



THE THEME OF EXISTENCE IN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD AND NORMAN MAILER'S OEUVRE

FAHIMEH KESHMIRI^{1*}, PARVIN GHASEMI²

¹Fateme Zahra Pardis, Farhangian University, Isfahan, Iran

² English Department, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran

*Correspondence: Keshmiri_86@yahoo.com



FAHIMEH KESHMIRI

Article Info:

Article Received:03/06/2015

Revised on:18/06/2015

Accepted on:28/06/2015

ABSTRACT

Twentieth century intellectuals such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Norman Mailer have dealt with the question of existence in their work. In this article among the many characteristics revealing existence, the major ones including the themes of identity and existence and cultural and historic moments they capture in their works, have been analyzed with regard to the techniques of the two writers in their major works. The differences in their visions and some critics' views are discussed too. It shows how the two writers, though from two different parts of the world and maneuvering over two different genres, have delicately dealt with the question of existence by the appropriate selection of setting, and characterization. Noticeably, the Influence of Fitzgerald on Mailer's Philosophy and Art and their American literary and philosophic roots are analyzed as well.

Key Words: Existence, identity, faith, humanity, Fitzgerald, Mailer.

©KY PUBLICATIONS

INTRODUCTION

F. Scott Fitzgerald and Norman Mailer are authors whose philosophic origins and American literary, as well as the American cultural currents of their times are comprehensively explored in their literary art. Most scholars believe that Fitzgerald and Mailer's charity to American culture reach far beyond their roles as American literary artists, they are not only considered voluble social critics of twentieth-century America, but articulate interpreters of their American cultural background. Literary works such as *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Dream* stand as evidences to these authors' commitment with and pertinent understanding of their cultural moments, yet these

works also publicize that their art takes shape as a vision enthused by the intellectual and philosophic currents of their time. Fitzgerald's letters and interviews reveal that Nietzsche's ideology had a thoughtful influence on his thought and writing in his early to mid twenties, what are hardly ever considered in critical studies of Fitzgerald's canon of works (Brucoli, 2004, 83). However, as Ronald Berman notes, "the decade of the twenties was philosophically explosive" (Berman, 2001, 65) so, it is not easy to image that Fitzgerald, who was known to emphasize his reading of a range and assortment of works as indispensable to his art, would have unnoticed the main intellectual currents of his

time—the explosion of European philosophy on the American scene.

This paper aims to examine Fitzgerald and Mailer's explanation of the human experience through their choices in setting and character development. First, existentialism and its philosophical origins and then, Existentialism's major concepts of identity, humanity and faith are illustrated in the selected works of these two writers within the framework of setting and characterization. Like many other writers, these literary masters employed literature to convey their idea of life. Fitzgerald's perspective on life is captured in his great novel, *The Great Gatsby* which conveys the author's hopes and ideas. Mailer's *An American Dream* can be good illustrations of the miseries of the time and simulation of many other past and future human miseries too. Among the many characteristics revealing existence the major ones are the themes of identity, humanity and faith. The two writers, from two different parts of the globe and maneuvering over two different genres, carefully comment on human existence through the specifics of setting and character development.

Material and Methodology

The theme of Existence among the many themes Fitzgerald and Mailer used to convey their main idea about life and time are examined in these two writer's great works. The approach to this subject is eclectic, profiting from historical, social, and biographical approaches. A close reading of the mentioned texts will assist the revelation of these two writer's answer to the question of existence and identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Scholars have diversely discussed that the philosophic voices that resound in the American consciousness—and in the works of Fitzgerald—can be credited to American philosophers such as William James, John Dewey, George Santayana, Paul Tillich, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. What is noteworthy about Fitzgerald and Mailer is both the influence of European existentialism on their canon of works, and the reflection of existential culture of their era in their novels such as *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Dream*, moments that reflect the

growing influence of European existentialisms in American culture.

For Fitzgerald, the notable moment of *Gatsby* or the postwar Jazz Age reflects the foremost damage of cultural discourse, which concentrated on the applicability of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophies of modern civilization and individual to American concerns. In Mailer's cultural setting, the appropriateness of Martin Heidegger's ideas of the individual's effort for legitimacy and the mounting discourse on the probability of existential psychology becomes the subject of Mailer's analytic of American culture in *An American Dream*. It is through the uniqueness of these authors' translations of existential philosophies to American interests that Fitzgerald and Mailer capture their specific American cultural moments and put their cultural moments in their works, moreover they add depth to their art through their adoption of the existential discourses that were gaining currency in their cultural moments.

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Mailer's *An American Dream* were written during a time when the essentials were being laid for the study of existential philosophy in America via Nietzsche and Heidegger correspondingly. In Fitzgerald's postwar 1920s, American cultural intellectuals focused on Nietzsche's philosophies of morality and tried to apply Nietzsche's philosophies on modern subjectivity to modern American culture, what is addressed in *The Great Gatsby*. In Mailer's postwar period, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard's existentialisms remained a part of America's discourse on the validity of existentialism to American culture, yet Mailer writes *An American Dream* when existential psychology is substituted the traditional Freudian and Jungian approaches to psychoanalysis in America and Heidegger's philosophy and psychology flooded American discourse, a moment Mailer capture in *An American Dream*. Yet even though the precise philosophies each of these writers engage with is different, they find frequent ground in their shared *existential* vision of the dilemmas of and remedies for the modern individual and the modern, "civilized" world.

Like Fitzgerald and Mailer, the Existentialists share a comparable idea of the

complications of existence and of living in modern eras. Particularly, they focus on the insinuations of our inherent subjectivity and lack of ability to ever achieve an objective viewpoint, the intricacy of making choices, decisions, and commitments in the deficiency of absolute truths and objective guides, and our existence as self-creating and meaning-seeking individuals, who must look for meaning and value for our lives despite the fact that our world is meaningless, and absurd. Considerably, existentialists answer Naturalists: yes, the world is including beast forces beyond our control, yet existing individuals are not just animals forced to biological struggle to survive. They have the aptitude to exceed these forces and create genuine meaning and content for their own lives, They are responsible for developing their quintessence, and they have the capability to become attentive of these forces and choose how react to them, in their everyday lives. All these subjects are Fitzgerald and Mailer's critiques of and remedies for the modern individual and the world.

Even though Fitzgerald and Mailer's visions are undeniably existential in nature, the essentials of their philosophic visions vary to a great extent. In a 1964 interview published in the *Paris Review*, Norman Mailer mentioned that Fitzgerald is one of the writers whom he has learned the most from. Actually, Fitzgerald's philosophic visions of modernity, his translation of existentialisms to American interests, and his existential concerns with the effects of a gradually more oppressive American system on the individual and the culture, are reflected in Mailer's literary works. In actual fact, "in *An American Dream* Mailer discloses his development of a coherent view of life in the form of his own American brand of existentialism, a vision of the sole psychological experience of being American that grows from the American existential foundations laid by Fitzgerald in the first half of the 1920." (Foster, 1968, 222)

Considerably, critical studies of Fitzgerald incessantly refer to this writer as innocents of philosophy even though evidences reveal that Fitzgerald is minimally versed in the philosophic discourse of his time. But his early works show that Nietzsche's ideology had a deep impact on his early

works. If Fitzgerald had not commented on every facet of culture in both his fiction and his non-fiction his innocence of the philosophic currents of his age would be more probable, even a sensible assumption. Yet, European philosophies were translated, and appropriated to American interests both in the intellectual circles, and in social criticism, cultural annotations, journals and magazines.

"Fitzgerald was not only names and defines his age "the *Jazz Age*" but also captures the vivacity of this age like no other writer of his time." (Brucoli, 2004, 84) The critics who have recognized the existentialist impulse in Fitzgerald's work see Fitzgerald not only as a chronicler, but more prominently as a considerate and perceptive social critic who is working out the "dilemmas of philosophy" in his art.

Fitzgerald scholar David Ulrich identifies the existentialist desire in Fitzgerald's early works in his focus on identity and cultural memory as socially constructed (Ulrich, 1999, 418). Fitzgerald's early concern with America's creation of mythologies and what Foster identifies as Fitzgerald's characters' forms the origin of Fitzgerald's early "existential vision" of modernity. Foster believes that this vision positions Fitzgerald as the first modern American writer to interpret American experience existentially. Fitzgerald's multipart vision positions him as a chronicler and an existentialist, the philosophy he explores and espouses inseparable from the historic moment he puts in motion through his art. In fact, all through his early short stories and novels, Fitzgerald addresses and captures the existential center of his times by showing how the individualist values of Americans conflict with the conformist values of the culture at large. His opinions are mirrored in his early novels *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) by illustrating broken characters both physically and spiritually and thus incapable to act. Yet Fitzgerald's vision of modernity, keep a sense of hope for the individual and American culture. For Fitzgerald, the first step is understanding the self and world. *This Side of Paradise* closes with Amory Blaine's admission that he knows himself, nothing more, suggestive of Amory's growth and his existential awareness of self. *The Beautiful and*

Damned ends with the awareness that wealth is more imperative than human life and by lauding courage and an individualist ethic through Anthony Patch's proud vision of himself. Ullrich mentions that Fitzgerald's early works show his formation of a "complex philosophy of culture," what had previously developed by 1919-1920, and informs his critique of American culture in his later works. But, with *The Great Gatsby* in 1922, Fitzgerald claimed to Maxwell Perkins that "he wants to write something new", something that is not only different from his own works, but from the artistic endeavors of his contemporaries. Critics such as Richard Lehan argue that "the new novel Fitzgerald had already begun to imagine in 1922, what would become *The Great Gatsby*, "was to be consciously different" (Lehan, 1990, P. 28). In fact, "in a 1924 interview Fitzgerald reveals one of the ways in which *Gatsby* was to be different from recent trends in American literature." (Brucoli, 2004, 83)

Fitzgerald's compound mixture vision in *Gatsby*, not merely embodies the cultural and philosophic dilemmas of his era, but divides him from the literary-artistic works of his time. "Fitzgerald's pessimism toward American culture is retained in Nick Carraway's scorn for the blind masses and the "legal aristocracy," yet in *Gatsby*, as critics argue. Fitzgerald's philosophy is positivistic, optimistic, and affirmative in nature." (Foster, 1968, 225)

Ronald Berman notes that Fitzgerald's philosophic vision in *Gatsby* is found in his arrangement of "the dilemmas of philosophy in anecdotes of social life," These philosophies are enthused by the philosophic discourse of Fitzgerald's time and they became more complex in the novelistic form of *Gatsby*. (Berman, 2001, 9) Wright Morris claims, Fitzgerald's existential-philosophic vision of modernity, positions him as the first American to formulate his own philosophy of the absurd.

Even though Fitzgerald's philosophic vision is existential and origins from Nietzsche, we can not entirely understand Fitzgerald's absurdist vision by relying entirely on a frame like Nietzsche, which is only part of Nick's story and Fitzgerald's complex philosophy. Actually, as Nick comes to see more of

how *Gatsby* sees, he understands that *Gatsby's* faith is in the absurd. It is *Gatsby's* dream, his pledge to Daisy, his faith, courage and hope, in the face of hopelessness that both revives Nick's faith and forms the root of the absurdist vision Fitzgerald presents in *Gatsby*. We can understand Fitzgerald's absurdist vision of modernity by considering *Gatsby* as an outsider to the Nietzsche's civilization Nick envisions as his own. When Daisy found out that *Gatsby* was not "a person from much the same strata as herself," *Gatsby* "made the most of his time" with Daisy, an admittance that suggests the "penniless young man without a past" is aware of the impracticality of winning Daisy. *Gatsby's* quest to amass great wealth and win Daisy, is, partly, achieved, when he risks everything for the possibility of achieving what is considered to be impossible. For Nick, it is *Gatsby's* endless hope, his faith that the absurd is possible, that makes *Gatsby's* vision different from his own.

Fitzgerald's view—that "hope keeps the world beautifully alive"—forms the basis of his absurdist vision (Lehan, 1990, 28). It is *Gatsby's* hope and the authentic liveliness of his creative spirit, that Nick suggests separates *Gatsby* from the majority of men. Yet, what is unique about *Gatsby* is that he embraces his creative spirit and gives direction to his vitality through his promise to Daisy. In fact, *Gatsby* embodies the American spirit Fitzgerald sees as part of the American character that can save the individual and culture from the corruption. Accordingly, "*Gatsby* embodies Fitzgerald's hopeful vision for the individual: that hope, faith, commitment, and courage will keep the world beautifully alive" (Lehan, 1990, 29). What Nick memorializes through writing *The Great Gatsby* is the one exceptionally American characteristic that has survived the times. It is this American spirit that Nick sees in *Gatsby* and that he feels responsible for sharing with his contemporaries, a spirit whose physical personification is damaged by the irresponsible, but live in the hearts and minds of his contemporaries." Through Fitzgerald's creation of his own consistent view of American culture and the individual's place in culture, Fitzgerald puts his philosophy in motion through *Gatsby* with the intention of descriptive "a nation's vision of itself"

(Mailer, 1999, 98). Through *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald shows us that we must break all illusions and come to realize the world more obviously; we must take responsibility for developing our own vision.

“Mailer’s vision of the existential foundations of America builds on and departs from Heidegger’s existentialism through his views that, there is a God, and that God depends on human action.” (Adams, 1976, 38) It is at this point that Mailer’s existentialism departs from Heidegger’s. Although Heidegger’s existentialism is constantly secular, Mailer builds from this view that the existence of God depends on the individual and he enlarges the meaning of this existentialism through his view “that God depends on the outcome of human action” (Adams, 1976, 38). Eventually, Mailer’s view is a consequence of this view. Mailer envisions the tension between faithfulness and unfaithfulness as a struggle between good and evil in the individual. Further, because faithfulness depends on an individual’s thoughts and action, Mailer’s view “that God depends on the outcome of human action” could read, “God depends on the outcome of human thought and action” (Adams, 1976, 39). Additionally, Mailer couples his view that God is engaged in a war with the Devil here on earth, a war for souls that began in *The Garden of Eden*. All through *An American Dream*, Rojack engages in war internally and externally, existentially and literally. It involves expelling evil from within the self and the world, Rojack believes an evil on earth is embodied in the form of Nazi soldiers and in the form of “the Devil’s daughter,” Deborah. It is a religious war and a personal war for existential and literal freedom. It is a national and cultural war in which the individual struggles for freedom from an domineering government and social structure, and against the more totalitarian values of America that breed, conventionality and submission. Mailer envisions this war as a Revolutionary War, in which Rojack, struggles to liberate himself from an oppressive environment, another American legacy Mailer shows is the experience of “Being” American in his current historic moment.

Mailer suggests the American Existential Experience and existential Vision of America is a

legacy we must recuperate in order to fully understand how we arrived and the present, historic moment, as a culture. Significantly, this legacy is a revolution in the consciousness of its time, which became a war to attain freedom.

Before America’s origin as a nation, America was an annulled, and abyss from which individuals could make a new start. Early Americans were free and endless possibilities stood before them in this New World. From this foundation, American democracy was born.

Throughout Mailer’s intricate vision of the existential essentials of Being American, he proposes that America and Americans should recover the existential possibilities the individual and the nation were founded on. This is the scheme Mailer shows all through *An American Dream*: he presents what America once was, what it is in his present time, and through Rojack’s aggressive response. Mailer shows us what could soon come to be. Actually, he does not promote violence as many critics believe, he simply shows us the possibilities for our future if Americans and America, itself, continues to stifle individuals in conventionality. It is through Rojack that Mailer states his view that, if society asphyxiates an individual, stifles him in conformity, and then he cannot act in any moral way. This is the integrity and the philosophy of *An American Dream*, that we are responsible for facing-up to our own lives before we are so swamped in our inauthentic modes of Being American that our great effort for freedom becomes a ferocious retaliation against the world in which we are fascinated. For Mailer, the growing violence and coercion visited upon the individual by the culture in general in his historic moment will either lead to the full obliteration of the individual, individualism, and the vivacity of the human spirit. Through Rojack, Mailer shows us how vital our need to restructuring ourselves and our culture is. As individuals, we must believe our responsibility to struggle to discover a more reliable life style for our own and our nation’s futures. On a nationalistic level, what is at stake is the future possibilities of both individual and the nation as a whole; on a sacred level, what is at wager is the soul of humanity and the existence of God, all of which Mailer envisions as bounce to the

existential experience that is exclusive to Being American. Mailer suggests we must recover the existential possibilities for ourselves and our nation and struggle to discover a valid way of living for ourselves and our culture. This is Mailer's *American Dream* that authentic individuals will supply to the creation of a real community, culture, and American experience and will free us from the public and individual violence of the past and present. Mailer believes, the future of the human being, the nation, and God depend on it.

Fitzgerald and Mailer's emphasis on subjective epistemology are similarly embodied in their viewpoint that we need to break all mirages and come to see self and world more obviously and united. They call for a heightened consciousness of self and world through which individuals can start to create their own meaning, structure, and way of living in their times. They illustrate the significance of living artistically. In their view, we must struggle to create. The real growth of the individual, the need to give direction to the vitality of the human spirit, and the need for the expression of the creative spirit, should be the regular aim of humankind. In reality, the most important thing they ask readers to do is to take responsibility for what their own lives are summed to. But as voices of their own generations, Fitzgerald and Mailer not only take responsibility for their own lives as artist, but also feel a sense of responsibility to their readers and nation.

Fitzgerald and Mailer show us that we should, break from the herd and create our own morality and scheme for living. "Tolerate the crowd and come to recognize ourselves, and strive for a more authentic existence for ourselves, others, the creation of a genuine public, and for an authentic American experience. We must make a promise to and for our lives and give direction to the vitality of our artistic spirits.

In *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald guides us through the Jazz Age, modern New York and the standards of modern vision. In *An American Dream*, Mailer leads us through the philosophical and psychological experience of Being American. "Mailer guides readers through the 'psychological frontier'— the only frontier in America, Mailer states, that has not

been used up, that has to be explored." (Adams, 1976, 39) Yet Fitzgerald and Mailer both explore and guide us through the existential center of their times by amalgamate philosophy and art and capture the deepness of the dilemmas of human existence for their era. In fact, the depth in which these two writers detain the texture and feel of their respective historic human moments is both what gives their art its lasting quality, and is the genius of their art. So, Fitzgerald and Mailer's messages places them as more than just chroniclers of American experience, who capture the psychological and philosophic experiences of Being American in their times they serve as prophets for their generations, for Americans then and now and healers for "those who are without faith" (Fadiman, 1933, 63).

CONCLUSION

F. Scott Fitzgerald and Norman Mailer's American literary and philosophic origins, as well as the American cultural currents of their eras have been lengthily explored in their literary art. *The Great Gatsby* and *An American Dream* stand as testaments to these writers' engagement with and right understanding of their cultural moments, which reflect the rising influence of European existentialisms in American culture. For Fitzgerald, the historic moment of *Gatsby*—the postwar *Jazz Age*—reflects the main strain of cultural discourse, which focused on the applicability of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophies of modern civilization and the modern individual to American interests and wills. In Mailer's cultural milieu, the applicability of Martin Heidegger's ideas of the individual's strive for authenticity and the increasing discourse on the feasibility of existential psychology as a substitute to psychoanalytic approaches to mental health becomes the subject of Mailer's analytic of American culture in *An American Dream*. Critics see Fitzgerald not only as a chronicler, but more prominently as a considerate and insightful social critic who is working out the "dilemmas of philosophy" in his art. Indeed Fitzgerald's existential vision of modernity places him as the first modern American writer to interpret American experience existentially. Fitzgerald's complex vision positions him as a chronicler and an existentialist, the philosophy he explores and espouses indivisible

from the historic moment he puts in motion through his art. Actually, all through his early works, he addresses and captures the existential center of his times by showing how the individualist values of Americans conflict with the growing oppressive and conformist values of the culture in general.

The influence of Fitzgerald on Mailer's works is not just in techniques. His philosophic visions of modernity, his translation of existentialisms to American interests, and his existential apprehensions with the effects of a harsh American system on the individual and the culture resounds throughout Mailer's cultural criticism and his literary works.

Yet although Fitzgerald and Mailer's visions are undeniably existential, the essentials of their philosophic visions, like those of their predecessors, greatly vary.

REFERENCES

- Adams Laura, (1976), *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer*, Athens, Ohio UP,
- Berman Ronald, (2001), *Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and the Twenties*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press.
- Bruccoli Matthew J. and Judith Baughman, eds. (2004), *Conversations with F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Jackson University Press of Mississippi.
- Fadiman Clifton, (1933), *Ernest Hemingway, an American Byron Nation*, 63-64.
- Fitzgerald F. Scott., (1919). *Babes in the Woods*, Smart Set, 67-71.
- _____. (1998), *The Beautiful and Damned*, New York, Oxford UP.
- _____. (1925), *The Great Gatsby*, New York, Scribner.
- Foster Richard, (1968), *Mailer and the Fitzgerald Tradition*, NOVEL 1.
- Lehan Richard, (1990), *The Great Gatsby: The Limits of Wonder*. Boston, G.K. Hall & Co.
- Morris Wright, (1963), *The Territory Ahead*, New York, Athenaeum.
- Mailer Norman, (1959), *Advertisements for Myself*, New York, Medallian Books.
- _____. (1999), *An American Dream*, New York, Vintage Books.

_____. (1966), *Cannibals and Christians*, New York, The Dial Press.

_____. (1972), *Rebuilding the Cities*, John P. New York, Wiley.

Ullrich David W, (1999), *Memorials and Monuments: Historical Method and the Reconstruction of Memory in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'The Ice Palace'*, Studies in Short Fiction.