

SELF-CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION THROUGH  
OTHERING IN F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S *TENDER IS THE NIGHT*.  
IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEME OF THE OTHER, eroticized  
AND ABJECTED

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'The best I can wish you, my child, is a little misfortune'  
(W.M. Thackeray – *The Rose and the Ring*)

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**Abstract**

*This article analyzes identity construction strategies in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel 'Tender Is The Night', in an attempt to show that the two main characters (Dick Diver and Nicole Diver) use a process of othering in order to achieve a 'complete self'. Whereas Diver sees completeness as a flawed self and achieves it through eroticizing what is abjected: his union with Nicole and the symbolic adoption of her broken psyche, Nicole achieves a valid self through a vampire-like energy transfer from Diver. The latter turns from the eroticized other into the abjected other, in Nicole's process of self construction.*

**Keywords:** self construction, othering, abject, deject, eroticized, incest

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**Introduction – A novel of decadence and exhaustion  
of the postwar period**

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Scott Fitzgerald intended *Tender Is the Night* to be a psychological or philosophical novel on the model of *Vanity Fair*, which he so much admired. His disappointment with the outcome of its publishing, in 1934, was similar to that experienced in 1925, after the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, with the significant difference that the latter was a real success, even if Fitzgerald felt that the public and the critics did not grasp its meaning properly. *Tender Is the Night* was, however, a novel with moderate success and, at the time it appeared, it sold less than one fourth of the amount of copies from *This Side of Paradise*, his first novel.

Fitzgerald's goal in *Tender Is the Night* was to create a novel without a hero, or rather a modern Odyssey that would show the present condition of man as lacking in heroism. Heroism, Fitzgerald implies, is no longer possible in an era of corruption and moral disintegration that threatens and finally annihilates any attempt at noblesse. Heroism is an anachronistic value in the America of the twenties and thirties. It has lost its *aura* – to use Walter Benjamin's phrase, which referred to the condition of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, about the same time Fitzgerald's novel appeared. The heroic acts, the final purpose and the clear motivation that characterized human behavior in the old times are replaced by trivial acts, the lack of final purpose and a lingering, passive attitude that makes the moment a supreme goal in life – a view Fitzgerald deeply shared with Hemingway.

The group of Americans enjoying life on the French Riviera after the war is described as reckless, purposeless, made up of people leading chaotic lives and living a daily carnival – a spectacle of human decadence, of life that is undirected and loose. Carnival is by itself a performance of change, of fundamental instability. The heroes of carnival have a changing personality, too. They display multiple selves ultimately having none of their own. They are defined by the succession of masks that they exhibit and their personality is a continuous flow of gestures and attitudes successively assumed. Hence the inevitable lack of heroism characteristic of the postwar life, of a lost generation that seems unable to reconstruct itself, to remake and recover the unity shattered by the war and by the modern world's crisis.

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### *From the abjected to the eroticized*

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From the very beginning of the novel, the young promising physician Dick Diver is perceived as a genuinely open self, with an eager responsiveness towards the other, a sort of unique character through his vitality, self-control and self-discipline. Diver is the center of the group, perceived as such both by his companion and by himself. The scene when Dick, Rosemary, the Norths and two French musicians go in a restaurant and Dick states that “no American man had any repose” except himself is relevant in this respect. He thus challenges the others to find an example to confront him with, to find a man who is as self-possessed as him: “Things looked black for them - not a man had come into the restaurant for ten minutes without raising his hand to his face” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 110). After several unsuccessful attempts to find someone that would overthrow Dick's record and shatter his self-reliance, the group gives up. Finally, Diver rejoices: “‘You see,’ Dick said smugly, ‘I'm the only one’ ” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 111). Described admiringly from Rosemary's angle he becomes the heart of an entire fascinating world, an “all complete” character (Fitzgerald, 1953: 75). The issue of personal completeness is extremely important in motivating Dick's choice of marrying Nicole and forming a whole with her schizophrenic psyche, her invalid self.

Nicole attracts him by her innocence – the same attribute that would later make him fall in love with Rosemary – but what he actually sees in Nicole is the projection of his own feeling of nostalgia, an emotion caused by youth and beauty, an unutterable expression of something that is lost: “She smiled, a moving childish smile that was like all the lost youth in the world.” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 25)

His falling in love is actually an attempt to get close to the embodiment of an absence that represents at the same time – by its being an embodiment – a presence. Nicole is thus the other as abjected because she steps outside the norms of self-preservation and is rejected by the others as an in-valid self, as something that is threatening, incomprehensible, outside the normative system and hence aggressive. The abject, as Julia Kristeva explains in her essay on abjection, is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, 1982: 4). On the other hand, Nicole is for Dick a prop for his self-construction, and I will dwell on this later in my paper. Falling in love with Nicole is actually remembering absence, something that is lost or forgotten, and marrying her represents an act of appropriation of her broken psyche, an act of acquiring absence through eroticism. Julia Kristeva describes the abject as both abhorrent and, at the same time, as something that was once the object of attraction, with which the self had to part in order to exist as a separate entity, but which constantly tries to resurface, being present through the act of remembering:

*The abject from which he does not cease separating is for him, in short, a land of oblivion that is constantly remembered. Once upon blotted-out time, the abject must have been a magnetized pole of covetousness.* (Kristeva, 1982: 8)

Dick Diver falls in love with the promise of her, the promise that the fusion of their two selves would make him complete exactly by breaking the tightness of his own self. I would like to dwell in more detail on the aspect of Dick’s choice. To throw light upon Dick’s motivations it is important to look into his view of himself from the beginning. Someone calls him “lucky Dick” in college and “the name lingered in his head”. He realizes that

*Lucky Dick can’t be one of these clever men: he must be less intact, even faintly destroyed. If life won’t do it for him it’s not a substitute to get a disease, or a broken heart, or an inferiority complex, though it’d be nice to build out some broken side till it was better than the original structure.* (Fitzgerald, 1953: 4)

Dick Diver wishes to achieve a breach in his intactness, in his abstract and unnatural structure. Intactness in psychoanalytic reasoning is actually a way of non-existence, or, to put it better, it characterizes an embryonic stage, one that

precedes birth, since the latter implies the trauma of separation and hence, the experience of incompleteness. Diver seems therefore an unnatural personality through his intactness, an abject being himself, for he does not fit in the established order of things. Thus, he is complete and incomplete at the same time, oscillating between worlds, never actually belonging to any. He is what Kristeva describes as the *stray*, the *deject*, always on the move, threatened by the abject:

*A deviser of territories, languages, works, the deject never stops demarcating his universe (...). He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding. He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo-object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays, the more he is saved.* (Kristeva, 1982: 8)

He knows that “the price of his intactness was incompleteness” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 5) and Nicole’s ill mental condition represents for him the very means of building out some broken side to his structure in order to achieve completeness. The quotation from Thackeray that Dick mentions is relevant in this respect: “‘The best I can wish you, my child,’ so said the Fairy Blackstick in Thackeray’s *The Rose and the Ring*, ‘is a little misfortune.’” He needs a vulnerable side in order to render him real, natural and complete, to deliver him from the womb of abstraction that surrounds him. What he searches for might be interpreted as a new birth, a birth that would supply him with the sign of flaw, of pathos – pain and suffering – and would hence make him alive, true, valid and help him achieve completeness in incompleteness. The union with Nicole’s schizophrenic psyche is thus the way he chooses to achieve completeness.

Fitzgerald metaphorically portrays Nicole’s inner world, her chaotic self, in the passage that describes her garden:

*The garden was bounded on one side by the house, from which it flowed and into which it ran, on two sides by the old village, and on the last by the cliff falling by ledges to the sea. Along the walls on the village side all was dusty, the wriggling vines, the lemon and eucalyptus trees, the casual wheelbarrow, left only a moment since, but already grown into the path, atrophied and faintly rotten. (...) turning in the other direction past a bed of peonies, she walked into an area so green and cool that the leaves and petals were curled with tender damp.* (Fitzgerald, 1953: 82)

Just like Nicole’s, his psyche is also atrophied, as it is too abstractly directed, too intellectualized to be naturally complete. Dick yearns for a reconstruction of his personality, a reconstruction through an act of deconstruction that would break his intactness and the incestuous idealization of the self, by his marriage with Nicole. What Diver achieves is a compound self made up of two atrophied, incomplete

ones. The Divers' compound identity is suggested by the name they use at the beginning of their marriage to sign the letters they send: "Dicole". It is symbolical of the de-constructed personality and psyche that their union achieves.

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### *Incest and America*

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Incest is a fundamental motif in the novel. Nicole's relation with her father, which triggered her mental illness, is an incestuous one. The psychoanalytical significance of incest consists in a reorientation of one's erotic and emotional energies onto oneself, on the original source of biological life. It is worth mentioning in this respect that Fitzgerald draws a parallel between incest and America herself. Hence, Nicole represents the old moneyed class, rooted in the American tradition, "granddaughter of a self-made American capitalist." (Fitzgerald, 1953: 111) The fact that Nicole's degenerate father is "a fine American type in every way" (Fitzgerald, 1953: 15), a prosperous man of the East, who had inherited a family tradition and a fortune, is undoubtedly significant and corroborates this interpretation.

It is, Fitzgerald implies, a matter of incest that America itself seemed to undergo since the beginning of its existence, a tendency that became even stronger in the decades following the First World War and visible in its self imposed insularity and withdrawal from the rest of the world. America's self-reliance (embodied in the novel by Rosemary's categorical mother) implicitly leads to self-idealization and finally to a degenerating outcome.

Maria DiBattista, in her essay on *Tender Is the Night*, remarks:

*Fitzgerald's most brilliant and original use of nascent Freudianism and its insights into individual and cultural pathology was to see in the Oedipal project a vivid metaphor for the "vicious" idealism endemic to the New World that discounted or ignored the claims of past history in determining individual or national destinies. As Faulkner well knew, incest was the logical outcome of America's "exigent idealism" that encouraged withdrawal and self-insulation as guarantees for the Emersonian ideal of self-reliance (...) and self-determination. (Maria DiBattista, 1987: 219)*

The Oedipal complex is evident in Nicole's biography. Her father recalls:

*After her mother died when she was little she used to come into my bed every morning, sometimes she'd sleep in my bed. I was sorry for the little thing. Oh, after that, whenever we went places in an automobile or a train we used to hold hands. She used to sing to me. We used to say, 'Now let's not pay any attention to anybody else this afternoon – let's just have each other – for this morning you're mine.' (Fitzgerald, 1953: 18)*

Following this interpretation, after her mother's death the need of repressing the manifestations of the Oedipus complex are no longer so powerful and the wish to take the mother's place becomes reality.

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***From the eroticized to the abjected***

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A paternal figure for Nicole is Dick Diver himself, the psychiatrist who undertakes the role of protector and healer of Nicole's schizophrenic psyche through transfer of energy – his way of achieving incompleteness. It is relevant to mention that Diver undergoes a process of self-dissipation throughout the novel: from a state of initial "all completeness" to an intermediary one in which we are told that "he still had pieces of his own most personal self for everyone"(Fitzgerald, 1953: 139) and finally to a total exhaustion, which is a form of inertness.

He dissipates himself in others to such an extent that he is finally drained out. When Mary North and her friend call for his help in the middle of the night he reflects:

*He would have to go fix this thing that he didn't care a damn about, because it had early become a habit to be loved, perhaps from the moment when he had realized that he was the last hope of a decaying clan. On an almost parallel occasion, back in Dohmler's clinic on the Zürichsee, realizing this power, he had made his choice, chosen Ophelia, chosen the sweet poison and drunk it. (Fitzgerald, 1953: 321)*

His choice of Nicole is the choice of a *pharmakon*, a remedy for his intactness, which at the same time threatens him, by drawing off his energy, until he is finally drained out and symbolically disappears at the end of the novel.

This is what he offers to the group of friends that follow him in their postwar journey through Europe:

*His love for Nicole and Rosemary, his friendship with Abe North, with Tommy Barban in the broken universe of the war's ending – in such contacts the personalities had seemed to press up so close to him that he became the personality itself; there seemed some necessity of taking all or nothing; it was as if for the remainder of his life he was condemned to carry with him the egos of certain people, early met and early loved, and to be only as complete as they were complete themselves. (Fitzgerald, 1953: 263)*

The passage prefigures the final collapse by his growing void of inner strength, by the leveling down of his energy, as if he underwent a process of entropy.

The source that depletes his energy and wastes him completely is Nicole. The transfer of energy occurs gradually. First, “Dick and Nicole had become one and equal, not opposite and complementary: she was Dick too, the drought in the marrow of his bones. He could not watch her disintegrations without participating in them” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 207). Then, she continues “her dry suckling at his lean chest” until she “felt surer of herself” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 317) and finally discards, abjects him when she realizes that he is not what she had thought – “an inexhaustible energy, incapable of fatigue.” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 319) Thus, this time it is Diver who is the focus of the process of othering, and from the eroticized, he becomes himself the abjected other. Dick’s mission is now completed, his function of reconstructing the personality damaged by a deconstructing father is fulfilled and Nicole moves on to another source of raw energy, of gross vitality – Tommy Barban whose name and behavior suggest the force and brutality of a barbarian: “(...) he sat in the only chair, dark, scarred, and handsome, his eyebrows arched and upcurling, a fighting Puck, an earnest Satan.” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 312)

For Nicole, people are sources of energy, as she permanently searches for “the vitality that had made them independent or creative or rugged.” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 196) Thus, the process of feeding on the other’s energy continues with Tommy Barban and she feels that “for the first time in ten years she was under the sway of a personality other than her husband’s. Everything Tommy said to her became part of her forever.” (Fitzgerald, 1953: 311) It is obvious that Tommy is the new source of raw energy and strength for Nicole, but he is not necessarily her next victim and their relationship is not a vampire-victim one, as it might appear. On the contrary, I believe he can be regarded as the real male figure that she is looking for, the real masculine character in her life. Dick is, as I have emphasized before, just the healer, the one who reconstructs her broken self; he performs the restoring function and her feeding on his energy is thus inherent. There are recurrent hints towards the end of the novel at her becoming stronger and stronger and at her leaving her past illness behind, while Dick is gradually devitalized:

*Nicole relaxed and felt new and happy: her thoughts were clear as good bells – she had a sense of being cured and in a new way. Her ego began blooming like a great rich rose as she scrambled back along the labyrinths in which she had wondered for years. (...) ‘Why, I’m almost complete,’ she thought. ‘I’m practically standing alone, without him.’ And (...) wanting the completion as soon as possible (...) she got home and wrote Tommy Barban in Nice a short provocative letter. (Fitzgerald, 1953: 307)*

Nevertheless, the possibility of a relapse into the initial phase of her illness, and of her re-becoming a prey to aggressive men is just as valid and Fitzgerald had most probably intended to place such an ambiguity in his novel. From this last perspective, her relation to Tommy Barban can be interpreted as relinquishment to an aggressive force similar to her father’s deconstructing aggressiveness:

*Moment by moment all that Dick had taught her fell away and she was ever nearer to what she had been in the beginning, prototype of that obscure yielding up of swords that was going on in the world about her. Tangled with love in the moonlight she welcomed the anarchy of her lover. (Fitzgerald, 1953: 316)*

Tommy's love does not represent a beneficent, coherent and constructive force, but a chaotic, anarchic one that perfectly matches Nicole's mental condition.

This is a view favored by Rena Sanderson as well in her article "Women in Fitzgerald's fiction". Discussing the development of Nicole's mental condition, she regards her affair with Tommy Barban not as an evolution towards self-control, but as deterioration:

*In an ultimate display of her regression into a primitive stage of self-indulgence, she prefers the warrior Tommy Barban, the epitome of martial masculinity, to the sensitive but weak father-psychiatrist who "created" her. (Sanderson, 2003: 159)*

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### ***Exhaustion and collapse or return to nostalgia?***

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Dick, the savior of a "decaying clan" is defeated in the end by the strength of the illness, "the versatility of the madness" he had undertaken to cure. The "incalculable story [that] was telling itself inside him" (Fitzgerald, 1953: 286) fades away gradually. He is an incomplete man, but not in the way he conceived of in the beginning. Once the "organizer of private gaiety, curator of a richly incrustated happiness" (Fitzgerald, 1953: 137), a man with fine manners and an "air of having the key to security" (Fitzgerald, 1953: 166), Dick gradually becomes vulnerable and loses himself in his increasing melancholy.

As Milton Stern notices in his essay on "Tender is the Night and American History", the name of the main character is itself suggestive through its double aquatic symbolism:

*One is Dick's deep diving into learning, discipline, creativity, and the moral identity Dick learned from his father and aunts, all metaphorically suggested by Dick's superb aquatic abilities in his younger days. The other is the dying fall, Dick's long dive into disintegration and oblivion, metaphorically related through the swimming theme with the older, dissipated, and exhausted Dick's inability to perform aquatically. (Stern, 2003: 101)*

Symbolically, at the end of the novel he is referred to only through Nicole's point of view: by the letters she receives from him and by the different stories she heard, she knows that he practices medicine in America and the last thing mentioned is that "his latest note was post marked from Hornell, New York, which is some distance from Geneva and a very small town; in any case he is almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another" (Fitzgerald, 1953: 334).

He is impossible to locate precisely in the end, as if he vanished from sight. This could be a hint at his approaching the point of nostalgia, a place of origin or the embryonic stage preceding a rebirth, hence his elusiveness, his being impossible to locate clearly at the end of the novel as if he gradually disappeared from life. Having completed the circle by achieving incompleteness, he heads towards the experience of intactness. If we consider Jungian archetypal psychology, his final departure is an attempt to harmonize the archetypal images and energies in himself, thus reiterating the cycle. Symbolically, he goes back to America (as Nicole reports, "he is almost certainly in that section of the country, in one town or another") the country of the *homo viator*, but also the *good mother* country, a place to be born anew and one of utopia, symbolising the journey towards self-discovery. It is in this space that Dick Diver's self-construction begins and ends at the same time.

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