

TWIN AMERICAN CULTURE OF “ROARING TWENTIES” AND “JAZZ AGE”  
REPRESENTED IN *THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED*

Leishangthem Malem Chanu  
Research Scholar,  
Department of English & Cultural Studies,  
Manipur University.

**Abstract**

*“The Beautiful and Damned”, Fitzgerald’s second novel published in 1922 is about the superficiality of café society in New York during the Jazz Age. It explores and portrays the society of the American Eastern elite before and after the World War in the 1920’s. During this period jazz music became hugely popular, when the “smart set” enjoyed living to excess in the heady days before the Great Depression. Fitzgerald observes that these people were often attractive and glamorous in appearance, but flawed and shallow in personality. The overt superficiality veils a covert diversity of hang-ups, anxieties, desires, needs, neuroses, passions, emotions, ambitions and failings. Scott Fitzgerald tells us the story of one Anthony Patch, a 1910’s socialite and a supposedly heir to a tycoon’s fortune, his troubled marriage with the beautiful Gloria Gilbert, his experiences of World War I, the couple’s post-war partying lifestyle in New York, and his decline into alcoholism.*

**Keywords:** World War I, flapper friends, extravagant expenses, stereotypical socialites, illusions.

The 1920s in America were an age where the social and political systems were undergoing a tremendous change. After the turmoil of 1919, the reactionary temper of the 1920s was quite extreme. The emergence of small and big companies kind of created an economic boom. It was also a period of cultural experimentation. People had a lot of money in their hands and they spent it on consumer goods like ready-to-wear clothes, automobiles, various home appliances. There was a kind of mass culture, people buying the same things, enjoying the same music, using the same slang words etc. Many people were uncomfortable with this new culture but, for the young people in the big cities, it was “the roaring twenties”. After the experiences of the World War, the people feverishly pursued personal pleasures. The new and unusual clashed openly with the conventional and commonplace. All these conflicts resulted in – what the historians called – a “Cultural Civil War”.

It was also called the Jazz Age, a name given by Scott Fitzgerald himself in 1922, and not because he himself liked jazz music but because his circle of daring young people in the cities was, like a jazz musician, intoxicated with nervous energy. Jazz music emerged as an especially American expression of the modernist spirit. An undeniable ally of glamorous party cultures of that time. The Charleston, the cake walk, the black bottom, the flea hop, all these the young people wanted to dance. Jazz bands were playing in dance halls of New York and Chicago; radio stations and phonograph records carried the music across the nation. The old people objected to the jazz music’s “vulgarity, depravity and the moral disasters” it supposedly inspired but, the young people loved the freedom they feel on the dance floor.

The class system was totally altered during those times. The aristocrats of old, who have old money and only have to inherit and didn't have to work, were there. But, another wealthy class have emerged who were self-made, who were salaried people but earns more money, and also people who became wealthy by chance or by underhanded methods.

F. Scott Fitzgerald in his novels and short stories paints an American society which vibrates with the youthful energy of "the roaring twenties", the gins and cocktails, the Wall Street and the booming industries, the charms of beautiful belles, the youthful awe and hope America promises to many people. And on the other side, his stories also paints an image of confusion, moral degradation, hypocrisy, pretentious affections, shallow relationships, the feeling of alienation, disillusioned conscience and regrets. His books provide a curious window into a world that has been and gone. Further a world where the American society had drowned them in a moral and ethical degradation.

**Keywords:** World War I, flapper friends, extravagant expenses, stereotypical socialites, illusions.

"*The Beautiful and Damned*", Fitzgerald's second novel published in 1922 is about the superficiality of café society in New York during the Jazz Age. It explores and portrays the society of the American Eastern elite before and after the World War in the 1920's. During this period jazz music became hugely popular, when the "smart set" enjoyed living to excess in the heady days before the Great Depression. Fitzgerald observes that these people were often attractive and glamorous in appearance, but flawed and shallow in personality. The overt superficiality veils a covert diversity of hang-ups, anxieties, desires, needs, neuroses, passions, emotions, ambitions and failings. Scott Fitzgerald tells us the story of one Anthony Patch, a 1910's socialite and a supposedly heir to a tycoon's fortune, his troubled marriage with the beautiful Gloria Gilbert, his experiences of World War I, the couple's post-war partying lifestyle in New York, and his decline into alcoholism. As the novel opens, Anthony Patch, a young man in his twenties, handsome, intelligent, and moderately well educated, wants only to live a life of luxury, and expects to inherit his grandfather's many millions. He was a Harvard graduate and travels through Europe to study the finer arts like architecture, painting as well as music and poetry. When he returned, he lives in a lavishly furnished apartment in New York, and in his bathroom were hung photographs of famous actresses of those times, where the bath tub is the "pride" of his apartment with an expensive carpet. He has an English servant. He disdains work, and believes nothing is equal to his supposed abilities.

In New York, Anthony was part of a society or culture which consists of parties, drinks, dances, flirting with the flappers (the jazz girls of the decade). He enjoys the excitement of such gatherings and his alcoholic habits grew. He fell in love with the beautiful debutante, Gloria Gilbert, who was a modern girl and doesn't appreciate the reformers like Anthony's grandfather. Just as Anthony has never had to develop any strength of character because of his grandfather's riches, Gloria has never had to develop any strength of character because of her remarkable beauty. She is spoiled, selfish, and narcissistic. She is Fitzgerald's model of a flapper: She is one of the first socialites to bob her hair and wear daring fashions. She doesn't want the responsibilities of marriage and motherhood and likes going to cabarets. Mrs. Gilbert was from the old generation and didn't approve of Gloria's wild ways and her flapper friends. Here is another significant thing about "the roaring twenties", the emergence

of “The New Woman” and a new sense of morality. Different from the prudish and conservative image of a lady, this new woman was educated in the ways of the world, fashionable, fun loving, who drinks and smokes and parties till dawn. The image of a flapper is a young girl with bobbed hair and short skirts who drank, smoked and behaves in an “unladylike” manner by being more sexually free than the older generation. But, not all the girls in 1920s were flappers, there were also women who were recruited during the war to fill in the vacancies left by men who had to join the army. And a higher percentage of middle-class women were attending college than ever before. This new class of woman can’t accept that their only goal is to get married and have children. The 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the constitution in 1920 gave the women the right to vote and it reinforced the freedom felt by them. Though not all the women were flappers, they became a symbol for fashion and reflected the rebellion against prudishness and signify a loosening of inhibitions.

Anthony marries Gloria Gilbert who is a beautiful and vain woman; her only claim to special treatment being her looks. He spends his time with those he considers wealthy. And they sink into a pointless and destructive life; instead of taking up work to supplement Anthony’s fixed income they squander it in an endless round of parties and extravagant expenses. The parties give the illusion that Anthony and Gloria are part of a thriving social network while in fact a rift is growing between the couple and their friends, many of whom are beginning to settle into careers. Gloria wants a house in the country but, Anthony doesn’t want to give up his beloved New York apartment too. So, the rental charge of both the places pushes their finances to the precipice. Anthony’s alcoholism and dreams of inheritance create issues in their marriage and it was not a happy union. But they were stereotypical socialites, spending life in luxury, idleness and indulgence; the “bright lights” of the 1920s New York smart set.

“The magnificent attitude of not giving a damn...for what they chose to do and what consequences it brought. Not to be sorry, not to lose one cry of regret, to live according to a clear code of honor toward each other, and to seek the moment's happiness as fervently and persistently as possible.” (Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and Damned*: 211).

When Adam Patch, Anthony’s grandfather, an inflexible and intolerant reformer, walks in unexpectedly on one their gin-soaked parties, he writes Anthony out of his will. He leaves everything to his secretary, Shuttleworth. After his death, the Patches must sue to claim the inheritance which lured them into destruction. This shatters his illusion and destroys his dreams. He struggles to recover his money, to fight the looming poverty, and falls into depression. This novel is also about squandered talent and is a great example of the “Lost Generation” of America.

After Anthony's disinheritance, he enlisted in the army as the U.S. enters World War I, but was rejected as officer material. It was a new experience for him at Camp Hooker and struggles to adjust to the primitive living conditions, the rules and regulations. He met Dorothy Raycroft, a young South Carolina girl at the army camp with whom he had an affair. Although she possesses none of Gloria’s beauty or glamour, she was warmhearted, realistic, sensible, and accepts her life with the ingrained stoicism of those who have no illusions. During this period, Gloria has trouble adjusting to life alone without her familiar circle of friends and reminisces the past. After the War, Anthony and Gloria move lower down the social scale. Their apartment is smaller and cheaper. Acquaintances from Kansas City ignore

them when they pass them on the street. Their old friends ignored them. Anthony states that it is money which makes a person upper class. Fitzgerald remarks in the novel that Anthony and Gloria Patch have become characters that have lost their costumes to play their part in the story. Beauty was all Gloria ever had so when she thought she was thirty years old and no future of becoming a movie star, she melodramatically suggested that they move to Europe for three years and then “just die.” Later that evening, Anthony gets drunk and pretends to have forgotten his wallet because he does not have the money to pay his bill. Stumbling through the street, he meets his best friend who refuses him a loan. Anthony becomes agitated and decides to confront Joseph Bloeckman, a movie producer and a former admirer of Gloria. He finds him at an elite club and gets in a fistfight with him. Eventually, Bloeckman throws him out on the street. A passerby puts him in a cab, but he is also thrown out of the cab because he has no money. Anthony stumbles home and reflects that he does not even feel drunk anymore, simply frenzied. They declined rapidly into alcoholism, dissolution and ruin – “to the syncopated beat of the Jazz Age”. At the novel’s end, they won the fight for the inheritance, but the cost has been high. When Gloria return home with the exciting news that they have won the lawsuit and no longer have to worry about destitution, Anthony is lying incommunicative on the bathroom floor, poring over his childhood stamp collection. It is said, Anthony’s mind and body deteriorated following the suicide of Shuttleworth when the inheritance money was revoked from him.

Other characters in the novel also helped us in understanding the society of those times. Richard Caramel, who enjoys the kind of early literary success that Fitzgerald himself experienced, is too heedless to realize that he is compromising his talent as he completes one popular book after another. He was disillusioned with the success he has achieved through compromise. Maury Noble, supposedly based on the contemporary wit George Jean Nathan, is cynical enough to compromise with full awareness of what he is doing, although he knows the worthlessness of what he thereby achieves.

“I grew up then, into this land of jazz, and fell immediately into a state of almost audible confusion. Life stood over me like an immoral schoolmistress, editing my ordered thoughts. But, with a mistaken faith in intelligence, I plodded on....I did not think – I was a battleground for the thoughts of many men” (Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and Damned*: 236).

His wit and philosophy are shallow; he stopped visiting the Patches as they declined further in the social scale. Yet his success, along with that of Caramel, forms a counterpoint to Anthony’s decline and fall.

“*The Beautiful and Damned*” is also a study of the atmosphere of failure which resulted from excess in the 1920s America. Throughout the novel, one finds Anthony and Gloria overwhelmed by nothing more substantial than the depressing, claustrophobic ambience of the world in which they find themselves. They are constantly fleeing places—their apartment, their summer house, parties—trying to escape their own emotions and sense of frustration. Likewise, they escape into alcohol, fleeing the sense of desperation and failure that surrounds them like an ever-growing shroud.

**Works Cited:**

- Abrams, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New Delhi: Cengage Learning India, 2012. Print.
- Bendixen, Alfred. Ed. *A Companion to The American Novel*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Print.
- Brucoli, J. Matthew's *A Brief Life of Fitzgerald*: Brucoli, J. Matthew with Judith Baughman. ed. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*. New York: Scribner, 1994. Print.
- Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Beautiful and Damned*. London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013. Print.
- Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of research Papers*. New Delhi: Affiliated East-West Press, 2004. Print.
- Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. Print.
- Lemon, Lee T. *A Glossary for the Study of English*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974. Print.
- Mizener, Arthur. "The Maturity of Scott Fitzgerald". *Modern American Fiction: Essays In Criticism*. Ed. Walton Litz. USA: OUP, 1963. Print.
- Sen, Krishna. *From the Global to the "Glocal" – Re-visiting the American Dream*". *Studies in American Literature. Vol. III*. Calcutta: American Literature Study Circle, 2003. Print.
- Shi, David Emory, Tindall, George Brown. *America – a narrative history*. United States of America: Norton, 2013. Print.
- Waugh, Patricia. *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.