that the thing to do was to write biographical novels with a burst of ideas toward the close; since his advent in the literary world, he has discovered that another genre has recently come into favor: the kind which makes much of the tragedy and who Mencken has called ‘the meaninglessness of life.’ Fitzgerald had imagined, hitherto, that the thing to do in a novel was to bring out a meaning in life; but he now set bravely about it to contrive a shattering tragedy that should be, also, a hundred-percent meaningless. As a result of this determination, the first version of *The Beautiful and Damned* culminated in an orgy of horror for which the reader was imperfectly prepared. Fitzgerald destroyed his characters with a succession of catastrophes so arbitrary that, beside them, the perversities of Hardy seemed the working of natural laws.

The heroine was to lose her beauty at a prematurely early age, and her character was to go to pieces with it; Richard Carmel, a writer of promise, was to lose his artistic ideals and prostitute himself to the popular taste; and the wealthy Anthony Patch was not only to lose his money but, finding himself unable to make a living, abjectly to succumb to drink and eventually to go insane. But the bitterest moment of the story was to come at the very end, when Anthony was to be wandering the streets of New York in an attempt to borrow some money. After several humiliating failures, he finally approaches an old friend whom he sees with an elegant lady just getting into a cab. This is the brilliant Maury Noble, a cynic, an intellectual and a man of genuine parts. Maury cuts Anthony dead and drives away in the taxi. ‘But,’ the author explains, ‘he really had not seen Anthony. For Maury had indulged his appetite for alcoholic beverage once too often: he was now stone-blind!’ But the point of my story is this: though Fitzgerald had been perfectly serious in writing this bathetic passage, he did not hesitate, when he heard people laugh at it, to laugh about it himself, and with as much surprise and delight as if he had just come across it in Max Beerbohm...

There is a moral in *The Beautiful and Damned* that the author did not perhaps intend to point. The hero and the heroine of this giddy book are creatures without method or purpose: they give themselves up to wild debaucheries and do not from beginning to end, perform a single serious act; yet somehow you get the impression that, in spite of their fantastic behavior, Anthony and Gloria Patch are the most rational people in the book. Wherever they come in contact with institutions, with the serious life of the time, these are made to appear ridiculous, they are subjects for scorn or mirth. We see the army, finance and business successively and casually exposed as completely without point or dignity. The inference we are led to draw is that, in such a civilization as this, the sanest and most honorable course is to escape from organized society and live for the excitement of the moment....

On the other hand, *The Beautiful and Damned*, imperfect though it is, marks an advance over *This Side of Paradise*: the style is more nearly mature and the subject more solidly unified, and there are scenes that are more convincing than any in the previous fiction.”

Edmund Wilson
“F. Scott Fitzgerald” (1922)
reprinted in *The Shores of Light:
A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties*
(Random House/Vintage 1961) 31-34

“*The Beautiful and Damned* is a more frayed and pretentious museum-piece [than *This Side of Paradise*] and the muddiest in conception of all the longer books. It is not so much a study in failure as in the *atmosphere* of failure—that is to say, of a world in which no moral decisions can be made because there are no values in terms of which they may be measured. Hardly is it a world suited to the purposes of the novelist, and the characters float around in it as in some aquamarine region comfortably shot through with the soft colors of self-pity and romantic irony.”

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

“*The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) is a study of marriage in the Jazz Age modeled partly on Fitzgerald’s own marriage with Zelda Sayres. Anthony Patch, a talented but indolent young playboy, finds no purpose in his life until he meets Gloria Gilbert, a popular debutante whose family originally came from the Middle West. They marry and commence a wild orgy of spending, parties, trips, drinking, and gaiety which brings disaster on them both. Anthony becomes an alcoholic, and a wealthy, puritanical grandfather, Adam J. Patch, disinherits him when he discovers his immoral life. Rejected as an officer candidate in 1917, Anthony enlists as a private, and in a bleak Southern army camp seduces Dot, a native small-town girl. When Adam Patch dies, Anthony and Gloria spend their last cent fighting his will. Contrary to the expectations of the reader who is familiar with the clichés of naturalism, they do not lose this case, the will is broken, they come into thirty million dollars, and we know that Anthony’s last chance to regenerate himself has been lost.

The theme of *The Beautiful and Damned* is well illustrated by a remark Anthony makes to the heartbroken Dot as he prepares to abandon her, a remark which sheds some light on Fitzgerald’s own personal tragedy: ‘Dot...you’ll forget. Things are sweeter when they’re lost. I know—because once I wanted something and got it. It was the only thing I ever wanted badly...and when I got it it turned to dust in my hands.’”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 143-44

Michael Hollister (2015)