

The divide between
European and American Cultures
as seen in the novel:

Tender is the night.

~*Fitzgerald.*

That there was a divide in the two parts of the world with the iron curtain between them, is not a matter of debate now. The divide occurred at various levels and because of various reasons, and had a multitude of consequences. Studying the nature of the divide is a topic that has been dealt with much attention in books of history and, hence, it is neither advisable, nor correct contextually that we should scourge the roots of the divide in a paper that discusses the literary features of the novel. However, this is the first novel that we have come across on our study of various texts from the Modern era and the most prominent feature of this text is that it *does not confine itself to the European continent*. Fitzgerald was not a native European writer, another feature that puts him in contrast with the other writers that we have come across. He was a writer of the *lost generation* as he lived to see the infamous First World War and then the following great depression, not from America but from Europe, living in Paris. This novel was written in a time when the First World War had just ended and has been witnessed by Fitzgerald. He started working on it almost immediately after his, arguably the most famous novel, *The Great Gatsby* was published in the year 1925. This was the period when American market was blooming. Fitzgerald struggled to complete the novel, assembling it one event at a time and slowly treading through near similar events in his life (his relationship with the young actress Lois Moran in 1927, death of his father in 1931, first attack of schizophrenia on his wife in 1932) he came around to giving it the final shape in 1933. However, this was clearly not the final shape that Fitzgerald would leave the novel in. There were various of the novels and another copy was published in 1934. By this time, America was well into the grasp of The Great Depression. Hence, Fitzgerald saw the entire cycle, from the boom to the slump in the

span on writing his novel. Hence, this novel will completely relay the outlook of America as was existent in the time lying between the First and the Second World War. However, it is not very helpful to talk about something without having standards defined for it. Though two speakers may understand what the standards expected are, it would have been incorrect for Fitzgerald to keep an absolute standard. Hence, to judge the American culture, Fitzgerald decided to pitch it against the next most prevalent culture on planet earth, the European culture.

The plot of the novel primarily revolves around and in Europe and, hence, we often see the dichotomy between the European and the American point of views. It is clear by the novel that the author keeps his and the opinions of his characters of the Americans fairly different. There always people in the text that seem to be breaking the rules as set by the characters of Fitzgerald, but there never is a character that flouts a rule made by Fitzgerald. The novel primarily progresses keeping the dichotomy between the two cultures alive. The most notable example of it is when Dick on board the yacht in a fit of his new learned innocence says blithely:

“I don't like innuendo in these deafening English whispers.”

The brawl that ensues between him and Lady Caroline is another ominous sign of how Dick's ability of manipulating and controlling a multitude of culturally diverse people is falling, as was the case also with America, which was becoming an ill behaved super power.

Immediately as the novel starts, we see the thoughts of Dick Diver, as the following:

“He mocked at his reasoning, calling it specious and 'American' – his criterion of un-cerebral phrase-making was that it was American.”

Also, in the same chapter, it is clearly indicated that Dick respected the genius of Freud, and was willing to risk his life to meet him in Vienna, showing that the respect of the intellect is clearly more directed towards Europeans than the Americans. In the next chapter, Dick, who was the “*unaging American face*” according to Franz, is told to have gotten Nicole's attention by endorsing a fake soldiers' dress, while in reality he “*didn't see any of the war*”. This reflects rather strongly upon America's attitude in the war time, that is in the WW I era. Also, in the same chapter it is said that American girls “*wrote to soldiers that they did not know*.” This rather reflects a rather odd sense of morality, and this would have been preposterous in European countries, as being a rather vulgar act. Nicole in her first days in fact goes as far as saying that she thought Dick to be quieter than others and she found others to be rather ‘sissy’.

thereby almost giving word to her belief that the Europeans that she met were sissy and while the Americans were soldiers and heroes. In the following chapter, Mr. Warren is introduced to us as “*a fine American type in every way, tall, broad, well-made*” and in the latter chapters it is revealed that even though he was outwardly respectable, inside he was a pervert. In chapter 4, Dick says, while talking about his plans:

“I’ve only got one, Franz, and that’s to be a good psychologist.”

However, we see that Franz is “*continually confronted with a pantheon of heroes (ancestors).*” telling us that Europeans have a heritage, an inherited heroism of their ancestors, that they as a duty must survive in their deeds and life. This form of history is not wound around the weight of Americans, like Dick, who can choose their path with much greater freedom. Another assault on the intellectual capability of Americans is seen as Franz says:

“You are an American. You can do this (write your book on such a topic) without professional harm. I do not like these generalities. Soon you would be writing books called 'Deep Thoughts for the Layman', so simplified that they are positively guaranteed to cause no thinking. ...”

In chapter 9, the English and the American women are distinguished brilliantly by Fitzgerald by saying:

“... there was a small gallery of English-women of a certain age, with neck bands, dyed hair, and faces powdered pinkish grey; and of American women of a certain age, with snowy-white transformations, black dresses, and lips of cherry red.”

American women are shown to be results of a miraculous transforms, while European women are seen as natural heiress of the kind of beauty that they possessed. Later on Baby Warren is shown trying to conform Dick to “*her idea of an aristocrat.*” which “*She knew these facts from the English, who had known then for more than two hundred years.*” This idea is clearly borrowed from the Europeans, among many other of her ideas, including “*English are the best balanced people in the world*”. Its weakly hinted in chapter III of book II that the *French, young and feminine* manners of Rosemary along with a blend of *American Democracy* landed her into uncomfortable position of dealing with too variegated a group, getting people that she liked along with those people that she did not like. This is seen, hence, as a negative outcome of her being American surpassing the positive outcomes of her being young and feminine (French like). Also, at multiple places, the alienation of Americans trying to adapt to the quiet

Europe is accentuated, like chapter 6, book II:

“After lunch they were both overwhelmed by the sudden flatness that comes over American travellers in quite foreign places ... missing the clamour of the Empire, they felt that life was not continuing here.”
“Unlike American trains, that were absorbed in an intense density of their own and scornful of people of another world less swift and breathless, this train was part of the country through which it passed.”

In chapter 8, book II, Mr. McKisco thinks:

“... he jumped at the conclusion that Barban was the end product of an archaic world and, as such, worthless. McKisco's contacts with the princely classes in America had impressed upon him their uncertain and fumbling snobbery, their delight in ignorance, and their deliberate rudeness, all lifted from the English with no regard paid to factors that make English philistinism and rudeness purposeful, and applied in a land where a little knowledge and civility buy more than they do anywhere else – an attitude which reached its apogee in the 'Harvard manner' of about 1900, He thought that this Barban was of that type, and being drunk rashly forgot that he was in awe of him.”

And, hence, he beautifully surmised what he felt regarding the intrusion of English manners by the Americans. In chapter 12, we have another snide comment on American notion of honour when being unable to kill McKisco, Tommy laments *“The distance was ridiculous, I'm not used to such farces – your man must remember that he's not now in America.”* In book III, chapter 7, there is another instantiation of what the writer thought, when the Americans are walking out the station, they came :

“ ... with frank new faces, intelligent, considerate, thought-less, thought-for. An occasional English face among them seemed sharp and emergent.”

In the following chapters we see that the money of the Americans is all the more accentuated. In chapter I, book IV, we see Dick explicitly saying:

“In your experience Baby, have you found that when a European wants to see an American very pressingly it is invariably something concerned with money?”

The waning glory of America is then shown reflecting in the academic circles too, when Dick says that the paper by an American, though mediocre in its content, it would be greeted with more than a cold

response “*for no more reason than that America was such a rich and powerful country.*” Similarly we see that Tommy too blandly agrees: “... *Everybody in your country is making millions.*” Beyond this, the complacency which had permeated into America by the time it hit the great depression is very well stated in a single sentence talking about actors “... *in a nation (America) that for a decade had wanted only to be entertained.*” As the chapters proceed, we see that the view of America moves into a more meek one, just as Dick is losing his charisma. America is still trusted as is seen when Nicole says about the camphor rub, “*Its American – Dick believes in it.*” but then readily goes ahead to give it away to Tommy as he is leaving. Also, as the book V is almost into the American depression, we see that the “... *Europeanized Americans who had reached a position where they could scarcely have been said to belong to any nation at all, at least to any great power ...*”. Here on, the Americans become more a figure of perturbations and rustic than powerful ones, as we notice while Nicole and Tommy are talking and they hear noises made by American women in the opposite balcony. Also, when Nicole asked Tommy to kiss her, Tommy says that:

“*That’s so American,*” he said, kissing her nevertheless. “*When I was in America last there were girls who would tear you apart with their lips, tear themselves too, until their faces were scarlet with the blood around the lips all brought out in a patch—but nothing further.*”

Such is the newer face of America presented to us. In a way, the *snowy-white transformations* have come a sort of full circuit for many Americans. The final vision of America is given to us in form of a tourist who shushes Tommy, Dick and Nicole as he lies waiting for the Tour de France to pass by.

Hence, the development of a nation is shown from a place blooming with millionaires and then finally becoming one that dashes the hopes of millions, all the while contrasting it against the stoic European culture. This development is seen through the eyes of a writer who excels in conjuring up imaginative metaphors, and who actually went through the whole cycle almost in pace with the nation itself. America suffered because it did not have enough time to ossify its moral code and develop a stable society that was self content like the Europeans. Nevertheless, they always attempted to put up their best attempts at being *like* the English in a way that was different from the *English* way of doing it. Hence, it mostly ends up looking a horrible caricature of the British etiquette, save those who have *'repose'*. The European culture is also shown to have its own weaknesses and strengths, with the biggest weakness being the load of the ancestors gnawing at the feet of the ambitious people seen with Franz, and the strength being having something with them that is not as ethereal as money in inheritance, having finesse, having art. Hence, the American and the European cultures both have their share of oddities, but there is

only one fact that connects them firmly, that in the course of the book, they almost never gel well with each other, save when money is involved. Keeping that point of view in mind, it is clear that Fitzgerald has not only quite successfully assembled a portrait in his novel of the complex lives of its characters, but also he has been successful in capturing the Zeitgeist of a whole nation at war with its own greed.

However, critics are of the opinion that Fitzgerald actually should have included yet another year before bringing about the fall of his protagonist, as even though the crash had occurred, there were more rich Americans in Europe, and the parties maddened in the French Riviera, in 1930 than in 1929, the year the fall of Dick comes along. Hence, the historical accuracy of the novel is a little under doubt, but the error can be easily dismissed as being deliberate rather than erroneously.

Finally, it is clear in this novel that Fitzgerald remained true to his words "*Americans, should be born with fins, and perhaps they were – perhaps money was a form of fin. In England, property begot a strong place sense, but Americans, restless and with shallow roots, needed fins and wings.*" (*The Swimmers*) This indeed is clearly very true in the context of the novel.