F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Image of His Father

BY HENRY DAN PIPER '39

In his serious writings Scott Fitzgerald was a stern and uncompromising moralist. The two earliest and probably the most important moral influences in his life were the Roman Catholic Church and his father, Edward Fitzgerald. By the time he was twenty-two, and had finished writing his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, he had left the Church; thereafter the Catholicism in his work became more and more diffuse. But his father continued to be a sort of "moral touchstone" for him all his life. "Always deep in my subconscious," as he says in his hitherto unpublished fragment "The Death of My Father," "I have referred judgments back to him, [to] what he would have thought or done."

In *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night* the fathers of Nick Carraway and Dick Diver serve their sons in this same capacity. More than that, they furnish the moral frames of reference against which the tragic implications of each novel's story are made explicit. It is his father's code of right conduct that enables Nick Carraway to attain, at the end of *The Great Gatsby*, a mature and tragic sense of life. He has grown up; and in the process of growing up he has been forced to recognize, somewhat unwillingly, the corruption in his glamorous wealthy cousins, Tom and Daisy Buchanan, and to acknowledge the fundamental decency of Gatsby—"who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn."

*Tender Is the Night* is a more formal tragedy. In the scene (pp. 262-266) where Dick Diver recognizes his own moral corruption, it is by his father's standards (the "good instincts—honor, courtesy, courage") that he judges himself and, in acknowledging his guilt, thereby becomes a genuinely tragic character. In this crucial episode Dick's fall from grace is suggested first by his fumbling attempt at a rather sordid seduction (Fitzgerald built it up even more elaborately in the earlier versions of the novel) and then is appropriately symbolized by memories of his father, and by the unexpected news of his father's death. Like Fitzgerald, "Dick loved his father—again and again he referred his judgments to what his father would probably have thought and done."
In these two novels both fathers are portrayed as the remote and rather abstract symbols of an ideal moral order. Scott Fitzgerald's relations with his own father were much more ambiguous. Still, out of this very ambiguity came one of his most notable themes. Edward Fitzgerald was a genuine tragic figure, a man of divided loyalties, resembling Nick Carraway and, particularly, Dick Diver, much more than he resembled either of their fathers. In a sense, Mr. Fitzgerald was the prototype of both these heroes, and The Great Gatsby and Tender Is the Night were efforts on the part of his son to explore and dramatize in fiction the reasons for his father's defeat by life. For, in spite of his son's affection for him, he was always, in Fitzgerald's eyes, a "failure."

Like his fictional counterparts, Edward Fitzgerald taught his son the important things—good manners, good morals, and good taste. He read aloud to him his first poetry, "The Raven" and "The Prisoner of Chillon," and told him the Civil War reminiscences that his son later made into magazine stories. More than this, he supported his son's precocious literary inclinations against the opposition of his wife's more prosperous and pragmatic family. And some years later, when Fitzgerald failed to catch a pass and lost an important prep school football game, it was his father who consoled him and restored his self-confidence by his delight over a poem his son had just written for the school magazine. It was a lesson that stayed with Fitzgerald all his life. Now he would always know that, with his talent for writing, he could win some measure of that acclaim and "success" he coveted so avidly, but which he could rarely attain in the world of vigorous action.

In spite of his sensibility and fine manners, however, Edward Fitzgerald was a failure so far as the bustling, success-worshiping everyday world was concerned. To his ambitious son growing up in the prosperous commercial city of St. Paul, Minnesota, this fact was a source of recurring humiliation. The high point of his father's career seems to have been his marriage to Miss Annabelle McQuillan. Her father had come to St. Paul as a penniless immigrant from Ireland, had established a successful grocery business, and had died suddenly at the age of forty-four leaving a fortune of between a quarter- and a half-million dollars. But Mr. Fitzgerald, in spite of his literary tastes and genteel Maryland connections, never managed to measure up to the McQuillan standards of success. Unfitted by temperament for business, he moved from one
unsatisfactory job to another until he was finally fired in 1908 and thereafter lived almost entirely on his wife’s money. By this time he was also drinking excessively. Everyone in the neighborhood, and even his children’s teachers at school, knew about his tippling. His son never forgot humiliating episodes like the time his father came home drunk and tried to play baseball in the backyard, or the afternoon when he lost his salesman’s job and Scott had to give back to his mother the money she had just given him to go swimming.

What was he to make of this father of whom he was both ashamed and proud? Perhaps, at first, it was easier to accept the prevailing judgment of outsiders. But the older Fitzgerald grew, the more reasons he found to justify his father’s position in society. It was not an easy problem, and it continued to trouble him all his life, yet it was one that he must solve if he himself was to effect any kind of a reconciliation with life.

It also provided him with important material for his writing. Just how vital his father’s position was to him can be seen in the story “Shadow Laurels,” Fitzgerald’s first really serious piece of work and his first contribution to The Nassau Literary Magazine at Princeton. He was eighteen when it appeared in April, 1915. In the competence of its technique and in the implications of its theme, it is a major advance over any of his earlier schoolboy plays and sketches. Written entirely in dialogue, it tells of a young American, “his manner... that of a man accustomed only to success,” who returns to France, the land of his birth, seeking his father. In a Paris winetron house he is shocked to learn that his father became a disreputable drunkard and finally was murdered in a café brawl. But when, in his humiliation, he speaks of his father disparagingly, he is sharply reprimanded by his father’s old drinking companions:

He was a wonderful talker... He knew everything... he used to tell me poetry... [of] roses and the ivory towers of Babylon and about the ancient ladies of the court and about “the silent chords that flow from the ocean to the moon.” That’s why he made no money. He was bright and clever—when [he] worked, he worked feverishly hard, but he was always drunk, night and day.

Don’t you see, he stood for us as well as for himself... how shall I say it?—he expressed us... [He] was everything to me.¹

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father told me something
that has been the running over in my mind ever since.

"When you feel like criticizing someone, remember that in this
world every one has an unfound virtue./"

He didn't say anything more but we've always been unusually
reserved and very quiet. I think I understood that he
meant a great deal more than that. As a consequence
I've inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has stood me
in good stead in this world, and I consider that the
advantages that you've had.

When I was in college I was accused of being in politics,
because I was privy to the sacred secrets of wise, unknown
men. Most of the confidences were unspoken—especially
those regarding sleep, a preoccupation of a host of boys by
whom I realized by some inimitable sign that an
intimate revelation was gathering on the horizon—er—for
the intimate revelations of great men or at any rate the
veracity which they express them vary no more than the heavenly
messages from heaven which reach us over the prophetic radio.
Resolving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. Even still a little
afraid of meeting something I forgot that, as my father unhesitatingly
put it and I doubtlessly repeat, a sense of the fundamentals, becomes
a parcelled out—unequally at birth.

And after hoarding this way of my tolerance, I come to the
admission that I was a little. Companions may be founded on the
hard rock of the wet marches, but after a certain point I
don't care what's founded on. When I come back buy to the east
west east avenue, 80 that I wanted the world to be a uniform
and at a sort of moral extension, forever. I wanted no more
necessities exceeded with privilege to glimpse with the human
eyes. It was only Gatsby himself that was exalted from any.
Never again, in the novels and stories that Fitzgerald published after this early piece, was he to write so transparently of his feelings toward his father. Several similar allusions crept temporarily into an early manuscript version of *The Beautiful and Damned*, where he described Anthony Patch’s lonely boyhood, his sense of isolation from his mother, and his adoration of his rather disreputable father. Anthony’s earliest memories of Mr. Patch were always associated with “the pungency of whiskey,” and one day, in a disagreeable scene, his father came to dinner drunk and, before the seated family, was ordered from the table by Anthony’s grandfather. Afterward the boy went off to bed, “lonely and depressed.” But all of this material was carefully deleted by Fitzgerald from later versions of the novel.

Possibly, when he removed these passages from his manuscript, Fitzgerald planned to tell his father’s story at even greater length in his next novel. Not long after finishing *The Beautiful and Damned* he wrote Maxwell Perkins that his next book would be a story of the Middle West in the 1880’s (the Gilded Age, when his own father had come west to St. Paul). What he wrote, instead, was *The Great Gatsby*. This, of course, is also a story of Middle Westerners, though the setting has now been moved to Long Island, that most eastern extension of Middle Western wealthy suburbia. And it tells of another postwar Gilded Age, Fitzgerald’s own rather than his father’s. Besides, his father is no longer the central protagonist, although there are resemblances to him in both Carraway and Gatsby. Rather, he remains dimly in the background, the story’s remote but ever-present moral arbiter.

His son was still at work on his next novel, *Tender Is the Night*, when Mr. Fitzgerald died in January, 1931. When the news came, Scott and Zelda were in Europe, and it was one in a succession of shattering blows. Less than a year earlier Zelda’s mind had given way, and now she was slowly convalescing in a Swiss sanatorium. And there were other troubles. Fitzgerald was making little headway with the novel of American expatriate life that he had been trying to finish for the past half-dozen years. Most of his creative energy during this time had been dissipated on the hasty but well-paying magazine stories that helped him to meet his exorbitant living expenses. Since Zelda’s collapse he had been under even greater financial pressure, and now the novel had been put aside indefinitely. But he was irritable, chafing to get at it again. Hem-
ingway and his other literary friends had been advising him to stop wasting his talent on hasty potboilers and to get his book done. Besides, his magazine stories were growing thinner and thinner as the wells of inspiration ran dry. Even the magazine editors were beginning to grumble. To make things worse, Fitzgerald was drinking harder than ever and had quarreled seriously with most of his intimate friends.

In this depressed state of mind he came home in January for his father’s funeral; but it was a confused trip and turned out to be a disappointment in every possible way. Now that his father was gone, he felt more lonely and insecure than ever, and after a few unhappy weeks in America he was eager to return to Zelda. “I’m damn glad to be going back to Europe, where I am away from most of the people I care about and can think instead of feel,” he wrote to his favorite cousin from the “Olympic” after a few days at sea.²

Some time after this, probably not very long afterward, Fitzgerald wrote his fragmentary sketch of reminiscence, “The Death of My Father.” Just what purpose it was intended to serve we do not know. Perhaps Hemingway had something to do with it. “Hope to read your account [of his father’s death] between board covers rather than in the Post,” he had written in a letter of sympathy, admonishing Fitzgerald not to fritter away “such fine material” in a trashy magazine story. Like so many romantic writers, Fitzgerald wrote best of those events which had hurt him most deeply, as Hemingway had already told him before. “Remember,” he now wrote, “we writers have only one father and one mother to die.”³

Not until a year and a half after his father’s death did life become orderly enough for Fitzgerald to settle down to work again on his novel. Now he completely replotted his story, building it around the moral and emotional disintegration of a young American expatriate, very much like himself, married to a lovely young schizophrenic resembling Zelda. And on pages 455-456 of his manuscript he inserted a considerable part of the text of “The Death of My Father.” In the published version of Tender Is the Night, where it appears “between board covers,” Fitzgerald has omitted some of the more personal portions of these reminiscences. Still,

³ Hemingway to Fitzgerald, April 12, 1931 (Princeton University Library).
sufficient has been retained to establish his identification of his own father with Dick Diver's.

Even more impressive are the resemblances between Edward Fitzgerald and Dick Diver himself. Like his wife, Diver is a schizophrenic personality; but where her disease is mental, his is spiritual. And like Mr. Fitzgerald, his loyalties are divided between the "good instincts" in which he has been bred ("honor, courtesy, courage") and the gross, wasteful but leisurely world of parvenu wealth into which he has married. Dick's wife also came from Middle Western money made from selling food—but we must not press the parallels too far. They would have turned up in one guise or another whether Fitzgerald consciously intended them or not.

In the beginning, every son is cast in his father's image. To mature and become an individual in his own right, he must at first reject his father and his father's values, and go out into the world to forge his own. But, as he soon learns, the world is a rather chaotic place, and lasting standards are hard to come by. In the long run, every father is judged at last by the values he has taught his son.

The intensity of Fitzgerald's immersion in his own sensuous experience, the accuracy of his dialogue, and the brilliant concreteness of his imagery, are a measure of his preoccupation with the external world in which he came of age. He readily accepted its more superficial values—money, popularity, success—as well as its judgment of his father as a "failure." Yet when he came to write about that world, to deal with it imaginatively and to find values which would give his experience of it meaning, he returned constantly to the old standards, the "good instincts," which he had learned from his father. Whatever story he has to tell, from "Shadow Laurels" to his last full-length novel, *Tender Is the Night*, in all its ambiguities and complications, is identified in some way with this father image. Perhaps the reason that Fitzgerald was at last able to free himself from it in his unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, was because he had gotten his problem out into the open and had explored its tragic implications more fully in *Tender Is the Night* than in any other earlier work. It is here that his use of "The Death of My Father" is central to an understanding of that book. And we see now that Edward Fitzgerald's failure and the standards by which he was willing to fail were, by all odds, his greatest legacy to his son.