Paying Forever: A Cultural Analysis of Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited”

 When it comes to works that represent an age, few texts better represent the early 1930’s than F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” (1931). “Babylon Revisited” is often overshadowed in cultural criticism by *The Great Gatsby* and its chronicle of “the excesses of the sumptuous lifestyle of the wealthy in America in the 1920’s” (Gibb 98). Yet “Babylon Revisited” belongs to a different period of time and as such has something different to offer than *The Great Gatsby*. In it, Fitzgerald again addresses the excessive lifestyle he so famously captured in *Gatsby*, but here he shows the collapse of the lifestyle and its accompanying value system, as well as its continued pull after the collapse. Using its characters, “Babylon Revisited” shows the moral crisis America faced following the Crash of 1929, highlighting the difficulty of the conflict while advising moderation when moving forward.

Unfortunately, little criticism has been done on “Babylon Revisited” in general, despite Brian Sutton’s claim that it is “Fitzgerald’s greatest short story” (164), which he supports with articles by a number of different authors. Of the criticism that does exist, an unfortunate number focus on Charlie’s factually incorrect ride across the Seine. This issue initially arises in Richard Griffith’s article “A Note on Fitzgerald’s ‘Babylon Revisited,’” where Griffith points out “the strange route taken by Charlie Wales from the Ritz Bar to Lincoln Peters’s home in the Rue Palatine” (236). This vein of analysis is further continued by Garry Murphy and William Slattery in “The Flawed Text of ‘Babylon Revisited’: a Challenge to Editors, a Warning to Readers,” where they call his trip “a monumental editorial error” (315). While these authors make a valid point, they fail to look at the rest of “Babylon Revisited” and what it has to offer, instead staying focused on this one point that, for the most part, does not take away from the rest of the story. One of the only critics to touch on the value of “Babylon Revisited” from a cultural standpoint is Kurt Curnutt in his article “Fitzgerald’s Consumer World,” in which he writes that the story “recognizes...that even in a hobbled economy, consumers are less apt to right their values than they are to pine for new opportunities to indulge their irrational exuberance” (114). He argues that “Babylon Revisited” is a testament to the power of consumption and how even the Great Depression cannot curb it entirely, but on the whole his treatment of “Babylon Revisited” is unfortunately brief. This analysis will help expand the existing literature to help fill that gap, as well as open up conversation concerning cultural criticism in this time period.

America was a rapidly changing place during the Roaring Twenties. During World War I, production boomed as weapons and other military items were constantly in demand, and the economy grew accordingly. However, after World War I, there was nowhere to focus this enlarged economy. As a result, the “consumption ethic” was born, an ethic Malcolm Cowley called “a new ethic that encouraged people to buy” (Cowley 56). This is a sharp contrast to the earlier “production ethic” that was so popular in World War I, which encouraged “industry, foresight, thrift and personal initiative” (Cowley 55). This new consumption ethic was furthered along by the “vilification of financial restraint” (Curnutt 105) found in contemporary newspapers and periodicals that made the old value and moral system of the production ethic outdated. Furthermore, in order to finance this new consumption ethic, credit had to be made more readily available in order to enable as many people as possible to take part, resulting in “expanding credit through a variety of institutions” (Curnutt 106). Suddenly, people had money to spend and a wide array of products to buy.

Eventually, the consumption ethic came to be associated with the corruption of American values. People became so wealthy that “notions of value [lost] their material anchorage and [became] instead ever more abstract” (Carnutt 110). Essentially, excessive wealth caused people to lose contact with reality and allowed them to live in an imaginary world. As a result, “images of immateriality” (Curnutt 110) came to define the new world and ethic, creating an atmosphere in which it was not only accepted but encouraged to spend large amounts of money frivolously. This “pursuit of disembodied prosperity” resulted in the “loss of tangible measures of value” (Curnutt 110). No longer were things like family and stability and character valued as American ideals. Rather, the nation became “extravagant, pleasure-worshipping and reckless of tomorrow” (Cowley 56). The moral values America prided itself were no longer popular during the era of the consumption ethic but “old” (Fitzgerald 1850) and outdated compared to the new culture that had emerged.

Different characters are used throughout “Babylon Revisited” to represent these two different ethics. Marion is the epitome of the old time production ethic that was most popular before the boom of the 1920s. She and her husband “were just getting along...[and] never got ahead enough to carry anything but [Lincoln’s] insurance” (Fitzgerald 1849) during the boom years. As Marion herself remarks, “When you were throwing away money we were living along watching every ten francs” (Fitzgerald 1847). Marion is part of the class of people who worked and saved and did not spend any money or risk it in the stock market, and she was glad when the bust happened. Marion highlights just how much at odds the production and consumption ethics were. Marion saw the “consumption ethic” as wasteful and irresponsible, and events like the death of Marion’s sister only served to reinforce this idea. Following the Crash of 1929, she felt herself justified because it was that same selfishness and irresponsibility that caused it.

On the other side of the coin are Duncan and Lorraine, the personification of the consumption ethic. Duncan and Lorraine represent more of the younger generations, the people who really broke away from the past in order to enjoy themselves. They “[made] months into days in the lavish times of three years ago” (Fitzgerald 1844) by spending carelessly and excessively. For example, Lorraine rode a stolen tricycle with Charlie down the Étoile in the early hours of the morning and became an object of contention in Charlie’s marriage to Helen, although Charlie implies it never went so far as to an affair (Fitzgerald 1850). While Duncan and Lorraine are now both poor, they cannot let go of the past, doing their best to continue the drunken revelries of three years prior (Fitzgerald 1844). Lorraine calls the resulting poverty of the bust “old” and tells Charlie she “[doesn’t] feel old a bit” (Fitzgerald 1850). This attitude mimics that of many Americans following the Crash of 1929 who were not finished enjoying themselves and were unwilling to revert to what they saw as the stuffy values of the production ethic. But at the same time they no longer had the means to live the life of a pure consumption ethic.

However, most Americans, while enjoying the Twenties, came to regret the loss of morals they had previously experienced and searched for a way to reconcile the two ethics. Charlie is the only character in “Babylon Revisited” they can identify with, having experienced both of these ethics and understanding the need to move on after the Crash. When trying to get Honoria back, Charlie laments how Marion has “’forgotten how hard I worked for seven years there...She just remembers one night’” (Fitzgerald 1849). Before the boom, Charlie was like Lincoln and Marion, working hard to earn money and save it industriously. He was just as much a part of the production ethic as they were. In the Twenties, however, Charlie became the epitome of the consumption ethic. When revisiting Paris and walking through the streets, Charlie recalls “thousand-franc notes given to an orchestra for playing a single number, [and] hundred-franc notes tossed to a doorman for calling a cab” (Fitzgerald 1842). Money was nothing to him and he had no qualms about spending it excessively. More than just the money, though, Charlie acted with the irresponsibility characteristic of the consumption ethic, drinking the entire time and locking his wife out in the snow, which eventually led to her death. After the Crash, however, Charlie reacted differently than Duncan and Lorraine, who are “poor as hell” (Fitzgerald 1844) but still come back to Paris to drink and have a good time. He works and regains the fortune he lost, setting him apart from both Duncan and Lorraine and their inability to move on.

When revisiting Paris, Charlie does a lot of reflection on the consumption ethic that shows his recognition of the downside of the ethic, which is an important step in moving forward. Walking past his old haunts, Charlie observes that he finally “[realizes] the meaning of the word ‘dissipate’—to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something” (Fitzgerald 1842). He calls his former life a “nightmare” (Fitzgerald 1850) and wonders how it was possible for him to get to the point where he lived like that. Furthermore, his visit to Paris helps him realize that he wasted his life away while upholding the consumption ethic and has absolutely nothing to show for it but a tombstone and an empty home. He wishes he could just “jump back a whole generation and trust in character again as the eternally valuable element” (Fitzgerald 1842), wanting back the moral foundation upon which the production ethic was built rather than the nothingness of the consumption ethic. Charlie is doing his best to move forward, to regain custody of his daughter and create a home for the two of them before it is too late.

Yet as Curnutt writes, “Babylon Revisited” “is not a parable about the inevitability of the ‘correction,’ the deflation of the market that balances its overvaluation” (Curnutt 114). That idea undermines how powerful and seductive the consumption ethic was. Despite his desire to move forward, the pull of the past proves too strong for Charlie, showing just how powerful the consumption ethic really was. The reader can see this in Charlie early on when he takes Honoria out to lunch and insists that he is going to buy her “anything you like” (Fitzgerald 1843). Honoria is displeased by this idea, pointing out that she has no need for another toy and that he should not spend money needlessly. However, Charlie insists and Honoria agrees in order to please him. Even in the face of reason, Charlie still desires to act on the values of the consumption ethic. While he is still a long way from descending into drinking and recklessness, and there is no indication that this is the path he is following, it shows how he is still captivated by the idea of the consumption ethic, even while he realizes all of the evils that came with it.

Ultimately, it is the pull of the consumption ethic that ruins Charlie’s chance to get Honoria back. At the beginning of “Babylon Revisited,” Charlie leaves Marion and Lincoln’s address for Duncan to find him, desiring to reconnect with old friends now that he is back in Paris. It is his inability to stay away from the Ritz and his past that enables Duncan and Lorrain to intrude on his visit with Marion and Lincoln shortly after they agree to give him custody of Honoria. He lies to Marion and Lincoln and tries to pass the fault off to somebody else, but the reality is that Charlie “’remains too deeply enamored of the pleasures of Babylon to recover his [daughter] or to escape the condition of spiritual exile” (Curnutt 114). Charlie is well aware of its evils, but the allure of the consumption ethic proves too strong for him to resist, showing that it is difficult, if not entirely impossible, to forget the “consumption ethic” and happily go back to the production ethic, despite having Honoria, the strongest of motives, encouraging him to move on.

In trying to riddle out a way to move forward, none of Charlie’s options appear to be valid. He could continue to live the life of the consumption ethic, which clearly still has power over Charlie, but it has too many evils and no longer fits with real life after the Crash. Yet going back to the production ethic does not work either. Marion is deeply unhappy with her life, in stark contrast to Duncan and Lorraine, who are “gay...hilarious...roaring with laughter” (Fitzgerald 1851). After finding happiness and experiencing the joy of the consumption ethic, Charlie is not capable of going back to the staid and unhappy life of the production ethic, no matter how much he yearns to. He seems to be left with no way to move forward, hoping only that “they [can’t] make him pay forever” (Fitzgerald 1853) and that eventually things will work themselves out.

Charlie’s situation is one that seems to reflect the general state of America at that point in time. Unlike Marion or Duncan and Lorraine, who are each at opposite ends of this crisis’ spectrum, Charlie has elements of both. He understands where both sides are coming from, but he’s still caught in the middle between two opposing forces, much like the average Americans who were reading this text in the thirties. Charlie therefore becomes a symbol for the similar moral crisis facing the nation as a whole, and it is with this character that “Babylon Revisited” is able to make a social commentary on this time period and contribute to the ongoing conversation of how best to move forward.

As a reflection of contemporary American society, “Babylon Revisited” does not seem to offer a way to move ahead, but it may not be trying to. Offering an explanation is too easy because then it detracts from the gravity and complexity that Charlie and Americans like him find themselves in when reconciling the consumption and production ethics. That implies it is something simple enough to be fixed in a short story and does not deserve to be treated as a real struggle. Instead, “Babylon Revisited” leaves Charlie’s dilemma unresolved. He desperately wants his daughter and a way to move forward, to regain the morals of the production ethic without entirely forgetting the pleasure of the consumption ethic, and just when he deems himself up to the challenge, he fails miserably. It ends with Charlie alone again in the bar facing the stark reality of his position: he is aging, he is alone, and all he can do is hope that eventually this vicious cycle will stop (Fitzgerald 1853). While bleak, this shows exactly how serious Charlie’s position is and how necessary it is to find an acceptable resolution with which to move forward.

While “Babylon Revisited” might not offer explicit directions on how to move forward after the Crash of 1929, it does provide a few ideas on what the future should look like. Most importantly it stresses the importance of a strong moral foundation. Charlie expresses some of this when saying he wishes he could “trust in character again as the eternally valuable element” (Fitzgerald 1842). He also observes that “The present was the thing—work to do and someone to love” (Fitzgerald 1849). Both of these emphasize the importance of character, of trustworthiness and purpose. This is especially important in comparison to the foundation of the consumption ethic, which resulted in the “loss of tangible measures of value” (Curnutt 110). Of all the shortcomings of the consumption ethic, it is this one that really made it unsustainable and most directly contributed to the death of Charlie’s wife. Therefore, the story suggests a new moral system needs to be developed, a new American value system that has a foundation in character, purpose, and direction so that people can never again become so disconnected from reality.

Furthermore, “Babylon Revisited” emphasizes moderation in creating a new ethic. In a way, Charlie is already doing this. After the death of his wife, Charlie checks himself into a sanitarium in order to recover from the alcoholism he developed while reveling in the consumption ethic (Fitzgerald 1846-1847). This is the first step: recognizing the problem and seeking help in order to resolve it. As part of his recovery, Charlie makes a point to have one drink a day “’so that the idea of alcohol won’t get too big in my imagination’” (Fitzgerald 1846). He elaborates that he wants to “’[keep] the matter in proportion’” (Fitzgerald 1846) and not admit “’it’s got any attraction’” (Fitzgerald 1846). In this way Charlie can maintain control of his addiction to alcohol by admitting its power but not letting it become overpowering. The consumption ethic can be treated in a similar manner. It is a problem, one with a powerful grasp on Charlie’s life and the American lives he represents. He should not quit it completely, but instead incorporate it into his life in small ways so that it “’keeps the matter in proportion’” (Fitzgerald 1846). In this way, Americans can still enjoy some of the benefits of the consumption ethic without experiencing the complete moral degradation of Charlie and his peers during the Twenties.

“Babylon Revisited” thus highlights the moral struggle America was facing at the onset of the Great Depression. Through its characters, the story shows just how real and important the struggle to reconcile the production and consumption ethics was for Americans to address, whether they were fully conscious of its presence or not. Most importantly, “Babylon Revisited” strove to make this issue more defined for the public as it tried to offer a way for them to move forward following the glittering world of *The Great Gatsby*, showcasing Fitzgerald’s own evolution as a writer in a changing world.

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