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Research Article

The Collapse of the American Dream: Illusion and Psychological Conflict in Tender Is the Night

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Abstract

This research paper examines the themes of illusion, psychological conflict, and the decline of the American Dream in Tender Is the Night by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel presents the story of Dick Diver and Nicole Diver, whose seemingly glamorous life gradually collapses due to emotional instability, moral weakness, and social pressure. Fitzgerald portrays the fragile nature of wealth and social prestige and reveals how these illusions often hide deeper psychological struggles. Through the development of characters and narrative structure, Fitzgerald criticizes the superficial values of modern society and the destructive consequences of pursuing material success without emotional stability. This paper analyzes how Fitzgerald presents the collapse of personal identity and the moral decline associated with the failure of the American Dream.

Keywords: Illusion, Psychological Conflict, American Dream ,Moral Decline Personal Identity.

Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald is widely recognized as one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century. His works capture the spirit of the Jazz Age and explore themes such as wealth, ambition, social status, and the moral confusion of modern society. Among his major works, Tender Is the Night stands out as a deeply psychological novel that examines the emotional and moral struggles of its characters.

The novel tells the story of Dick Diver, a talented psychiatrist, and his wife Nicole Diver, a wealthy woman who struggles with mental illness. At first, the couple appears charming and successful, enjoying a luxurious lifestyle on the French Riviera. However, as the narrative unfolds, their lives begin to deteriorate. Dick Diver's professional ambitions fade, and his personal identity gradually collapses under the pressures of wealth, responsibility, and emotional conflict. Fitzgerald uses this tragic transformation to illustrate the fragility of human relationships and the dangers of living in a world shaped by illusion and superficial values.

This research paper explores how Fitzgerald portrays psychological conflict, illusion, and the decline of the American Dream in the novel. By examining the characters and themes of Tender Is the Night, the study highlights Fitzgerald's critique of the glamorous yet morally unstable world of the wealthy elite.

Historical and Social Context of the Novel

The novel reflects the social and cultural atmosphere of the early twentieth century, particularly the period known as the Jazz Age. During this time, economic prosperity and cultural change created new opportunities and lifestyles. However, this prosperity also led to moral confusion and social instability. Fitzgerald portrays the wealthy expatriate community in Europe as glamorous but emotionally empty. Through the setting of the French Riviera, he reveals the contrast between external luxury and internal dissatisfaction.

Characterization of Dick Diver

Dick Diver is one of Fitzgerald's most complex characters. At the beginning of the novel, he appears intelligent, charismatic, and professionally successful. As a psychiatrist, he is respected by others and admired by his friends. However, his marriage to Nicole gradually weakens his independence and ambition. Over time, Dick becomes emotionally exhausted and

loses control of his career and personal life. His decline symbolizes the tragic consequences of sacrificing personal identity for social prestige and material comfort.

Psychological Struggles and Mental Illness

A central theme in the novel is the exploration of psychological conflict and mental illness. Nicole Diver suffers from severe emotional trauma and psychological instability. Fitzgerald presents her condition with sensitivity and complexity, highlighting the difficulties of healing and recovery. At the same time, Dick's role as both husband and doctor creates a complicated power dynamic that ultimately contributes to his emotional downfall.

Fitzgerald also examines the broader social and emotional factors that intensify psychological strain. Nicole's trauma is not solely a result of her personal history; it is exacerbated by societal expectations of women in elite circles and the pressure to maintain appearances. Similarly, Dick's professional identity as a psychiatrist creates a constant tension between his public competence and private vulnerability. This duality under cores the fragile balance between perception and reality, showing how mental illness can be compounded by social roles and responsibilities.

The novel further portrays the ripple effect of psychological struggles on relationships and social networks. Dick's growing sense of inadequacy and Nicole's dependency strain their marriage, while their friends and acquaintances often misinterpret their behavior, assuming superficial causes for deeper emotional issues. Fitzgerald emphasizes that mental illness is not an isolated problem; it intersects with human relationships, trust, and the demands of social life.

Alcohol, escapism, and self-deception also appear as coping mechanisms for the characters' psychological distress. Dick, in particular, uses charm, social success, and occasional indulgence to mask his anxiety and inner turmoil. These attempts at self-preservation ultimately fail, revealing the limits of human resilience when confronted with unaddressed emotional trauma.

Through these portrayals, Fitzgerald provides a nuanced examination of mental health. The novel does not simplify or sensationalize psychological suffering but instead presents it as a complex interplay of personal history, social pressures, and interpersonal dynamics. This makes the struggles of the Divers both tragic and deeply human, highlighting the consequences of neglecting emotional well-being in a world obsessed with appearances.

Illusion and Reality

Fitzgerald frequently contrasts the appearance of happiness with the reality of emotional suffering. The Divers' luxurious lifestyle appears glamorous to outsiders, but beneath this surface lies a deep sense of dissatisfaction and instability. Fitzgerald uses this contrast to criticize the illusions created by wealth and social status. The novel suggests that material success cannot guarantee emotional fulfillment or personal stability.

Another important aspect of illusion and reality in the novel is the way characters perceive one another. Many people initially view Dick Diver as a confident and admirable leader within his social circle. His charm, intelligence, and ability to manage social situations create an image of control and strength. However, this public image gradually begins to fade as the reality of his inner struggles becomes visible. The gap between how others see him and how he truly feels highlights Fitzgerald's exploration of illusion.

Rosemary Hoyt's perspective also helps reveal this contrast. As a young actress, she is fascinated by the glamorous world of the Divers and initially believes their lives represent perfection and sophistication. Her admiration reflects how easily outsiders can be drawn into the illusion of wealth and elegance. Over time, however, she begins to recognize the tensions and emotional complexities that exist beneath the surface of their seemingly perfect lives.The settings in the novel further strengthen this theme. The beautiful beaches, luxurious hotels, and elegant parties create an atmosphere of beauty and pleasure. Yet these surroundings often conceal emotional conflict and personal

dissatisfaction. Fitzgerald uses these attractive settings to show how environments associated with luxury can disguise deeper personal struggles.

Through these elements, the novel reveals that appearances can be misleading. Fitzgerald suggests that people often construct idealized versions of their lives to maintain social respect and admiration. However, the contrast between outward success and internal conflict exposes the fragile nature of these illusions. In this way, the novel presents a powerful reflection on the difference between what people show to the world and what they truly experience.

The Failure of the American Dream

The decline of Dick Diver represents the broader failure of the American Dream. Although he begins with talent, ambition, and opportunity, his life gradually deteriorates due to emotional weakness and social pressures. Fitzgerald suggests that the pursuit of success and prestige often leads to moral compromise and personal destruction. Through Dick's tragic story, the novel reveals the limitations and contradictions of the American Dream.

At the beginning of the novel, Dick Diver appears confident, intelligent, and respected. He is a talented psychiatrist with a promising future, and many people admire him for his charm and leadership. However, as time passes, the responsibilities of his marriage to Nicole and the expectations of high society begin to affect his stability. Instead of achieving personal fulfillment, Dick becomes trapped in a life shaped by wealth, social status, and emotional dependence.

Fitzgerald also shows that material wealth does not guarantee happiness or moral strength. Although Dick and Nicole live in luxury and move among the wealthy elite of Europe, their lives are filled with tension and dissatisfaction. Dick gradually loses his professional focus and sense of purpose. His increasing reliance on alcohol and his emotional exhaustion demonstrate how the dream of success can turn into a source of failure and disappointment.

Conclusion

In Tender Is the Night, F. Scott Fitzgerald presents a powerful critique of wealth, illusion, and the moral instability of modern society. The novel portrays the psychological struggles of its characters and exposes the fragile foundations of the American Dream. Through the tragic decline of Dick Diver, Fitzgerald demonstrates how ambition, love, and social prestige can become destructive when they are built on illusion rather than genuine emotional strength. Ultimately, the novel remains a profound exploration of human vulnerability and the complex relationship between success, identity, and morality.

WORKCITED

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