

# The twilight world of babylon revisited



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

At first glance, “ Babylon Revisited” seems to carry the same theme as The Great Gatsby of the dangers of idealizing the past to the point of destroying the present. However, “ Babylon Revisited” adds an extra layer of meaning by firmly placing the ambiguity between the hopes for the future and the sins of the past squarely in the realm of alcoholism. Through the characters, Fitzgerald depicts a drinking culture where the parties have lost their joy and the hangovers have become the de facto lifestyle. The characters of “ Babylon Revisited” live in a twilight world of desperation and regret, too old to enjoy the drinking but incapable of truly changing their ways.

Charlie is the character that most resembles F. Scott Fitzgerald’s biography, a former expatriate who spent the 1920s in Paris, drinking and writing and dealing with an unhinged wife. There is an irony to the characterization since Charlie is a shell of a human being holding onto the past, whereas Fitzgerald’s writing had become much deeper and more mature in his post-Paris years. Charlie’s appearance is described as “ He was thirty-five, and good to look at. The Irish mobility of his face was sobered by a deep wrinkle between his eyes. As he rang his brother-in-law’s bell in the Rue Palatine, the wrinkle deepened till it pulled down his brows; he felt a cramping sensation in his belly” (676). This physical description is from Charlie’s perspective where he admits that he’s old (wrinkles) but still maintains his illusion of youthful exuberance (Irish mobility). Even though Charlie’s stated intention is to take custody of his daughter, the story makes it obvious that he would prefer to relive the past when alcohol was fun and the party continued. Charlie is introduced asking about old friends only to discover that most of them are gone. Even before he visits his brother-in-law, he is making plans

to see old drinking companions. Fitzgerald encapsulates Charlie's sense of disorientation while talking about the Ritz bar. "It was not an American bar any more—he felt polite in it, and not as if he owned it. It had gone back into France." (675) In that one sentence, Fitzgerald communicates Charlie's history, his disorientation and his current life. Charlie feeling "polite" in a bar engenders a question of what he was like in the 1920s before the 1929 Crash. There are also several questions from that line. Does Charlie feeling polite mean that there's a self-knowledge about his past where he was never polite? Or did the fact that he was an American in Paris living an expatriate life make him feel impolite when he was among other Americans? Charlie seems to have once carried the self-image of a loud and boisterous drunk and once that ends, he seems confused by the fact that he didn't die young and must now carry on his drinking in polite repose. Charlie's relationship to his past shifts between nostalgic and regretful, but it is more often nostalgic. His time at the Ritz bar is spent talking to Alix about the old crowd, but when he says that his main intention is his daughter, Alix is surprised that he has a daughter. Note that Alix is a character who has known Charlie for years.

After a disastrous visit with his in-laws and his daughter, he returns to the bars. In these scenes, he is a petulant child who does not get his own way, so he moves back into the familiar territory of dissipation, even though he admits repeatedly that there is no joy left in the activity. "All the catering to vice and waste was on an utterly childish scale, and he suddenly realized the meaning of the word 'dissipate'—to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something. In the little hours of the night every move from place to

place was an enormous human jump, an increase of paying for the privilege of slower and slower motion.” (678)

As much as Charlie wants to be the respectable and mature father, he is a child upset that his playtime is over. Even when he is trying to convince his in-laws to allow him to take his daughter, he blatantly lies about his drinking. “ I haven’t had more than a drink a day for over a year, and I take that drink deliberately, so that the idea of alcohol won’t get too big in my imagination.” (681) However, this deception is not merely for his in-laws; Charlie is just as much trying to convince himself that he’s sober. When Duncan and Lorraine meet him while he’s with his daughter, his assessment of the situation is blatantly false, but he’s only lying to himself: “ They liked him because he was functioning, because he was serious; they wanted to see him, because he was stronger than they were now, because they wanted to draw a certain sustenance from his strength.” (680)

One of the most frustrating aspects of Charlie is his lack of insight. In the language of Alcoholic Anonymous and 12 Step Programs, Charlie is a man who is not willing to take that first step to admitting that he has a problem. Even though Charlie’s in-laws don’t let him have his daughter because they don’t trust him, he filters everything through his sense of entitlement. “ They couldn’t make him pay forever,” (689) is what Charlie is feeling in place of naked honesty. He cannot admit that he’s a hazard to himself and his daughter. Instead, he is being made to pay for past mistakes by two unfeeling in-laws.

If Charlie is based on Fitzgerald, then Helen is based on Zelda, Fitzgerald's mentally unstable wife who constantly fought with him and jealously denigrated his work. Hemingway famously blamed her for the limitations of Fitzgerald's work. Charlie echoes this blame when he states that " I never did drink heavily until I gave up business and came over here with nothing to do. Then Helen and I began to run around" (681). His in-laws stop him from speaking against Helen, but as a dead character she has become part of his narrative. Since she is not around to defend herself, Charlie can blame all of his bad habits on her. She becomes another tool for his self-deception. Not only is he telling himself that he no longer drinks heavily, but he can put all the drinking solely on the shoulders of Helen. As the story says " The image of Helen haunted him. Helen whom he had loved so until they had senselessly begun to abuse each other's love, tear it into shreds." (683) In other words, Charlie maintains the memory that it's nobody's fault. The

### Couples

There are two couples that haunt Charlie - Marion & Lincoln as the responsible couple and Lorraine & Duncan as the old drinking couple. These couples seem diametric opposites at first and yet, they are all refusing to see any growth on the part of Charlie. Lorraine sums up the eternal childishness of the drinking couple when she writes to Charlie: " We did have such good times that crazy spring, like the night you and I stole the butcher's tricycle, and the time we tried to call on the president and you had the old derby rim and the wire cane. Everybody seems so old lately, but I don't feel old a bit." (684)

Even though Marion disapproves of Charlie, her assessment of him as a good time drunk without responsibility is very similar. “ When you were throwing away money we were living along watching every ten francs. . . . I suppose you’ll start doing it again” (682). When these couples meet in the climactic scene, Charlie is put in the position of trying to fight the perceptions of four people who know him solely as an irresponsible drunk. Sadly, Charlie cannot dispute their image of him with anything but self-deception and acquiescence.

### **Works Cited**

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. “ Babylon Revisited.” In Baym, Nina, gen. ed. The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Vol D. 8th ed. New York: WW Norton, 2012. 675-689.