

Tender is the Night: exploring the psychotic form

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Accidental Breakthrough

According to dictionary.com, psychosis is a disorder...that indicates impaired contact with reality. According to myself, F. Scott Fitzgerald unintentionally created a work of fiction that hews perfectly to this definition of psychosis in *Tender is the Night*.

In his *opus magnum*, F. Scott Fitzgerald struggles to break the formal constraints of the novel, as he saw them, and to give new life to the structure of long-form fiction.

He interlaces stream-of-consciousness and third-person narrative styles, jumps from the future into the past, and switches narrative perspectives without warning from one character as narrator to another.

Are these flaws in the novel? Yes. Yes, they are. Are these intended to be facets of the formal experiment? The most likely answer is yes, but I have yet to contact F. Scott Fitzgerald through my Weegie board to get his side of the story. Suffice it to say in the context of this essay, *Tender is the Night* is a novel that can't quite hold itself together and which fails, therefore, to become a successful formal experiment.

The novel does turn out to be a happy accident of form despite (and because of) its erratic stylistic jumps and juxtapositions. The work isn't the new method Fitzgerald was seeking, not the lesson in modernism that he had intended it to be. However, with *Tender is the Night* F. Scott Fitzgerald does create an original, formally psychotic novel as an off-shoot of his attempts to combine stream-of-consciousness and a third-person narration.

This is, in the first place, a book about breaking up and cracking up. The mind is broken. Nicole Diver, the wife of the protagonist suffers from schizophrenia. The narrative explores her mental fragility and tells the story of Nicole's recovery in a psychiatric clinic outside of Zurich. Relapses and "lesions" in her the state of her mind mark some of the more energetic passages of the novel. From these facts alone, we can argue for psychosis as the literal center of the novel.

Interestingly, there is more. If we take psychosis as being a manifest difficulty to deal with reality as well as existing in a state of schism, then we can see several other examples of psychosis in the novel - in character, relationships, and structure.

Character, relationships, and structure all coalesce, in the case of *Tender is the Night*, in the protagonist. Dick Diver experiences jarring blow after jarring blow, each one distancing him from his stable position as the charming, married man living the high life on the Riviera. When a young actress propositions him, old doubts arise concerning Dick's reason for marrying Nicole. Was it for love or was it a professional obligation (Dick had been Nicole's psychiatrist and agent of her recovery)?

Nicole's growing jealousy of the young actress triggers a relapse to a state of great mental imbalance. At one point she forces the family car off the road and almost kills them all, Dick, the kids and herself. Nicole's breakdown sends Dick, once again, down paths of doubt. Was this the woman he married? Had he been deluding himself to think that she was cured? The relapse brings into question the material of the marriage

and the bond created therein and generates a paranoia in Dick. He begins to question everything, starts binge drinking, and suffers under a constant crisis of conscience.

There is a breach of reality; a dream wedges its way into Dick's waking life. The man falls into stupor and gets locked in jail.

The pressures of his failing marriage weigh on Dick Diver and the structure of the narrative parallels the schism in the relationship. Fitzgerald utilizes a third-person narrative with a focus on Dick Diver's perspective for a majority of the novel, but at the onset of Nicole's psychosis, the author inserts sections of stream-of-consciousness which occur exclusively in the mind of Nicole and which demonstrate her troubles with coherence and sanity. For the reader this creates trouble with coherence as well.

Further on, the narrative drops the stream-of-consciousness entirely, in favor of a split third-person, where sections are devoted to the actions and perspective of Dr. Diver and his wife Nicole, who decides, at this same moment in the story's structure, that she needs more independence from her husband.

Fitzgerald has again presented a schism, in narrative structure this time, with the story dividing its interests between two deeply afflicted and divided people. It's schizophrenic. Dick is of two minds, attempting to discover his proper role. Should he be doctor to Nicole and stay with her, or become the lover of a young actress?

Nicole is divided in her loyalties: to be true to her burgeoning sense of independence and take on a new lover or be true to the man who brought her back to life; who guided and protected her for the past decade.

The manner of telling – the narrative form of the story - dissolves along with the confidences of these two characters. There are no transitional moments, however. Simply, the narrative jumps from mode to mode and from the mind of one character to another.

Achieving such a complexity of dissolution is no small feat. F. Scott Fitzgerald manages to create a work of depth and nuance, with manifold variations of style and an emotionally hefty set of subjects. For a work to be satisfying, it needs a unifying vision, an aesthetic base or premise. *Tender is the Night* lacks this vision. A sense of disconnection nags at the reader, like a paranoid doubt, like an impossible question that won't go away: Who am I? What am I?

The inconsistencies of style are exactly the strengths of the novel, at the same time, they are the novel's greatest weaknesses. The experimentation of the book produced a new form – a psychotic novel – broken up and dissolved in the difficulty it faces in forming a stable contact with reality. Ultimately, there is not enough unity in the work to satisfy. We finish the book feeling we have encountered several books smashed together, splintering against one another. And it's exhausting without the gratification of having met a challenge.

There is no breaking into a work as broken up as this one.

One has to wonder if the troubles of the novel were the result of the specifically biographical challenge of the work. Was it impossible for Fitzgerald to see and tell his own story clearly, honestly? Could the writer have struck on the rocks of inability when he attempted to tell his own story without obscurity or evasion? Was it this (possible) impossibility that generated the wild divisions and inconsistencies of style and structure?