

## Philosophy of Transcendentalism in the Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald

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### Abstract

Transcendental idealism was an integral part of the American psyche ever since Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman becomes the staunch advocates of it. It holds that human can reach higher level of existence which is more fulfilling and meaningful. Transcendentalism speaks of the invisible in the visible, and the ideal behind the real. Fitzgerald, being a romantic writer belongs to this transcendental tradition of writers. Therefore, he upholds this American cultural tradition of Emerson and Thoreau in his fictional world. This paper try to reveal the deep transcendental longings infused into a few characters in his writings especially, in his masterpiece 'The Great Gatsby' and other mature novels like, 'This Side of Paradise', 'The Beautiful and Damned', 'Tender Is the Night' and in Fitzgerald's last novel 'The Last Tycoon'.

**Keywords:** F Scott Fitzgerald, Transcendentalism, American cultural

### Introduction

Since the Romantic writers in general had been influenced by the German transcendental philosophy of Emmanuel Kant, the Romantic writers in America were no exception. In addition to Kant, they had Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman to inspire them with transcendental idealism. These writers had in their turn been greatly influenced by the Transcendentalism of the great Indian Mystics, Yogis, and other transcendentalists. American transcendentalism was both a philosophical and an aesthetic movement. In Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, the philosophic and aesthetic were happily fused together.

### Transcendentalism

Definition of transcendentalism is quite elusive. Yet it can be defined through a metaphysical analysis which is a contextual. "Ultimately, no single idea or cluster of ideas affords the key to what transcendentalism is... It is as Burke suggests, 'a symbolic function, a way of thinking, which results in ideas being put to a peculiarly characteristic use'... Sampson Reed conceives of transcendence in terms of the reconciliation of two corresponding particulars; the reconciliation of subject and object produces perfect understanding which leads the mind to participation in a higher order of being or meaning. Truth is revealed. The activity is self-sustaining in that 'every approach to Him, by bringing us nearer to the origin of things, enables us to discover analogies in what was before chaotic'... Through the perception of correspondences, the mind penetrates the illusion of separation between internal and external, nature, man and God, visible and invisible, the particular and the universal. Unlike the "pure" mystic, the transcendentalist generally does not seek to annihilate the visible world in a striving after unutterable reality; instead, he seeks to unify his divided vision in order to see things as they are—which, for him means to see them as pure forms or as 'things as they are' in relation to other 'things'. A precarious stance is necessitated by transcendental vision if the perceiver is at once to transcend and to participate in the visible world".

Ernst Cassirer explains this balance aptly as: "'Transcendence' itself postulates and requires 'participation' just as

'participation' postulates and requires 'transcendence'. Objectively considered this reciprocal determination may seem enigmatic and paradoxical; nevertheless, it proves to be necessary and singularly clear, if we take as our point of departure the nature of the Ego, i.e., of the willing and knowing subject."

This transcendental trend had influenced Fitzgerald too, being a romantic writer with deep transcendental longings. Fitzgerald infused his transcendental insights into a few characters in his mature novels.

In *This Side of Paradise*, a best seller, we can see in Amory Blaine, the protagonist of novel, clear metaphysical, transcendental longings when he exhibits a passion for reading and gains knowledge of all sorts. Love of knowledge is transcendental. "He read voluminously all spring, the beginning of his eighteenth year: "The Gentleman from Indiana", "The New Arabian Nights", "The Morals of Marcus Ordeyne", "The Man Who Was Thursday", which he liked without understanding; "Stover at Yale", that became somewhat of a text-book; "Dombey and Son", because he thought he really should read better stuff; Robert Chambers, David Graham Phillips, and E. Phillips Oppenheim complete, and a scattering of Tennyson and Kipling. Of all his class work only "L' Allegro" and some quality of rigid clarity in solid geometry stirred his languid interest."

It is true that he is addicted to his egoism. Yet he has some transcendental urge to rise above that barrier. He knew he was none but full-fledged egotist. He was painfully aware of the need to become a personage. So he developed an interest in affairs of his country and even world matters. General issues that concerned the public now begin to interest him and he even develops a sense of social justice that makes him an admirer of Karl Marx and Socialism. It could be that it was his transcendental tendency that made him skeptical of what was going on in America at his own time. He must have had in his mind the picture of an ideal society. But when he saw the real society, the American society, before his very eyes he was shocked to see the difference between the two and that made him highly critical and cynical of the American and other societies.

He finds fault with the existing state of affairs that went contrary to his moral conscience too. In a way, it was the hidden springs of his transcendental idealism that made him raise his voice against the retrogressive tendencies in the America of his time. It is this metaphysical, transcendental longing that makes Amory a personage as against a personality. But this idealistic longing is not so pronounced in the novel to be of a remarkable transcendental note. Nevertheless, traces of this are discernible when we read between the lines, and read perceptively.

*The Beautiful and Damned*, the second novel of Fitzgerald hardly deals with any transcendental tendency. It is too full of subhuman trivialities to accommodate any transcendental aspiration because it is conceived with another purpose and crystallized with another technique. Its main purpose was to show the horrid realities that underlay the outward glitter of the American sophisticated life. The so-called beautiful are damned too, under the peculiar social set-up. The technique used to suit this purpose was the “ironic pessimistic, naturalistic mode”. This would not therefore entertain any transcendental philosophy at all. The characters are those in decay and typical of the rotten rich of the period given to a life of debauchery and licentious activities without any regard for moral edification and spiritual transcendence. Their minds are too charmed by egoistic and material pursuits to permit the natural “upward rising urge” of the sensitive human being.

It is not that transcendental tendencies were absent in the earlier or later novels, but its impact was less felt because of other considerations.

*The Great Gatsby*, is charged with transcendental idealism, we see in Jay Gatsby, the hero of, strong transcendental aspirations and highly sensitive with “a romantic readiness to the promises of life”. For him, life was much deeper than mere outward material crust. Life was multidimensional, multi-layered. It is a complex phenomenon partaking of the physical, mental, moral, and spiritual, aspects. He fondled an “imperishable dream” in his mind. Gatsby’s dream represents, “a quest to recover the object of his vision and a quest to recover the vision in its God-like imperishable form”.

He believed in the invisible world of good qualities like love in the true sense. A vertical movement from physical to the mental and moral level, and then to the spiritual is transcendental. It is up to every individual to make the best of life. Gatsby was a fine balance of a good man. He was indeed “great” from this point of view as the title suggests. Although there is no spiritual yearning mentioned of Gatsby, at the end of the novel we realize that he was much more spiritual than most Americans despite his bootlegging background because he cherished in his heart an “incorruptible dream” and was deeply innocent. The essential goodness of his heart and his ignorance of the corrupted minds of the upper class makes him spiritual, for he is not hard-hearted or callous or even wicked....”

Fitzgerald’s immediate concern as a writer was to raise adequate money to marry the girl of his dreams, Zelda Sayre. So he had to write in such a manner as to please the publishers as also the readers. His first novel *This Side of Paradise* and the initial stories he wrote were all to fulfill this need where he had to suppress his transcendental aspirations to a great extent. But when it came to *The Great Gatsby*, the real self of the author who had told Maxwell Perkins that “I want to write something new—something extraordinary and beautiful and simple and intricately patterned”, came to the fore. This real self of the author was one highly conditioned by his transcendental

longings, and a metaphysical quest. It yearned after something nobler and more sublime in life. His preoccupations were typically romantic and transcendental—love, beauty, happiness—these had been his priorities. All other things were immaterial and pure means to achieve these celestial, transcendental aims. This found a ready expression in *Gatsby* and hence, the close parallel between Fitzgerald and *Gatsby*, and *Zelda* and *Daisy*.

He had a ‘Platonic conception of his self’. His love for his golden girl, *Daisy*, was also Platonic love. His love transcended physical and temporal barriers. He did not love her just for sexual gratification. He had, on the contrary, loved the person of *Daisy* with all her present realities. It was pure love for love’s sake without any expectation of material gains or physical pleasure or sensual gratification. He worshipped her on the altar of love and beauty. She had sneaked into his mind as the object of his constant perusal and obsessive preoccupation. His love for *Daisy* transcended the temporal barrier because the passage of time did not diminish his love for her nor even her present status of being married to Tom Buchanan. He knew it was his inability to have sufficient money that made her get married to Tom Buchanan, an immensely rich but rough and tough person who was careless, callous, and not at all sensitive. As a striking contrast to him, *Gatsby* was full of the sap of “romantic readiness”, highly sensitive and fully human. He was kind, considerate, and sympathetic. His love for *Daisy* knew no bounds. For him the single most important thing in life, the central thing, was his love for *Daisy*. All else were secondary, and were relegated to the periphery. Yet, the question remains: Was his dream limited only to *Daisy*? The plain answer is a big ‘No’, because there are internal evidences in the novel to prove that *Gatsby*’s dream at times assumed gigantic proportions.

Despite his having become immensely wealthy, money was not his chief concern. Deep within his heart he was never attached to the wealth which he acquired, quite illegally through bootlegging as he had no other option being a person of poor origin, because to marry a wealthy girl like *Daisy* presupposed immense wealth. And he was ready to do anything for *Daisy*. That “anything” could not steal his heart because he did not set his heart upon material things. All his parties and the flaunting of wealth were mere ploys to win back his dear *Daisy*. For him whatever may be the way he acquired wealth, it did not matter. It was only a means to an end and that end was getting married to *Daisy*. Though he was involved in criminal, illegal activities to accumulate wealth he was far from being a criminal at heart, for his motivating force behind the deed was not criminality, but a helpless eagerness to become rich to merit the possession of *Daisy*, his rich beloved.

He did not in all probability know that “he was in the service of a vast, vulgar, meretricious beauty”. Despite his vague awareness or perhaps the suspicion that “her voice is full of money” implying that she cared a lot for money, *Gatsby* does not cease to love her. He did allow that suspicion to poison his love. He accepts her as she is. To his high conception, she was a golden girl, a goddess-like girl. To him she seemed to be an embodiment of beauty and a worthy object of his love. It was sheer illusion. He was not ready to look at the heart of this lethal “illusion”. His dream was to be united to her soon, and that dream had a “colossal vitality”. It roused his “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” and made him feel that life was not something lived on the material level but on the deeper mental and soul-level. Thus his having clung to such idealism

was quite transcendental and this philosophy has informed the inscape of this novel. Richard Chase affirms: "He has an enormous sense of his own destiny. The purpose of his quest is to "enter life", which he does by launching a campaign to conquer and subdue to his own purposes the great world that regards him as an insignificant outsider".

Gatsby hugged such an "incorruptible dream", as the narrator, Nick Carraway avers, and that dream was transcendental to the core surpassing time and space. No doubt, Gatsby had to sacrifice his life in the pursuit of this ideal, this dream, because it was totally divorced from reality, a downright "illusion" his golden girl having turned treacherous as also her husband a villain.

However, transcendental longing is Gatsby's "saving virtue" making him "the son of God" reigning supreme in the heaven of his dream, a much higher level of living than the mere down to earth existence truckling to subhuman trivialities.

When we come to *Tender Is the Night*, Fitzgerald's next novel, we find the transcendental tendencies of the characters like Dick Diver and Nicole nipped in the bud by cruel fate and tempting circumstances, combined by the strength of tragic flaws in character, particularly in the case of Dick Diver. Thereafter the novel lacks these, and registers the gradual decay of the character of Dick Diver, the protagonist as the novel progresses. The last novel *The Last Tycoon*, has transcendental tendencies in so far as the hero, Monroe Stahr is a man of high moral sense, mission and commitment to a noble cause. But his activities are practical and his thoughts are centred around these although he has great integrity. Hence in the strict sense of the term, we cannot say that the novel is wedded to transcendentalism, but rather to more of pragmatism. But Monroe Stahr had high aims and noble plans in his mind which were quite elevating. But unlike that of Gatsby Stahr's plans and dreams were quite feasible and practical. There was no gap between precept and practice, the idea and the real. In other words his ideas were realistic ideas unlike Gatsby's illusions. But this high practicality makes Stahr's transcendentalism less charming and closer to earth-bound.

### Conclusion

This transcendental trend had influenced Fitzgerald too who was also a romantic writer with deep transcendental longings and all the romantic qualities. Deep within him there had been a metaphysical well from which time and again gushed forth a strong fountain of idealism—transcendentalism—which he knew, must be the safer alternative for pessimism, Existentialism and Hedonism which he projected in his fictional works as the prevailing fashion demanded.

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