F. Scott Fitzgerald's Short Fiction Short Guide

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Social Concerns

Although Fitzgerald often derogated his short fiction, claiming these works were accomplished only in order to give him money so that he could work on his long fiction, many readers find the tales, at least the better ones, of great worth. Fitzgerald did state that he put a great deal of his "essence" into these pieces. They frequently do offer an immediacy and focus not found in the longer works.

Also, the sense of place can sometimes be found in a short story more sharply than in the novels. Surely, most of the stories express the main themes of Fitzgerald's other fiction in a compact form; these include the importance and glamour of youth, the significance of social standing, a sense of the "historical moment," the necessity of moral standards, an emphasis on both the power of circumstance and the exercise of free will, as well as the aforementioned sense of setting.

Analysis of Stories "The Ice Palace" that a deep sense of place plays the key role in this tale, with the principal conflict developing between the warm and "soft" South and the cold and harsh North. The two principal characters, Sally Carrol Happer (in typical Southern fashion, always addressed by her first two names by her friends) and Harry Bellamy, probably represent Zelda Fitzgerald (from Montgomery, Alabama) and Fitzgerald himself (from St. Paul). The plot is simply the story of how these young people, affianced at the opening of the story, fall out over the clash between their home grounds.

A visit to St. Paul, which is the unnamed city where Harry lives, by Sally Carrol (from Tarleton, Georgia) creates the rift. Even before she leaves for the visit, her friend Clark says, "Don't marry a Yankee, Sally Carrol.

We need you round here." This urging sets the tone for the rest of the text. It is emphasized by Harry's ill-thought ejaculation, "Those damn Southerners!" □ a remark whose humor escapes Sally Carrol and which irritates her.

The climax of the plot develops when Harry insists on taking Sally Carrol through a large ice structure (of which there was one in St. Paul in earlier times), where she becomes lost, frightened, and finally near collapse.

She cannot wait to return home, where she is finally heard (in a fine piece of dialogue) speaking with Clark while eating: "What you doin'?" She blissfully replies, "Eatin' green peach. 'Spect to die any minute." She is home, and she is happy.

The theme of what could be termed a geographical/cultural conflict is represented not only by the plot but also by Fitzgerald's fine depiction of two key scenes. The first is in a cemetery filled with the graves of Confederate soldiers, a place where Sally Carrol tenderly feels her Southern heritage (also a scene reminiscent of the one in Henry James's The Bostonians, 1886, in which a Civil War memorial is visited by the two main characters). The other is the depiction of St. Paul in the winter and, especially, the

imposing but (at least to Sally Carrol) forbidding edifice of ice. Seldom in a work of short fiction has the ambience of place been so clearly and forcefully set forth perhaps, as is often the case, the intensity of the clash derives from the author's personal experience with these two areas.

"Mayday" Like many of Fitzgerald's stories, this one (perhaps the most grim of the early tales) is divided into sections. In this case, there are eleven of them, adding to the episodic effect of the piece, which some critics find a negative quality. However, Fitzgerald said that his intention was to capture the atmosphere of the events of the spring of 1919 and of the postwar "hysteria" that emerged then, particularly in New York, the setting of the story.

Arthur Mizener believes this tale to be an "impressionistic" one, and the diversified sets of characters supports this judgment. The plot does have the unity of time; all the events take place within one day. However, the actions of the character groups are unrelated except for chance encounters (sometimes in coincidental form that is difficult to accept as realistic). In this long story (almost reaching the length of a novella), the principal groups are Gordon Sterrett and Philip Dean, two former friends and classmates at college; the recently mustered out veterans Carroll Key and Gus Rose (some critics, like Jeffrey Meyers, comment on the choice of names by Fitzgerald, to the effect that he selected names of people he knew or, as in the case of Key, his own name and even chose a title that puns on the term for a call for aid; such speculation is interesting and may be valid); the grasping Jewel Hudson, who is, in effect, blackmailing Gordon Sterrett, and Edith Bradin, a former girlfriend who still likes Gordon; and a group of minor characters who help to advance the plot and react with the main personages.

Fitzgerald once declared that the period of this story marked the opening of the Jazz Age with its chaotic events, from the disorderly mob advancing toward the newspaper office (where suspected German sympathizers are believed to work) and wrecking the office, to the near insanity and finally the suicide of Gordon Sterrett.

Certainly the story line of this tale suggests the more unhappy aspects of that period, including the wild party scenes at Delmonico's, at Childs' restaurant, and at the Commodore, where the two friends, Peter Himmel (perhaps a pun on the German word for heaven) and Philip Dean misbehave outrageously. Andrew Turnbull asserts that both the riot (which has been well documented) and the party at Delmonico's and the shenanigans the following day are all based on actual events in New York on that day. Surely, the way that Fitzgerald presents them bears the mark of deep personal experience and understanding.

While many of the episodes are unrelated in any plotlike way, they all tend to advance the theme of disassociation and confusion. The most striking example, apart from the riot (in which Carrol Key is killed by accident), is the decline of Gordon Sterrett, who is the closest thing to a protagonist in the tale. Although the story is quite long, the author depends on a great deal of antecedent information to explain the deplorable state of Gordon's life at the opening of the plot. Many readers have suggested that Gordon's plight no money, lost job, realization of no talent, and a hounding woman

represents Fitzgerald's fear of poverty and artistic lapse. His suicide, at the end of the story, is believable and moving.

The theme of disillusionment and loss inform the story in other ways, also. Dean's callous refusal to lend Sterrett the money he needs to pay off Jewel Hudson, the confusion and sense of alienation of the two former soldiers, and the almost desperate mood of the partying and the antics of "Mr. In" and "Mr. Out" (taken from signs that Philip and Peter have stolen from a building and based on a real incident that Fitzgerald witnessed), the worldweariness of Jewel Hudson, and the sense of loss in Edith Bradin all these factors contribute to a picture of an era worn thin by too much passion and too little exercise of common sense the Jazz Age.

"Babylon Revisited" As the title of the story indicates, the plot has to do with a character's returning to a city where something important has happened. The city is Paris, and it is evoked well by an author who knew it well (Fitzgerald and Zelda lived there for a time, on the same street where sits the apartment building of Marion and Lincoln Peters). The five-part structure of the plot suggests a similarity with a five-act tragic drama, as does the skillful use of just enough antecedent information to make the events and motivations clear.

The essence of the tale is that Charles Wales caused his wife's death, inadvertently, by locking her out of their home in Paris many years earlier, while he was both jealous and drunk.

Wales has come back to reclaim his daughter, who has been living with the sister of his dead wife, Helen. This woman is the mean-spirited Marion Peters (one of the few such females portrayed by Fitzgerald), whose husband, Lincoln, is considerably more sympathetic to Wales than his wife is.

The daughter, named Honoria (who, as Meyers points out, is nine years old and speaks good French, like Scottie Fitzgerald at that time), loves her father deeply and wishes to live with him.

In several well-developed scenes, the point is made that the past cannot be escaped, as two former friends of Wales's appear drunk at the Peters apartment and spoil Charles's chance to take back his daughter, whom Marion is on the point of turning over to him. As usual, the tone of the story is a combination of nostalgia (for the way Paris used to be) and the reality of the present (Paris has changed, as has Charles Wales). Much of the impact of the tale derives from the highly developed style. For example, the pervasive theme of the terrible price paid for the loss of time is underscored by Charles's rumination about his former belief that "The men locked their wives out in the snow because the snow of twenty-nine wasn't real snow. If you didn't want it to be snow, you just paid some money."

Apart from the failure of Charlie's redemption, the story also emphasizes the confusion and chaos of the Depression years, as experienced both in Europe and America, a time when a few people did well (as Wales did) and others struggled (as the Peters family

did, a point of further conflict between Marion and Charles Wales). The intensity, circular plot (Charlie ends up where he began, at the bar of the Ritz), and strong emotional aspects of the story are valid reasons that Fitzgerald wrote a screenplay based on it, which was, however, never made into a motion picture.

Adaptation of "Babylon Revisited" A later screenplay was filmed, in 1954, with the title The Last Time I Saw Paris (probably taken from the song, popular during World War II). The stars were Elizabeth Taylor as Helen and Van Johnson as Charlie. Among the many alterations of the original story were the addition of Walter Pidgeon playing Helen's father (a character who does not appear in the story) and the shift of the time setting to the period right after World War II. The director, Richard Brooks, did what he could with a somewhat overdramatized script; however, he drew from Van Johnson what may well be his finest performance on film.

"Absolution" This most Catholic of Fitzgerald's stories reflects his concern for moral values, his grasp of the child's mind, and his sense of the difficulties of the priesthood. The two main characters, the eleven-year-old Rudolph Miller and Father Schwartz, interact in one key scene, interrupted by segments of antecedent information that clarify the plot and the motivations of the lad. Also, the father of Rudolph, Carl Miller, is thus introduced and developed just enough to explain further Rudolph's dilemma.

The story opens in an almost fairy tale style: "There was once a priest with cold, watery eyes, who, in the still of the night, wept cold tears."

Throughout the plot, the problems of the boy □ essentially an unwillingness to confess his sexual awareness □ and those of the priest □ which have been viewed as ranging from a despair over his vocation and over his distance from "real" life to a disturbing homosexual impulse □ are presented economically and eloquently. In this story, the excellence of Fitzgerald's style (an element of his writing that is often undervalued or, at least, not adequately noticed) is pivotal, as he sets the broad, heated rural scene, in which "there was no escape [for Father Schwartz] from the hot madness of four o'clock," and establishes the unsettled mood of the characters: the fight between Rudolph and his father, the uneasy dialogue between priest and the "beautiful boy," and the idyllic ending: "It would be night in three hours, and all along the land there would be these blonde Northern girls and the tall young men from the farms lying out beside the wheat, under the moon."

It has been claimed that, while some of the events in the story are based on Fitzgerald's experience (for example the father's striking the son and the telling of a lie in the confessional), there is a symbolic failure (and a real one, in a moral sense) of the lad by his "real" father and his "spiritual" one, especially as the priest first confuses Rudolph with his wandering commentary □ notably the statement that things "go glimmering" □ and then horrifies him by collapsing to the floor, evidently dead.

That Rudolph represents the young Fitzgerald, as has been averred, seems likely; if so, this story goes a long way toward revealing some of the inner confusion and conflict that helped to make the author's life so unsettled.

Key Questions

Since the short fiction of Fitzgerald is relatively little known these days, it might be effective to deal with the relative qualities — of, for example, plot, characterization, and style — of these works in comparison with those of the novels. One might, for intance, examine the question of whether the somewhat disconnected story line of "Mayday" compares favorably with the advance of events in, say, The Beautiful and Damned. Further, inasmuch as many critics and authors believe that the short story is a more demanding form, in its requirement of absolute compression, it could be well to discuss whether Fitzgerald, in these stories, actually achieves the condensation needed to create a satisfying piece of short fiction.

As to setting, an important element in all of the stories, one might question whether the European setting of "Babylon Revisited" is as well realized as the American settings in the other tales. As always, the style of Fitzgerald merits attention, especially in the passages of dialogue that enliven the stories and help to develop the profound themes therein.

1. In which of these four stories does the setting seem to play the most important part?

2. Aside from the geographical clash, what is the principal basis of conflict in "The Ice Palace"?

3. Does the tone of "Mayday" achieve its evident goal of re-creating the ambience of New York in the spring of 1919? What devices are especially useful in this effort?

4. Are there any real similarities between Charles Wales and Gordon Sterrett, allowing for the difference between the situations of these unhappy men?

5. Do you find the episodic plot of "Mayday" confusing and annoying? Is there a better way by which the author could have developed the story line?

6. Do you fully sympathize with Charlie Wales, or do you believe that Marion is at least somewhat justified in her mistrust of him?

7. Does the eloquence of the style in "Absolution" take away from the thematic focus of the story — is the style, for example, excessively "poetic"?

8. Which of these four tales has the strongest thematic impact? What aspects of the chosen story cause you to make this judgment?

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