

## “Babylon Revisited”

The best of the *Tender Is the Night* cluster stories is “Babylon Revisited,” which earned Fitzgerald his top *Saturday Evening Post* price of four thousand dollars and which is generally acclaimed as his finest story. “Babylon Revisited” represents a high point in Fitzgerald’s career as a short-story writer: it is an artistically superior story which earned a high price from a commercial magazine. In the story’s main character, Charlie Wales, Fitzgerald creates one whose future, in spite of his heroic struggle, is prescribed by his imprudent past, a past filled with heavy drinking and irresponsibility. He is destined to be haunted by reminders of his early life, embodied by Lorraine and Duncan, drinking friends from the past; to be judged for them by Marion, his dead wife’s sister who, like Charlie’s conscience personified, is disgusted by his past and demands punishment; and to be denied, for his penance, any right to fill the emptiness of his life with his daughter Honoria, who is in Marion’s custody and who is the only really meaningful thing left. Fitzgerald fashions Charlie as a sensitive channel through which the reader can simultaneously view both Paris as it existed for expatriate wanderers before the Depression and the now-dimmed Paris to which Charlie returns.

The contrast is masterfully handled in that the course of Charlie’s emotional life closely parallels the changing mood of the city—a movement from a kind of unreal euphoria to a mood of loss and melancholy. The contrast at once heightens the reader’s sense of Charlie’s loneliness in a ghost town of bad memories and foreshadows his empty-handed return to Prague, his present home. All of Charlie’s present misery has resulted, in Fitzgerald’s precise summary, from his “selling short in the boom”—an allusion to the loss of his dead wife Helen. Charlie, however, refuses to be driven back to alcohol, even in the face of being denied his daughter Honoria. Although he might easily have done so, Fitzgerald avoids drawing the reader into a sentimental trap of identification with Charlie’s plight, the responsibility for and consequences of which must finally be borne only by Charlie. As he later did in Dick Diver’s case in *Tender Is the Night*, Fitzgerald has shown in “Babylon Revisited” how one man works his way into an existence with nada at the core; how he manages to dissipate, “to make nothing out of something,” and thus prescribe for himself a future without direction. It is also in the creation of this mood of Charlie’s isolation that the artistic brilliance of the story, as well as its kinship to *Tender Is the Night*, lies.

The popular thrust of “Babylon Revisited” is a dual one in which Fitzgerald plays on what were likely to be ambivalent feelings of popular readers toward Charlie. On the one hand, he is pictured first as an expatriate about whose resolution to remain abroad American audiences may have been skeptical. On the other, Charlie appears to have reformed and obviously loves his daughter. Marion, by contrast, is depicted as a shrew, and the reader is left to choose, therefore, between the punishment of a life sentence of loneliness

for a penitent wrongdoer and the granting of his complete freedom and forgiveness rendered against the better judgment of the unsympathetic Marion. Fitzgerald guarantees that the reader will become emotionally involved by centering the story around the highly emotional relationship between a father and his daughter. Because Charlie is, in fact, guilty, to let him go free would be to let wrongdoing go unpunished—the strictest kind of violation of the Puritan ethic. To deprive Charlie of Honoria, however, would be to side with the unlikable Marion. Fitzgerald, then, resolves the conflict in the only satisfactory way—by proposing a compromise. Although Marion keeps Honoria for the moment, Charlie may be paroled, may come back and, try again, at any time in the future.

The story, therefore, is successful on three major counts: it served as a workshop in which Fitzgerald shaped the mood of *Tender Is the Night*; it entertained with the struggle against unfair odds of a well-intentioned father for the affection of his daughter; and it succeeded on the mythic level, suggested in the title, as a story in which all ingredients conspire to lead to Charlie's exile—an isolation from the city that has fallen in the absence of a now-reformed sinner, carrying with it not only the bad but also the good which Charlie has come to salvage.

--Bryant Mangum

from "F. Scott Fitzgerald," in *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*, ed. Frank Magill. Salem Press, 1982. pp. 1368-77. Reproduced from *Critical Survey of Short Fiction*. Copyright, 1981, by Salem Press, Inc. By permission of the publisher, Salem Press, Inc.