The Illusion of the American Dream in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Winter Dreams”

In 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s idea of the American Dream was iconic. The lust for money and the endless pursuit of all things beautiful was a mentality that is now recognized as shaping the actions of many, including Fitzgerald. As he and his wife, Zelda, struggled with alcoholism, their lives quickly declined into depression and anxiety, yet they were under the impression of living a happy life. As literary executor John Callahan said, “In its American guise, the dream Fitzgerald sought to realize flowed from that most elusive and original of the rights proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence” (Callahan 379). The pursuit of happiness, its unalienable right, influenced the culture and Fitzgeralds. In F. Scott Fitzgerald’s work, “Winter Dreams,” the message of the illusive American Dream is evident as dark, hollow, and producing little to no emotional fulfillment. Americans fell in love with Fitzgerald because they saw him as an icon, a snapshot of their bright jazz age. Yet between Fitzgerald’s letters to Zelda, and her eventual admittance to a mental hospital, it seems the logic behind the glittering standard was faulty. Life, in the Fitzgeralds’ eyes, was both beautiful and tragic. “Winter Dreams” details the dichotomy between beauty and happiness as it directly ties them together and shows how neither of them result in emotional fulfillment. Instead, “Winter Dreams” revolves around depression, indifference towards living, and alcoholism. Following the life of Fitzgerald and the story of
“Winter Dreams” helps to expose the shallow mentality that because the beautiful and glamorous life was seen as a gateway to happiness the American dream is based on illusions, resulting in false worth and indifference.

For Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald, their lives were far from the early glamor they lived after the initial success of *This Side of Paradise*. The coupled partied wildly-- gaining the reputation of being drunks. They were at odds with each other constantly and “Zelda was becoming entangled in the crosscurrents of a complex of opposing roles, making an effort to be both daring and loving, to not give a damn and to care deeply, to be proud of Scott’s drawing on her for his fiction while resenting it” (Milford 76). The dichotomy between their perceived happiness and their immense depression towards their lives was growing, and it only caused more drinking. McKaig, a friend of the Fitzgeralds, wrote about them in his diary, saying that they were “drunk as usual,” and “Fitzgeralds came in, drunk,” (Milford 75). The love they shared for each is evident by letters detailing their dependency on one another, yet their alcoholism and differences took their happiness and sanity. It is not impossible to believe, therefore, that the Fitzgeralds had a curious view of the ways in which their glamorous and beautiful life had actually ruined them.

In 1922, Zelda and Scott were raising their daughter, Frances Scott Fitzgerald. The world they protected her in was a far cry from the corruption that was sweeping through the big cities of America. The prohibition era was just beginning, and the gangsters of Chicago and New York were quickly finding ways to get around the law. The world was changing-- not just in its regulations, but with its mentality. “The 1920’s witnessed a major shift in American urban life and culture. This era saw optimism and the possibility of a better American society transform
into deflated hopes and disillusionment” (Beshears 198). The gangster represented this idea in its natural form. They were the empowerment to the people-- they helped to support the glamour of the 20’s and its idea of beauty and wealth as the high life. They made their lifestyles fashionable, and even justified their corruption. Al Capone, the infamous gangster, said, “If I break the law, my customers... are as guilty as I am” (Beshears 201). Their power quickly enabled citizens to fall into a life of recklessness and reach towards the “American Dream.” This was one of the major factors that led people to believe that beauty and wealth were directly related to happiness.

During the pursuit of a satisfactory life, both F. Scott Fitzgerald, and his character from “Winter Dreams,” Dexter, have self-worth that is dependent on the notion of beauty and money as what makes a person successful. Dexter is, in his own opinion, “probably making more money than any man my age in the Northwest. I know that’s an obnoxious remark, but you advised me to start right” (Fitzgerald 194). Although Dexter realizes the boastfulness of this remark, he uses it to identify himself as a power person in society. His wealth ranks his successfulness. Judy echoes these expectations herself, denying men on account of their lack of funds. Dexter embodies the “American Dreamer” because “he wanted not association with glittering things and glittering people-- he wanted the glittering things themselves” (188). He is not looking for the attention associated with wealth, but rather the wealth itself. After Dexter met Judy, she became his wealth, and identity. “No disillusion as to the world in which she had grown up could cure his illusion as to her desirability” (196). Here he loses his own standards to fulfill what he imagines has become his self-concept. However, even here it is his own “illusion” that is guiding him. The basis of these qualifiers are nothing. Beauty, wealth, and happiness are all variable and shallow things that the American Dream built its concept on.
Judy Jones had left a man and crossed the room to him—Judy Jones, a slender enameled doll in a cloth of gold: gold in a band at her head, gold in two slipper points at her dress’s hem. The fragile glow of her face seemed to blossom as she smiled at him. A breeze of warmth and light blew through the room... He was filled with a sudden excitement. (198)

Again entranced by Judy, Dexter abandons his feelings for another girl, Irene Scheerner, who was “no more than a curtain spread behind him, a hand moving along gleaming teacups, a voice calling to children...” (197). He takes Judy home, and is “startled” by the immensity of her house. He resists going in until Judy pleads, “I’ll be so beautiful for you, Dexter” (200). Once again, he is overtaken with the inconsistency of the glittering idea of the American Dream and leaves behind the seemingly plain Irene.

F. Scott Fitzgerald faced similar issues regarding self-worth and self-concept. He considered his happiness directly influenced by his success as a writer and his monetary funds. Fitzgerald was constantly frustrated with his procrastination and wrote that he wants get rid of his “laziness” and “word consciousness and self-doubt” (Turnbull 163). He described himself as being “deteriorated in the three years since [he] finished The Beautiful and Damned” (Turnbull 162) because his writing was not as good as he wanted it to be and he felt increasingly stressed with his home life. He and Zelda underwent a tumultuous period. In a letter to Zelda after one of their fights he wrote, “To repeat the phrase that became an athema in my ears during the last months of our trying to make a go of it ‘expressing oneself’ I can only say that there isn’t any such thing. It simply doesn’t exist” (Milford 254). At this point, Fitzgerald is admitting that because one cannot understand oneself enough to express how they feel. He cannot express himself and he is not particularly interested in hearing what Zelda feels either. Perhaps this is the reason he would later fail to visit her in the asylums she was constantly admitted to.
The “American Dream” is nothing more than an illusion. The concepts it rests on are faulty and rest on variable factors. This creates the shallowness that both Dexter and Fitzgerald struggled with. Dexter is torn between the beauty of Judy and the mundane practicality of Irene. This illusion of the perfect beautiful dream, shows how the people lacked moral. The American Dream faded just as quickly as the glimmering parties and alcohol did. The brokenness Fitzgerald leaves Judy and Dexter in, shows how he felt about the life they lived and the consequences of such a lifestyle. Even Zelda’s mental illness can be related to the idea that with deep happiness comes deep pain. Ultimately this creates indifference by the person involved, or in Dexter’s case, beyond “revulsion or amusement” (Fitzgerald 201).
Works Cited


