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## THE FOLLIES AND FAILURE OF THE POST-WAR GENERATION IN THE FICTION OF SCOTT FITZGERALD

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### Abstract

*Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald is one of the key members of the group called 'lost generation'. He is also one of the outstanding writers of the United States of America who comes under a period popularly called Jazz Age. This epoch prominently affected American History. The writings of Fitzgerald are broadly autobiographical, interlocked by the author's perception and understanding of life. His writings are considered a valuable social document of the 1920s. Fitzgerald stands as a spokesman of his own period who has recorded the revolution of his times. Success and Failure in the life of Fitzgerald and its portrayal in his fiction are closely linked. His subject for his fiction comes from his personal experiences. Several of his writings including his letters, essays, stories and fictional works show two or three moving events of his life. His failure as a big shot in college, his failed courtship with Ginevra King, his early failure and success thereafter in love with Zelda Sayre, his nervous breakdown, his success as a writer are some of the sweet and sour experiences in his personal life. The triumph and crash of an essentially romantic man is evident in Fitzgerald's life and works. This paper analyses Fitzgerald's portrayal of the lost values and failure of the American post-war generation in his fictional works This Side of Paradise (TSP), The Beautiful and Damned (BD), and The Great Gatsby (GG).*

**Keywords:** Success, Failure, Loss, Values, Flapper, Money, and Dream.

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### Introduction

Scott Fitzgerald is a successful writer who wrote mainly about failure. In his personal life, he often failed in his expectations that urged him. He was disillusioned and felt quite uneasy when he could not achieve offices of leaderships and the affections of beautiful women. He endured difficulties in his personal as well as his professional life. He often courted failure. At the same time he found himself a literary celebrity at the age of twenty three, when he published his debut novel *This Side of Paradise*. Fitzgerald was troubled by the early defeats, until he married the woman of his desire and won

admiration of elite writers a few years later with the publication of *The Great Gatsby*. The personal experiences in his life serve as the basis to understand his writings. Most of his characters are desperately deceived and defeated in spite of their success. Virtually all of Fitzgerald's main characters are stuck by defeat that ruins their life and thus they fail in one way or another.

### **The American Post-war Period**

The America of 1920s was a period of immense abundance, self-importance and excess. The works of Fitzgerald can be better understood with sufficient knowledge of the time in which they were written. Without having an insight into the historical background, social changes and cultural events of the 1920s the readers would almost be vague. Jazz Age, Roaring Twenties and Golden age are the terms used to refer the period that covers years from 1920 to 1929 in the United States of America. "The 1920s are remembered as a time of innocent indulgence when prosperity appeared limitless, impulses bore no consequences, and irresponsibility was a birthright. As always, the reality was more complex. The period was actually a whirlwind of transformation..." (Curnutt 28). The period characterizes the great abundance of money and wealth in general.

In the time of transition the need to defend traditional values had become a prime concern. In the history of the world the 1920s was an outstanding period. The post-war issues left the people in a state of despair and made them indulge in new ways of life. People fancied money, status and power to be the means of everything. The spiritual side of life was neglected and life became bedraggled. People gave themselves to all sources of entertainment that included dancing, touring, partying and drinking. The Prohibition Act came into effect in 1920 which prohibited sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors as well as on buying and drinking it. Alcohol became a forbidden fruit and gave an opportunity to organised crime. It was a crucial time for the women community. They enjoyed more freedom in a new era where women held loose morals. The roles of women evidently changed. Suffrage for women and the War were accelerating factors for changing the role of women. The twenties were also considered as a period of second industrial revolution. Houses were filled with more electrical and electronic devices that gave much leisure for housewives. The growth in automobile industry was also boundless. These drastic changes in the social, economic and political life made the people to wither their tradition and morals.

### **The Follies and Failure of the New Generation**

Most of the young Post-war Americans were influenced by the emerging trends. The disillusion of the war and changing life scenario influenced every person. People were busy with getting rich. They devoted much time for pleasure adopting hedonistic principles. They did not realize that they are moving away from their old-fashioned

values. They never made any attempt to implant traditional values that will give meaning to their lives. The life in excess, carelessness and imprudence resulted in emptiness in peoples' lives. Amory Blaine, the protagonist of Fitzgerald's first novel *This Side of Paradise* is encompassed with youth, astuteness and good looks. Like most of Fitzgerald's heroes, he is "unbearably lonely, desperately unhappy" (TSP 25). He is the son of an affluent, charming, sophisticated woman Beatrice. Anthony Patch, in *The Beautiful and Damned* is the grandson of a multimillionaire and has a beautiful wife. Power, new money and fine looks are the possessions of Jay Gatsby in *the Great Gatsby*. The common denominators for these heroes are youth, physical beauty, wealth and romantic readiness. Despite their success in possessing all these traits they have an inner sense of failure. Amory lives with a notion of what he will be in future, neglecting the present by his follies. He sees himself as a boy of marked glory and as the youngest general in the world. He considers himself to be superior "physically, socially and mentally" (TSP16). He strives to be popular in the campus by being a football player and by joining the campus elite club. He keeps dreaming into his fantasy world; "before he fell asleep he would dream one of his favourite waking dreams, the one about becoming a great half-back, or the one about the Japanese invasion, when he was rewarded by being made the youngest general in the world. It was always the becoming he dreamed of, never the being" (TSP15). As he comes to age, the future becomes more difficult. His fancied future becomes an illusion and he is forced to confront with the harsh reality that is experienced in the present.

Unlike Amory, Anthony is bound from the start to become a failure. Anthony Patch is a Harvard scholar, whose vocation is doing nothing though he poses to be an aspiring writer. He awaits the death of his grandfather, who is a multimillionaire. He is anxious of money, "to become immensely rich as quickly as possible" (BD 40). Fitzgerald too was anxious of money. He was constantly under pressure of gaining more to fulfil his dreams. Anthony is a stylish and blasé aesthete, who lives in a comfortable ivory tower in a New York apartment. He has the advantage of a certain culture. He is independent and affluent and has his future guaranteed by the prospect of inheritance. His desire is to keep alive his pleasant life. Anthony does not wrestle with what he will be but what he is. Anthony is damned by his grandfather. He does nothing because there is nothing to do. He feels compelled to do something and he can think of nothing better than writing a history of middle ages. The future he is willing to live in is the unrealistic idealized one where he loafs graciously about. Gatsby's power is inextricably linked with his wealth. From the very beginning of the novel *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby is portrayed as a playboy millionaire. He has a beautiful house with servants and dozens of friends. He epitomizes the idea of self made success. He is successful financially and socially. He created a new persona for himself from his underprivileged past. In reality Gatsby is a liar and criminal who earned his wealth through bootlegging. It is heavily evident that he earned his fortune through bootlegging as Tom Buchanan says: "A lot of these newly

rich people are just big bootleggers, you know" (GG 86). He is neither great nor indeed Gatsby but James Gatz, who is the son of a shiftless and unsuccessful farm people. He gains wealth and throws lavish parties only to win back his love for Daisy. He never succeeds in his desire or love. The women in Fitzgerald's novels are debutante flappers. The leisure class women embrace highest external value but their internal worth is in overturn to what they dream. The socio-economic status of the women affected their moral development where as they have achieved personal fulfilments. In the pursuit of big money, Fitzgerald's women adopt the loosened moral standards. They value their attractive personal appearances that help them launch and accomplish romantic relationships. This attitude reflects the conflict between wanting success and compromising one's moral and personal goals to achieve it. The American women of the 1920s had been fighting for liberties like smoking, drinking, experimenting with sex since the start of the twentieth century. The women in Fitzgerald possess habits like drinking, smoking, bobbing their hair and kissing a variety of men. The economic prosperity and changing moral standards in a great deal affected America's traditional values.

Fitzgerald's heroines are beautiful and they attract his male characters easily. They are frivolous, self centred, reckless and in short good for little. They seek for more money, more kisses and more amusement. Fitzgerald portrays young women who dream of a greater degree of freedom and financial autonomy that is not within their grasp. Marriage is only a social security for them and naturally they choose prospective husbands. Like Fitzgerald's wife Zelda, they all live with the American dream, becoming mad with it. They are spirited, ambitious, and outspoken. Their material desires are easy to identify rather than their spiritual, intellectual and emotional desires. They are often affected by irresistible urges of world-weariness and vitality.

The heroines of *This Side of Paradise* became role models for the corruptible younger generation. Rosalind, a character in the novel can be regarded as the original American flapper. The activities of the so called flappers were enough to shock the older generation. Rosalind Connage is the sister of Amory's friend Alec, at Princeton. Rosalind breaks her engagement with Amory for financial reasons. She feels that the money which Amory earns from his advertising profession could not support her life. Addicting himself to alcohol, Amory heels the pain caused by Rosalind. She marries a wealthier Dawson Ryder, sacrificing her real love, for the sake of money and status. It is to be noted that Zelda married Fitzgerald only after his success of publication of his first novel. Gloria Gilbert, the heroine of *The Beautiful and Damned* is a symbol of beauty that is both careless and fascinating. Gloria marries Anthony only for the wealth which he is to inherit from his grandfather. Both rent an apartment after their marriage and it is filled with people at week-end parties. They indulge in a new life giving away themselves to alcohol and smoking. Gloria recognizes her failure in marriage at the decline of Anthony and she falls back to dream on her beauty. Daisy Buchanan in *The*

*Great Gatsby* is a member of the established American Aristocracy. She is an attractive, wealthy and shallow young lady who always dresses herself in flimsy white dresses. She has married the wealthy Tom Buchanan and in spite of wealth she is bored and careless. Daisy shared love with Gatsby when he was stationed in the army in Louisville. Soon bored and impatient she started to develop affairs with men of her social class. That was how she met and fell in love with the wealthy Tom. "Her voice is full of money" remarks Gatsby in one of his discourse with Nick about Daisy (GG 133). After her marriage the couple led a meaningless and shallow life. However she enjoys the wealth and social prominence that her marriage has brought in.

### **Conclusion**

Fitzgerald as a social historian records the frivolity and ruin of the Jazz age. He was granted a significant place among the American Social Novelists. He beautifully engraved the rapidly changing moral, social, and political situation of the 1920s. He focused exclusively on the wealthy individuals' socio-economic situation and their behaviour. His works of the 1920's deal with the decade's spirit of boisterous amusement and booming economy that led to the destruction of America's traditional values. Fitzgerald had an unprecedented impact on America. His characters Amory Blaine, Anthony Patch, Jay Gatsby and his heroines the debutante flappers are representatives of Americans who want wealth, happiness, success and fame. These are the things they longed for. Even after accomplishing their dreams, they find a vacuum in their inner selves. They experience a sense of loss and that is where they meet with failure. In spite of the external jollity, modernity and matchless material prosperity the characters in the novel have lost something in their life that should have been treasured. They are the 'lost generation'. They lack stability, traditional values and identity.

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