

ANALYSIS

The Last Tycoon (unfinished, 1941)

F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

“Left unrevised and incomplete at the author’s death, it was edited for publication by Edmund Wilson. Cecilia Brady, the daughter of a great motion-picture producer, reminisces about events that began five years earlier when she was an undergraduate at Bennington College, starting with a flight home to Hollywood on a plane whose other passengers include Wylie White, a script writer down on his luck, Manny Schwartz, once an influential film producer, and Monroe Stahr, another producer and partner of Cecilia’s father, Pat Brady. Cecilia becomes much attracted to Stahr, but he is caught up in an affair with an English woman. When the woman marries her fiancé, Stahr turns to Cecilia at the very time that he has a falling out with her father and each of the partners conceives the idea of murdering the other. On the way to New York to establish an alibi, Stahr repents and decides to revoke his orders that will result in Brady’s death, but his plane crashes before he can carry out his new plans, and Cecilia is deprived of both her father and the man she loves.”

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 412-13

“Had Fitzgerald been permitted to finish the book, I think there is no doubt that it would have added a major character and a major novel to American fiction. As it is, *The Last Tycoon* is a great deal more than a fragment. It shows the full powers of its author, at their height and at their best.

The book begins with a brilliant description of a flight in a transcontinental plane. It breaks off after an equally brilliant drunken scene between Stahr, the producer, and Brimmer, the communist—breaks off with perhaps half its story told. In between, we get to know Stahr and we get to know Hollywood. But, chiefly, we get to know Stahr, the ‘last tycoon,’ the individualist, the man who has to make the decisions, who has to be right, or the whole machine will break down, yet the man who feels personally responsible to all the men who work for him. It is an extraordinary portrait, for you no more question Stahr’s curious creative drive than you do his limitations. And the tragedy of the book is implicit in Stahr himself, in his strength as well as in his weaknesses. The machine and the life he had helped to create are bound to destroy him in the end. But—at least as Fitzgerald had planned it—he goes down whole.

Wit, observation, sure craftsmanship, the verbal felicity that Fitzgerald could always summon—all these are in *The Last Tycoon*. But with them, there is a richness of texture, a maturity of point of view that shows us what we all lost in his early death.”

Stephen Vincent Benet

“*The Last Tycoon*”

The Saturday Review of Literature (1941)

“*Gatsby*’s was Fitzgerald’s apotheosis, too. As the haunting promise of *The Last Tycoon* testifies, he did not lose his skill; there is a grim poetic power in his unraveling of Monroe Stahr greater in itself than anything else in his work. But something in Fitzgerald died concurrently with the dying of his world. His fairy world decomposed slowly, lingeringly; and he lived with its glitter, paler and paler, to the end....

Fitzgerald was a boy, the most startlingly gifted and self-destructive of all the lost boys, to the end. There is an intense brooding wisdom, all Fitzgerald’s keen craft raised and burnished to new power, in *The Last Tycoon* that is unforgettable. To see how he could manipulate the emergence of Stahr’s power and sadness, the scene of the airplane flight from New York to Hollywood and the moment when the earthquake trembled in Hollywood, is to appreciate how much closer Fitzgerald could come than most modern American novelists to fulfillment, of a kind. But what is Monroe Stahr—the Hollywood producer

‘who had looked on all the kingdoms,’ who died so slowly and glitteringly all through the book as Fitzgerald did in life—but the last, the most feverishly concentrated of Fitzgerald’s fair-world characters in that Hollywood that was the final expression of the only world Fitzgerald ever knew? Fitzgerald could penetrate Hollywood superbly; he could turn his gift with the easiest possible dexterity on anything he touched. But he did not touch very much.”

Alfred Kazin

On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature
(Doubleday/Anchor 1942) 248-49

“Of *The Last Tycoon* we have only the unrevised hundred and thirty-three pages, supported by a loose collection of notes and synopses. In an unguarded admission Fitzgerald describes the book as ‘an escape into a lavish, romantic past that perhaps will not come again in our time.’ Its hero, suggested by a well-known Hollywood prodigy of a few years ago, is another one of those poor boys betrayed by ‘a heightened sensitivity to the promises of life.’ When we first meet him he is already a sick and disillusioned man, clutching for survival at what is advertised in the notes as ‘an immediate, dynamic, unusual, physical love affair.’ This is nothing less than ‘the meat of the book.’ But as much of it as is rendered includes some of the most unfortunate writing which Fitzgerald has left; he had never been at his best in the approach to the physical. Nor is it clear in what way the affair is related to the other last febrile gesture of Stahr—his championship of the Hollywood underdog in a struggle with the racketeers and big producers.

Fortuitously the sense of social guilt of the mid-thirties creeps into the fugue, although in truth this had been a strong undertone in early short stories like ‘May Day’ and ‘The Rich Boy.’ It is evident that Stahr is supposed to be some kind of symbol—but of what it would be hard to determine. From the synopses he is more like a receptacle for all the more familiar contradictions of his author’s own sensibility—his arrogance and generosity, his fondness for money and his need for integrity, his attraction toward the fabulous in American life and his repulsion by its waste and terror. ‘Stahr is miserable and embittered toward the end,’ Fitzgerald writes, in one of his own last notes for the book. ‘Before death, thoughts from *Crack-up*.’ Apparently it was all to end in a flare-up of sensational and not too meaningful irony: Stahr, on his way to New York to call off a murder which he had ordered for the best of motives, is himself killed in an airplane crash, and his possessions are rifled by a group of schoolchildren on a mountain. If there is anything symbolic in this situation, could it be the image of the modern Icarus soaring to disaster in that ‘universe of ineffable gaudiness.’ Which was Fitzgerald’s vision of the American of his time?”

William Troy

“Scott Fitzgerald—the Authority of Failure,” *Accent* (1945)
reprinted in *Modern American Fiction*, ed. A. Walton Litz
(Oxford 1963) 135

“And in *The Last Tycoon* the theme of destruction prevails. Cecilia says that Stahr is losing his battle with schizophrenia. Not a single character who does not go to pieces. Wylie White’s career had reached a dead end. Manny Schwartz shot a bullet into his head, and somebody played ‘Lost’ on the juke box. Minna Davis is dead and quickly forgotten; Pete Zarvis has gone to pot and attempts suicide; Roderiguez is ‘through’; Marcus is slipping, and Brady has fallen. Kathleen has been educated to the end that she might read Spengler, and the grunion throw themselves away, ‘relentless and exalted and scornful’ upon the beach. Cecilia ends in a sanitarium with consumption, and Stahr, deathly tired, ‘ruling with a radiance that is moribund’ loses his power. In love with ‘Minna and death together,’ he beats his wings ‘finally frantically’ like the plane in which he rides, and then falls to his death. Fitzgerald has planned to end the novel with a funeral, and I think of that funeral which he did not live to write as the consummate symbol of decadent individualism today. All is evil, all must be destroyed before the self can reign again pure and alone. Where is the fundamental Amory? Fitzgerald could find him only in the wreckage of the grave.”

Weller Embler

“F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Future”
Chimera (1945)

“In *The Last Tycoon* he was...able to invest with some human dignity the pimp and pander aspects of Hollywood. There he was writing, not for highbrows or for lowbrows, but for whoever had enough elementary knowledge of the English language to read through a page of a novel. Stahr, the prime mover of a Hollywood picture studio who is the central figure, is described with a combination of intimacy and detachment that constitutes a real advance over the treatment of such characters in all the stories that have followed Dreiser and Frank Norris. There is no trace of envy or adulation in the picture. Fitzgerald writes about Stahr, not as a poor man writing about someone rich and powerful, nor as the important last unthrust of some established American stock sneering at a parvenu Jew; but coolly, as a man writing about an equal he knows and understands. Immediately a frame of reference is established that takes into the warm reasonable light of all-around comprehension the Hollywood magnate and the workers on the lot and the people in the dusty sunscorched bungalows of Los Angeles. In that frame of reference acts and gestures can be described on a broad and to a certain degree passionlessly impersonal terrain of common humanity.

...Hollywood, the subject of *The Last Tycoon*, is probably the most important and the most difficult subject for our time to deal with. Whether we like it or not it is in that great bargain sale of five and ten cent lusts and dreams that the new bottom level of our culture is being created. The fact that at the end of a life of brilliant worldly successes and crushing disasters Scott Fitzgerald was engaged so ably in a work of such importance proves him to have been the first-rate novelist his friends believed him to be. In *The Last Tycoon* he was managing to invent a set of people seen really in the round instead of lit by an envious spotlight from above or below. *The Great Gatsby* remains a perfect example of this sort of treatment at an earlier, more anecdotic, more bas relief stage, but in the fragments of *The Last Tycoon*, you can see the beginning of a real grand style. Even in their unfinished state these fragments, I believe, are of sufficient dimensions to raise the level of American fiction to follow in some such way as Marlowe's blank verse line raised the whole level of Elizabethan verse.”

John Dos Passos
“A Note on Fitzgerald”
The Crack-up, ed. Edmund Wilson
(1941; New Directions, revised 1945)

“As for *The Last Tycoon*, its promise, it seems to me, had been extravagantly over-estimated for the most generous reasons by his friends. It is true that it is about the only novel yet attempted to take Hollywood seriously; it is also true that Fitzgerald was certainly trying for what Dos Passos has called a wider ‘frame of reference for common humanity’ than he had managed before. But it doesn't seem to come out right. In *The Great Gatsby* Fitzgerald had started with personal dilemmas and a sort of self-examination and ended by creating a fable that had indeed Dos Passos' wider frame.

In *The Last Tycoon* he apparently began with the frame and ended with the personal dilemmas and the self-projection willy-nilly dragging their way in. On any other basis the projected pattern is baffling. The serious theme of the novel, as evidenced first of all by the title, appears to be the modern conflict between the original craftsman of the whole and the mass-production assemble line. Why then did Fitzgerald choose to undercut his whole drama by letting us know that Stahr is a dying man? Why did he attach an apparently unrelated love affair which he regarded as ‘the meat of the book’? The love affair, no doubt, illuminates the last feverish gasping for life of a man with a ‘definite urge toward total exhaustion.’ But why have a hero so defeated in advance if you mean to deal evenly with a general theme? Unless Fitzgerald was again unwittingly projecting himself, I do not know the answer.

What seems particularly to have worried Fitzgerald about the book was the loss of the old emotion and sparkle; where the radiance and disillusion had balanced before, now the radiance was fading. ‘Where will the warmth come from in this?’ he wrote of one of the scenes between Stahr and Kathleen. ‘My girls were all so warm and full of promise.’ The self-criticism was accurate; perhaps that is why after three years, even three years filled with sickness and pot-boiling, the novel was still only half-finished. It must have cost him an heroic effort to accomplish as much as he did.”

Andrews Wanning
“Fitzgerald and His Brethren”
Partisan Review (1945)

“It is hard to agree with the many critics who have said that *The Last Tycoon* would have crowned Fitzgerald’s achievement. The flaws suggested in *Tender Is the Night* are here more than ever apparent; and although the novel has a kind of distinction that clung to Fitzgerald’s writing, even in the depths of his least engaging journalism, there is nothing in this final book to compare with *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald had indeed set himself a hard task: nothing less than to glorify as a romantic figure a powerful Hollywood film executive; and Monroe Stahr, ‘the last tycoon,’ at thirty-five the outstanding figure on the production side of the moving-picture industry, has aspects that remind us of Dr. Diver and Gatsby, and even recall Amory Blaine and Anthony Patch. Stahr is a Jew, with next to no education, suffering from a disease of the heart; his wife, Minna, is dead and—in the same manner that Gatsby dreamed of reunion with Daisy—Stahr dreams that he will find another Minna.

The story is mostly told by Cecilia Brady, daughter of Stahr’s chief business partner; and the difficulties of presenting matters through the eyes of a girl of eighteen are never satisfactorily overcome. When Cecilia is coy about men, a sense of embarrassment is almost unavoidable: when she sees events with mature eyes we remain unconvinced by her sophistication. By this time Fitzgerald had been to some extent caught up in the prevailing interest in politics, so that at moments Stahr seems about to turn into that hero of our time, the man who is very rich and very ‘Left.’ And the notes on the unfinished portion of the novel indicate that he was to play a part—and a violent part—in Hollywood politics.

However, the portion of *The Last Tycoon* that exists, treats chiefly of Stahr’s love affair with the girl Katherine, of Irish origin, whose father had been shot by Black-and-Tans, and ‘the day her stepmother presented her at Court they had one shilling to ear with so as not to feel faint.’ Katherine had been engaged to ‘a king’ in London and, when she mentioned his name, ‘Stahr visualized the face out of old newsreels.’ In fairness to Fitzgerald, who was at his least happy with British subjects (Boxley, the English author in Hollywood, admirable target for satire, is a complete failure), it should be remembered that he might have cut out some of this rubbish in the final draft. It seems more probable that Hollywood, magazine stories and his own daydreams had been too much for him, and that the final version of *The Last Tycoon* would have been readable but thoroughly second-rate.”

“Power without Glory”
The Times Literary Supplement (1950)

“*The Last Tycoon* (posthumously published 1941) is an especially interesting example because, though only a fragment, it shows the kind of way out that Fitzgerald was trying to find from his spiritual predicament. It is the story of a powerful and talented Hollywood producer, Monroe Stahr, who is putting up a losing fight against two encroaching forces: the anonymous controllers of the movie industry and the growing strength of the employees. This fight becomes so embittered that Stahr, fearing for his own life, causes a murder to be committed. He himself is killed in an airplane crash.

It is significant that the background of the story is Hollywood, that is, that section of human activities where the creation of illusory values is the main concern. It is further characteristic that the hero falls in love with a woman whom he had seen only once, simply because she resembles his dead wife and does not belong to Hollywood proper: this corresponds to an attempt at finding other values on other levels. Moreover, the hero is uncertain of his own attitude towards this woman as well as his decision to get his enemy out of the way. And finally, there is the unusual device of having the story narrated by the enemy’s daughter, who cherishes a hopeless love for the hero—another basic illusion leading to frustration. Naturally, the whole fragment, powerful as it appears in the shaping of individual scenes, suffers from a lack of cohesion which is a result, not only of its being incomplete but of the basic uncertainty of the author.”

Heinrich Straumann
University of Zurich
American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Harper Torchbooks 1951,1965) 111-112

“Even in *The Last Tycoon*, where the writer Wylie is obviously the character through whom the story of Stahr *must* be told, Fitzgerald’s resolve to keep the writer as character peripheral quite ruins any possibility of a coherent organization; and in the end Fitzgerald smuggles himself into the skin of Stahr and of the

young girl through whom the events are seen. Nothing is gained, and a good deal is lost—organization, certainty, and consistency of characterization.... When Fitzgerald treats social themes he is absurd; surely there appears in the overrated fragment, *The Last Tycoon*, the least convincing Communist in American fiction.”

Leslie Fiedler
“Some Notes on F. Scott Fitzgerald”
An End to Innocence (Beacon, 1955)

“Had he lived to finish it, it would almost certainly have been the one great novel about Hollywood.”

Mark Schorer
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 683

The Last Tycoon is a fascinating fragment romanticizing Monroe Stahr (star), modeled on the real movie producer Irving Thalberg, a star at MGM where Fitzgerald worked as a screenwriter. Soon after his death, friends of Fitzgerald such as Benet and Dos Passos said that had he lived to complete it, this would have been as brilliant a novel as *The Great Gatsby*. On the contrary, this is not Fitzgerald at his best. Whereas in *Gatsby* he was able to detach himself from romanticism by narrating through Nick Carraway, in *Tycoon* he writes like *Gatsby* in love with Daisy recast as an actress. And his style lacks the metaphors, wit, lyricism, and mythic resonance of *Gatsby*. The sparkle is gone. The romantic Fitzgerald was paid a lot more than Nathanael West as a screenwriter, but the cynical West outdid him in writing a literary novel about Hollywood, using *Gatsby* as an aesthetic model.

Michael Hollister (2012)