

Tender Is *What* Night? Surprises in the Growth of Fitzgerald's Fourth Novel

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1925-1934: The nine-year span over which F. Scott Fitzgerald labored at *Tender Is the Night* balances uneasily at October 1929, which marked a turning point in many lives and fortunes. Fitzgerald's golden decade, one could say, ran from early October 1919, with the fixing of the World Series, through late October 1929, with the collapse of the stock market, when the brilliant world of *Gatsby* and the Jazz Age was dead and an austere new world emerged that was altogether different for everybody. Fitzgerald's personal life also suffered painful changes, mostly having to do with his wife Zelda's worsening mental condition, so that his work was beset by pressures and perplexities that he was not suited to handle.¹

Tender Is the Night is a bold departure for Fitzgerald: it is set almost entirely in Europe, the central character is a practicing psychiatrist (one of the earliest in literature), and the glamour for which Fitzgerald is famous works as a functional part of the story, strictly subservient as an ironic counterpoint to the ugliness and emptiness of the lives of the characters.

The novel teems with surprises. A quick scan, facilitated by the computer, reveals that some form of "surprise" appears at least fifteen times, applied to various characters in various situations, as though a limitation—vanity, stupidity, derangement, impairment, drunkenness, immaturity, depravity, senility—prevented people from being ready for what may happen. Even when characters are capable of foresight, however, some events are so improbable as to seem miraculous, so that nobody sees them coming.

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Let me examine different sorts of surprise attending *Tender Is the Night*. At a low level, we can note the pervasive presence of surprise in all the characters, twice reaching the extreme of "vast surprise." ("Actually he was one of those for whom the sensual world does not exist, and faced with a concrete fact he brought to it a vast surprise." "[T]hey skirted a lost streak of wind with the hotel growing in size at each spiral, until with a vast surprise they were there, on top of the sunshine").² We can also remark the extrinsic historical surprise in the fate of a novel that started out with newspaper accounts of a crazed girl named Dorothy Ellingson who killed her mother and turned into *The Boy Who Killed His Mother* but wound up with *A Girl Raped By Her Father*; and, at a higher level of irony, the intrinsic surprise when that father, banished from the girl's life, shows up, supposedly near death and repentant, and then abruptly disappears (in language drawn from biblical accounts of miraculous healing).

The 1934 version of *Tender Is the Night* did not satisfy Fitzgerald, and he tinkered with the material over the remaining six years of his life, producing a different structure for much the same material that was published posthumously. Most readers prefer the earlier version, partly because it is the one that presents a stronger plot that begins *in medias res* and withholds much that can be later discovered or revealed as a surprise. For example, the revelation of Devereux Warren's confession of sex with his daughter originally comes in chapter 3 of Book II on page 129 of 315, about two fifths of the way through; in the later version, it comes in chapter 3 of Book I on page 18 of 334, only about one twentieth of the way.³

That aspect of the novel seems to be the key. Dick and Nicole were brought together by her mental condition, traceable to the trauma of what seems to be a single sexual encounter with her father (that is, according to his account, which says baldly that "then all at once we were lovers" so that any rape involved may have been only statutory). Many other pairings in the book seem to parallel or echo the primal violation. Dick begins as Nicole's psychiatrist, that is, in some ways, *in loco parentis*, and he fails to avoid the transference that leads to her

loving him and his returning the love, *in loco amantis*, with them marrying and having two children. The teen-aged movie star Rosemary Hoyt, whose big hit is called *Daddy's Girl*, falls for Dick, who is twice her age and technically old enough to be her father, and they begin an affair.

We may surmise here that incest itself is schizophrenic, or at least that it exhibits two antithetical sides. On the one hand, it is quite natural, happening all the time among lower animals and, according to Freud, constituting everybody's earliest sexual attraction. For complex reasons, we usually progress beyond this infantile stage to mature relations, but a vestige or residue is always somewhere there: a powerful attraction to the opposite-sex parent and a concomitant fear of the same-sex parent. On the other hand, this natural impulse is for most cultures regulated by strong taboos. Freud argues that we have totems and taboos for the purpose of curbing the primal impulse to get rid of the same-sex parent and possess the opposite-sex parent.

Another binary operation of incest is as a spring for literary plots, sometimes working with ideal economy, sometimes destroying everything calamitously. Of what Coleridge called "the three most perfect plots ever planned"⁴—*Oedipus Tyrannus*, *The Alchemist*, and *Tom Jones*—one involves *the* archetypal incest story and another involves the possibility of incest (between Tom and Mrs. Waters at Upton), later dispelled. When Fitzgerald was at work, many were aware of Ernest Jones's article "The Oedipus-Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive," published in 1910, nine years before T. S. Eliot's analysis of the artistic failure of *Hamlet* on much the same grounds.

As Claude Lévi-Strauss notes in *Structural Anthropology*, Oedipus's two sins can be seen as opposite corners of a diagram: he, so to speak, *under-loves* his same-sex parent and *over-loves* his opposite-sex parent.⁵ Furthermore, as Anthony Burgess's *MF* suggests, both sins are connected to Oedipus's possession of knowledge that permits him to solve a riddle; but the price of knowledge, in a Faustian bargain, is

mortal sin.⁶ (Or the price of achievement, in a Promethean bargain, is everlasting torment.)

The stuff of great tragedy also persists as the stuff of farce: the situation in *Hamlet*, marriage with deceased brother's wife, is transformed into a joke in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*: "He shall prick that annual blister, / Marriage with deceased wife's sister"⁷ (which evidently vexed the English parliament until about 1950), all the way to the bemused questions asked by the mobster Paul Vitti (played by Robert De Niro) in *Analyze This*: "Have you *seen* my mother?"

If I were to write the history of luck, I would probably say that all readers are lucky to have Aristotle, who was lucky to have Sophocles, who was lucky to have Oedipus, who, after a promising start, had no luck at all. Aristotle's paradigmatic analysis of the archetypal tragic plot is as convincing today as it was more than 2000 years ago, despite the ostensibly primitive psychology on which it depends. The perfection of Sophocles' plot is a matter of artistic management, but it also involves certain elements that incest makes possible, especially a pervasive doubling. In an incest plot, certain characters have multiple functions, such as sibling-lover or parent-lover, and this multiplicity leads into contradictions and paradoxes (think of Mary's being called *figlia del tuo figlio*—"daughter of your own son").⁸ The working out of the plot typically involves a resolution of such contradictions, so that one element is liquidated or eliminated, with tragic or comic results. But the multiplicity also introduces a pervasive instability and ambiguity that can shake a plot to pieces, along with the characters involved in it.

For a while, *Tender Is the Night* plays the doubling game very well. The alliterative weirdness of the name Dick Diver brings in farcical notes of incongruity. Both "dick" and "diver" can have sexual meanings, and "diver" also means "pickpocket," as in Jenny Diver in *The Beggar's Opera*. Suspicious of the outlandish name for a serious character, I did an informal Internet search and found that there are six authentic Richard Divers in the United States and even two Dick Divers outright. "Diver" echoes the first name of Nicole's father,

Devereux. Dick's and Nicole's names begin with such a rhyming syllable that one friend can conflate them into "Dicole." Tommy Barban's last name is reduplicative, and his whole name seems to echo that of the Tom Buchanan who plays a roughly similar role of antagonist in *The Great Gatsby*. The line from Keats that furnishes the title involves a sort of palindrome: from *t-n* in "Tender" to *n-t* in "Night." One should probably not make too much of such matters, but it is worth noting that Nabokov's Van Veen and Humbert Humbert are involved in incestuous or quasi-incestuous relations. A passage in *Finnegans Wake* has to do with a quintessential girl who is "dadad's lottiest daughterpearl and brooder's cissiest auntybride"⁹—which suggests Lot's incest with his two daughters and the incest between the twins Siegmund and Sieglinde in Wagner, often marked by alliterative couplings of *Bruder* and *Braut*. At one point in *Tender Is the Night*, Nicole says of a song lyric "Thank y' father-r," which Dick doesn't like, "Oh, play it! [...] Am I going through the rest of life flinching at the word 'father'?"¹⁰ That in turn adumbrates a moment in *Chinatown* when Evelyn Mulwray, played by Fay Dunaway, stutters "my fa-father." In an exercise in gratuitous doubling, the sequel to *Chinatown* is called *The Two Jakes*, the second Jake being married to Catherine, the daughter of Evelyn and her father, Noah Cross, with the never-resolved possibility that Catherine was also abused by her father-grandfather.)

I believe that, if Fitzgerald had left the novel alone, it would have survived better and gained even more admiring readers; Hemingway changed his mind about it after Fitzgerald's death and said that "the best book he ever wrote, I think, is still 'Tender is the Night' [...]. Wonderful atmosphere and magical descriptions [...]."¹¹ But the problem must have haunted Fitzgerald. The original opening, centered on Rosemary's perspective, is brilliant: "On the pleasant shore of the French Riviera, about half-way between Marseilles and the Italian border, stands a large, proud, rose-colored hotel." The present tense is immediate and vivid, the postponement of the subject until the end of the sentence generates suspense, and the "rose-

colored" is particularly charged: the girl's name is "Rosemary," and "rose-colored," alone or in such combinations as "rose-colored glasses" and "rose-colored spectacles," has long connoted unrealistic optimism of outlook. (The earliest citation in the *OED* is from 1854.) The revised text begins in the past tense with much less of a charge: "In the spring of 1917, when Doctor Richard Diver first arrived in Zürich, he was twenty-six years old, a fine age for a man, indeed the very acme of bachelorhood." In the original version, the reader sees the Divers first as anonymous figures on a beach: "Her face was hard and lovely and pitiful. Her eyes met Rosemary's but did not see her. Beyond her was a fine man in a jockey cap and red-striped tights [...]"¹² Such a glimpse—a woman like a mask of tragedy, a man like an acrobat—tells much more than the "Case History" of the later version, in which suspense and surprise are sacrificed to chronology.

Something else may have caused Fitzgerald trouble. Big-hearted, he seems to have been constitutionally incapable of letting a wicked character remain wicked. In a manner unique among novelists, he lets characters be themselves and he gives them the benefit of the doubt. He also persistently gives them the lighting effects of beatitude. I was led into this stretch of consideration by accidentally seeing a cigarette machine in a European hotel lobby, with one brand name that reminded me of a passage in Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth*, which is roughly contemporaneous with *Tender Is the Night* and also concerns Americans in Europe. In Italy the Dodsworths encounter "the Noisy Pair," who complain about everything, including their inability to "buy Lucky Strike cigarettes or George Washington coffee in this doggone Wop town [...]"¹³ It occurred to me that Fitzgerald never picks on his characters in such a way, even when it is pretty obvious that they are no better than Lewis's pair. Nor would Fitzgerald ever do what Hemingway does in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and dwell on what the author knows that a character does not know: "[...] he did not know the Somali proverb that says a brave man is always frightened three times by a lion; when he first sees his track, when he first hears him roar, and when he first confronts

him.”¹⁴ To my recollection, the only occasion when a Fitzgerald character does not know something comes in *The Love of the Last Tycoon* when a black man tells Stahr that he never goes to movies because “There’s no profit”; instead, he reads Emerson. The man soon goes away, “unaware that he had rocked an industry.”¹⁵

Rather than parading any such moral or intellectual superiority, Fitzgerald is engagingly modest. In this detail or that, a character is elevated to the level of myth. Gatsby, we are told in the diction of the Gospel of Luke, “was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father’s Business, the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty.”¹⁶ Although Meyer Wolfshiem is a clown and a crook, when he leaves Gatsby and Nick he “raised his hand in a sort of benediction,”¹⁷ a memorable phrase that may have stimulated the “kind of valediction” applied to a departing character in the second section of Eliot’s “Little Gidding.” And, as noted above, Devereux Warren’s sudden recovery from an ostensibly mortal illness is summarized in the language of the Gospel of John: “craziest thing has happened down here—the old boy took up his bed and walked.”¹⁸

Elements of surprise persist in both versions of *Tender Is the Night*, but they are more surprising in the original. There, the design looks more like the perspective of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, both of which feature a charismatic man who does not himself read or write and is described by a bureaucratic first-person narrator with a measure of personal interest in the story (Nick Carraway and Celia Brady). With *Tender Is the Night* designed as though from Rosemary’s point of view, we have something like that structure, although the narrator remains omniscient. The revised version removes the interest of that perspective of innocence.

Neither version makes clear how good and worthy Dick is, and a reader needs to know whether a piece of fortune is good or bad, deserved or undeserved. Dick seems to be a good son, a stellar student, and a resourceful host, but we never get an idea of how he stacks up as a psychiatrist. Instead, we get the title of a projected book

(“*An Attempt at a Uniform and Pragmatic Classification of the Neuroses and Psychoses, Based on an Examination of Fifteen Hundred Pre-Krapaelin and Post-Krapaelin Cases as they would be Diagnosed in the Terminology of the Different Contemporary Schools—and another sonorous paragraph—Together with a Chronology of Such Subdivisions of Opinion as Have Arisen Independently*”)¹⁹ and his reflection that “This title would look monumental in German,” with, indeed, a footnote providing a translation: “*Ein Versuch die Neurosen und Psychosen gleichmässig und pragmatisch zu klassifizieren auf Grund der Untersuchung von funfzehn hundert pre-Krapaelin und post-Krapaelin Fallen wie sie diagnostiziert sein wurden in der Terminologie von den verschiedenen Schulen der Gegenwart, zusammen mit einer Chronologie solcher Subdivisionen der Meinung welche unabhängig entstanden sind*” [sic]. To me, he looks like a shallow windbag, who may know the name of Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926) but cannot spell it (possibly Fitzgerald’s problem more than Diver’s). Besides, for all his sophistication, he is a ninny. When Rosemary passionately says, “Take me,” Dick asks, “Take you where?”²⁰ (He must have read chapter 8 of *The Great Gatsby*, in which Gatsby “took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand.”²¹)

It may be that the first version was too close to Fitzgerald’s own life for him to judge it as art. Nicole is patently based on Zelda (who was very disturbed and got worse as his work on the novel continued) and on Sara Murphy, a wealthy American woman married to a wealthy American man living in a villa in the south of France (the book is dedicated to Gerald and Sara Murphy). Clearly, Nicole is a character in her own right, but she is given some of Zelda’s symptoms, background, and appearance. Zelda was outraged by the tracing of Nicole’s troubles to incest, since Zelda had never undergone anything remotely like that. It may be that, in the revision, Fitzgerald was trying to subdue the effect of the incest by removing the suspense that makes the reader wait for such a dramatic revelation. For whatever reason, Fitzgerald cannot make ends meet, and the novel fizzles

limply to its end, as though to say, 'This is what happens when fathers get involved with daughters and psychiatrists get involved with patients. Obey the rules and stay within boundaries.' Fitzgerald seems to have been unable to invest the story with a sense of evil of the sort that underlies the greatest tragedy.²²

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NOTES

¹See Matthew J. Bruccoli, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 2nd rev. ed. (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2002).

²Since editions of both versions abound, I shall document important passages by the date, book, and chapter only. 1934: I, 10; 1951: II, 11; 1934: II, 8; 1951: I, 8. Incidentally, the phrase "On top of the sunlight" is the last line of the last poem, "A Winter Daybreak above Vence," in James Wright, *Above the River: The Complete Poems* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1990) 376.

³*Tender Is the Night* (New York: Scribner's, 1934); *Tender Is the Night: A Romance*, rev. ed., ed. Malcolm Cowley (New York: Scribner's, 1951).

⁴*The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 14 (*Table Talk II*), ed. Carl Woodring (London: Routledge, 1990) 295 (from 5 July 1834).

⁵Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. C. Jacobson and B. G. Schoepf (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967) 213-30.

⁶Anthony Burgess, *MF* (New York: Knopf, 1971) *passim*.

⁷*The Complete Annotated Gilbert and Sullivan*, ed. Ian Bradley (Oxford: OUP, 2001) 407.

⁸See Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Paradiso XXXIII, 1.

⁹James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1939) 561.

¹⁰1934: III, 7; 1951: V, 8.

¹¹*The Sons of Maxwell Perkins: Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, and Their Editor*, ed. Matthew Bruccoli and Judith S. Baughman (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2004) 316.

¹²Bk. I, ch. 1.

¹³Sinclair Lewis, *Dodsworth* (New York: Harcourt, 1929) 218 (ch. 21).

¹⁴*The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (New York: Scribner's, 1987) 11.

¹⁵*The Love of the Last Tycoon: A Western*, ed. Matthew Bruccoli (Cambridge: CUP, 1993) 93.

¹⁶*The Great Gatsby* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 79.

¹⁷*The Great Gatsby* 58.

¹⁸1934: III, 2; 1951: V, 2.

¹⁹1934 and 1951: I, 8.

²⁰1934: I, 15; 1951: III, 3.

²¹*The Great Gatsby* 118.

²²A number of elements in *Tender Is the Night* reappear in later works: a mentally disturbed woman, an ostensibly relaxing beach setting, and the fleeting unreality of film all matter in Bergman's film *Persona* (1963), and one might notice that the disturbance first strikes the woman—an actress—during a performance of *Elektra*. Father-daughter incest is a part of Calder Willingham's *Eternal Fire* and Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*—among the very poor or the very rich. A most intriguing and surprising possibility is that Edith Wharton could have read *Tender Is the Night* (she lived until 1937). We know that she met Fitzgerald and had some correspondence with him, chiefly about *The Great Gatsby*, which she admired (although she did not admire Fitzgerald himself). I mention this because, possibly as late as 1935, she had drafted a vivid scene of a story called "Beatrice Palmato," concerning a woman seduced by her father, who is wealthy and powerful, like Devereux Warren. See Gloria C. Erlich, *The Sexual Education of Edith Wharton* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1992).