Spring 1971

One Fine Morning: An Analysis Of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "May Day"

Daniel Burr
Carroll College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.carroll.edu/langlit_theses
Part of the Literature in English, North America Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholars.carroll.edu/langlit_theses/126

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages and Literature at Carroll Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Languages and Literature Undergraduate Theses by an authorized administrator of Carroll Scholars. For more information, please contact tkratz@carroll.edu.
ONE FINE MORNING

AN ANALYSIS OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S "MAY DAY"

by

Daniel Aaron Burr

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English
Of Carroll College in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for Academic Honors with the
Bachelor of Arts Degree in English

Carroll College
Helena, Montana
March 1971
This thesis for honors recognition has been approved by the Department of English.

Sister Miriam Clare, O.S.F.
Sister Miriam Clare, O.S.F., Ph.D.; Associate Professor, Department of English

Joseph T. Ward
Joseph T. Ward, Ph.D.; Professor, Department of English

Richard T. Lambert, Ph.D.; Instructor, Department of Philosophy

April 2, 1971
PREFACE

My interest in F. Scott Fitzgerald began, as it must have for many people, after I read *The Great Gatsby* for the first time. This short novel is generally considered his masterpiece; it is the representative work used in most survey courses that treat Fitzgerald. Critical studies of *The Great Gatsby* comprise almost half of the books on any complete Fitzgerald bibliography. Because so much attention is given to this novel it has mistakenly been regarded as an isolated accomplishment, with little in Fitzgerald's early fiction to anticipate it and nothing in his later work to surpass it.

This paper makes no attempt to dispute the position of *The Great Gatsby* as its author's finest achievement, but it does propose that Fitzgerald underwent at least five years of conscious artistic development before producing his masterpiece. The short story, "May Day," is presented as embodying, in embryonic form, many of the elements that make Fitzgerald's mature work so significant.

"May Day" was selected as an indicator of Fitzgerald's developing artistry because it appears at a pivotal point in his career. The story was finished in the early months of 1920; by that time Fitzgerald had completed his first novel, *This Side of Paradise,* and was well into *The Beautiful and*
PREFACE

My interest in F. Scott Fitzgerald began, as it must have for many people, after I read The Great Gatsby for the first time. This short novel is generally considered his masterpiece; it is the representative work used in most survey courses that treat Fitzgerald. Critical studies of The Great Gatsby comprise almost half of the books on any complete Fitzgerald bibliography. Because so much attention is given to this novel it has mistakenly been regarded as an isolated accomplishment, with little in Fitzgerald's early fiction to anticipate it and nothing in his later work to surpass it. This paper makes no attempt to dispute the position of The Great Gatsby as its author's finest achievement, but it does propose that Fitzgerald underwent at least five years of conscious artistic development before producing his masterpiece.

The short story, "May Day," is presented as embodying, in embryonic form, many of the elements that make Fitzgerald's mature work so significant.

"May Day" was selected as an indicator of Fitzgerald's developing artistry because it appears at a pivotal point in his career. The story was finished in the early months of 1920; by that time Fitzgerald had completed his first novel, This Side of Paradise, and was well into The Beautiful and
There is little in this second novel that indicates improvement in the author's craftsmanship, and Fitzgerald wrote only short stories and one play from the time of its publication until *The Great Gatsby* appeared in 1925. It is the early short stories then that hold the key to Fitzgerald's development as a writer; of these stories "May Day" is considered by many critics to be the most successful. It is a novella-length work of almost 23,000 words—*The Great Gatsby* contains only 50,000 words—with an ambitious theme and a unique structure that are combined into an organic whole. This paper presents a detailed analysis of a single short story under the premise that it anticipates the genius of the author's maturity. Chapter one is devoted to the position of "May Day" in Fitzgerald's canon and of Fitzgerald himself in American literature. The thought and overall structure of the story are treated in chapter two, while certain stylistic devices are isolated in the third chapter. The conclusion sums up the entire thesis and presents certain observations realized as I worked on the paper and at its completion.

In the bibliography I have listed a book, *Style in French Prose*, by Richard A. Sayce, a Fellow of Worcester College at Oxford University. While it has been impossible to cite a direct reference to this book in the paper itself, I included it in the bibliography because the method of analysis of style in literature proposed by Professor Sayce has been followed quite closely in this paper. The merits of
this method are not indisputable, but I have found its use quite rewarding. I have not given precedence to any single Fitzgerald critic in the paper because in many ways "May Day" is unchartered territory. It is mentioned in every study of Fitzgerald's complete works, but nowhere is the story given detailed analysis. A section on Fitzgerald criticism in chapter one briefly explains the attitude of some critics toward "May Day."

Coming as it does at the end of my undergraduate study, this thesis represents the influence of four years of teachers and courses, and all of them must be given acknowledgment. A special indebtedness is owed to my thesis advisor, Sister Miriam Clare who, for the past two years, has been a most inspiring teacher and friend.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**THE POSITION OF "MAY DAY!**

A study of the development of F. Scott Fitzgerald's thought and technique from his earliest fiction to the novel he was working on at the time of his death presents something unique. The position of "early" or "lost" manuscripts in order to reconstruct the phases of his growth as an artist. Fitzgerald's work is almost totally exposed, most of what he wrote—good and bad—was eventually put into print. He was neither a writer who had nor did he pass through any lengthy literary apprenticeship, nor presented it to the public. In 1919 Fitzgerald gathered together most of his books, but the collected works of F. Scott Fitzgerald published in novel form, for the book was filled with stories, plays, and poems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I THE POSITION OF &quot;MAY DAY&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II THE THOUGHT AND STRUCTURE OF &quot;MAY DAY&quot;</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III THE STYLE OF &quot;MAY DAY&quot;</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

In a 1935 letter to his publisher, Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald wrote: "I wish I had these great masses of manuscripts stored away like Wolfe and Hemingway, but the mess is beginning to be pretty thoroughly piled up, so afraid" ([Andrew Turnbull (ed.), The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965], p. 353).
CHAPTER I

THE POSITION OF "MAY DAY"

A study of the development of F. Scott Fitzgerald's thought and technique from his earliest fiction to the novel he was working on at the time of his death presents something unique for a major writer. There is little need to trace down "early" or "lost" manuscripts in order to reconstruct the various stages of his growth as an artist. Fitzgerald's work is almost totally exposed, most of what he wrote—good and bad—was eventually put into print. He was never a writer who had a great deal of unused material on reserve in notebooks,¹ nor did he pass through any lengthy literary apprenticeship that would have perfected his writing before he presented it to the public. In 1919 Fitzgerald gathered together most of his early writing and produced a large novel which became a national best seller. It is not surprising that a contemporary reviewer greeted This Side of Paradise as "the collected works of F. Scott Fitzgerald published in novel form," for the book was filled with stories, plays, and poems

¹In a 1935 letter to his publisher, Maxwell Perkins, Fitzgerald wrote: "I wish I had these great masses of manuscripts stored away like Wolfe and Hemingway but this goose is beginning to be pretty thoroughly plucked I am afraid" (Andrew Turnbull [ed.], The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963], p. 263).
that dated from the author's undergraduate years at Princeton. The success of his novel created a demand for Fitzgerald's short stories; within a year he had reworked almost all of his early stories and sold them to magazine publishers. *This Side of Paradise* was followed by a period of great productivity; Fitzgerald started several novels and wrote and sold more than a dozen new stories in a few months' time. His career as a professional writer had been launched before he had even begun to master the craft of fiction. It would take the young author five years to catch up with his own success.

A study of the development of Fitzgerald's thought and technique must then begin with his earliest published fiction. The novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, and the short stories written between 1920 and 1925 are all a part of the tremendous growth that would take him from the clumsy patchwork of *This Side of Paradise* to the superbly integrated artistry of *The Great Gatsby*. During this formative period Fitzgerald fell under the influence of several literary traditions, resulting in his experimentation with a number of fictional techniques. Because he always considered short story writing as a means of earning money so that he could be free to write novels, these various traditions and techniques do not appear in Fitzgerald's

---

fiction in a single line of progression. Often what he accomplished in his short stories was never applied to his novels, and vice versa. Fitzgerald did not create a completely successful novel until *The Great Gatsby*, but as early as 1920 he had mastered the short story form in a novella-length work entitled "May Day." Even though this story does not fit precisely into a history of the development of his fictional technique in the novel, it is the first indication of a serious concern for craftsmanship in Fitzgerald's fiction, a concern that would make the later masterpieces possible. The structure of "May Day" is experimental, one that does not appear again in Fitzgerald's fiction, but the thought of the story is something that is present in all of his best work.

Fitzgerald's biographer, Arthur Mizener, has stated that there are three areas of interest in a study of the man: his times, his life, and his work. Of course this is true of all important writers, and Fitzgerald has suffered more than many from excessive concentration in the first two areas, but all three must be given consideration because Fitzgerald

---

3In 1925 Fitzgerald wrote to his friend John Peale Bishop: "No news except I now get $2000 a story and they grow worse and worse and my ambition is to get where I need write no more but only novels" (Turnbull, ed., *op. cit.*., p. 355).

was very much a man of his time and he constantly turned to his own life to find inspiration for his work. To place "May Day" in the canon of Fitzgerald's fiction it is necessary to begin with the era in which the story was written. Fitzgerald belongs to the first period of national introspection that had appeared in American literature since the Civil War. This new critical consciousness began after the First World War; soon the economic and social values that had guided the country through a half century of great expansion were being challenged by a generation that could no longer ignore the moral corruption that was hidden under the prosperous surface of American life. As early as the 1890's, writers like Frank L. Norris and Theodore Dreiser began to call attention to the misery that the Industrial Revolution had brought to the city, but the grim volumes of the naturalists were not enough to shake the belief in traditional values. It required the massive carnage of the Great War to jar Americans out of their confident assumptions and into the disillusionment of the Lost Generation. After 1919 the romantic celebration of the battlefield disappeared from literature, taking with it most of the old values and leaving little to replace them. Some Americans celebrated the departure as an end to hypocrisy and the beginning of liberation. H.L. Mencken became the spokesman for a new culture of skepticism and freedom. Alfred Kazin sums up Mencken's impact on the young postwar writers: "He was the
great cultural emancipator, the conqueror of Philistia, the prophet and leader of all those who had been given their emancipation and were now prepared to live by it. But there was a far more serious side to the lost generation, something that went beyond a sophisticated attack on American cultural backwardness. The writers who flocked around Mencken in the 1920's were middle-aged or older by the time of the war.

Kazin goes on to describe the young men who grew up on the battlefields in Europe:

Born in the middle nineties, when modern American writing was just beginning to emerge as a positive force, they arrived on the scene just at the moment of triumph; and they seemed from the first not merely the concentration of all that the modern revolution had brought to America, but its climax. Standing at the center of the whole modern literary experience in America, writers like Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Dos Passos were significantly the evangelists of what had been most tragically felt in the American war experience. They were "the sad young men," the very disillusioned and brilliant young men, "the beautiful and damned," and counterparts of all those other sad and brilliant young men in Europe... who wrote out of the bitterness of a shattered Europe and the palpable demoralization of western society.

Fitzgerald was a part of both traditions, coming strongly under the influence of Mencken early in his career, and living in Europe among the American expatriots by the end of the decade. As the social historian of the Jazz Age his vision went deeper than mere sophistication; he recorded in America

---


6 Ibid., p. 313.
what Hemingway experienced in Europe—the confusion of values that confronted those who survived the war.

Another important feature of American life in the early decades of the twentieth century was a questioning of the fundamental economic principles that had for so long been accepted as a part of the national character, and the advancement of new economic systems, including socialism. In 1906 Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* precipitated a movement of labor literature that grew until the entry of the United States into the war in 1917 enabled the government to enforce restrictive security measures against socialist groups. In presenting a Literary Calendar for the years 1911-1930, Malcolm Cowley sees 1919 as the culmination of the socialist hopes. The year was characterized by workers' strikes and anti-Communist riots in several major cities. The war-inspired prosperity that came with the boom days of the 1920's soon turned attention away from ideological disputes, and the young writers became involved in a more fundamental revolt against traditional American morality, but the presence of the socialist theme in Fitzgerald's "May Day" shows how far the cause had permeated the literature of the era.

Just as Fitzgerald's fiction reflects the mood and events of his times, it also relies heavily on his own life.

---

for its inspiration. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born on September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. His mother's family was Irish and had enjoyed considerable wealth and prestige in St. Paul for two generations. Fitzgerald's father belonged to a Maryland family that could trace its ancestry back to Francis Scott Key and the American Revolution. The attractive gentility of his father was constantly marred by an inability to support the family; most of their money came from Mrs. Fitzgerald's inheritance. The "deep-seated social self-consciousness" which his biographer notes and Fitzgerald's notorious interest in the rich were a result of his family having a heritage of money and position without a current and secure wealth.\(^8\) The fear of poverty haunts much of his fiction.

Fitzgerald spent most of his youth in St. Paul until 1913 when he enrolled at Princeton University. The Princeton experience would furnish most of the material for This Side of Paradise for it was during his college days that Fitzgerald's interest in writing and literature was firmly established. He left Princeton in 1917 without a degree to accept a commission as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army, spending two years in the service but never being sent overseas. Thus, though the First World War is often a background to his early fiction, it was not a vital experience in his life, and always

\[^8\] Mizener, op. cit., p. 7.
he could see the battlefield as something far away and slightly romantic. By the time he was discharged from the service Fitzgerald had completed two revisions of a novel entitled The Romantic Egotist; both attempts had been rejected by publishers. Since he had recently fallen in love with Zelda Sayre, a young girl he met while stationed in Alabama, Fitzgerald knew he would have to prove he could earn a living if they were to marry. Putting his manuscripts aside, he took a job in New York in February, 1919, as a copywriter in an advertising firm, spending the next four months revising old stories, writing new ones, and trying to sell something to the popular magazines. The Smart Set accepted two of his stories for the standard price of forty dollars each.9 In June, Fitzgerald gave up his job and returned home to attempt one more revision of the novel, hoping its sale would give him the money to marry. Many of the Princeton experiences were cut out to make room for his New York adventures; in September, 1919, This Side of Paradise was accepted for spring publication by Maxwell Perkins of Scribner's.10 His enthusiasm at fever pitch, Fitzgerald returned to the East in the fall on the money he had received from selling two stories to Robert Bridges for Scribner's Magazine, one of the more respected magazines. The

---

10Ibid.
acceptance of his novel by a prominent publisher had already made a difference in the attitude of magazine editors. Once in New York, he learned that the Saturday Evening Post wished to purchase one of his stories for $400; he was also introduced to Harold Ober, who became his permanent literary agent.  

Fitzgerald continued to prosper, selling two more stories to the Post, and by the end of the year he had plans for writing a second novel. Then in December a letter to Perkins describes a "frightful literary slump" in which Fitzgerald seemed unable to direct his work. Later he wrote that he had abandoned the novel project and instead turned the material into several short stories. The period was one of despair and uncertainty over the pending publication of the novel and his emotional courtship with Miss Sayre. Evidence indicates that "May Day" was originally conceived as the opening section of the abortive novel. Fitzgerald worked on several more clever magazine stories and between January and March of 1920 he put "May Day" into its final form. On March 26 This Side of Paradise was published and its immediate success put Fitzgerald into the literary spotlight. It also won for him his bride. By July he was able to sell "May Day" to The

11 Ibid., p. 65.
13 Piper, op. cit., p. 69.
Smart Set. It so impressed the editors, including H. L. Mencken who then used the magazine to advance his literary dictums, that instead of the usual $40.00, they paid $200.00 for the story. This event marked the beginning of Mencken's influence on Fitzgerald.¹⁴

In 1921 Scribner's published Flappers and Philosophers, thereby establishing the pattern of following each of Fitzgerald's novels with a collection of short stories. The Beautiful and Damned appeared in 1922 along with Tales of the Jazz Age, which included "May Day" among its eleven stories. The Vegetable, Fitzgerald's only play, was completed in 1923 after months of agonizing work. Its failure was the first in the series of tragedies that would characterize the rest of Fitzgerald's life. His popularity began to subside; another book would not appear until 1925—The Great Gatsby.

Without exception critics have been amazed at the technical development that took place in Fitzgerald's writing from the time of his first novel to The Great Gatsby. During the five years that separate the two books, Fitzgerald wrote only one novel, The Beautiful and Damned, which represents an improvement over This Side of Paradise but gives little hint of the masterpiece that was to come. Until the revival of interest in Fitzgerald's complete works, critics have been willing to accept The Great Gatsby as a literary curiosity.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 70.
which appeared without warning and would not be equaled again by its author. The novel itself prompted impressive praise from some of the leading literary figures of the day, but in the obscurity that overtook Fitzgerald in the late 1930’s, it, as well as his other works, was forgotten. Fitzgerald’s death in 1940 produced several articles that attempted to sum up his entire achievement; he was generally classified as a writer who had lived an interesting life, in the midst of which he had suddenly produced one important book. The Nation considered him a "man of talent who did not fulfill his early promise," and called *The Great Gatsby* "his only enduring novel." In 1941 Oscar Cargill concluded that *The Great Gatsby* was "out of line" with Fitzgerald’s other work and stressed that it was "important for the author’s reputation to know that it was consciously different and not accidentally so." Because many of his short stories had been hurriedly written for popular magazines, the critics dismissed all of them and concentrated on his five novels for their judgments of his worth.

But another trend in Fitzgerald criticism gained impetus with the posthumous publication of *The Last Tycoon*, an unfinished novel, in 1941 and *The Crack Up*, a collection of
highly personal essays and letters, in 1945. Edmund Wilson and John Peale Bishop, men who had known Fitzgerald since his Princeton days, wrote essays that gave serious consideration to his artistry; soon they were joined by Malcolm Cowley, Glenway Wescott and others. This revival of interest reached a peak in the late 1950's when book-length studies on Fitzgerald's entire canon began to appear. The Great Gatsby was no longer considered an isolated achievement; studies on the growth and development of Fitzgerald's literary consciousness returned to the fiction of his early years to find new evidence of his genius.

Of these recent studies the most thorough analysis of Fitzgerald's technical development was given by James Miller in his book, The Fictional Technique of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Miller relates Fitzgerald to the Henry James-H.G. Wells controversy over the techniques of selection and saturation in the novel. Presenting This Side of Paradise as an example of the loosely constructed discursive type of novel written by Wells, and The Great Gatsby as a novel where the experiences of life are filtered through the highly selective artistic process proposed by James, Miller chronicles Fitzgerald's progression from one literary tradition to another, giving

special attention to *The Beautiful and Damned* and "May Day" as transitional works. Fitzgerald's reading is also noted, showing how his taste changed from slice-of-life writers such as Compton Mackenzie and Wells to highly selective authors such as Edith Wharton and Joseph Conrad.  

"May Day" and especially *The Beautiful and Damned* were products of a period when Fitzgerald was under the influence of H.L. Mencken and the American naturalists. Mencken's dictum that the quality of fiction is determined, not by the artistry of the novelist, but by the attitude and character of the protagonist, is the guiding principle of Fitzgerald's second novel. In a 1922 article, Edmund Wilson places Fitzgerald in the "ironical-pessimistic" school of fiction which "makes much of the tragedy and meaninglessness of life." But the Mencken period was short-lived; by 1924 Fitzgerald, in an interview with Charles Baldwin, said, "The writer, if he has any aspiration toward art, should try to convey the feel of his scenes, places, and people directly—as Conrad does"; later he was to single Joseph Conrad out as the greatest influence on *The Great Gatsby*.  

---

18 Ibid., p. 7.  
Miller regards Fitzgerald's technique in "May Day" as a "them-atic integration of several unrelated lines of action," and concludes that "although he never resorted to the technique again, his experimentation with it in 'May Day' suggests his growing concern with finding the right technique for a particular subject and marks an important advance in his attitude toward his art."  

The best study of the growth of Fitzgerald's thought is Robert Sklar's *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Last Laocoon*. Sklar views Fitzgerald's development as a struggle to gain intellectual control over his conception of the genteel romantic hero. In *This Side of Paradise* Fitzgerald intended his protagonist, Amory, to present a gesture of revolt against social conventions, but as Sklar sees it, this "gesture of revolt shifts without hesitation into a gesture of commitment" and the novel ends in a paradox: "its hero in fact embraces the conventions of the society he grew up in, only to find them without value for the post World War One society in which he must live." In the end Amory withdraws from society, not in revolt, but in order to construct a firmer foundation within himself so that when he returns he might try again to succeed by society's conventions. In his second novel Fitzgerald did

21 Miller, op. cit., p. 56.
22 Sklar, op. cit.
23 Ibid., p. 56.
not solve this paradox; rather he retreated and wrote a "novel of ideas to which This Side of Paradise had been the preface." Sklar also notes the influence of Mencken and the naturalists on Fitzgerald. In its philosophizing and preaching, The Beautiful and Damned represents a "by-passed state of growth." It was not until The Great Gatsby that Fitzgerald's conception of the genteel romantic hero had been mastered so that with this novel he "created his own vision of national tragedy and of high art . . . which assumes a place among the imperishable works of American fiction." Like Miller, Sklar also recognizes the important position of "May Day" in Fitzgerald's development. "May Day' marks the first of several important advances or turns in Fitzgerald's career where latent developments in style and thought suddenly come to fruition in his art." These two recent studies of Fitzgerald are different in their emphasis, but they both agree that "May Day" was the most significant expression of the author's development between This Side of Paradise and The Great Gatsby. This high regard for the story was also held by the few contemporary reviewers who offered serious criticism of Fitzgerald's work.

24 Ibid., p. 92.
25 Ibid., p. 93.
26 Ibid., p. 195.
27 Ibid., p. 72.
In 1925, Paul Rosenfield called "May Day" Fitzgerald's most mature tale, containing descriptions that are done "with quiet virtuosity." An analysis of the thought and technique of the story will underscore this "quiet virtuosity" and reveal that the genius of The Great Gatsby was not a literary curiosity, but rather the culmination of an intense struggle toward artistic maturity.

CHAPTER II

THE THOUGHT AND STRUCTURE OF "MAY DAY"

"May Day" is Fitzgerald's vision of America in the aftermath of the Great War. Beginning at nine o'clock in the morning on the first day of May, 1919, and ending twenty-four hours later, the story presents several seemingly unrelated lines of action which merge at selected points. No elaborate plot structure unifies "May Day"; rather it is a dominant thematic principle which relates the diverse characters and events to each other. Fitzgerald's theme is man's eternal search for rebirth, manifested in nature and in history. As the title indicates, "May Day" is the story of spring, of the season that marks the return of life to the world after the near-death of winter. Added to this natural phenomenon is the armistice of 1919 which ended the war in Europe and brought the soldiers home. Victory on the battlefield made the promise of America appear true and fine; it was once again a time for night-long parties and fresh starts. The charac-
ters in "May Day" celebrate victory and the coming of spring, each hoping for a new start in life, all destined for failure.

Fitzgerald's theme of rejuvenation is given further dimension by the aura of moral corruption which followed the war. By 1919 young writers like Scott Fitzgerald had seen the end of innocence; they knew it was to be a sterile spring and a false promise that girded America. To obliterate the horror of a war which united men in the frenzied pursuit of pleasure. The people who had rallied together to supply guns and soldiers for the battlefields now began to use their resources to manufacture a national army. War may have destroyed the moral foundation of the society, it is this background which frustrates the characters of "May Day" in their desperate, absurd search for new happiness. But the story goes beyond personal depri-
vations of the war to reveal the roots of the moral decay which followed the war and which had eroded the fabric of American life in this century. It is Edwin Russell's point when he states that Fitzgerald's thematic double vision—of the decay and the depri-
vations of the war and the confusion and the false values of American life in this century, is this background which frustrates the characters of "May Day" in their desperate, absurd search for new happiness. But the story goes beyond personal depri-
vations of the war to reveal the roots of the moral decay which followed the war and which had eroded the fabric of American life in this century.
the end of innocence; they knew it was to be a sterile spring and a false promise that greeted America. To obliterate the horror of a million dead bodies in Europe, America took up the frenzied pursuit of pleasure. The people who had rallied together to supply guns and soldiers for the battlefields now began to use their resources to manufacture a national orgy of vanity. War may have destroyed the moral foundation of Western civilization, but, at least in America, it left prosperity to compensate for the loss. Belief in the infinite value of wealth and power inspired the spring of 1919 with gaudy indulgence. It is this background which frustrates the characters of "May Day" in their desperate, absurd search for new happiness. But the story goes beyond personal destinies; Fitzgerald's double vision—of the reverie and the despair—indicts the confused values of American life in this century. This is Edwin Fussell's point when he states that Fitzgerald's story encompasses "the pervasive malaise of an entire civilization." 29

In the table of contents to the original edition of Tales of the Jazz Age Fitzgerald provided brief comments on each of the stories. Of "May Day" he wrote:

... This somewhat unpleasant tale ... relates a series of events which took place in the spring of (1919) ... Each of the three events made a great impression on me.

In life they were unrelated, except by the general hysteria of that spring which inaugurated the Jazz Age, but in my story I have tried, unsuccessfully I fear, to weave them into a pattern which would give the effect of those months in New York as they appeared to at least one member of what was then the younger generation.

This mild and rather obvious summary of the story's intention reveals much concerning the transitional phase Fitzgerald was undergoing at the time. He describes his story as "somewhat unpleasant," a characteristic obviously derived from the naturalistic writers Mencken had encouraged his followers to read. But Fitzgerald goes on to say that he has tried to "weave" the events of "May Day" into a "pattern," showing that, at least in the short story form, he gave far more attention to the importance of technique than any ordinary disciple of Mencken would have considered necessary. In fact, the phrase, "give the effect or," even suggests Henry James in describing the desired end of selectivity in writing. Fitzgerald's success in "May Day" is largely due to the control he exerts over his material; the story exhibits a clas-

---

30F. Scott Fitzgerald, Tales of the Jazz Age (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), pp. viii-xi.

31Recalling that Fitzgerald began "May Day" as the opening of a novel, these remarks in a 1920 letter to Harold Ober reveal this influence: "Now my novels, . . . are not like my short stories at all, they are rather cynical and pessimistic—and therefore I doubt if as a whole they'd stand much chance of being published serially in any of the uplift magazines . . . How about it . . . do you think a story like C. G. Norris's Salt or Cabell's Jurgen or Dreiser's Jenny Gerhardt would have one chance in a million to be sold serially" (Turnbull [ed.], The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald, p. 391).
sical symmetry in design and an exacting economy in detail.

The elaborate prologue that begins "May Day" serves two functions. The first, and weakest, is derived from the indefinite time and place and the use of formal, even Biblical, language. Fitzgerald must have intended these elements to create an air of universality for the story. They do, but in an obvious, clumsy fashion. The second function of the prologue is realized more effectively. These five paragraphs enable Fitzgerald to maintain artistic control over the material that is to follow. The cynical tone of the prologue establishes the author's position, leaving him free to write without interrupting the narrative to make value judgments.

Also, the limited number of motifs and images used in the story are introduced here, thus providing a principle of selectivity to govern the writing. Throughout "May Day" Fitzgerald can refer to these images in defining his characters because their symbolic value has been established in the prologue. Finally, the prologue mentions all of the general types of characters that will be found in the story: soldiers, artists, the idle rich and their women. Its importance is such that the prologue is worth quoting in full.

There had been a war fought and won and the great city of the conquering people was crossed with triumphal arches and vivid with thrown flowers of white, red, and rose. All through the long spring days the returning soldiers marched up the chief highway behind the strumm of drums and the joyous, resonant wind of the brasses, while merchants and clerks left their bickerings and figurings and
crowding to the windows, turned their white-bunched faces gravely upon the passing battalions.

Never had there been such splendor in the great city, for the victorious war had brought plenty in its train, and the merchants had flocked thither from the South and the West with their households to taste of all the luscious feasts and witness the lavish entertainments prepared—and to buy for their women furs against the next winter and bags of golden mesh and vari-colored slippers of silk and silver and rose satin and cloth of gold.

So gaily and noisily were the peace and prosperity impending hymned by the scribes and poets of the conquering people that more and more spenders had gathered from the provinces to drink the wine of excitement, and faster and faster did the merchants dispose of their trinkets and slippers until they sent up a mighty cry for more trinkets and more slippers in order that they might give in barter what was demanded of them. Some even of them flung up their hands helplessly, shouting:

"Alas! I have no more slippers! and alas! I have no more trinkets! May heaven help me, for I know not what I shall do!"

But no one listened to their great outcry, for the throngs were far too busy—day by day, the foot-soldiers trod jauntily the highways and all exalted because the young men returning were pure and brave, sound of tooth and pink of cheek, and the young women of the land were virgins and comely both of face and figure.

So during all this time there were many adventures that happened in the great city, and, of these, several—or perhaps one—are here set down. (25-26)

Two dominant characteristics of the "conquering people" are brought out; pride and love of luxury. The splendid city is a visible manifestation of their greatness. After the returning soldiers, the first people mentioned are merchants and clerks who profited by the war and hope to become even richer now that things are back to normal. As they watch the procession, their faces are grave—not happy, but grave, with

the ruthless, calculating certainty of business men. No mention is made of the cause of the war or of the evil force it has defeated, only that it has "brought plenty in its train."

The young men returning from battle are "pure" and the young women who greet them "virgins"—all sexually innocent, all fresh and beautiful, like merchandise ready to be marketed. Adorned with rich and colorful clothing, the people celebrate their victory. Fitzgerald will use these two images—the human body and clothing—to measure the decadence of the characters in his story. Finally, in the midst of this grand exaltation, the author proposes to tell several stories—"or perhaps one"—hinting that the many are all a part of a single story and a larger destiny.

After the prologue, "May Day" is divided into eleven sections, with the story unfolding in two movements. The first is a series of realistic events culminating in the disillusionment expressed in the "coming of dawn" passage at the end of section nine; the second is a series of absurd, aimless activities that originate in this disillusionment and end in death.

As has been noted, a thematic principle unifies the various elements of the story. The key to understanding this principle rests with Fitzgerald's handling of point of view. Maintaining the detached attitude established in the prologue, he employs a third person narrative voice. However, the author is not omniscient. The story has three focal points—Gordon Sterrett,
the soldiers, and Edith Bradin—and each section is presented as if the material were filtered through the consciousness of one of them, giving the dialogue and narrative passages a common tone and limiting the impressions to those most immediate to the focal point character. This device exists halfway between the objectivity of an omnipresent author, exemplified in *This Side of Paradise*, and the subjectivity of a first person narrator like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*; it is a clear indication of a transition in Fitzgerald's writing. The use of focal points is especially well suited to "May Day" because no single character could function as a narrator, considering the diverse range of social classes represented in the story. Also, the technique enables Fitzgerald to impose a degree of selectivity on his writing that is otherwise only attainable through a first-person voice. The focal point characters allow for the development of the story's theme on several levels and enable the author to reproduce the mood or atmosphere of a nation. Each character searches for rejuvenation, and for each the search is frustrated by the corruption of values suggested in the prologue.

As the story itself begins, time and place are made specific—it is nine o'clock in the morning on the first of May, 1919, in New York City—so that the vague universality of the prologue can be brought into focus with startling impact. The first two sections of "May Day" are devoted to
Gordon Sterrett, a young man who believes in the infallible power of money to secure happiness and fulfillment. Based on the image-pattern initiated in the prologue, Fitzgerald describes Gordon; his body suggests decay, his clothing poverty. Obviously the model for this character is the dark, suffering artist found in the novels of the naturalists. Wearing a "shabby suit," Gordon "was small, slender, and darkly handsome; his eyes were framed above with unusually long eyelashes and below with the blue semi-circles of ill health, this latter effect heightened by an unnatural glow which colored his face like a low, incessant fever." (26) Although the description is somewhat sympathetic, Gordon soon displays an unattractive craving for luxury which shows him to be less a frustrated artist than an unsatisfied hedonist. Once in his friend's hotel room Gordon is overcome by the beautiful clothing he sees:

Gordon rose and, picking up one of the shirts, gave it a minute examination. It was of very heavy silk, yellow with a pale blue stripe—and there were nearly a dozen of them. He stared involuntarily at his own shirt-cuffs—they were ragged and linty at the edges and soiled to a faint gray. Dropping the silk shirt, he held his coat-sleeves down and worked the frayed shirt-cuffs up until they were out of sight. (27)

Thus, clothing is early established as the material symbol of corruption and Gordon's attitude to it shows his twisted values. "'I can't stand being poor,'" he confesses to his friend, and when Philip has an insight into the real problem,
"'You seem to be sort of bankrupt—morally as well as financially,'" Gordon replies significantly, "'Don't they usually go together?'" (30)

The strong physical attraction Gordon feels toward the fleshy sexuality of Jewel Hudson plagues his aristocratic conscience. He blames their meeting on the celebrations that followed the armistice: "'All I did was to welcome the newly arrived and go on parties with 'em . . . I never intended to get so involved, I always seem to run into her somewhere.'" (29) Now Gordon feels that a loan from Philip will enable him to take care of Jewel and start on a career as an artist.

Gordon's self delusion is twofold; the vulgar yet attractive Jewel is substituted for his own sexuality which he is unable to accept, and his poverty is used to account for his failure as an artist. Fitzgerald integrates clothing, the symbol of corruption, into Gordon's plans for starting a new career.

"... But, my God, Phil, a week's rest and a new suit and some ready money and I'll be like I was. Phil, I can draw like a streak, and you know it. But half the time I haven't had the money to buy decent drawing materials—and I can't draw when I'm tired and discouraged and all in. With a little money I can take a few weeks off and get started." (30)

Gordon Sterrett's spring is inspired by the easy fallacy that money will solve his problems and inaugurate a new life. He ignores the fact that his difficulties really stem from a craving for pleasure and an undisciplined life. The pathetic
idea that a new suit will make him an artist when he has been
unable to draw for months, and the fear of his own attraction
to Jewel are both part of an immaturity that will cost Gordon
his life by the end of the story.

Unfortunately, Gordon has turned for help to a man
whose character is even more shallow than his own. Fitzgerald
develops a strong physical contrast between Gordon and Philip
Dean. The dark, sickly Gordon is set against Philip, the
product of inherited wealth and a life of ease. "Dean was
blond, ruddy, and rugged under his thin pajamas. Everything
about him radiated fitness and bodily comfort. He smiled
frequently showing large and prominent teeth." (26) Grad-
ually the conversation between the two men shifts from the
forced comaraderie of old college friends to a petty dispute
over the money. Even before he is asked for the loan Philip
is annoyed that Gordon should interrupt his holiday with an
embarrassing display of weakness. Philip's character is
derived from the healthy, blond superman, common in the lit-
terature of the day, who is firmly in control of his own destiny
and cannot stand failure in others. Poverty horrifies him
even more than it does Gordon. To Philip it is "a sort of
evil" (30)—something that cannot be explained or endured.
The scene reaches a climax after Gordon makes his last plea
for the money and is left physically distraught.

Gordon stretched out his arms and clenched the edges of
the bed, fighting back a desire to cry out. His head was splitting and whirring, his mouth was dry and bitter and he could feel the fever in his blood resolving itself into innumerable regular counts like a slow dripping from a roof. (31)

The frenzy of this passage is followed immediately by the precision in the description of Philip who now has become quite a dilettante.

Dean tied his tie precisely, brushed his eyebrows, and removed a piece of tobacco from his teeth with solemnity. Next he filled his cigarette case, tossed the empty box thoughtfully into the waste basket, and settled the case in his vest pocket. (31)

Cold and practical, Philip adheres strictly to the American success formula. Even his pleasure is calculated. He is the modern descendent of Benjamin Franklin, offering the traditional proverbs, echoing the same values. "'You've got to buckle down if you want to make good," (29) is the only advice he can give Gordon.

Aside from the contrast in their physical appearance, and the fact that Philip has money and Gordon does not, the two men share a common code. They believe in the superior man: rich, healthy, and attractive, his feelings always under control, his weakness never seen by others. A person's appearance is a clear indication of his ability. The successful man always looks it. "'I supposed you had a little confidence in me,'" says Gordon. "'I did have--but when I see you like this I begin to wonder,'" is Philip's reply. Gordon has violated the code, poverty has destroyed his claim to superiority, now
he only causes embarrassment by asking for help. Philip loves pleasure, so much so that he bluntly tells Gordon that helping him will cut down on his ability to enjoy it himself. By his own set of values Gordon cannot dispute the logic of this. Both men dismiss Jewel as an inferior person. "'I can't stand that sort of woman,'" (30) says Philip after Gordon describes her. They refuse to see other people's problems as anything more than a request for a handout. Gordon hopes to placate his own conscience by offering money to Jewel but before he is able to do so he receives the same treatment from Philip: "'Oh, for Heaven's sake drop the subject for a while! No point in glooming on my whole trip. Here, here's some money.'" (32) Gordon's degeneration frightens Philip so he gives him a five dollar bill and hopes it will make him go away. Before they leave the hotel room, both men see hatred in each other's eyes. It is the self-hatred of people who cannot bear the sight of their own weakness.

In section two "May Day" moves from the personal confrontation in the hotel room to the impersonal world of the American working-class: the noon crowd on New York's Fifth Avenue; hundreds of men and women staring into shop windows filled with furniture, clothing, and jewelry; soldiers wandering aimlessly, seeking some recognition from the people they fought battles to defend. This is the American Dream rendered repulsive by a tone of pagan decadence taken from the prologue.
Everything described—"mesh bags and purses and strings of pearls in gray velvet cases . . . gaudy feather fans of many colors . . . laces and silks of expensive dresses . . . bad paintings and fine period furniture" (32)—has the air of wanton luxury, unredeemed by beauty or grace. The platinum wrist watches and opera cloaks they admire are sadly incongruous to the sandwich-and-sundae lunches the working girls eat. This is a world of false dreams, where a "wealthy sun" shines "transient gold" (32) over the fawning spectacle of a nation that worships money.

As the two young men walk through the crowd each interprets it differently:

Through this medley Dean and Gordon wandered; the former interested, made alert by the display of humanity at its frothiest and gaudiest; the latter reminded of how often he had been one of the crowd, tired, casually fed, overworked, and dissipated. To Dean the struggle was significant, young, cheerful; to Gordon it was dismal, meaningless, endless. (33)

Philip stands at the top of this struggling mass which exists only for his comfort; otherwise it has no value. Although Gordon has been a part of the giant productive machine and knows the struggle is futile, this knowledge does not lessen his faith in its value. Gordon wants everything that Philip has; he simply is unwilling to work to get it. This is the first indication of Gordon's limited moral perspective. He knows the dream is false, not merely because the vision of wealth is corrupt, but because for most people it can never
become a reality. Forced to spend the day watching Philip pamper his body and purchase more clothing, Gordon is humiliated as cruelly as the noon crowd on Fifth Avenue. Tragically, this meaningless self-indulgence is the only kind of life that appeals to him. Gordon wants to draw because he sees "a pile of money in it," (29) not because he feels any need for artistic expression. The character suffers because his frustrations are so banal; Gordon awaits only the opportunity to sell himself to the American success story and Philip denies him even this by refusing the loan.

When the present becomes unbearable Gordon's thoughts retreat to the past and a girl, Edith Bradin, "poignant, debonnaire, immersed in her own inconsequential chatter," (33) the one person he never had any difficulty in drawing. Unable to face reality, he must have a dream even when he knows that it is inconsequential. Gordon's role in "May Day" is summed up by Robert Sklar: "The story of Gordon Sterrett contributes . . . only a thread by which to tie together start and finish, and a non-moral language which yet provides a moral context as it spreads beyond into the lives of others."33

The second focal point and manifestation of the theme in "May Day" is introduced in section three with the two soldiers, Gus Rose and Carrol Key, characters drawn from the

33Sklar, op. cit., p. 75.
lower classes but ironically used to express the racial and political superiority felt by the victors in the aftermath of war. The existence of these two men is something merely physical; Fitzgerald describes them as, "devoid of all except the lowest form of intelligence; . . . ugly . . . ill nourished . . . vermin-ridden . . . cold . . . hungry." (35) The characters are overdone, obviously taken from books rather than real-life experience. They had spent the war in a "dirty town of a strange land," (35) not knowing where they fought, not caring why. The poverty of Gus Rose and Carrol Key is not the unexplained evil that so frightens Philip Dean and Gordon Sterrett. It is an inherent part of their lives: "Tossed as driftwood from their births, they would be tossed as driftwood to their deaths." (35) But clothed in the uniform of the United States Army and sent to war in defense of the shop windows on Fifth Avenue, these two men belong to America. They cannot be dismissed as her illegitimate offspring, recent immigrants from Europe, for one of them possesses a name "hinting that in his veins, however thinly diluted by generations of degeneration, ran blood of some potentiality." (35) Gus Rose and Carrol Key are the modern American patriots, the legitimate descendants of the nation's text-book heroes—minus the heroic features. Key's "chinless face," "dull watery eyes," and "high cheekbones," or Rose's "rat-eyes," and "much broken nose" (35) are not the stuff out of which national monuments
are made. in the mob of spectators, they
get... "The Red
The entire mental pabulum of these two men consisted of an offended nasal comment extended through the years upon the institution—army, business or poorhouse—which kept them alive, and toward their immediate superior in that institution. Until that very morning the institution had been the "government" and the immediate superior had been the "Cap'n"—from these two they had glided out and were now in the vaguely comfortable state before they should adopt their next bondage. (36)

The armistice and spring of 1919 hold only the illusion of regeneration for Rose and Key. "Generations of degeneration" (35) have destroyed their ability to function as free men and, indeed, reduced them to something less than human. Drunken-ness and physical violence characterize their lives. But there is something even more frightening about these men. Ignorant and without character, they have become the spokes-men for the superiority of the American way of life. With Gordon Sterrett they share an unshakeable faith in the value of money. New York is the promised land where millionaires leave fifty-dollar tips at Delmonico's and the waiters get to drink all the left-over champagne. This is a far cry from the lux-ury of Philip Dean's hotel room, but for men like Rose and Key, it is the necessary illusion that transforms their bondage into the privilege of citizenship. In defending this privilege they are not passionate—they drop out of the mob as soon as
they learn they will have to walk several blocks to break up the Red meeting—but they are willing to follow the crowd as long as it is convenient.

Momentarily caught up in the mob of spectators, they listen as the Jewish orator asks questions: "'What have you got outa the war? . . . Who got anything out of it except J. P. Morgan an' John D. Rockefeller?'" (37) But for a group of people whose vision of America is defined by the myth of a poor boy becoming a Morgan or a Rockefeller, such questions are un-patriotic. Cheap political slogans suffice for the answer: "'God damn Bolsheviki!'" (37) Then, just as Rose and Key join the crowd and "immediately became an indistinguishable part of it," (37) they soon slow down "to a saunter" (38) and let it sweep by. In this case their damage is slight but the real danger is that, commanded with enough force, as they must have been during the war, or inspired by drink, as they will be in a few hours, these two men will kill or be killed for America.

The paradox of their poverty extends beyond these misguided feelings of superiority and patriotism. Moments after they leave the mob they enter a different world—that of the fashionably rich at Delmonico's where Key's brother works as a waiter—and here they assume a subservient role that is yet another aspect of their homage to the dollar sign. The rich young men and women frighten them; they look for the "least
elaborate" door by which to enter and once inside the restaurant "they took off their caps and held them in their hands." (39) Even the waiters make them feel inferior and it takes a few moments to get up the nerve to ask about Key's brother. Fitzgerald merges the two lines of action that have so far developed in "May Day" by placing Carrol Key and Gus Rose in the pantry just off the ball room where the Yale fraternity party is to be held. Sitting on mop pails amid scrub brushes and brooms, the two soldiers have access to all the liquor they can drink. As they live their version of the American-Dream-come-true, in the ball room the beautiful and wealthy young people of America try to live up to all the happiness that money can buy. The soldiers provide what Robert Sklar calls "comic note and also a social perspective" to the aristocratic pretenses of the Yale fraternity men.\(^3^4\)

Through Edith Bradin, the third focal point character in the story, the party at Delmonico's comes alive. Gordon Sterrett and the soldiers were derived from Fitzgerald's reading in the naturalists; Edith, the first fully-realized version of his famous flapper, is the most successful character study in "May Day." Her success is largely due to the technique through which she is presented. When Gordon Sterrett and the soldiers controlled the point of view in their sections,\

\(^{3^4}\) Ibid., p. 76.
the control was exercised externally, as if the author stood beside them, recording events and dialogue. With Edith, Fitzgerald moves inside his character's mind and transcribes her internal voice into third person narrative. This highly personal point of view endows Edith with a complexity and vitality lacking in the story's other characters.

The prologue had referred to the gaudy clothing beautifying the victorious nation's women; Edith is one of these women, cold and vain, possessed of a beautiful body and abundant wealth, at once demanding and disdainful of all attention. She is consumed by vanity and, as Robert Sklar says, in love with her own body.35

She thought of her own appearance. Her bare arms and shoulders were powdered to a creamy white. She knew they looked very soft and would gleam like milk against the black backs that were to silhouette them tonight. The hairdressing had been a success; her reddish mass of hair was piled and crushed and creased to an arrogant marvel of curves. Her lips were finely made of deep carmine; the irises of her eyes were delicate, breakable blue, like china eyes. She was a complete, infinitely delicate, quite perfect thing of beauty, flowing in an even line from a complex coiffuer to two small slim feet . . .

Closing her eyes she drew in a deep breath of pleasure. She dropped her arms to her side until they were faintly touching the sleek sheath that covered and suggested her figure. She had never felt her own softness so much nor so enjoyed the whiteness of her own arms.

"I smell sweet," she said to herself simply, and then came another thought--"I'm made for love." (43-44)

Again the images of clothing and the human body define the character. Significantly the colors used to describe Edith

35Ibid., p. 75.
are red, white and blue—she is both the American dream girl
and a pagan goddess.

The love Edith feels herself made for cannot escape
her vanity. Men exist as black backdrops to set off her own
beauty. She wants to possess a man, to protect him, not sex-
ually, but as a mother or, more fantastically, as a goddess
possesses and protects. There is very little sexuality con-
ected with Edith's almost sterile beauty. She is a thing of
beauty not a woman.

The dance brings together many of the men Edith had
known as a college debutante, the men from whom she expected
and received adoration. One of them, Gordon Sterrett, has
become Edith's hope for a new life: "Edith Bradin was falling
in love with her recollection of Gordon Sterrett." (43) That
she is Gordon's vision of the ideal woman has already been
seen. Now it becomes apparent that the price of this vision
is emasculation. "There was a quality of weakness in Gordon
that she wanted to take care of; there was a helplessness in
him that she wanted to protect. And who wanted someone she
had known a long while." (44) Gordon's attraction to Jewel
Hudson, a sexual woman despite her grossness, shows that a
part of him resists the surrender of his manhood to Edith, but
it is an instinct that repells him and he is drawn to the dance
to see Edith.

As Edith breezes through a series of partners on the
dance floor, she conveys information about herself solely
dance floor, she conveys information about herself solely through dialogue. A mechanical but effective charm is apparent in her ability to make polite conversation with men she hardly remembers and cares very little about.

A dark man cut in with intense formality. "You don't remember me, do you?" he said gravely. "I should say I do. Your name's Harlan." "No-ope. Barlow."

"Well, I knew there was two syllables anyway." (45)


Finally, Gordon appears and asks her to dance. At first she is aware only of his physical presence: "One of his arms was around her; she felt it tighten spasmodically; felt his hand on her back with the fingers spread. Her hand holding the little lace handkerchief was crushed in his." (46-47) Gradually her awareness of Gordon grows; he is drunk, tired, upset. Attracted by weakness in men, her first impulse is to inspire confidence. But soon, like Philip Dean, Edith feels "an unutterable horror" (47) in his presence. The weakness Edith expects in men is submission to her, not personal degeneration. A man in Gordon's condition can hardly set off her beauty. He will not make a good admirer because he is filled more with self-pity than with passion for her. Edith is soon overcome by an intolerable boredom.

From Philip, Gordon wanted only money; from Edith he
seeks an idealism in which he can believe. "'You're pure woman . . .' he protests, refusing to tell her about his sordid condition, "'I'll get someone else to dance with you.'" (48) Membership in Edith's world bars weakness and anything less than complete admiration. "He reached out and patted her hand, and involuntarily she drew it away." (49) Edith's love for Gordon perishes with her realization that it was just a passing exercise in vanity, a facet of narcissism and the dream. "Love is fragile--she was thinking--but perhaps the pieces are saved, the things that hovered on lips, that might have been said. The new love words, the tender-nesses learned, are treasured up for the next lover." (49)

With the end of section four, "May Day" reaches its pivot. Each of the focal characters has been introduced; all who will appear in the story have at least been mentioned. Fitzgerald has moved everyone toward the party at Delmonico's; the young people are dancing in the ballroom while the two soldiers drink in the pantry nearby. In sections five through nine the characters will gradually leave the party and, with the coming of dawn in section nine, bring the first movement of the story to an end.

The next five sections are fairly mechanical in function, serving primarily to advance the various plots. But there is in the action a growing sense of absurdity and degeneration. In section five Peter Himmel, Edith's original escort who had
been snubbed for his awkward attempt to kiss her before the
dance, discovers the two soldiers in the broom closet, and
they all become very drunk. The episode is a comic dialectic
between an ineffectual college youth and the working-class
mentality. But out of the farce there grows an alarming
tendency toward bigotry already seen in the two soldiers.
Peter expounds on the petty snobbishnesses of American ivy-
league colleges:

"I thought perhaps you might be members of that lowly
section of the university known as the Schffield Scientific
School."
"No-ah."
"Hum. Well, that's too bad. No doubt you are Harvard
men . . ." (52)
As the joke continues, the soldiers laugh, not with Peter, but
at him. Gradually, through drink and a mutual lack of character,
the three men descend to a common level, showing that violence
and racism are to be found in all social classes.

"We got in a sort of fight for a while," said Key
after a pause, "but it was too far away."
"A fight?--tha's stuff!" said Peter, seating himself
unsteadily. "Fight 'em all! I was in the army."
"This was with a Bolshevik fella."
"Tha's stuff!" exclaimed Peter, enthusiastic. "That's
what I say! Kill the Bolshevik! Exterminate 'em!"
"We're Americuns," said Rose, implying a sturdy, de-
fiant patriotism.
"Sure," said Peter. "Greatest race in the world! We're
all Americans! Have another."
They had another. (52-53)

Edith's decision to leave the party comes after "her
senses were lulled to trance-like sleep." The impersonal flir-
tations have become boring; on a sudden impulse she goes to
see her brother Henry, working late as the editor of a radical newspaper. As Edith leaves the hotel through a back door she passes Jewel Hudson, another significant meeting of widely-separated social classes. Described simply as "an over-rouged young lady," (55) Jewel has come to find Gordon. Although Edith is free to come and go as she pleases, Jewel, because of her poverty and vulgarity, is denied admission to the hotel. She finally succeeds in bribing the waiter, in humble imitation of what she has seen the wealthy do, and Gordon receives the message that she is waiting outside. Their meeting reveals the unpleasant truth that the money is more Gordon's idea than Jewel's. Gordon explains that he hasn't been able to get the money. "'Money nothing!' she snapped. 'You haven't been near me for ten days. What's the matter ... I don't care about the money that bad.'" (56) Meekly he protests against the invitation to go with her, until finally, "with a glance around him in which relief and despair were mingled, Gordon hesitated; then she suddenly pulled him to her and kissed him with soft, pulpy lips. 'All right,' he said heavily." (57) Rejected by the idealized Edith, Gordon finds he has no choice but to go with Jewel whose sexuality is both alluring and repugnant to him.

Section nine concludes the first movement of "May Day." Edith moves from the glittering surroundings of Delmonico's to her brother's shabby office where he and another man are working. Here she finds a politeness absent from the
fashionable society she left behind when Henry introduces her to his co-worker. Here Edith tries to persuade Henry to give up his socialist ideals.

"I wish you'd—you'd come back to Harrisburg and have a good time. Do you feel sure that you're on the right track—"

"You're wearing beautiful stockings," he interrupted. "What on earth are they?"

"They're embroidered," she replied, glancing down. "Aren't they cunning?" She raised her skirts and uncovered slim, silk-sheathed calves. "Or do you disapprove of silk stockings?" (60)

Henry, knowing his sister's vanity, easily plays upon it and distracts her. At this point, two of the story's plots again come together. The gang of soldiers, rejoined by Gus Rose and Carrol Key, suddenly bursts into the newspaper office. The resulting violence is registered through Edith's sensibility; she is aware of "warm bodies under rough cloth, and her ears were full of shouting and trampling and hard breathing." (62)

One of the soldiers is accidentally pushed out of the second-story window and his skull is crushed on the pavement below. After the police disperse the mob, Edith discovers her brother Henry on the floor with a broken leg. The first day of spring, of ritual hopes and new beginnings, has come to an end in violence and death.

Section nine concludes the first movement of "May Day." Up to this point brutally realistic actions have dominated the story; now absurd fantasy reigns. In the first passage of the section Fitzgerald gives his strongest statement on the class
distinctions that exist in America.

"Childs', Fifty-ninth Street," at eight o'clock of any morning differs from its sisters by less than the width of their marble tables or the degree of polish on the frying-pans. You will see there a crowd of poor people with sleep in the corners of their eyes, trying to look straight before them at their food so as not to see the other poor people. But Childs', Fifty-ninth, four hours earlier is quite unlike any Childs' restaurant from Portland, Oregon, to Portland, Maine. Within its pale but sanitary walls one finds a noisy medley of chorus girls, college boys, debutantes, rakes, filles de joie—a not unrepresentative mixture of the gayest of Broadway, and even of Fifth Avenue. (63)

The restaurant scene brings together several of the story's major characters. Gus Rose is the focal point for this section; he is alone for it was Carrol Key who fell from the window and died outside the newspaper office. Rose admires the "colorful circus of beauty and riotous pleasure before him," (64) but he is also aware of a strange couple sitting nearby:

The man was drunk. He wore a dinner coat with a dishevelled tie and shirt swollen by spilling of water and wine. His eyes, dim and bloodshot, moved unnaturally from side to side. His breath came short between his lips.

"He's been on a spree!" thought Rose.

Ironically, Rose is the one who breathes in the odor of decay from Gordon Sterrett. Peter Himmel and Philip Dean are also in the restaurant amusing their friends with childish pranks.

When Philip sees Gordon and Jewel he feels confident that his refusal to lend him the money was justified. Gordon makes no attempt to defend himself; Jewel answers Philip's insults and then resolutely leads Gordon out of the restaurant. Philip
and Peter continue with their foolishness until the waiters are forced to eject Peter.

But the commotion upon his exit proper was dwarfed by another phenomenon which drew admiring glances and a prolonged involuntary "Oh-h-h!" from every person in the restaurant.

The great plate-glass front had turned to a deep creamy blue, the color of a Maxfield Parrish moonlight—a blue that seemed to press close upon the pane as if to crowd its way into the restaurant. Dawn had come up in Columbus Circle, magical, breathless dawn, silhouetting the great statue of the immortal Christopher, and mingling in a curious and uncanny manner with the fading yellow electric light inside. (67)

This passage marks the climax of the first movement of "May Day"; it contains a profound moral meaning and historical significance. Evoking romantic wonder at the coming of dawn in the New World, it sums up the American Dream. As nature renews herself, the people in the restaurant are overcome with a yearning for the greater-than-real, linked inextricably with Columbus and the discovery of America. But this vision of wonder cannot be separated from what has preceded it in the story—greed, vanity, violence, and death.

In "May Day" the American Dream becomes a nightmare.

To further place the passage in context with Fitzgerald's thematic design for "May Day," Robert Sklar notes that Maxfield Parrish was a highly successful commercial artist of the era whose "deep, creamy blue" moonlight frequently appeared in magazine advertisements. Nature's "magical, breathless"...
dawn is as false and as sentimental as that of the commercial artist. There is no harmony as the sunlight "mingles in a curious and uncanny manner" with the manufactured electric light of the restaurant. The corrupted values of the characters in "May Day" symbolize the corruption of a nation. For Fitzgerald the dream of Columbus ended in the disillusionment of the Lost Generation.

Edwin Fussell proposes that the significance of this passage in "May Day" can only be understood in relation to the concluding lines of *The Great Gatsby*. The Dutch sailors and Columbus, Gatsby and the people of "May Day," all believe in the American Dream which, "eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning—" The disillusionment expressed at the end of section nine in "May Day" turns into a black comedy in the next section. Fitzgerald catches the reader off guard by beginning with an account of the adventures of "Mr. In and Mr. Out." Several paragraphs transpire before the reader understands what is happening, adding to the confusion that dominates this section. The drunken reverie of Peter and Philip through New York represents aimlessness born of disillusionment. A comic tone is

---

37 Fussell, *op. cit.*, p 46.

established by serious handling of the material. But as the two young men parade before the ever-growing crowds of people on their way to work, they point up the vulgar absurdity of an entire way of life. The taxi drivers and waiters are willing to put up with Peter and Philip as long as they have the money to pay for their fun. The signs they jokingly wear—Mr. In and Mr. Out—effectively destroy their individuality; they are nameless and mindless. Gus Rose continues to be the center of consciousness as he follows the two young men, hoping to see something amusing. The little adventure finally ends in the lobby of the Biltmore Hotel where the story had begun twenty-four hours earlier. Rose watches stupidly as Peter and Philip cavort in the hotel dining room. Then Edith enters with Mr. Bartholomew, her brother's co-worker, and seeing Rose she cries, "There's the soldier who broke my brother's leg." (75) Bartholomew is reduced to acting as an agent of Edith's revenge. He makes a "lightning-like" spring toward Rose and the entire lobby "closed around." (75) Rose, an inborn and defenseless man, is alone held responsible for the violence of the story. Peter and Philip take little notice of the event. They enter the elevator and, in mocking parody, deliver orders for the building of a new tower of Babel.

Then they were in the elevator bound skyward. "What floor, please?" said the elevator man. "Any floor," said Mr. In. "Top floor," said Mr. Out.
"This is the top floor," said the elevator man. "Have another floor put on," said Mr. Out. "Higher," said Mr. In. "Heaven," said Mr. Out.

This is Fitzgerald's vision of America, manifesting its pride and materialism in the grand presumption of an elevator to heaven.

"May Day" concludes with the three brief paragraphs of section eleven describing the suicide-death of Gordon Sterrett. The section is a melodramatic anti-climax to a story that would have been most effectively ended with the lines above. This is the one flaw in the structure of "May Day." As Fitzgerald presents the character, Gordon lacks the strength of character required to shoot himself. Gordon's death is not significant because the struggle in his life had been so trivial; he cannot represent the death of the artist in modern society because he was not a true artist. A new suit of clothes was far more important to Gordon Sterrett than self respect.

Fitzgerald's vision of America is presented with devastating honesty in "May Day." The thematically-unified structure of the story enables him to work on several levels in presenting this vision; individual destiny and national destiny are symbolically related, as they would be in The Great Gatsby. But for a complete view of Fitzgerald's apprenticeship certain stylistic elements of "May Day" must be isolated. This will be the endeavor of chapter three.
CHAPTER III

THE STYLE OF "MAY DAY"

To fully understand Fitzgerald's stylistic achievement in "May Day", one must return to his structuring of the story around the three focal characters; for Gordon Sterrett, the soldiers, and Edith Bradin are not only essential to working out the thought of "May Day," they play an important role in determining the quality of the writing as well. At the time of the composition of "May Day" Fitzgerald was experimenting with point of view in his fiction. This Side of Paradise was written as a third-person narrative and the novel suffers because there is nothing to govern the tone or the selection of incidents. However, within a year of its publication, a year that saw the completion of more than a dozen short stories including "May Day," Fitzgerald had written in a review of John Dos Passos's Three Soldiers:

There is none of that uncorrelated detail, that clumsy juggling with huge masses of material which shows in all but one or two pieces of American realism. The author is not oppressed by the panic-stricken necessity of using all his data at once lest some other prophet of the new revolution uses it before him. He is an artist—John Dos Passos. 39

These remarks, along with the comments included in the table of contents to Tales of the Jazz Age, demonstrate that early in his career Fitzgerald was concerned with the writer's handling of material to produce a desired effect. In "May Day" he hit upon a device to satisfy the thematic structuring of the story as well as to exercise selectivity in the writing. The story is written in the third person, but in each of its eleven sections the material is filtered through the sensitivity of a focal character who determines both the extent of the vision and the tone of the narrative. This technique gives intensity to the story's theme since each instance of corrupted values is related in language and syntax that at once defines and typifies the corruption.

The subtlety of Fitzgerald's craftsmanship first becomes evident in section one which is governed by the sensibility of Gordon Sterrett. The section opens on an objective note: "At nine o'clock on the morning of the first of May, 1919, a young man spoke to the room clerk at the Biltmore Hotel..." (26) The first paragraph continues, giving information about Gordon's appearance and the immediate situation. Soon the point of view shifts as Gordon's sensibility begins to take over. This is first seen in the telephone conversation between the two men which is recorded without quotation marks: "Well, how was Gordy, old boy! Well, he certainly was surprised and tickled! Would Gordy come right
up, "for Pete's sake!" (26) Gone is the objective tone of the story's opening; this is the conversation registering on Gordon's sensibility. Fitzgerald will use this device of blending dialogue into narrative throughout the story. Once in the hotel room, the impressions again belong to Gordon; images of the body and clothing predominate. The language becomes very concrete, textures and colors are given special attention. Gordon sees "thick silk shirts," and "soft woolen socks." (27) A sensual quality as well as a value system underscored through the alliterated "t" and "s" sounds. The shirts on the bed are yellow with blue stripes whereas Gordon's own clothing is described as faded and gray. While they appear to be objective accounts of random details, these descriptions are actually determined by Gordon's intense love of luxury. All that is the product of wealth he sees as attractive; all that stems from his poverty is dull and colorless.

In the first few paragraphs of the story there is a steady movement from objectivity to subjectivity in the point of view. This movement continues even after the initial exposition gives way to the conversation between Gordon and Philip which takes up most of the section. While the men speak, an exact account of Philip's progress as he dresses himself is integrated into the dialogue. Since very little attention is given to Gordon's activity, it is obvious that he is watching the other man and the reader is presented with
Gordon's observations. Dean performs an elaborate sensual ritual; "polishing his body . . . inspecting his calves . . . patting his bare ankles . . ."; (27-31) each item of clothing from his underwear to his tie is noted. That Gordon pays such attention to these details shows his envy; he is an outsider standing on the edges of the world of wealth, unable to participate in it. By recording very little of Gordon's movements in the hotel room, Fitzgerald gives him this quality of static passivity. As the section ends, Gordon's sensibility recedes and the interior thoughts of both men are recorded: "For in an instant before they turned to go out their eyes met and in that instant each found something that made him lower his own glance quickly. For in that instant they quite suddenly and definitely hated each other." (32) This comment completes the pattern of movement which, like a camera technique in filming,. begins with a panaramic view, focuses on the point of view character, and ends by moving back again for a broad perspective. It is this technique which accounts for the unique double vision of "May Day." Fitzgerald portrays the world of fashionable wealth--the hotel room, the Fifth Avenue shops, the party at Delmonico's--but always there is a feeling of decadence which comes, not from any explicit moral judgment of the author, but because the characters who function as the centers of consciousness are themselves corrupt. "May Day"
is built around a series of impressionistic scenes with the details of each selected by the corrupt sensibility of the focal point character. General outlines are never given; only individual objects and sense experiences receive attention. In section one no information is supplied about the appearance of Philip Dean's hotel room; Gordon notices only the clothing in the room and the constant descriptions of shirts and handkerchiefs create the impression necessary for the thematic development of the scene. The same is true of every scene in the story; the items in the shop windows suffice to create an impression of Fifth Avenue; the smell of smoke and perfume makes the party at Delmonico's vivid; the sun rising over the statue of Columbus is an impressionistic rendering of the American Dream.

The counterpointing of the corruption of the characters and the information they supply comprises the moral vision of "May Day." The passage that opens section two furnishes an excellent example of this. The center of consciousness here is Gordon Sterrett who has been established as a sensuous and greedy young man. The description of the shops on Fifth Avenue is qualified by Gordon's faulty moral perspective. A preoccupation with material value and display is evident, especially in the adjectives used: "wealthy," "expensive," "gaudy," and "elaborate" appear in the first two sentences alone. The movement of the people is conveyed through im-
personal crowd verbs: "swarmed," "loitered," "drifted," "massed." Most of the objects listed are given a sensual quality: "thick windows," "mesh bags," "velvet cases." (32) Thus it is Gordon's personal values that are reflected in the writing.

It is in section three that the first shift in the focal point occurs; here the soldiers, Gus Rose and Carrol Key, take over the point of view. In describing these characters Fitzgerald assumes a superior, disdainful tone; they are "human beings . . . devoid . . . of intelligence"; in mock seriousness he speaks of their "mental pabulum" and "common consciousness." (35-37) This type of writing is a poor imitation of the scientific objectivity of the naturalists, from whom Fitzgerald obviously borrowed his characters, and it makes this section the weakest in the story. There is no basis for the judgments made by the universal narrator; "marvelous, hatless young ladies," "stiff young gentlemen," "comet-like waiter," and "catlike steps" are hardly images that would be found in the minds of men like Key and Rose. As a result of this ambiguous sensibility the premise of the story's technique is seriously violated. It is only when Fitzgerald stops talking about his characters and allows them to speak for themselves, in dialogue, that the writing is effective. The most dominant characteristic of their speech is the repetition of phrases which convey their need for mutual support. "Oh boy," "I..."
bet," "I'll say," "b'lieve me," reappear throughout the
dialogue. Whenever they propose action, the word "maybe" is
used to indicate their moral indecision. Other than these
elements, Fitzgerald relies on slurred pronunciation—"playin',"
"oughta," "o'right"—and incorrect tenses to suggest the speech
of the lower classes and his success is minimal.

In section four the sensibility shifts to the third
focal character, Edith Bradin. Fitzgerald accords this
character the most personal treatment in the story; consequently
she is the most fully realized. This section follows the
pattern that has been used in the previous three sections; it
opens with narrative description and moves into pure dialogue.
Here the initial description is like a stream-of-consciousness
soliloquy. Edith's vanity determines the choice of words. In
the first paragraph alone the personal pronoun "she"—equivalent
to "I" in this context—is used six times and continues to be
dominant throughout the section. Edith is totally self-con-
scious, constantly aware of her own appearance and the impres-
sion she is making on others. Fitzgerald structures each of
the brief paragraphs in this section with logical exactitude,
for in them Edith is conducting a justification of her behav-
ior. One sentence leads to another in word-choice and thought-
pattern until the end of the paragraph when Edith, with com-
plete self-assurance, determines that she has done the right
thing. This is seen in the first paragraph of the section.
She was still quite angry when she came out of the dressing-room and crossed the intervening parlor of politeness that opened onto the hall—angry not so much at the actual happening which was, after all, the merest commonplace of her social existence, but because it had occurred on this particular night. She had no quarrel with herself. She had acted with that correct mixture of dignity and reticent pity which she always employed. She had succinctly and deftly snubbed him. (42)

Edith continues in this fashion until she appears on the dance floor. Then the dialogue with her former suitors, and especially Gordon Sterrett, takes over. For several pages Fitzgerald interrupts the conversation only to indicate the physical movement of Edith and her partners—"she stepped forward and took his arm..." She leaned back and looked up at him... She slipped, stumbled lightly..." (45-46) in a fashion reminiscent of Philip Dean dressing himself in section one. Here, however, it is Edith, conscious of her own movements; before, it was Gordon who watched Philip.

Until she meets Gordon, Edith's conversation is quite meaningless; she herself gives the best description of it:

"...her line—made up of the current expressions, bits of journalese and college slang strung together into an intricate whole, careless, faintly provocative, delicately sentimental." (44)

Robert Sklar suggests Fitzgerald's purpose in using this technique: "Edith Bradin does not simply dance, she performs an intricate dialogue with a series of partners that conveys information about her social and intellectual position more
effectively than explanatory narrative. As the section ends, Edith returns to the logical construction of her earlier inner soliloquies. With delicate rhythms, this concluding passage expresses her consummate vanity.

--Love is fragile--she was thinking--but perhaps the pieces are saved, the things that hovered on lips, that might have been said. The new love words, the tendernesses learned, are treasured up for the next lover. (49)

In the second half of "May Day" Fitzgerald continues to structure each section with initial exposition leading into dialogue. Repeated use of such construction supplements the unity of the story. However, unity is given its strongest emphasis through the clothing motif which becomes a metaphor for the theme of corrupted values. The significance of this motif is made explicit in the prologue where lavish clothing is made a concrete symbol for the vanity of the conquering people. Each character is "May Day" is introduced with brief physical description and always clothing is the first detail noted. Social position and personal values are defined by clothing; Gordon's "well-cut, shabby suit" (26) indicates his poverty while Philip's "blue silk pajamas" (26) display his inherited wealth. The soldiers believe that getting rid of their uniforms will remove the stigma of army discipline. Edith takes great delight in describing her embroidered silk stockings to her brother. When Philip and Peter go on their

---

40 Sklar, op. cit., p. 74.
early morning revery through the streets of New York, it is the "Mr. In" and "Mr. Out" signs attached to their clothes that indicate the absurdity of the situation. The last thing that Gordon notices before he commits suicide is the "dishevelled rumpled clothes on the floor." (74) The carefully integrated appearance of this single symbol is a vital part of Fitzgerald's growing technical craftsmanship. The successful use of symbolism here enables him to write with descriptive and direct language that avoids explicit value judgments and yet conveys such a significant moral position. The Great Gatsby stands as the full fruition of this technique which has become a mark of Fitzgerald's singular genius.
CONCLUSION

A deep moral sense and a budding social awareness, structurally united into an organic whole, went into the writing of "May Day." The story is an artistic success in its own right; it is a dramatic presentation of several characters whose frustrations have a common basis—the corruption of values caused by war—but who remain distinct through Fitzgerald's attention to psychological make-up and social mannerisms. As a transitional work, "May Day" represents a remarkable improvement over This Side of Paradise and gives clear indication of the elements that would make The Great Gatsby so significant. Much of Fitzgerald's success in "May Day" is due to his handling of point of view through the focal point characters. The device is essential to the full realization of his theme on an individual and universal level. Economy of detail and directness in language characterize the story. Primarily it is the initial and fairly effective attempt to incorporate symbolism into his writing that shows Fitzgerald's budding artistry.

Because "May Day" is an early work it does evidence some immaturity. Only Edith Bradin is a truly original character; the others are derived from Fitzgerald's reading. The degeneration and suicide of Gordon Sterrett is in obvious
imitation of the naturalist equation for a man destroyed by circumstances. In Gordon's case it is his own weakness and not society that causes his downfall and his suicide death is more literary than realistic. Fitzgerald's handling of the lower classes is faulty because he had little real-life contact with such people. Ultimately it is the young and beautiful men and women—debutantes and college students—who are the most successful characters in his early fiction because they were most immediate experience of his own life.

"May Day" is Fitzgerald's embryonic vision of the American Dream; it is also a proving ground for certain techniques which would later enable him to relate that vision with such honesty. No student of Fitzgerald's mature work can do him justice without recognizing the importance of the early short stories, and especially of "May Day," in the development of his thought and technique.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


