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A CRITICAL REVIEW OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *THE BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED*: BEAUTY, INHERITANCE, CONSUMPTION, AND THE SOCIAL BAGGAGE OF MODERNITY

Book under review: Fitzgerald, F. S. (1922). *The beautiful and damned*. Charles Scribner's Sons.

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Keywords	Abstract
F. Scott Fitzgerald, <i>The Beautiful and Damned</i> , Modernity, Consumption, Social Class, Inheritance, Decadence, Sociology, Anthropology, Cultural Capital, Anomie, American Literature.	F. Scott Fitzgerald's <i>The Beautiful and Damned</i> (1922) is frequently read as a novel of Jazz Age decadence, privileged youth, alcoholism, romantic disillusionment, and the moral exhaustion of the American leisure class. Such a reading, however, risks reducing the novel to a period piece. A closer interpretation reveals a much more durable social anatomy: Fitzgerald examines what happens when inherited wealth substitutes for vocation, when beauty becomes a form of social capital, when marriage becomes entangled with property, and when the desire for pleasure gradually consumes the capacity for meaningful action. This review reads the novel through literary, sociological, anthropological, and philosophical frameworks. Thorstein Veblen's theory of conspicuous consumption, Georg Simmel's analysis of metropolitan modernity, Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie, Max Weber's account of status and rationalization, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of distinction and cultural capital, Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, Mary Douglas's anthropology of classification, and Marcel Mauss's theory of exchange illuminate different dimensions of Fitzgerald's world. The review



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	also places the novel beside contemporary cultures of consumption, celebrity, curated identity, inherited privilege, and digital self-display. Rather than treating Anthony Patch and Gloria Gilbert simply as morally defective individuals, the review argues that they are products and performers of a social system in which desire has become detached from purpose. The novel's enduring importance lies precisely here: its "beautiful" surfaces conceal a structure of social, psychological, economic, and cultural baggage that modern societies have not entirely discarded.
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Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned* occupies an unusual position in American literary history. Published on March 4, 1922, it was Fitzgerald's second novel, situated between *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Its composition was substantially more deliberate than that of his first novel, and Fitzgerald revised it with the assistance of Edmund Wilson and his editor Maxwell Perkins. The novel was first serialized in *Metropolitan* from September 1921 to March 1922 before appearing in book form. ([Cambridge Assets](#))

The book is often treated as an imperfect precursor to *The Great Gatsby*. That judgment is understandable, but it can obscure the particular achievement of *The Beautiful and Damned*. Fitzgerald is not yet working with the compressed symbolic architecture of *Gatsby*'s world. Instead, he allows his novel to sprawl, accumulate contradictions, and expose the messiness of privileged existence. Contemporary reviewers themselves disagreed sharply: some praised Fitzgerald's observational powers while others criticized the novel's moralizing and characterization. ([Cambridge Assets](#))

At the centre are Anthony Patch, the grandson and prospective heir of the wealthy moral reformer Adam Patch, and Gloria Gilbert, a beautiful young woman whose identity is inseparable from the social value assigned to beauty, youth, fashion, and desirability. Their marriage begins with the promise of romantic fulfilment but gradually becomes an economy of expectation, consumption, resentment, and exhaustion. Anthony does not possess the discipline necessary to convert inherited privilege into meaningful work; Gloria possesses beauty but finds that beauty is itself subject to time. Their tragedy therefore cannot be reduced to drinking or extravagance. Their deeper problem is that they have inherited a social world but not a convincing purpose for inhabiting it.

The novel consequently asks a question that remains remarkably contemporary: **what happens to human beings when society teaches them how to acquire things, display themselves, and desire recognition, but fails to teach them what their lives are for?**

The Plot as a Social Anatomy

Anthony Patch imagines himself as an intellectual and potential writer, but his relationship with work remains largely hypothetical. He possesses leisure without transforming leisure into creative production. Gloria, meanwhile, has cultivated herself as an object of admiration. Their attraction is therefore partly reciprocal and partly narcissistic: each sees in the other an idealized confirmation of the life he or she wishes to possess.

Their marriage initially appears to offer an escape from ordinary constraint. Yet the escape becomes imprisonment. Alcohol, parties, expensive habits, social competition, marital quarrels, and



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financial anxiety progressively replace intellectual ambition. The inheritance expected from Adam Patch becomes the silent gravitational center of their existence. Instead of asking what they can make, they increasingly ask what they will receive.

This is one of Fitzgerald's most important insights. **Inheritance does not merely transfer money; it can transfer expectations, identities, anxieties, and moral assumptions.** The characters inherit not only a fortune but a social script.

The novel's historical setting intensifies this argument. It moves through the period surrounding the First World War and into the early Jazz Age, touching on consumer culture, automobiles, cinema, Wall Street speculation, changing sexual mores, class inequality, immigration, xenophobia, and the cultural obsession with youth. Recent scholarship consequently treats the novel as a substantially richer social document than its reputation as a failed precursor to *The Great Gatsby* might suggest. (LSU Press)

Veblen and the Theatre of Consumption

Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) provides one of the most productive sociological lenses through which to understand Fitzgerald's characters. Veblen argued that consumption can function as a public demonstration of economic status rather than merely as the satisfaction of practical needs (Veblen, 1899). In this sense, objects become social declarations.

Anthony and Gloria inhabit precisely such a world.

Their parties, clothing, meals, apartments, social acquaintances, and recreational habits possess meaning because they communicate position. Consumption becomes performative. To live well is not simply to live comfortably; it is to be seen as living extraordinarily.

The distinction is crucial. **Luxury in Fitzgerald is rarely private. It is social theatre.**

This observation also allows a striking analogy with contemporary life. The contemporary equivalent of the Jazz Age drawing room is often the digital profile. The expensive automobile, fashionable dress, elite restaurant, and glamorous party have acquired new technological counterparts in photographs, branded lifestyles, luxury travel posts, carefully staged interiors, and algorithmically circulated images. The medium has changed; the social grammar has not.

Veblen's insight therefore travels remarkably well across a century. What changes is not the fundamental desire for distinction but the machinery through which distinction is displayed. Fitzgerald's characters need witnesses. So do many contemporary consumers. The difference is that today's witness is potentially infinite.

Simmel, the Metropolis, and the Exhaustion of Sensation

Georg Simmel's analysis of metropolitan modernity adds another dimension. For Simmel (1950), modern urban life produces an enormous density of impressions. The individual encounters money, commodities, strangers, fashions, advertisements, occupations, and competing identities at an unprecedented scale. One response is what Simmel calls the blasé attitude: a defensive indifference produced by excessive stimulation.



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Anthony and Gloria repeatedly seek stimulation, yet stimulation eventually ceases to produce satisfaction. Parties become repetitive. Pleasure becomes habitual. Alcohol is no longer merely celebratory but aesthetic. Luxury loses its capacity to surprise.

This is one of Fitzgerald's subtle achievements: **he portrays decadence not simply as too much pleasure, but as the eventual inability to experience pleasure meaningfully.**

The tragedy is therefore not abundance itself. It is habituation to abundance.

A person who has everything may eventually discover that the possession of everything is not equivalent to the experience of meaning. In this respect, the novel anticipates contemporary debates surrounding overstimulation, compulsive consumption, attention economies, and the psychological consequences of perpetual novelty.

Fitzgerald's world is not technologically contemporary, but structurally it is familiar. His characters live in a culture where novelty promises happiness, only to produce the need for greater novelty.

Durkheim and the Problem of Anomie

Émile Durkheim's concept of **anomie** offers perhaps the strongest sociological vocabulary for Anthony's deterioration. Durkheim (1951) used the term to describe a condition in which social norms become insufficiently regulating, leaving individuals without stable standards for desire and conduct.

Anthony possesses freedom but lacks direction.

That distinction matters. The novel does not portray him as a prisoner of conventional necessity. On the contrary, he has extraordinary freedom. Yet freedom without an internal or social structure of purpose becomes corrosive. There is no compelling reason for him to work, and therefore no compelling reason for him to stop postponing work. There is always another party, another drink, another social engagement, another postponement.

The inheritance functions paradoxically. It gives Anthony economic security while weakening the incentive to create a meaningful vocation.

This is where James L. W. West III's discussion of vocation becomes especially useful. West argues that the question of vocation is central to Fitzgerald's early novels and that *The Beautiful and Damned* develops a sustained concern with the necessity of meaningful work and purpose. ([Cambridge University Press](#))

Anthony's failure, therefore, is not simply laziness. It is a crisis of vocation.

The novel suggests that human beings need more than resources. They need structures through which resources become purpose.

Weber, Status, and the Problem of Inherited Identity

Max Weber's sociology of status provides another productive comparison. Social class is not merely a matter of economic possession; it involves honour, lifestyle, social recognition, and membership in particular communities (Weber, 1978).

Anthony belongs to a world in which status is inherited and performed. Adam Patch represents an older moral order associated with discipline, accumulation, reform, and public seriousness. Anthony



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represents a younger order in which the inherited fruits of discipline are consumed without the discipline that produced them.

- This creates an intergenerational conflict.
- The older generation asks: **What will you accomplish?**
- The younger generation increasingly asks: **What can you afford?**

Yet Fitzgerald does not romanticize Adam Patch either. His reformism is itself compromised by hypocrisy, authority, and moral rigidity. The novel is therefore not an uncomplicated sermon in favour of traditional values. It exposes both the old order and the new one.

This is important because otherwise the novel can easily be misread as a simple warning against pleasure. It is more complex than that. Fitzgerald is comparing competing systems of value and showing that neither inherited moralism nor unrestricted hedonism necessarily produces a humane life.

Bourdieu: Beauty, Taste, and Cultural Capital

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital allows Gloria's character to be examined with particular precision. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) argues that taste is socially organized and that cultural preferences participate in the reproduction of class differences.

Gloria's beauty functions similarly to capital.

Her appearance gives her access. Her youth grants her symbolic power. Her social presence has economic consequences even when she does not possess conventional economic authority. Yet beauty is unstable capital because the body changes.

This produces one of the novel's most painful paradoxes: **Gloria's greatest social asset is also the asset over which she has the least permanent control.**

Her fear of aging is therefore not merely vanity. It reflects a social system in which feminine value is disproportionately attached to youth and appearance.

The issue remains relevant. Contemporary societies frequently speak the language of individual self-expression while maintaining powerful commercial industries organized around appearance, youthfulness, beauty, fitness, fashion, cosmetic enhancement, and visibility. Gloria's anxiety can therefore be understood as an early literary representation of a problem that has not disappeared: the conversion of the human body into social currency.

Goffman and the Performance of the Self

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology is particularly illuminating here. Goffman (1959) conceptualized everyday interaction through the language of performance, impression management, front-stage behaviour, and back-stage behaviour.

Anthony and Gloria are extraordinary performers.

- Their public selves depend upon elegance, wit, beauty, sophistication, and social ease. Their private selves increasingly reveal insecurity, anger, dependence, jealousy, exhaustion, and fear.



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- The contrast between public performance and private collapse gives the novel much of its psychological force.
- The contemporary analogy is unmistakable. Social media has not invented self-presentation; it has industrialized it. Fitzgerald's characters curate rooms, clothes, friendships, parties, and conversations. Contemporary individuals can curate photographs, captions, locations, professional identities, and lifestyle narratives at a scale Fitzgerald could not have imagined.

The underlying problem is nevertheless similar: **when the performed self becomes more important than the lived self, maintaining the performance can consume the person who created it.**

Anthropology: Exchange, Purity, and Social Baggage

Anthropological theory further enlarges the novel.

Marcel Mauss's (1990) analysis of the gift demonstrates that exchange is rarely economically neutral. Gifts establish relationships, obligations, reciprocity, indebtedness, and status. In Fitzgerald's novel, inheritance can be interpreted as an enormous intergenerational gift—but one that carries obligations without necessarily producing gratitude or moral continuity.

Anthony does not simply await money. He waits for a socially transformative event that he imagines will release him from uncertainty.

Inheritance becomes a promise of identity.

Mary Douglas's (1966) anthropology of classification and social pollution offers another provocative lens. Douglas demonstrates that societies classify people, objects, behaviours, and spaces according to systems of order. What appears "improper" or "out of place" can become symbolically polluting.

Fitzgerald's characters live inside precisely such classificatory structures. The distinction between respectable and disreputable behaviour, old money and vulgar display, legitimate inheritance and scandalous acquisition, respectable sexuality and transgression, cultivated taste and vulgarity is constantly negotiated.

The novel's characters are therefore carrying what may be called **social baggage**: inherited classifications that precede individual choice.

This baggage is both traditional and modern. Family expectations, gender roles, class codes, ideas about respectable marriage, attitudes toward work, assumptions about wealth, and standards of beauty are carried from one generation to another. Modernity may change the costume, but it does not necessarily empty the suitcase.

Marx and the Conversion of Life into Commodity

A Marxian reading adds another layer. Marx's concept of commodity fetishism describes a situation in which social relations become obscured by relationships between commodities (Marx, 1976).



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Fitzgerald's world is full of this transformation.

A person's worth becomes connected to what he possesses. A woman's attractiveness becomes exchangeable as social value. A marriage becomes entangled with inheritance. A party becomes a display of economic capacity. Even leisure becomes a class signal.

The result is a strange inversion: **human beings begin to exist for the sake of the lifestyle rather than the lifestyle existing for the sake of human flourishing.**

This is why the title *The Beautiful and Damned* is so effective. "Beautiful" describes the visible surface; "damned" suggests the condition beneath it. The two terms are not opposites so much as stages of the same process. Beauty can become the entrance ticket to a world that eventually destroys the person trying to maintain it.

Decadence, Naturalism, and the Question of Responsibility

Recent Fitzgerald scholarship has challenged the tendency to regard the novel simply as an immature bridge toward *The Great Gatsby*. Kirsten MacLeod, for example, argues that the novel retains important connections to aesthetic hedonism associated with Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde while bringing that tradition into tension with naturalism. ([Cambridge University Press](#))

A purely moral interpretation blames them for indulgence. A purely deterministic interpretation treats them as helpless products of class and historical circumstance. Neither position entirely captures the novel.

Their privilege creates conditions of possibility, but they still make choices within those conditions.

This ambiguity is one reason the novel remains valuable. Fitzgerald is not conducting a laboratory experiment in which social forces mechanically produce a predetermined outcome. He is depicting human beings caught between agency and structure.

The scientific and philosophical analogy is therefore not that Fitzgerald "proves" a sociological theory. Rather, his fiction performs something that social science also attempts: it places individual behaviour inside a network of historical, economic, cultural, and psychological conditions.

Traditional Baggage and Contemporary Life

The deepest contemporary relevance of *The Beautiful and Damned* lies in its treatment of inherited baggage.

The novel's world carries the baggage of the nineteenth century into the twentieth: inherited wealth, patriarchal assumptions, class hierarchy, moral respectability, gendered beauty, conspicuous consumption, and the belief that social position can substitute for substantive achievement.

The twenty-first century has discarded some of these forms while creating new ones. The aristocratic drawing room has become the curated digital profile. The social register has become the follower count. The fashionable party has become the branded lifestyle event. The expensive automobile has become one of many visible markers of status. The fear of social exclusion has moved from physical neighbourhoods and elite clubs into networked spaces where visibility and comparison are continuous.



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This analogy should not be pushed too far. Contemporary society is not simply another Jazz Age, and digital culture has created forms of social participation unavailable to Fitzgerald's characters. Yet the underlying social mechanism—**the desire to convert consumption into recognition**—remains recognizable.

In this sense, Fitzgerald was not merely describing the 1920s. He was describing a recurring modern problem.

The Scientific and Philosophical Dimension

- The novel can also be read through a philosophical distinction between **means and ends**.
- Modern societies are extraordinarily effective at producing means: money, commodities, technology, entertainment, mobility, information, and opportunities. But the possession of means does not automatically answer the question of ends.

Anthony and Gloria are surrounded by means but impoverished in ends.

- This resembles a central problem in Weberian modernity: rationalization can increase efficiency without telling human beings what they ought to value (Weber, 1978). The question of purpose remains unresolved.
- The novel also resonates with Nietzsche's concern with inherited values and the need for individuals to create meaning rather than merely inherit moral conventions (Nietzsche, 1887/1967). Yet Fitzgerald's characters do not successfully create new values. They reject some inherited restraints without constructing a sustainable alternative. That is their existential weakness. They escape the old cage but do not know where to go after leaving it.

Critical Evaluation of Fitzgerald's Achievement

The novel is not without weaknesses. Its length can feel excessive, and Fitzgerald occasionally allows social commentary to become overt. Some characters appear deliberately exaggerated, and the narrative sometimes oscillates between satire, psychological realism, romance, and moral parable. These tonal shifts have contributed to the novel's reputation as less formally controlled than *The Great Gatsby*. Scholarship has nevertheless increasingly treated those tonal tensions as objects of interpretation rather than simply defects. ([ResearchGate](#))

The novel's characterization can also frustrate. Anthony and Gloria are not conventionally "likable." Their self-absorption makes sustained sympathy difficult. Yet that difficulty can itself be productive. Fitzgerald does not ask readers simply to admire his protagonists. He asks them to observe what privilege looks like from inside its own consciousness.

The novel's greatest achievement is consequently diagnostic rather than inspirational. It does not offer a model of how to live. It shows what happens when a society teaches people to mistake **appearance for identity, possession for achievement, stimulation for happiness, and inheritance for purpose**. Its central metaphor is not really wealth. It is **waste**.

Time is wasted. Talent is wasted. beauty is wasted. Money is wasted. Affection is wasted. Possibility is wasted. And that makes the novel more tragic than a conventional morality tale. The characters are



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not destroyed because they possess nothing. They are destroyed because they possess possibilities without learning how to convert possibility into meaning.

Conclusion

The Beautiful and Damned deserves to be read not merely as a preliminary exercise for *The Great Gatsby*, but as a sustained examination of the social production of emptiness. Fitzgerald's America is undergoing a transformation from inherited nineteenth-century hierarchies toward a faster, more commercial, more spectacular modernity. Anthony and Gloria stand precisely at that historical threshold.

Veblen reveals their conspicuous consumption; Simmel clarifies their exhaustion within modern stimulation; Durkheim illuminates their anomie; Weber explains their status-bound identities; Bourdieu exposes beauty and taste as forms of social capital; Goffman reveals their performance of self; Mauss exposes the obligations contained within inheritance and exchange; Douglas illuminates the classificatory systems surrounding respectability; and Marx reveals the conversion of human relations into relations mediated by commodities.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that Fitzgerald's characters are carrying far more than money.

They carry social baggage.

They inherit ideas about gender, class, beauty, success, marriage, morality, respectability, leisure, and happiness. Their tragedy emerges when those inherited ideas collide with a rapidly changing social world. The same tension persists today, although the furniture has changed. Contemporary individuals may inhabit digital rather than drawing-room theatres, but the pressure to perform status, cultivate appearance, consume visibly, and transform identity into a marketable image remains powerful.

The novel therefore remains contemporary without being superficially "modern." Its relevance lies not in predicting social media or celebrity culture, but in identifying a deeper structure: **human beings can become alienated from themselves when the social world gives them increasingly sophisticated ways of displaying a life without helping them construct a life worth displaying.**

That is the enduring brilliance of Fitzgerald's title. The beautiful and the damned are not two separate categories. Beauty can become the surface on which damnation is written. And the final lesson is not simply that pleasure is dangerous, wealth is corrupting, or youth is temporary. It is more unsettling: **a person may inherit almost everything society considers valuable and still fail to inherit a reason to live.**

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