

Failure in life of main heroes in tender is the night novel

[Experience](#), [Failure](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Explore the theme of heroic failure in ‘Tender is the Night’ with reference to your reading in 20th Century American prose

A hero stands alone; separate from others of his society both by choice and by the very fact that he is better than the rest. Whether in terms of physical courage and endurance, morality, or a transcendent purpose, these central characters are embodiments of a culture's values and what they most admire; both familiar and yet more perfect. In an America founded on the ideals of men determined to be different, to have the freedom to be superior, to live in greater decency and with sweeter promises than the old corrupt world they had left behind, this was to define a new breed of champion: the man who dared to dream. The world of the 1920s, booming with economic power and social upheaval, continued the American Dream with new variations. Fitzgerald's Jazz Age, the culture of excess in which he lived, flourished in and understood like no one else, offered an intoxicating (and often intoxicated) vision of a civilisation where 'charm, notoriety, mere good manners weighed more than money'. The old conventional values of hard-work, physical courage and endeavour were subsumed beneath the modern spirit of a country turned 'cynical' by the ravages of the Great War. The romance of the hero dreamer was dead; his trials proved a waste and the illusions of that more innocent America lost in the greed for capital, novelty and pleasure. 'Tender is the Night', a book concerned above all with the scope of a nation's history in the context and study of the era, unsurprisingly then charts the decline and fall of an idealist by the harsh and corrupting forces of a real America, mocking, violent and debauched. Dick's failure is in

the very best tradition of all the other heroes of 20th Century literature who believed quixotically in an American dream, only to find it hollow to the core.

From the first pages of Book 2, it is clear that he has been singled out for higher things: ‘even in war-time days, . . . Dick . . . was already too valuable, too much of a capital investment to be shot off in a gun’. Judged by a distant authority, he is elevated by the standards of a still hopeful, more nurturing pre-war age. If psychology, his chosen field, cast the mind as a more progressive West, the latest frontier to be explored, claimed and profited from, then Dick may be seen as a pioneer, heroically assuring America’s slice of the glory. His romantic notions are those of ‘the precious, the incommunicable past’ depicted in ‘My Ántonia’, the greatest of the prairie novels by Willa Cather and elegies to the courageous strivings of those people who actively pursued the American Dream. However, just as the desire for wealth, independence and stability are fulfilled, the conditions that made it possible changed; the same hunger which had led to the colonising of land, ironically necessitating the ending of that way of life and the evolution of those founding dreams. Dick’s continued belief in such a place and in such possibilities is gently scorned by his author as the ‘illusions of a nation, the lies of generations of frontier mothers who had to croon falsely that there were no wolves outside the cabin door’. Underlying this is the ominous foreshadowing of his professional decline: his pioneering, encouraged by the fallacies of nurturing foremothers (in truth, more destructive – another irony), will follow the same fate as his forefathers’, its role and status undermined by the seductions of a shifting universe, and its

softening emphasis on amusement, leisure and the enjoyment of money not earned.

In the difference between the young ' Dr Richard Driver' of 1917 (the first time his full name and title is used; dignifying his ambitions and at the same time slightly ridiculous, Fitzgerald introducing a tone of light mockery that exposes many of Dick's delusions) and the older, defeated man at the end, known instead by a series of post-marks, ' Geneva, N. Y.', ' Hornell, N. Y.', etc., lies the failure of a dreamer and his dream. ' A fiery, wiry, eagle-eyed' youth, wild, free and full of the bright possibilities of an America still in its prime, he like the romantic hero of Fitzgerald's other great work, ' The Great Gatsby', binds himself to a woman who seems to embody all that promise. Dick, even as Jay Gatsby devotes his life to ' the service of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty' , the allure of money in Daisy Buchanan's voice and the vision of what he could be with her at his side, weds his quixotic love of his country's past and future to the girl offering the freshness, beauty and excitement of its present. What they do not realise, and explains the sadly satirical tone of Fitzgerald's prose (' he wanted to be good, he wanted to be kind . . . He wanted to be loved, too, if he could fit it in'), is that the ' essence of a continent', whether for Jay its riches and status, or for Dick the loveliness of the ideal and its bloom, is fatally misleading. The writings of John Steinbeck mirror this disillusionment with the American Dream; ' Of Mice and Men', set in the Depression Era a decade after the events of ' TITN', depicts the fundamental tragedy, and hypocrisy, of a modern world which continues to hand down its fantasies of wealth, self-sufficiency and freedom,

while under the harshness of its economic and social conditions they only shatter. In the decadence of the Roaring Twenties, it is the immorality of its financial, sexual and partying extravagances that dooms Dick's spectacular potential. Nicole, representing the Real America 'confused, fractured, damaged' by the scars of a war that while producing extreme wealth for them both, also required the sacrifice of their innocence, destroys her husband, proving that the Ideal America cannot cure the problems of a sick state that does not adhere to the same moral code without killing itself. When she at last, in Chapter IX of Book 3, severs her parasitical attachment to Dick, she does so with the steely comfort of 'her money . . . , with her quick guile against his wine-ing and dine-ing slowness, her health and beauty against his physical deterioration, her unscrupulousness against his moralities'. He has failed in the face of the material temptations of her extraordinary wealth, the lures of a social scene in which he had once excelled by reflecting back to a disaffected and corrupt people the glitter of their best selves, and even perhaps the arrogance of the dreamer who believed that he could stave off the 'contamination' of the real world by his virtue, determination and the strength of those ancestral good manners. His failure is that of greatness frustrated, but in his self-sacrificing endeavour he attains an almost heroic stature.

On the other hand, it is also possible to see that though Fitzgerald depicts a real tragedy, the collapse of an idealist in an unworthy and disordered universe, it is not entirely clear whether his fall is actually heroic. As Nicole, in that final break, makes plain, 'you're a coward! You've made a failure of

your life, and you want to blame it on me', Dick is in many ways the architect of his own ruin. A romantic, he falls in love with a young, mentally unstable girl despite the knowledge that this will be a burden and is in anyway professionally unsound; what precipitates his degeneration is another reckless infatuation, Rosemary Hoyt, also young and this time incredibly shallow. His fantasies are self-destructive and deserve the ridicule Fitzgerald every so often heaps on them. The scene in Chapter XIII, Book 1, on a First World War battlefield, reveals Dick at his most idealistic and his most absurd. Eulogising a war he had never participated in, ' this kind of battle was invented by Lewis Carroll and Jules Verne and whoever wrote Undine', and describing more his own sense of loss for and adoration of an earlier, more idyllic age, Abe the real veteran and the voice of a cynical author answers that ' General Grant invented this kind of battle at Petersburg in sixty-five'. His delusions are self-imposed and deceiving, the evocation of Grant part of a continuous metaphor comparing his civil, pacific charm with the military exploits of an historic military hero. Indeed, the contrast between the two highlights the lack of those typically heroic achievements and even the stoic, ' man's man' qualities of Hemingway's (a friend and contemporary of Fitzgerald) ' Code Hero', as seen in the characterisation of Lieutenant Frederic Henry, in ' A Farewell to Arms'. All are pitched against a hard, merciless world, but the real heroes fight or are bravely resigned; they do not at the end dwindle pathetically and in unsavoury circumstances among the backwaters of America.

Although Nicole ' liked to think . . . his career was biding its time, again like Grant's in Galena', ready to valiantly spring anew, the reader knows better. Dick's failure is final and complete because what made him great, his charm, his morality and his dreams, died under the amoral excesses of the Jazz Age, the pressure of a damaged, too real America, and ultimately the emptiness of his own illusions.