

DISILLUSIONMENT IN A DRIFTING SOCIETY : A Study of  
Anthony and Gloria Patch in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned*

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F. Scott Fitzgerald is one of the most exciting and significant writers in American fiction. He is exciting because it was through his personal experience that he wrote about the 1920s, and significant because he coined a name to this decade, "The Jazz Age," and very realistically reflected the carefree and gay spirit of the era while successfully interpreting the subsequent moral decline and disillusionment of its youth.

Fitzgerald wrote in his autobiographical piece "Echoes of the Jazz Age"<sup>1</sup> that the Jazz Age began "about the time of the May Day riots in 1919."<sup>2</sup> This glittering decade that ended with the Great Depression on 24 October 1929, was probably the most prosperous in the history of the American nation. The legendary prosperity of this decade is not an artificial or mythical one, but it is real in the sense that the nation's gross national product (GNP) in 1929 was sixty-two per cent higher than that in 1914<sup>3</sup>. In other words, an economic prosperousness had followed the trying years of the first World War.

This economic prosperousness, together with a constantly expanding knowledge of science and technology, soon resulted in an industrial boom. The most phenomenal example of the boom can be witnessed in the automobile industry. As a result of the amelioration of assembly-line techniques, factories were able to produce cheaper cars for more people. The great increase in the number of cars from only five thousand in 1904 to half a million in 1914 and to five million in 1929<sup>4</sup> brought

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(1) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up With Other Pieces and Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1974), p. 9.

(2) Overblown rumors of Communist conspiracy aroused fear just after World War I. As a result, some soldiers went around New York in groups and forced their way into places where Socialists gathered. Violating basic civil rights, these soldiers crashed everything and harassed some of the alleged reds. Such anti-Socialist demonstrations soon proved effective and resulted in the suppression of the leftists. In fact, the last reported pro-left incident of any importance occurred in September 1920 when an anarchist bomb exploded on Wall Street.

(3) Lester Chandler, *America's Greatest Depression 1929-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 15.

(4) "Automobile," and "United States, History," *The Encyclopedia Americana*, 1978 International Edition.

on an increase in road construction and tourism which turned into major industries themselves. The boom in the automobile industry and the advancement in the number and quality of high-ways increased mobility and made well-to-do Americans want to spend most of their time away from home. Among the developments in the other newer industries, one can mention the increase in the manufacture of packaged food and electrical appliances such as toasters, mixers, refrigerators, vacuum cleaners that eased the domestic lives of women and provided them with more leisure, and the advancements of the techniques in the motion picture industry which enhanced the quality of entertainment for the funseeking crowds of that era.

Both economic prosperity and the industrial boom led to great social change. The Jazz Age is considered as the wildest of all times from the point of view of everyday life. Especially the well-to-do could afford to live as affluently and irresponsibly as they did, pursuing pleasure and finding little time to work in between. Once, interviewed by a reporter from the *Baltimore Sun*, Fitzgerald's wife Zelda's answer to the question "What would your ideal day constitute?" was

Peaches for breakfast...Then golf. Then a swim. Then just being lazy. Not eating or reading, but being quiet and hearing pleasant sounds rather a total vacuity. The evening? A large, brilliant gathering, I believe.<sup>5</sup>

This aristocratically bohemian manner of spending one's day was not just Zelda's way of life; most upper middle-class men and women wasted their time frequenting cocktail parties at exclusive country clubs, dinners at posh restaurants, and teas at fancy hotels, or going to long weekend parties at spectacular mansions decorated with imperial staircases, marble statuary, crystal chandeliers, heavy velvet draperies and soft, thick carpets. Many also spent their time drinking, gossiping and showing off their imported, fancy costumes at dances, theaters, cinemas, horse-races, swimming pools and golf courses.

Before the Jazz Age, there was heavy drinking especially among the millions of newly arrived, hard working, slum-dweller immigrants who frequented the saloons to forget the grim realities and to escape from the ruthlessness of their conditions. However, by the early 1920s, with the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment that prohibited the manufacture, sale and transportation of alcoholic beverages, a considerable decline in drinking among immigrants and villagers was observed. Nevertheless, the people in large cities who were wealthy enough to afford the illegal liquor, continued to drink in saloons called speakeasies that were supplied by underworld dealers. In fact, drinking had now become more attractive to these people for it carried implications of being rich and privileged. Even fashionable society women, who would have never entered a saloon, would sit at the bars of the speakeasies as it was the mode of the times. Besides the speakeasies, other social by-products of the Eighteenth Amendment were bathtub gin and bootlegging. There were so many people

(5) Nancy Milford, *Zelda: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), p. 101.

violating the prohibition that the police service was in vain. All this heavy drinking gradually led to a wide spread neurosis, and eventually most of the restless neurotics either committed suicide or were confined to insane asylums.

This hedonistic race has often been envied afterwards by other generations. Actually, however, behind the glittering lives of these prosperous and socially over-active people, mainly lie nothing but disillusionment and a dismal sense of futility.

Fitzgerald, who gayly and carefreely lived through the economically prosperous, industrially developed and socially over-active Jazz Age himself and experienced its deterioration, relates in his second novel *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) the decadence of a beautiful and elite adolescent couple of the 1920s whose frivolous and gracefully idle way of life leads to their damnation. Anthony Comstock Patch loses both parents while still a child. His wealthy grandfather has him privately tutored, sent to Europe and later to Harvard where

(he) became an exquisite dandy, amassed a rather pathetic collection of silk pyjamas, brocaded dressing-gowns, and neckties too flamboyant to wear. In this secret finery he would parade before a mirror in his room or lie stretched in satin along his window-seat...<sup>6</sup>

Graduating from Harvard at twenty, Anthony once again goes to Rome "where he dallied (for three years) with architecture and painting in turn, took up the violin, and wrote some ghastly Italian sonnets..." (p. 13). Upon his return to the States in 1912, Anthony rents a fine apartment on Fifty-Second Street, New York and starts living on an income of seven thousand dollars a year which he has inherited from his mother. After his few pleasant years abroad, Anthony's first visit with his grandfather is mainly centered on old Patch's advice to his prodigal grandson. To the old man's wise suggestion that he "ought to do something," "accomplish something," Anthony replies, "I thought - it seemed to me that perhaps I'm best qualified to write ... a history of the Middle Ages" (pp. 18-19). Yet, Anthony never puts pen to paper as he is actually in doubt of the significance of the task. He says, "...I'd feel that it being a meaningless world, why write? The very attempt to give it purpose is purposeless" (p. 25). Apart from "The Meaninglessness of Life" (p.49), another reason why Anthony prefers not to commit himself seriously to anything but social gatherings is his expectation to inherit his grandfather's great fortune, after which he plans to settle on a gorgeous estate and go into diplomacy or politics. So, frequenting teas, dinners and dances and often taking part in informal, aimless discussions on politics, religion and art to nurture his intellectual vanity, Anthony continues to lead an idle but socially active life. However, there is a lack of color in his days; he is bored with life. Until Anthony falls in love with Gloria Gilbert, he is a rather shallow char-

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(6) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and Damned* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, Ltd. 1973), p. 13. This edition will be used for all further quotations from the novel.

acter. It is only after his true and profound love for Gloria that he gains vivacity, and depth, and also credibility.

Gloria Gilbert, on the other hand, is almost a female counterpart of Anthony. She is a twenty-two year old, dazzling, society girl who leads a very active social life with a different boy friend every month. With her uninhibited manner, her being present at almost every high society party, and her boy friends from all over the United States, she rightfully earned herself the nickname "Coast - to - Coast Gloria" (p.54).

Gloria has absolutely no sense of responsibility and is not much interested in anything but herself. Her only aim in life is to have the best time she possibly can while she is still young and beautiful. She declares,

I want to just be lazy and I want some of the people around me to be doing things, because that makes me feel comfortable and safe- and I want some of them to be doing nothing at all, because they can be graceful and companionable for me (p.58).

After Gloria marries Anthony, she does not change her ways or mentality so as to assume the role of a sensible and caring wife who keeps to her house; she continues to live as egoistically, carefreely and negligently as ever. She is thrifless; she spends quite a lot of money on clothes, entertaining and travel. Let alone cooking a special dish for her husband, she herself makes a lot of fuss if she does not get the certain dishes she is used to eating cooked in certain ways. During their stay in a luxurious hotel room, for instance, Gloria constantly forgets to take care of the laundry when all she has to do is to ring for the chambermaid of the hotel to wash it. She also refuses to have a baby as she is interested only in her beautiful and youthful image: "And then afterward I might have wide hips and be pale, with all my freshness gone and no radiance in my hair (p. 169).

Gloria and Anthony's marital life is centered on drifting from one festive social gathering to another at ritzy places with the paparazzi of the town. Yet, from time to time, Anthony is preoccupied with a sense of waste; "(In) his moments of insecurity he was haunted by the suggestion that life might be, after all, significant" (p. 233). In the meantime, Anthony and Gloria wish with all their heart to hear Anthony's multimillionaire grandfather Adam Patch's death so that they can come into a considerable amount of money that will ease their recently originated financial problems. Unfortunately, however, Adam Patch one day accidentally drops in on one of those wild and crazy parties that Anthony and Gloria give so often. The pious old Patch, ashamed of and enraged by his grandson's carefree, frivolous and "sinful" manner of spending his life, cuts Anthony out of his will, thus depriving him of the inheritance that he was so anxiously looking forward to. Soon after this event, old Patch dies and Anthony decides to contest his grandfather's will. During the long and agonizing course of the lawsuit, Anthony realizes that he has not committed himself to anything in life - not even to the writing which he so much enjoyed; he has only consumed ready money. On the other hand,

turning over the pages of a *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, he had found a column which told him what his contemporaries had been about in this six years since graduation. Most of them were in business,... (another) had discovered a new treatment for typhus,...in art, science and politics, he saw the authentic personalities of his time emerging (p.234).

Depressed, Anthony starts feeling life slip by him as he comes into an acute realization of a terrible sense of waste. With the waste comes regret and he starts drinking heavily.

In the fourth year of their marriage, financial problems start threatening Anthony's and Gloria's high standard of living. While awaiting the result of the lawsuit, in vain they try to keep up their old manner of leisurely living by selling their bonds. In addition, they are forced to cut down on certain luxuries. For instance, Anthony reluctantly resigns from his clubs as he is no longer able to afford the fees, and Gloria, unable to buy a modish squirrel coat, feels out of place in her circle as she walks everyday on Fifth Avenue "a little conscious of her well-worn, half lengthed leopard skin, now hopelessly old fashioned (p. 317). They also have no choice but to refuse more and more invitations as they can no longer bear the expense of running in elite circles.

Realizing, however, the alarming gravity of their financial situation, both Anthony and Gloria decide to try their hand at work. At thirty-two, Anthony makes an unsuccessful attempt at salesmanship which hurts his ego as he realizes that unlike his competitive and successful contemporaries, he has not accomplished anything in life. This failure results in his drinking more heavily than ever. "he hated to be sober. It made him conscious of the people around him, of that air of struggle, of greedy ambition..." (p. 338). Then Gloria, at twenty-nine, but still confident of her looks, applies to a film producer to become a film star - a profession that would not only bring them considerable wealth, but one that would also nurture her vanity. To her dismay, however, Gloria is turned down as the director of the picture has found a younger woman for the role. The moment Gloria receives the letter of rejection, she is overcome by a dismal sense of lost time. Like Anthony, she too dolefully realizes the waste and in regret tries to recapture her lost youth and beauty:

Each night when she prepared for bed she smeared her face with some new unguent which she hoped illogically would give back the glow and freshness of her vanishing beauty (p. 337).

With the lawsuit still dragging on and as a result of these two unfortunate, failing attempts at earning a living, the financial strain on Anthony and Gloria grows worse and leads not only to a decadence but to an emotional estrangement as well. Now, in the mornings, Anthony is

so nervous that Gloria could feel him trembling in bed before he could muster enough vitality to stumble into the pantry for a drink. He was intolerable now except under the influence of liquor, and as he seemed to decay and coarsen under her eyes, Gloria's soul and body shrank away from him; when he stayed out all night, as he did several times, she not only failed to be sorry but even felt a measure of dismal relief...She was being bent by her environment into a grotesque similitude of a housewife. She who until three years before had never made coffee, prepared sometimes three meals a day (pp. 343-344).

By the time the trial that has been dragging on for four and a half years finally comes to an end, the handsome and vain Anthony is reduced to a pasty-faced man with blood shot eyes and a stooped and flabby figure. "He was thirty -three- he looked forty"(p.360).When Gloria announces that they have won the case and the thirty million dollars of Adam Patch, there is not enough sanity left in Anthony to grasp the joy of this long-awaited moment. Gloria and Dick, who is Gloria's cousin and Anthony's close friend, find Anthony sitting on the floor among his big stamp books:

Anthony' cried Gloria tensely, 'we' ve won! They reversed the decision.'

'Don't come in, 'he murmured wanly: 'you'll muss them. I'm sorting, and I know you'll step in them. Everything always gets mussed.'

'What are you doing?' demanded Dick in astonishment. 'Going back to childhood? Don't you realize you've won the suit? They've reversed' the decision of the lower courts. You're worth thirty millions. Anthony only looked at him reproachfully.

'Shut the door when you go out.' He spoke like a pert child. With a faint horror drawing in her eyes, Gloria gazed at him - 'Anthony!' she cried, 'What is it? What's the matter? Why didn't you come (to the court) - why, what is it?' 'See here,' said Anthony softly, 'you two get out - now, both of you. Or else I'll tell my grandfather.' He held up a handful of stamps and let them come drifting down about him like leaves... (p. 362).

Over the long years while Anthony and Gloria wait to come into Adam Patch's fortune, they dearly pay for their extravagant and irresponsible manner of living by losing their youth, innocence and beauty. In the end, although they are on a luxurious steamer cruising towards Europe as they had always dreamed, they are not seen anymore as the young, lively, beautiful couple having a great time; Anthony, travelling with a private physician, reduced to a feeble, half-sane drunkard carried around in a wheel-chair and Gloria, in an expensive fur coat that she was finally

able to afford, now looks 'sort of dyed and unclean' (p. 363).

Anthony, at the age of thirty-three, with thirty million dollars on his hands, now has neither enough life nor enough sense left in him to make the most of his fortune. On the deck of the ship, he is last seen sitting in his wheel-chair, brooding with tears in his eyes over his misspent youth and the hardships and miseries he had gone through during the trial. The novel ends with his pitifully ironic remark, "I showed them,... it was a hard fight, but I didn't give up and I came through!" (p. 364).