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The Superficial World of Social Transcendence as Seen in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*

In F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, manners and social etiquette are the defining elements that inform and structure the characters within the novel. Both protagonists, Dick and Nicole Diver, reside upon the surface, as mere caricatures of authentic character. They are both preoccupied with being loved and adored which creates parasitic relationships with others around them. Nicole strives to fashion herself within the superficial praise and valorization of her exterior qualities; however, lack of attention prompts her hysterical outbursts, placing the means to her mental cohesion external to her own person. Nicole thrives on immediate satisfactions; therefore, her substance is an ephemeral fusion of corporeal and mental flattery. In turn, this necessitates the need of a world outside herself in order to pacify her hysteric outbursts, thus keeping her emotional sanity out of her grasp. Conversely, Dick once conducted himself through life with all the social graces available to him (particularly repose and sobriety), creating a fantastic, transcendent world where he was able to guide himself through his own narrative. However, once Dick's repose dissolves, his access to his cathartic fantasy is fragmented, rendering him increasingly more indifferent to everything around him. Essentially, Dick's disintegration from the social veneer ironically makes him increasingly more reliant on others to obtain any form of transcendence. By shedding

all social interest, Dick externalizes his once interior porthole to elevated cathartic fantasy.

Dick Diver creates a fantasy world where he is able to manipulate people's present realities into a product of his creation, mainly through the absorption of their vices, thus leaving people feeling edified after having purged all social malignance. Dick provides the access to transcendence to those around him because "people believed he made special reservations about them, recognizing the proud uniqueness of their destinies, buried under the compromises of how many years" (Fitzgerald 27), elevating them above the trappings of convention. In this respect, Dick acts as the 'present'<sup>1</sup> catalyst to the joys of their future destinies, however, only "so long as they [subscribe] to [his world] completely" (27). Dick provides a purgative framework whereby those around him can indulge in the social conduct and cathartic happiness his manner and repose provides. Furthermore, Dick is able to "[win] everyone quickly with an exquisite consideration and a politeness that moved so fast and intuitively that it could be examined only in its effect" (27). Essentially, Dick charms them beyond reasonable doubt, opening the "gate to his amusing world" where "their happiness [is] his preoccupation, but at the first flicker of doubt as to its all-inclusiveness he evaporate[s] before their eyes, leaving little communicable memory of what he had said or done"(28). People submit to his "world" to partake in the glory that it represents--- an escape from reality. Through people's interactions and engagements with Dick, they "[perceptibly] [...] [give] up something [:] a preoccupation, an anxiety, a suspicion" (32) transforming them into "their best selves" (32). Considering that people around him use him as a proxy for dispelling their vices,

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<sup>1</sup> Present as understood in relation to the different stratum of time (past and future). Present in this specific instance is also synonymous with immediate as opposed to physically present in spatial locations.

Dick's arms are burdened, constantly "full of the slack he had taken up from others" (33). Dick's drive to entertain and host parties gives him purpose because he is at his most sensible while catering to others, tacitly catering to himself. Essentially, Dick's "world" is highly parasitic: everyone is feeding off each other for their own personal benefit. This parasitism is vital to Dick's integrity because just as much as he keeps people together, by both orchestrating parties and being the pivotal means for the cleansing and purging of sin, he too is incomplete without this audience. Dick is at the pinnacle of his existence when he is needed, being the adhesive that binds people together, thus making them feel "incomplete without him" (150).

As much as Dick fills other people's world with happiness and purpose, he is a silhouette of a real character who exists within the shallow veneer of respectable society. His emphasis on manners and repose is emblematic of how preoccupied he is with meager surface issues. Social conduct does not provide the gateway into meaning; rather, it is a prescribed set of rules and guidelines to which people collectively submit<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the fantastic world that Dick provides is only accessible through the sobriety of his repose. The notion that "no American men [have] any repose, except himself" (51) elucidates that he subscribes to a world where leisure allows him to thrive. The combination of both sobriety and repose synergizes an animated control through which Dick conducts his manners. However, when Dick starts drinking heavily, he loses his sobriety making his fantasy world fall apart. In response to Dick's lack of manners, Mary North states: "[a]ll people want is so have a good time and if you make them unhappy you cut yourself off from nourishment"(313). This notion of "nourishment" is reflective

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<sup>2</sup> One could even go as far to align this notion with that of a Hobbesian "social contract" whereby people submit to a given social code and/or morale in order to receive protection and security.

of social ceremony as the sustenance of the community. People need Dick to participate in their lives, perpetuating the parasitic feeding of social gatherings. Therefore, in as much as people need him to obtain transcendence, he needs the mannered structure of simulated order to buttress his cathartic fantasy.

Dick describes a class of "exploiters [...] formed by the sponges, who were sober, serious people [...], with a purpose in life and no time for fooling" (72). For that reason, when Dick forfeits his sobriety, no longer being serious and "exploiting" other people's purgatorial pulse, his purpose, as a catalyst to others' happiness (and vicariously his own), escapes him, thus rendering him increasingly more indifferent. After Dick acts without his renowned social graces, he becomes incoherent, spewing out fragmented shards of other's "slack" (33) because he is no longer bound by a social order, however plastic, which makes him intelligible: "[a] charming representative of the-' he stumbled momentarily, '-a firm of -bring me Brains addled a l'anglaise.' Then he went into an appeased sleep, belching now and then contentedly into the soft warm darkness" (275). After losing the structure of his repose and manners, Dick can no longer stomach everyone else's purged vice, thus stimulating and inducing him to reject and project it out of himself. However, in doing so, Dick dissolves his impulse to bring others together, which leaves him fragmented. By no longer striving to be the object of other people's admiration, Dick becomes increasingly detached from the meaningless, shallow social world that encompasses everyone. By refusing to participate within the social interactions and discourses of others, Dick is left unmotivated, fragmented, and bankrupt, thus completely passive and indifferent.

After his fantasy has faded, Nicole states: "I've ruined you", "you used to want to create things-now you seem to want to smash them up" (267). Because he can no longer create, he must rely on previous creations. However, being unable to indulge his past fantasy, Dick's relationship with the present is stunted, ruining any prospective future. Being no longer able to create anything, he can only mend what is already there. Nicole, sensing Dick's current fragility, "had come to hate his world with its delicate jokes and politeness"(280) stating that "his beach, [is] perverted now to the tastes of the tasteless"(280), while his inventions are "buried deeper than the sand of so few years" (281). In addition, she describes how she "hardened again as Dick knelt on the straw mat and looked about for Rosemary" (281). For Dick, Rosemary offers an avenue to access his fantasy world because she played a role within it, allowing him to revisit the past through interacting with her. Upon seeing Rosemary, "the past drifted back and he wanted to hold her eloquent giving-of-herself in its precious shell, till he enclosed it, till it no longer existed outside him" (208). Rosemary acts as a "catalytic agent to precipitate out [...]old reservations"(53); specifically, the touchstone to his 'old' fantasy. Upon seeing Rosemary, the "cloud of Dick's heart-sickness lifted as he began to play with [her], bringing out his old expertness with people [:] a tarnished object of art" (282). Dick is able to return to his glory days and escape the present through his interaction with her because she is emblematically a product of his invention, a part of his former fantasy world. Through his connection with Rosemary, Dick realizes that his fantasy has not abandoned him; rather, he abandoned it. Rosemary still plays her role recasting him back into its plot.

Dick develops a reliance upon his creations, because what was once a social indulgence is now an element of security. Dick's children are the offspring of his once transcendent world. There is an instance in the novel where his children sing: "Ouvre-moi ta porte [p]our l'amour de Dieu" (29), which means "open (for me) your door for the love of God." This verse parallels everyone's opening their world to their love of Dick's influence. The fact that his children are the ones who voice an omniscient quality about their father communicates how, being a product of his conditioning, they are able to express and articulate the rites of passage into his world. In a sense, while Dick still has his social manners and wits about him, he is fashioned as a god-like figure providing social providence to his followers. When both Nicole--"the product of [Dick's] ingenuity and toil"(55), much like his children--and Dick are positioned stably within his fantasy, every face "[turns] toward them [resembling] the faces of poor children at a Christmas tree [...]," while they "daringly lift [their guests] above conviviality into the rarer atmosphere of sentiment" (34): cathartic emotional transcendence. This notion of a childlike gaze eager for transcendence fixes Dick as the sole patriarch, the divine guide to enlightenment. However, this relationship of father and child is subverted once Dick loses touch with his fantasy. He becomes increasingly preoccupied and involved with his children, echoing the escalating need to be assured of his greatness and use. After his fantasy crumbles, Dick "[seeks] his children, not protectively but for protection" (280), looking to his own creations to protect him because he is exposed, no longer shielded by manners. While Dick becomes increasingly dependant on his fabrications, he becomes progressively static and unable to transcend the immediate shackles of the present.

Nicole experiences a similar thrust toward stillness; however, hers is an attempt to preserve and fix her position within the gaze of worship and admiration. Nicole is so concerned and focused on material and social status that she leaves no room for any interiority or substance. The only connection she has with herself is the odd fanatical outbursts of emotion expressed in the face of jealousy, abuse, or lack. Nicole was sexually abused by her father, teaching her at an early age that her function is merely sexual and physical, undermining the sanctity of the mind and body respectively. This "horror" (131) creates a fissure between mind and body, resulting in hysteric symptoms, thus fragmenting Nicole into "a whole lot of different simple people" (292). Nicole cannot grow into a full coherent person because she was robbed of her interiority by her father's lust for immediate pleasures. Her desire for stillness is manifested only when she feels instant pleasure, adoration, and praise, for instance: "she was happy; she did not want anything to happen, but only for the situation to remain in suspension as the two men tossed her from one mind to another; she had not existed for a long time, even as a ball" (276). This notion of existence is perpetuated by other people's preoccupation with her; therefore, her use and purpose is reliant on others, positioning her purpose outside of herself. Nicole is not capable of substantive emotion, rationality, or opinion. Thus, she requires someone else to guide her through her life, informing and framing her gaze while buttressing her shallow necessities. Nicole is at her best when she is being catered to and surrounded by other people's praises; however, when they are not present, her own emotions surface in bouts of furious neurotic rage. This parallels Nietzsche's musings on Apollo and Dionysus in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Nicole's 'Dionysian' outbursts of unbridled hysteria are lucid demonstrations of emotion that can only be regulated by the imposition of order, structure, and mental dominance, necessitating a masculine Apollonian counterpart to pacify her. Apollo is regarded "as the marvelous divine image of the *principium individuationis*<sup>3</sup>, whose looks and gestures radiate the full delight, wisdom, and beauty of 'illusion'" (Nietzsche sec. 1), demanding "self-control from his people and, in order to observe such self-control, a knowledge of self" (sec. 4). The concept of individuation here works to assert Apollo outside of social norms by focusing the perspective lens inwards, thus being able to transcend and ultimately subdue collective conventions through individual will. Dick, who once occupied an Apollonian position within his relationship to Nicole, is fragmented between domestic and professional roles, allowing Nicole's ecstatic Dionysian outbursts of "unashamed, unafraid, unconcerned " laughter resembling "some mild escape of childhood" (Fitzgerald 192) and irrationality to overwhelm him; this incites "all the rigid, hostile walls which either necessity or despotism has erected between [them] [to] [shatter] giving way for the outburst of pure emotion" (Nietzsche sec.1). To further parallel Nicole's character to that of Dionysus, the narrative describes how "the brilliance [and] versatility of madness is akin to the resourcefulness of water seeping through, over and around a dike [requiring] the untied front of many people to work against it" (Fitzgerald 191-2), therefore ascribing this force of nature as larger than life and in need of a solid impermeable structure to harbour it. Dick teeters between upholding his prerogative of stable order and falling victim to his own emotions; consequently, the outcome of this tension is indifference, for "[t]he dualism in his views

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<sup>3</sup> The *principle of individuation* is understood as the principle through which one's entity is differentiated from others.



of her - that of the husband, that of the psychiatrist --[is] increasingly paralyzing his faculties" (188). For example, after Nicole's fit of hysteria, Dick is "filled with a violent disgust that was not like anger" (193), alongside swelling sentiments of "agony" (190) because "he [cannot] watch [Nicole's] disintegrations without participating in them" (190-1) compelling "his intuition [to rill] out of him as tenderness and compassion" (191) basking in a "hot sorrow" and "grief that presented itself" (191.). These feelings are juxtaposed and counterpointed by the impulse "to treat her with active affirmative insistence, keeping the road to reality always open, making the road to escape harder going" (191). When Nicole is faced with Dick's growing indifference, her inability to be in command of her emotions allows "excess [to] [reveal] itself as [her] truth, [...] spoke[n] out of the bosom" of her narcissistic, bodily inclinations, for "whenever the Dionysian voice [is] heard, the Apollonian norm [seems] suspended or destroyed" (Nietzsche sec. 4) This notion parallels how Nicole's thrust towards her own immediate pleasure undercuts Dick's attempts to condition and constructively surround her within his notions of structure and order as adhesive measures to collect her fragmented emotions together. Therefore, Nicole, considering these binaries, embeds herself within the realm of shallow immediate desires, while Dick increasingly seeps into a world of "torment," trumping "the individual to produce [a] redemptive vision<sup>4</sup> and to sit quietly in his rocking rowboat in mid sea, absorbed in contemplation"(sec. 4). As a result, Dick's once prized world of manners and social order (as executed by his individuation) has isolated him from others, thus dipping him deeper into the realm of his own mind.

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this argument, the *redemptive vision* is best understood as Dick Diver's fantasy world. Therefore, what was once a gateway to transcendence/redemption is now a mere form of static isolation.

Meanwhile, Nicole is increasingly enthralled by her focus on fulfilling her transient desires.

Moreover, Nicole yearns to dislodge herself from Dick because she no longer feels loved or needed and has grown tired of his imposition. Nicole grandly states that "[e]ither you think --or else others have to think for you and take power from you, pervert and discipline your natural tastes, civilize and sterilize you" (Fitzgerald 289-90). This fear of civil sterilization mirrors the Dionysian preoccupation and focus upon nature, specifically, on one's natural inclinations. Through this fear of being fragmented from her "natural" desires, Nicole gravitates towards Tommy as a new lover (someone to satisfy her partial Dionysian motivations based on his increasing interest in her). Because of Nicole's lack of substance, she is a shadow of a character, unable to visualize a world of meaning outside her own narcissistic bubble. In her early letters to Dick, she writes, "the blind must be lead" (122), aligning herself with the aimless, directionless body in need of a strong mind to guide her. When Nicole contemplates making a "leap" (279) of faith, what may seem to be an assertion of an excessive individual thrust, is merely a repetition of what she was trying to escape in the first place. Essentially, she transfers Dick's position onto Tommy casting herself within the same role. After her relationship with Tommy is consummated, he "[m]omentarily had forgotten her too --almost in the second his flesh breaking from hers she had a foretaste that things were going to be different than she had expected" (294). This 'foretaste' foreshadows Nicole's perpetual lack, embedding her within a meaningless repetition, patterning her life through the substitution of similar sequences of aloof indifference. Dick has not progressed in curing her schizophrenic psychoses anymore than he has reinstated himself within the structured

order of social conventions. Nicole is forever emotionally detached, a passenger riding along in someone else's frame.

Ultimately, Nicole ends up repeating her past through the substitution of existing roles. Conversely, Dick perpetually fragments himself by losing touch with his social manners, fissuring his structural composure, thus making him increasingly reliant on figments of his previous creations to guide and protect himself. He disintegrates and grows increasingly indifferent and passive the more divided he becomes from the origins of his cathartic world. As Nicole and Dick try to escape the nightmare of their past, they inevitably fall prey to the shallow history they have always known. Unable to organize their lives around any genuine interiority predicated upon a relationship of self to self, outside of the facades that made them intelligible, Nicole and Dick are veneers of authentic character.

Works Cited

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