

Exposing the modern american dream through fitzgerald's novel "the last tycoon"

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This chapter aims at exposing the modern American Dream through Fitzgerald's last unfinished novel "The Last Tycoon". As the novel was written in an era where the American people were still suffering from the consequences of the Depression, Fitzgerald aimed at showing Hollywood's life and illnesses, and to shed light on such images as the new lifestyle and money making and -to raise questions about the modern American Dream through one of Hollywood's moguls, Monroe Stahr, and his determination to reach his dream. I'll use a new historicist approach to study this chapter relying on the work of William J. Palmer "The Films of the Nineties: The Decade of Spin".

In an essay about *The Last Tycoon*, J. Donald Adams states that the novel is the best example we have about one phase of American life — Hollywood and the movies. The novel provides us with an atmosphere of Hollywood's industry and the way actors as well as writers pursue their dreams.

Hollywood, in the novel, is revealed in relation to Monroe Stahr, the main protagonist through Cecilia the narrator. Fitzgerald's unfinished novel, in fact, is considered by critics as one of the best depictions of the film industry, which marked the modern age of a society in its high Depression. Although Fitzgerald does not explicitly criticize the American society in his work, he draws images about America using words that give the readers a strong opinion about a certain phases of the society which enables him to convey his messages easily. It was my first inkling that he was a writer. And while I like writers — because if you ask a writer anything you usually get an answer — still it belittled him in my eyes. Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good, they're a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one

person. It's like actors, who try so pathetically not to look in mirrors. Who lean backward trying — only to see their faces in the reflecting chandeliers.”

The extract talks about writers and actors who represent the dominant category at that era. The extract also draws an image about the American society from Hollywood world which illustrates the idea of conveying messages through characters. Although the main theme in the novel seems to be Hollywood's life and its inner mechanism, *The Last Tycoon* is concerned with the construction of modern America with its jumps and pauses. And like most critics argue, Monroe Stahr is the representative of modern America, using his meteoric rise, fall, and resulting moral confusion as an allegory for the rapid change in American business and society in the early twentieth century. Thus, Hollywood, the center of the American film industry, stands, in the novel, as a powerful force that manipulates the society more than being a place for film production. Richard Bach states in this context that, “ If you will practice being fictional for a while, you will understand that fictional characters are sometimes more real than people with bodies and heartbeats.” So, we can easily draw an image about America's Thirties where film industry was the hero of the age.

The way Fitzgerald handled Hollywood's innermost mechanism is significantly appealing: “ Fatigue was a drug as well as a poison, and Stahr apparently derived some rare almost physical pleasure from working lightheaded with weariness.” Furthermore, the atmosphere of Hollywood reflects the American society at a time where people were obsessed with celebrity; the celebrity that could not be separated from love, jealousy and

death. Then, this reflection in *The Last Tycoon* stands for the main principle of New Historicism which notes that that a literary work should be considered a product of the time. During the 1930s, a new way of life rose typically in Hollywood which characterized an era of money making through a new magical world. This magical world is one, which is a complete independent system giving a new breath to the American commercial sectors.

Monroe Stahr, a brilliant, young film producer, as much interested in the artistic value of motion pictures as in making money. Having lost his wife whom he had loved deeply, he now courts death through overwork. He is extremely interested in the welfare of his employees, although he is not always appreciated by them. It gives a side of the American dream shown by the 'Tycoon' who is a dreamer as well as a dreams catcher. In other words, the main character of the novel is the product of the era with its historical circumstances that shaped the American dream with a new historicist perception. Monroe Stahr as a figurative character in the novel, represents this huge power as being a producer and one of the moguls who manipulate the film industry. Fitzgerald portrays him as a dynamic captain of industry, a dream merchant of the highest order. He is a successful young man " part artistic visionary, part shrewd financier, Stahr brilliantly orchestrates success, including his own, and thereby commands the sometimes grudging respect of men nearly twice his age, men with the money but not the talent to match his". As a business tycoon Stahr is, of course, aware of the other sort of profit that resides in the movies, but he strives not to be corrupted by it and to spend it wisely. He tells Wylie White, " I'm a merchant. I want to

buy what's in your mind." Stahr is criticized throughout all what a hero should be. The New York Times on the web commented on the way Stahr handled the modern American hero as well as society stating that Monroe Stahr is a man who, though dying, fought to control a whole industry in order that he might create something that was both good and popular (1960). Thus Stahr's characterization portrays the new way of looking at the American dream.

Jesse Kornbluth goes further talking about Stahr's dream and vision stating that he has bigger challenges like the rise of a union, the Writers Guild and, most of all, the unending challenge of creating culture that can be transformed into commerce. In other words, Stahr as a dreamer is a creation of its own time revolving around a historical context just like the theory needed. Nevertheless, the novel does not shed lights on film industry and money making only, but also on the new American faith. Like Jack Cashill stated in his article "The Keeper of the Faith: Mogul as Hero in "The Last Tycoon" "that there exists a remarkable adherence to an ideal vision of life and work in America. Like many brilliant men, he had grown up dead cold.

Beginning at about twelve, probably with the total rejection common to those of extraordinary mental powers, the See here: a lie- and a sham -, he swept it all away, everything, as men of his type do ; and then instead of being a son-of-a-bitch as most of them are, he looked around at the barrenness that was left and said to himself, This will never do . And so he had learned tolerance, kindness, forbearance, and even affection like lessons. This passage illustrates the characteristics of an American hero in a

time when people were all the same. Stahr stated the most important tenets that were missing around him. Stahr is the embodiment of a power given by Hollywood's magic. According to the new historicist approach, films became a looking glass through which cultures, nations, governments, societies, and individual historical figures saw themselves. This point is seen in the novel when Stahr is talking with Reinmund: I've told you many times that the first thing I decide is the kind of story I want. We change in every other regard, but once that is set we've got to work towards it with every line and movement. This is not the kind of story I want. The story we bought had shine and glow - it was a happy story. This is full of doubt and hesitation. The hero and heroine stop loving each other over trifles - then they start up again over trifles. The passage shows the reflection of the era of the depression on the story and on its characters that are 'full of doubt and hesitation' which shows the atmosphere of the time.

Before moving to another point, let me give you a short summary about The Last Tycoon and his link with the American dream. The novel is about Monroe Stahr a movie producer in Hollywood. We go through his life that is colored and shaped with the American dream of success until his artistic end which has much more to do with the dream itself. According to Pelzer, Stahr has both the artistic integrity and the moral identity to inspire and to command the representation of his vision, but the industry that he benignly controls is in process of change. The profit margin is becoming the arbiter of taste, and everyone, it seems, now wants an increasing share of the take. They may not know how to use their money or their talent - that knowledge

is Stahr's particular genius — but producers and writers alike now seek to wrest control from this captain of industry and thereby destroy his potential to create a meaningful artistic statement. Stahr will struggle valiantly to preserve the old order, but the system, like his heart, is damaged from within and beyond salvation. Indeed, his projected death in an airplane crash, the novel makes clear, signifies “ The End” of the dream he embodies.

As the chapter revolves around the American dream, let's have a look at its meaning. In theory, the American Dream is supposed to be an accessible vision for every citizen of The United States. The Declaration of Independence announced by Congress in 1776 states that “ we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. Then, in this section from chapter two, I'll try to look at the American dream more deeply in *The Last Tycoon* and show how Monroe Stahr represented as created as well the modern America within a new historicist framework. As this chapter is dealing with the modern era in the American history, I consider it important to talk about Hollywood the setting as well as the idea.

According to Bryant Mangum, Hollywood as setting and the film industry as subject provided any writer a means to engage larger issues swirling through American culture in the late 1930s, among them the seeming failure of the American industrial economy and the rise of fascism and communism as viable alternatives to democratic capitalism. Thus, the late 1930s witnessed the emergence of a new culture projected by the word “ Hollywood” which

itself connotes more than the stereotypes of glamour and celebrity. Indeed, it was one of the most resonant words in the twentieth-century writer's vocabulary. Nowhere else but in Hollywood were the paradoxes of American life and cultural values – success and failure, wealth and poverty, art and commerce – so starkly opposed. It was my first inkling that he was a writer. And while I like writers — because if you ask a writer anything you usually get an answer — still it belittled him in my eyes. Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good, they're a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one person. It's like actors, who try so pathetically not to look in mirrors. Who lean backward trying — only to see their faces in the reflecting chandeliers. The extract shows the opposed version of writers and actors just like America is. In a world of paradoxes, writers as well as actors are trying so hard to keep going on sometimes fighting others but many times fighting themselves.

Perhaps the best way to look at modern America is to decode Stahr's characterization. While he is creative and hard-working: “ He was born sleepless without a talent for rest or the desire for it” which shows that Stahr is born to be a hard worker with great power. Also: “ is unable and unwilling to change from one way of feeling, thinking, to another, to balance his compulsion to die from exhaustion we note here that Stahr has no time to rest, he can die from exhaustion but never stops working. We have also: “ Fatigue was a drug as well as a poison, and Stahr apparently derived some rare almost physical pleasure from working lightheaded with weariness.” This quotation shows the pleasure Stahr derives from working harder,

despite his fatigue which poisons his body he keeps working more and more. This passage suggests clearly the atmosphere of America in the thirties of the previous century that was struggling to resurrect after The Great Depression.

Another passage that expresses Stahr's vision is when he is describing a moment with Kathleen: They sat on high stools and had tomato broth and hot sandwiches. It was more intimate than anything they had done, and they both felt a dangerous sort of loneliness, and felt it in each other. They shared in various scents of the drug-store, bitter and sweet and sour, and the mystery of the waitress, with only the outer part of her hair dyed and black beneath, and when it was over, the still life of their empty plates—a sliver of potato, a sliced pickle, and an olive stone. The extract describes the feeling of Stahr about the world around him and at the same time gives a vision about the paradoxical America. “ Bitter and sweet and sour” is a perfect example of the life at that time where people were struggling with loneliness but enjoying it at the same time. Benjamin Svetkey noted in “ Flirting with Disasters” that: “ Trends are always a reflection of what's happening in the world” which stands for a new historicist vision. The phrase “ a sliver of potato, a sliced pickle, and an olive stone” reflects what was happening at a time of paradoxes and illustrates what Benjamin stated above.

When trying to look for America in those sentences, I felt that the fragmented objects that were used in the description are the image of the 1930's people who were struggling to survive despite the chaos around. In other words, the three objects that were used above present in a mocking

way “ an easy form of human power” which draw a fragmented image of people using them. Just like the objects, people are “ cut off” trying “ to find the hard core of their more vulnerable forms of life”. Nevertheless, by describing the inner mechanism of Hollywood industry, Fitzgerald enables us to deduce the new patterns of the fragmented world America is going through in the novel. In other words, in the rootless, heartless film-world of the novel, Stahr, is no longer alive and useful or active as an opponent, he has become the victim of himself. It significantly shows a phase of America where people faded in pursuing celebrity with a “ futile ugliness of self-seeking”: From the heads showing over the back he recognized a young actor and his girl, and watched them disappear through the gate, already part of the summer twilight. Little by little he was losing the feel of such things, until it seemed that Minna had taken their poignancy with her; his appreciation of splendour was fading so that presently the luxury of eternal mourning would depart. A childish association of Minna with the material heavens made him, when he reached his office, order out his roadster for the first time this year. The big limousine seemed heavy with remembered conferences or exhausted sleep. When looking at this from a new historicist perspective, we'll find that Hollywood world has been affected by the era's changes. “ History makes Hollywood nervous” has been noted in Entertainment Weekly magazine which illustrates why and how Hollywood becomes nervous. The magazine's quotation is important in this study, as it can reveal both to what extent history can be influential and how historical changes can be both positive and negative.

To conclude, "The Last Tycoon" is the "undisputed champion" not just for its Hollywood description, and not just for its realistic images, but for an America that was and a Fitzgerald who was so much her child. In other words, Monroe Stahr is the representative of the film world that marked the modern America; a man that shows a society in its golden age of movie making. And under a new historicist light, Monroe Stahr was studied through exploring one of the basic principles of New Historicism. It is these voices in American history that need to be heard, these stories in American history that need to be told. In the novel historical landmarks, historical leaders and historical events were gathered to build the literary work and the protagonist alike.