

# Crimes without consequence



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The implications of modernist thought in F. Scott Fitzgeralds' *Tender Is the Night*, become apparent when conceptualizing crime and punishment.

Besides the murder of the Negro in the Parisian hotel, the idea of crime is plastic; adultery, deceit, moral depravity barely have consequences. Actions committed with good intentions often end in despair, such as the marriage of Dick and Nicole Diver. Similarly, seduction and dissimulation are not often met with ensuing punishment. Actions, whether they be morally right or wrong, tend to remain in a staid state without the traditional response. The modernists place characters in various moments and situations that do not necessarily conclude in the set conception of "punishment." Nicole and Dick Diver both commit "crimes" of infidelity during their marriage. While Dick's tryst with Rosemary ceases without any succinct culmination, Nicole sleeps with Tommy and ends her marriage to elope with him. Neither crime however, is met with a punishment. While Dick slowly loses his manner of attraction and wiles with women, he sinks into apathy and alcoholism. Fitzgerald does not seem to be punishing Dick in any way for his fleeting romance with Rosemary; rather, his empty life is almost an inevitability, another set of moments without weighty cause or effect. Nicole's actual instant of infidelity is described as a "moment" – not as a crime, a moral dilemma or anything deserving traditional punishment. She drifts into her affair in the same way she tends to her garden or glances at her children. Her love for Tommy Barban is simply situational; Dick was no longer fulfilling her in the manner she expected and Tommy was in the right place to take the fall. "Struggling a little still, like a decapitated animal she forgot about Dick and her new white eyes, forgot Tommy himself and sank deeper and deeper into the minutes and the moment" (294). As she embraces Tommy in

the hotel, the reader receives the sense that her lover could essentially be anyone. He loses all face and name and becomes another pawn, another performer within the “moment.” Dick’s reaction to Nicole’s adultery is completely devoid of accusation or punishment. His response to her confession is stoic and vacant. Her news could easily be about something entirely innocuous because his response elicits no inkling of condemnation or punishment. “I went dancing last night – with Tommy Barban. We went – ‘ He winced, interrupting her. {Don’t tell me about it. It doesn’t matter what you do, only I don’t want to know anything definitely’” (299). Although he winces at her story, he still insists on hearing nothing about the circumstances and claims to be emotionally detached from the “crime.” Rosemary too, although she professes to her mother to be in love with Dick Diver, maintains a grave detachment from the actual ramifications of her actions. She kisses a married man, attempts to seduce him on numerous occasions and finally consecrates the affair without once feeling the self-castigation that she should bear considering her immoral behavior. Punishment, either of oneself or of another, does not have a place in Fitzgerald’s novel. Infidelity is met with indifference; consequence of any action is often stifled. The event of the murder in the hotel is also treated as a different problem – Dick immediately jumps to the conclusion that Rosemary’s record will be tarnished by such bloodshed. He is uninterested in the punishment of the murderer or even the elements of the crime. Rather, he insists that facts be altered to protect his precious ingénue. The crime and the punishment is hence manipulated by Dick to create a different reality – a reality that will comply to his conception of the moment. He tells Rosemary, “ Look here, you mustn’t get upset over this – it’s only some

nigger scrap” (110) and then considers the appearance she has to maintain as an actress. “ If the situation were allowed to develop naturally, no power on earth could keep the smear off Rosemary – the paint was scarcely dry on the Arbuckle case. Her contract was contingent upon an obligation to continue rigidly and unexceptionally as ‘Daddy’s Girl’” (110). The actual murder is secondary; the only punishment that Dick considers surrounds Rosemary’s untarnished and innocent screen image. Interestingly, Dick tarnishes Rosemary’s innocence himself by allowing himself to fall in love with her. He calls her room after chasing her about the studios all morning and simply states, “ I’d like to be with you now” (94) without ever considering the “ crime” he is committing or the punishment that he should receive. He immediately hearkens back to their first elusive kiss in the back of the taxi cab, the protective, almost fatherly, way he took her in his arms and kissed her. “ There was the remembered dust of powder over her tan – when he kissed her face it was damp around the corners of her hair; there was the flash of a white face under his own, the arc of a shoulder. ‘It’s impossible,’ he said to himself” (94). Although he says “ it’s impossible” after recalling with fondness the moment they shared, Dick bears no remorse as he leaves one lover and calls his wife. Immediately after his vision of Rosemary and his undying need for her body in his arms, he calls Nicole and demands that they have dinner and see a play in the evening. The crime is masked completely by the conventions that surround their lives. The punishment, therefore, remains unclear. They both continue a farce of a relationship while lying to themselves and negating any concept of criminality in their own actions. The moments come and go, the crimes and punishments are vague and ephemeral. The crimes of each of all the

characters eventually effect their own psyches - their lives are damaged by their apparent neglect of reality. Living in each moment without bearing the consequences has a acute effect on Dick, but mostly leaves Nicole, Tommy and Rosemary unbroken.