"At Last Everyone Had Something to Talk About": Gloria’s War in Fitzgerald’s The Beautiful and Damned

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"—and now the three sat like over-oiled machines, without conflict, without fear, without elation, heavily enamelled figures secure beyond enjoyment in a world where death and war, dull emotion and noble savagery were covering a continent with the smoke of terror."
—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Published on 4 March 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Beautiful and Damned is generally considered the author’s least artistically successful work, which Fitzgerald himself called “a wretched novel, excellent in detail” (Correspondence 99). Partly an extension of his first novel, This Side of Paradise, the story of Anthony and Gloria Patch can be read as part naturalist examination of wealth and a failing marriage, part satire of the Jazz Age, and part treatise on youth in America. In short, the novel attempts to accomplish many goals at once. Given this public perception, it is nonetheless clear that Fitzgerald’s second novel showed an evolution in his literary self-esteem. He told editor Max Perkins prior to publication that “I do not expect in any event that I am to have the same person for person public this time that Paradise had. My one hope is to be endorsed by the intellectually élite & thus be forced on to people as Conrad has. (Of course I’m assuming that my work grows in sincerity and proficiency from year to year as it has so far)” (Dear Scott/Dear Max 47). Perkins told Fitzgerald two days later that “a writer of any account must speak solely for himself” (47), which echoed his call to Ernest Hemingway some years later that “all you have to do is follow your own judgment, or instinct, + disregard what is said […] the utterly real thing in writing is the only thing that counts, + the whole racket melts down before it” (Only Thing 224). Fitzgerald hoped that his second novel would show his reading public an amplified voice, a talented chronicler willing to show the Jazz Age its own underlying corruption. However, at the core of the novel is World War I, the conflict that would define a generation of literary figures. Though Fitzgerald had dealt with the war in an abbreviated fashion in his first novel, the conflict is much more ominous in his second. The United States declares war on Germany nearly two-thirds of the way through the book, upon which Fitzgerald writes: “At last everyone had something to talk about—and almost everyone fully enjoyed it, as though they had been cast for parts in a somber and romantic play” (The Beautiful and Damned 256). War is foreshadowed prior to its actual declaration—for instance Maury Noble states that rather than struggle for ideals in war, “people want excitement every so often” (223), and early on Anthony smokes a cigarette as “he fancied that Washington Square had declared war on Central Park and that this was a north-bound menace loaded with battle and sudden death” (29). When it does come, war warrants an interesting reaction from Gloria Patch, a Midwestern-born wife dealing with the past, her disjointed present, and her husband’s eventual deployment to training camp. Though Anthony never leaves the United States—the war ends before his unit is deployed overseas—Gloria’s notion of war mixes Old and New World notions of duty, deterioration, and eventual destruction against the backdrop of Fitzgerald’s subtle examination of war within the Lost Generation.

A multitude of interpretations fuel critical response due to the several narrative delineations in the book, the size of the novel (at 422 pages, the book is Fitzgerald’s longest), and the status of the novel as the precursor to The Great Gatsby. James L. W. West III believes vocation to be the overarching key to the book, as Fitzgerald satirizes his characters’ failed attempts to find “a calling that will give purpose to one’s hours and days” (xiii). Matthew J. Bruccoli notes the novel is one of “character deterioration” and “an improvement on the looseness of This Side of Paradise,” though he takes issue with Fitzgerald’s “indulgent narrative manner” (152). Further, Kirk Curnutt argues that the novel “depicts wasted youth as a lifestyle adopted by diletantes and bacchantes as well as romantic egotists,” and “elaborates upon Fitzgerald’s belief that, given the temporal fixity of youth, its only practical value is the brief pleasure offered by its consumption” (92-3). However, Scott Donaldson considers Fitzgerald’s first two novels showcases for the author’s burgeoning
political consciousness and his satire of political absurdity, for "though plenty of things needed reform, it would do no good to try to reform them. If war had proved nothing else, it had proved that" (317). Craig Monk extends Donaldson's examination and argues that "the war is the root of the social disillusion in [The Beautiful and Damned]" (66). Monk's catalogue of war references in the novel is ample, and he concludes that "the disillusioning realization that there are limits to human accomplishment was the lesson learned by all liberals as the lasting realities of the postwar period became manifest" (70). Noticeably absent from much of the criticism on the novel is a full examination of Gloria Patch and her role in Fitzgerald's treatment of war. Building on the above-stated criticism, I propose that Fitzgerald offers a fascinating and timely portrait of a young wife dealing with war and remembrance from multiple perspectives, from her Midwestern roots to her ascendancy within the nouveau riche of New York. Gloria Patch represents a complex identity indicative of World War I, since war at this scale had never occurred before, and those at home were greatly scarred as a result of the madness. Fitzgerald uses Gloria as a conduit for domestic fears, anxieties, and exasperations, all results of the war that changed the world forever.

Early in the novel Fitzgerald makes clear the difference between the Eastern elite and the Midwesterner. Anthony Patch "thinks himself rather an exceptional young man, thoroughly sophisticated, well adjusted to his environment, and somewhat more significant than anyone else he knows" (The Beautiful and Damned 11); being the grandson of Adam Patch (modeled on moralist Anthony Comstock), Anthony grows up privileged and coddled due to his parents' death early in his youth. Conversely, the first description of Gloria Gilbert comes from her cousin Richard Caramel, as he tells Anthony, "[h]er name's Gloria. She's from home—Kansas City. Her mother's a practicing Bilphist, and her father's quite dull but a perfect gentleman" (35). Fitzgerald describes Gloria’s father as a man past his prime: "[h]is ideas were the popular delusions of twenty years before; his mind steered a wabbly and anaemic course in the wake of the daily newspaper editorials," and he had graduated "from a small but terrifying Western university" (40). Gloria’s mother practices Bilphism, an invention of Fitzgerald’s concerned with reincarnation and pejoratively treated throughout the novel. Barry Gross contends that "the Midwest Fitzgerald knew was ... a boy's world and a boy's game, without novelty or danger, change or adventure, a diamond of occa-

sionally glittering surfaces but only a carat or two in weight" (114). He concludes, "as such, the Midwest was another country for Fitzgerald, the past, not a place but a time" (126). In his introductions of Anthony and Gloria, Fitzgerald sets the two in regional opposition, though when we first see Gloria the descriptors belie her supposedly simplistic origins: "She was dazzling—alight; it was agony to comprehend her beauty in a glance. Her hair, full of a heavenly glamour, was gay against the winter color of the room" (The Beautiful and Damned 54). The dichotomous upbringing seemingly vanishes once the two meet, as Gloria succeeds in entering a new category of social importance.

However, Fitzgerald hints at her Midwestern identity in various ways, which colors our understanding of her war experience later on. Joseph Bloechman, a movie man Gloria takes a liking to (in order to advance her hoped-for film career later on), is described as having an expression combining "that of a Middle-Western farmer appraising his wheat crop and that of an actor wondering whether he is observed—the public manner of all good Americans" (84). Again, Fitzgerald’s likening of Midwesterners to simple-minded folk in regards to their “American” quality stands in opposition to Gloria’s identity, which leads to his description of "the growth of intimacy".

First one gives off his best picture, the bright and finished product mended with bluff and falsehood and humor. Then more details are required and one paints a second portrait, and a third—before long the best lines cancel out—and the secret is exposed at last; the planes of the pictures have intermingled and given us away, and though we paint and paint we can no longer sell a picture. We must be satisfied with hoping that such fatuous accounts of ourselves as we make to our wives and children and business associates are accepted as true. (98)

The creation of selfhood for both Gloria and Anthony is the key to determining the effect of war on each character once it occurs. Prior to the conflict Anthony and Gloria feel the illusion of love—at the end of Book One Anthony "had told her gently, almost in the middle of a kiss, that he loved her, and she had smiled and held him closer and murmured, 'I'm glad,' looking into his eyes" (111)—and they continue to live a privileged life after their wedding. Though the Midwest is presented in the negative, the use of the region as a place of simplicity against the complexity of the city only heightens Fitzgerald’s critique of the modern moment. If culture and sophisti-
tion belong solely to New York City and the East Coast, then the destruction of that illusion as a result of war and aggression places a premium on the way things used to be, on the nostalgic past which the Midwest partly comes to represent for Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby* and stories like "Winter Dreams." Seen here in its infancy, Fitzgerald’s depiction of the Midwest, though pejorative, provides a layer of complexity to Gloria Patch’s reaction to war.

Gloria’s desire to create a new self in the manner of the nouveau riche (rather than that of her Midwestern upbringing), bridges the prewar and war periods in the novel. Once married, the Patches embark upon a cross-country honeymoon, eventually visiting Washington, DC, with its "atmosphere of repellant light, of distance without freedom, of pomp without splendor— it seemed a pasty-pale and self-conscious city" (The Beautiful and Damned 142). Having earlier lambasted Congress as "that incredible pigsty" whose members had "the narrow and porcine brows he saw pictured sometimes in the rotogravure sections of the Sunday newspapers" (52), Fitzgerald is quick to label the center of American politics "pasty-pale" and "self-conscious." Craig Monk notes that "while it is true that one cannot readily arrange Fitzgerald’s political views in any coherent, ideologically consistent fashion in his writings at this time, neither can one divorce his texts from their social context, a society disjointed and undergoing a dramatic political change" (69). This change is felt when the Patches visit General Robert E. Lee’s home in Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington. Gloria considers the idea of tourists visiting the site "perfectly terrible," as she exclaims "the idea of letting these people come here! And of encouraging them by making these houses show-places" (The Beautiful and Damned 143). Once Anthony remarks his wife that "if they weren’t kept up they’d go to pieces," Gloria reprimands him: "Do you think they’ve left a breath of 1860 here? This has become a thing of 1914" (143). Gloria’s reaction to changing the past to fit the present marks a turning point in both her development and the direction of the novel. The war is looming overseas and the memorializing of a defeated American foe (General Lee) so near to the nation’s capital puts Gloria in a disjointed position.

She appears to express what Monk deems "the necessity of social decay" (67), though that necessity comes from an inborn feeling of self-creation and achieving happiness deep within Gloria’s identity. Updating the past only leads to greater desperation and spiritual destruction, but living only within the present destroys our notion of the past. When Anthony asks if she wants to "preserve old things," Gloria responds:

"But you can’t, Anthony. Beautiful things grow to a certain height and then they fail and fade off, breathing out memories as they decay. And just as any period decays in our minds, the things of that period should decay too, and in that way they’re preserved for a while in the few hearts like mine that react to them. That graveyard at Tarrytown, for instance. The asses who give money to preserve things have spoiled that too. Sleepy Hollow’s gone; Washington Irving’s dead and his books are rotting in our estimation year by year— then let the graveyard rot too, as it should, as all things should. Trying to preserve a century by keeping its relics up to date is like keeping dying men alive by stimulants." (The Beautiful and Damned 143)

Unlike Jay Gatsby’s desire to repeat the past, Gloria does not wish to repeat the past at all. Instead she wants the past to remain realistic, to decay as people decay, and to change naturally as times change. Intervening with polish and preservation tarnishes, rather than memorializes, what was, and Gloria wants Lee’s home "to look back on its glamorous moment of youth and beauty," and "to smell of magnolias instead of peanuts and I want my shoes to crunch on the same gravel that Lee’s boots crunched on. There’s no beauty without poignancy and there’s no poignancy without feeling that it’s going, men, names, books, houses— bound for dust— mortal—" (143-44). The residual effect of time must be felt in order for Gloria to reconcile her present moment. Further, to Gloria "the effort to reconstruct and preserve the past violates the natural tragedy of mutability" (Curnutt 95), a concern that threatens to curtail Gloria’s concept of the past. That a child throws "a handful of banana-peels" into the Potomac River only strengthens Fitzgerald’s irony (The Beautiful and Damned 144). Gloria’s love for the “dying man” of time only makes sense if the man in question actually dies. That the majority of an entire generation was utterly obliterated from the earth in the coming years, in the fields of the Somme and Passchendaele and Flanders, weighs heavily on Fitzgerald, and he uses Gloria to express the volatility and impermanence of things against a backdrop of preservation, something impossible once war begins.

Interestingly, immediately following Gloria’s monologue Fitzgerald notes the fall of Liège (144), the first battle of the war, and
he has Gloria deliver a more subtle sentiment to her husband in flashback. To echo the somber and terrifying occasion of war and destruction, Fitzgerald creates in Gloria a sadness rather than a rage as she and Anthony prepare to leave their hotel in Coronado. "We're going away," she sobbed. "Oh, Anthony, it's sort of the first place we've lived together. Our two little beds here—side by side—they'll be always waiting for us, and we're never coming back to 'em anymore" (143). Once Anthony assures her that they will be together forever she replies, "But it won't be—like our two beds—ever again. Everywhere we go and move on and change, something's lost—something's left behind. You can't ever quite repeat anything, and I've been so yours, here—" (145). Now, like Nick Carraway, Gloria realizes that memory and the past are irrevocable in the present, for change comes and takes away what is certain and apparently permanent. It is no coincidence that Fitzgerald places this flashback immediately after the fall of Liège, for the war inevitably informs the remainder of the Patches' lives. James Meredith notes that Fitzgerald's fiction aligns with other narratives of war, his "pervasive sense of loss" triggered by war and its effect on culture (142). But for Meredith, Fitzgerald embeds in his fiction "an abiding hope and faith that the idyllic old world could once again be possible if only the modern times, brought on by a terrible modern war, could somehow cease to cast a deep and darkening shadow upon the everlasting light of the modern day" (142). Gloria partially represents this hope; she wishes for things to be as they were, colored by experience rather than nostalgia. Though she wishes to stay with Anthony in the two beds in Coronado, she knows that moments fade and times change, just as war rages and alters past, present, and future. Incidentally, as America's impending entrance into the war and Anthony's eventual deployment for training camp near, Gloria embodies a full range of emotions and perceptions as she comes to grips with what the world has become.

Two incidents prior to April 1917 mark Gloria's continuing anxiety regarding her societal significance, at once obsessed with money, parties, and vanity, but certainly wary of the coming pressures of brutal conflict. At one of the Patches' many parties Gloria slaps the ribald Joe Hull and falls to the floor as the men sing "The—panic—has—come—over us, So ha-a-as—the moral decline!" (The Beautiful and Damned 202). In her bedroom after, apart from the revelry downstairs, Gloria regards the storm outside as "inter-

minable, letting down thick drips of thunder like pig iron from the heart of a white-hot furnace" (203). Two hours later, "she was conscious, even aware, after a long while that the noise downstairs had lessened, and that the storm was moving off westward, throwing back lingering showers of sound that fell, heavy and lifeless as her soul, into the soggy fields" (204). Halfway between sleep and consciousness, Gloria's state is one of confusion, but by comparing "the soggy fields" surrounding the Patch home with her own despondency, Fitzgerald makes clear the connection between brutal, uncontrollable chaos (the storm) and the inability to escape the fray (Gloria is somewhat comatose). Gloria feels "a weight pressing down upon her breast" (204) as she sees a menacing figure in the doorway, in which "the minute or succession of minutes, and a swimming blur began to form before her eyes, which tried with childish persistence to pierce the gloom in the direction of the door. In another instant it seemed that some unimaginable force would shatter her out of existence" (204-05). The weight pressing down upon Gloria is a mixture of personal anguish concerning her and her husband, her position as a young wife of an inheritor rather than a creator, and the untold comparisons she has made between the forces of war and the inevitability of conflict. Sober during this episode, Gloria offers a much clearer perspective than do her drunken husband, Joe Hull, Maury Noble, and Richard Caramel. Gloria escapes her room and runs out to the countryside to a bridge, which Fitzgerald characterizes as a renewal, not only an escape from the shallow revelry of her husband and home but a return to the peacefulness of the past:

She was at the top now and could see the lands about her as successive sweeps of open country, cold under the moon, coarsely patched and seamed with thin rows and heavy clumps of trees ... The oppression was lifted now—the tree-tops below her were rocking in the young starlight to a haunted doze. She stretched out her arms with a gesture of freedom. This was what she had wanted, to stand alone where it was high and cool. (207-08)

Gloria's worry comes from the men singing, the loud thunder and rain along the soggy fields, the oppressive figure haunting her doorway, the threat of extinction, and the inability to reconcile her own vanity with the coming chaos. She tells Anthony that she "had to go out and get away from it" in order to feel alive again (208). There is no escaping war, certainly not a war that decimated countries, vil-
lages, and a generation. However, in her quest for a respite from the weight pressing upon her, Gloria discovers a freedom lacking in her marriage and relationships with others. Though short lived, Gloria feels a similar renewal again, only after war has been declared on Germany.

Prior to leaving for training camp Anthony considers how he and Gloria would spend his inheritance; they "talked of the things they were to do when the money was theirs, and of the places they were to go to after the war, when they would 'agree on things again,' for both of them looked forward to a time when love, springing like the phoenix from its own ashes, should be born again in its mysterious and unfathomable haunts" (257). The war has finally arrived and caused a fissure in their relationship, but they treat it initially as a therapeutic enterprise, something to assist them in agreeing "on things" once it ends (257). Similar fissures have already formed and separated the two. Fitzgerald has the couple quarrel over Gloria's wish to have a film career immediately prior to introducing the war—when Anthony asks if he is to live on her money from films she responds, "then make some yourself" (256)—and the decision to position a young couple’s slow decline into purposelessness alongside World War I only magnifies the disjointed perspectives of both Gloria and Anthony.

These perspectives are honed earlier in the novel when Anthony, in a bid to impress his ailing grandfather, considers joining the war effort, with Gloria, as a journalist and a nurse respectively. Anthony’s vainglorious notions of seeing himself “in khaki, leaning, as all war correspondents lean, upon a heavy stick, portfolio at shoulder” (The Beautiful and Damned 175) are countered by Gloria, who “embraced his suggestion with luxurious intensity, holding it aloft like a sun of her own making and basking in its beams” (178). The illusions of grandeur vacate when Anthony leaves for Camp Hooker, initially longing for his wife, then enters into an illicit affair with Dorothy “Dot” Raycroft within weeks. He urges Gloria not to come south and moves from camp to camp, eventually telling Dot that life “hurts people and hurts people, until finally it hurts them so that they can’t be hurt ever anymore. That’s the last and worst thing it does” (283). Anthony’s sentiment matches Gloria’s earlier notion that life is meant not for truth, but happiness in the face of aging and decline (254). Though the therapy of separation for the couple rings true here, in subtle contrast to Anthony’s debauches are Gloria’s experiences back home.
by a harsh and inevitable mortality” (324). At twenty-nine, Gloria acts as if her life is coming to an end, her beauty on the same course as General Lee’s home in Arlington. She longs not for children of her own, but for “ghostly children only — the early, the perfect symbols of her early and perfect love for Anthony” (324). In an influenza-induced tirade she screams:

“Millions of people...swarming like rats, chattering like apes, smelling like all hell...monkeys! Or lice, I suppose. For one really exquisite palace...on Long Island, say — or even in Greenwich...for one palace full of pictures from the Old World and exquisite things — with avenues of trees and green lawns and a view of the blue sea, and lovely people about in slick dresses...I’d sacrifice a hundred thousand of them, a million of them.” (326, first ellipsis mine)

Driven to declare, though certainly as result of illness, that the Old World with its “exquisite things” and “slick dresses” is worth decimating human life, Gloria embodies the elevated anxieties present in the postwar culture. In stark contrast to her earlier revelation at Lee’s mansion, Gloria wishes to return to the past, when things were good and right, young and slick. These vacillations are all part of Gloria’s inability to reconcile the concrete destruction of her marriage and the world in such a short period. She expresses a gesture “of denial, of protest, of bewilderment” (341) once Anthony resigns from his last club. With a crumbling marriage and a crumbling societal position, Gloria is victim to “a truth set at the heart of tragedy that this force never explains, never answers — this force intangible as air, more definite than death” (341). The inevitability of decline, narrowing prospects, an alcoholic husband, rising postwar prices, a small apartment, and no money are all forces in Gloria’s despondency. The force of unstoppable decline appears more frightening to Gloria than death itself.

Though it is clear that the major force behind Gloria’s depression is their wish to wait for and live off of Anthony’s grandfather’s money (which ironically happens in the last three pages of the novel), the secondary force is the ever-corroding effects of the First World War on her psyche. Though her Midwestern roots are quickly forgotten, Gloria’s longing in the end for the past to somehow strip away the present brings her full circle. War frees her and shackles her, leads her to independent thought and deepens her depression, ostracizes her and connects her to people at home and abroad. In short, World War I affects Gloria Patch in *The Beautiful and Damned*, and the many emotions and reactions she exhibits shows F. Scott Fitzgerald’s
ever-deepening understanding of war and its consumptive mental and physical damage.

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NOTES
2FSF to George Kuyper: 13 Mar. 1922.
3FSF to MP: 10 Dec. 1921.
4MP to ISF: 12 Dec. 1921.
5MP to FH: 30 Aug. 1935.
6Fitzgerald includes a short “Interlude: May 1917-February 1919” in This Side of Paradise (147-155), which represents Amory’s war service. It consists of two letters. Fitzgerald hints at the war prior to this section while Amory attends Princeton and features descriptions of his generation’s involvement. For example: “In Princeton everyone bantred in public and told themselves privately that their doths at least would be heroic. The literary students read Rupert Brooke passionately; the lounge-lizards worried over whether the government would permit the English-cut uniform for officers; a few of the hopelessly lazy wrote to the obscure branches of the War Department, seeking an easy commission and a soft berth” (This Side of Paradise 139). However, The Beautiful and Damned treats the war more extensively, though the conflict still remains confined stateside, since Fitzgerald himself was never deployed to Europe.
8FSF to MP: 12 Aug. 1920.

WORKS CITED

"AT LAST EVERYONE HAD SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT":

