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**Dick Diver's Failure:  
Dramatic Aspects of *Tender Is the Night***

**Satoko Hirai**

**I**

*Tender Is the Night*, Fitzgerald's last completed novel, was not taken to be such a masterpiece as *The Great Gatsby* at the beginning. After posting various problems on critical views, it became highly appreciated a few decades ago. One of the difficulties it presents can be attributed to its ambiguity. For example, while it is clear that Gatsby's disaster results from his deep love for a woman, it is impossible to trace Dick Diver's to its cause. He bustles about to help others with vague idealism.

Malcom Cowley says:

One fault of the earlier version was its uncertainty of focus. We weren't quite sure in reading it whether author had intended to write about a whole group of American on Riviera. . . or whether he had intended to write a psychological novel about the glory and decline of Richard Diver as a person.<sup>1)</sup>

Cowley published a revised edition of *Tender Is the Night*, in which he arranged the events in chronological order to give consistency to the work. Nevertheless, it is not valid to say that he could solve the problem.

The criticisms in 1960's tend to accept the ambiguity as a significant quality of the work. Arthur Mizener says:

Perhaps he [Fitzgerald] did not manage to give Dick all the cohesion he might have, but the real difficulty is that the source of Dick's disaster is indescribable. It can be shown and felt, but it can no more be analyzed than Hamlet's disaster can.<sup>2)</sup>

And then, in 80's, Brian Way analyzes the work in the view of deconstructionism and values the indeterminacy itself. Way says, "*Tender Is the Night* is conceived on a scale which make it possible for him[Dick] to explore a human life in all its complexity and variety."<sup>3)</sup> He thinks

that the work refuses any definite answer and that the characteristic of the work consists in its fragmentation. Yet, though Dick's character goes to pieces in the end, doesn't the work really have any continuity or consistency? As fragmentation is the theme of *Tender Is the Night* and its images spread throughout the work, it is likely that the thematic fragmentation is confounded with structural fragmentation. I will pursue the process of Dick's failure and examine whether there is consistency from one point of view, regarding Dick's behavior as theatrical action, a kind of performance.

## II

Dick can be treated as an actor from two aspects. Firstly, he is explicitly compared to an actor in the work. And Rosemary, his admirer, is literally an actress, so there are many figures of speech concerning acting. For example:

So rigidly did he sometimes guard his exposed self-consciousness that frequently he defeated his own purposes; as an actor who under-plays a part sets up a craning forward, a stimulated emotional attention in an audience, and seems to create in others an ability to bridge the gap he has left open.<sup>4)</sup>

Secondly, as well as most of Fitzgerald's protagonists, Dick tends to make illusion. Gatsby's extravagant parties, separated from daily and real world, are programs to show people, in other words, illusory entertainment. Dick also holds parties whose atmosphere is similar to that of Gatsby's. They produce ecstatic feelings escaped from reality. Dick, both as an actor and as a producer, gives to his guests as audience illusory parties compared to theatrical plays.

Gatsby and the other heroes in Fitzgerald's novel invite disasters because they are not able to grasp reality. If gaps between reality and illusion also cause Dick's misfortune, in examining Dick's failure it can be a clue to analyze dramatics<sup>5)</sup> of his action, resistant forces against reality, as dramatic aspects appear on the surface of the work.

What kind is the play which Dick tries to present? The next is a

climax of Dick's successful party:

The table seemed to have risen a little toward the sky like a mechanical dancing platform, giving the people around it a sense of being alone with each other in dark universe, nourished by its only food, warmed by its only lights. . . . Just for a moment they seemed to speak to everyone at the table, singly and together, assuring them of their friendliness, their affection. And for a moment the faces turned up toward them were like the faces of poor children at a Christmas tree. (p.44)

Here is presented a kind of trance, a feeling of comfortable isolation. The guests are oblivious to the outside of their circle and feel united with each other dazzled by the illusion which Dick makes up. We can see this reaction in a play, in a tragedy rather than comedy, where the audience and the artistes incorporate with each other to make an ecstatic state in the theater barriered off the outside.

It is night that contributes to give rise to this situation. If it were day, such an ecstatic state did not come about. Night has a power to conceal confusing real world and to make up a closed space in which Dick can give a successful play.

The title, *Tender Is the Night*, which seems to present the benefit of night, is derived from John Keats's *Ode to A Nightingale*. Some critics say that *Tender Is the Night* gets not only its title but also some essence from Keats's *Ode*. William E. Doherty says:

The title of the novel and the epigraph Fitzgerald offers illuminate the significance of "night" and "darkness" in the story. An enquiry reveals a complicated and careful symbolic structure in *Tender Is the Night* involving a contrast between the night and the day, darkness and light.<sup>6)</sup>

In *Ode* the poet dreams of escaping from the real world filled with agonies and being together with the nightingale in the dark shade of trees at night:

. . .and leave the world unseen,  
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim.  
 Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
 . . . .<sup>7)</sup>

Doherty says that Dick degenerates because he gives himself over to his own Romantic infatuation like opium, the spell of night, and gives up his profession and domestic life.<sup>8)</sup> However, though Dick's failure results from his discord with reality, it is not veritable to think that the ecstatic feeling provoked by night itself makes Dick impaired. The exhilarating parties symbolize the maximum of Dick's power and charm. The less Dick's power becomes, the more rarely the ecstatic feeling is provoked. His disaster seems to be caused by his inability to keep the ecstatic mood in his performance rather than by his devotion to it.

The rapture in Dicks play is cut off, when night stops casting its spell and the closed space disappears. Not covered with night, the world Dick lives in appears to be in confusion in which various things exist without connection. It looks like symptoms of schizophrenia, which is the sickness of his wife, Nicole. When daylight exposes the reality, the confusing background degrades Dick's exalted play, lessening its tension. Then, I will expatiate on the nature of the difficulties in Dick's performance by contrasting it with Rosemary's.

### III

Rosemary, a film star on Hollywood movies, also behaves as if she acts a role in her daily life, yet Dick's performance and hers do not harmonize with each other. He loses himself in the affair with Rosemary, in which he tries to regain his vitality. She is described as an immature without sincerity throughout the story; she says to Dick, " 'Oh, we're such *actors*—you and I,' " and these words are said to be 'her most sincere thing.' (p.118) Her performance, though effective in movies, is so worthless as to degrade Dick's play when they play together on a stage.

In visiting Somme, the battlefield in the War, Rosemary sheds tears hearing about misfortune of the girl who has come to give flowers to her brother's grave, which she remembers later as a happy memory. Her easy lamentation minimizes the great significance of the war which Dick is thinking deeply about. Brian Way says, 'Rosemary's reaction contributes an element of pure farce. She is the classic type of the sentiment-

talist—essentially hard and selfish, she loves the luxury of tears.’<sup>9)</sup> ‘Farce’ is an appropriate expression in associating insincere immaturity of Rosemary with her performance. A war naturally provokes pathetic feeling. On the contrary the elemental quality of a farce is ridiculousness. Of course the ridiculousness does not appear on the surface of this scene, yet Rosemary’s farce truly diminishes the gravity of the war. Her performance has power to trivialize others.

Though Rosemary’s play is concerned with sentimentalism common to adolescents, it exercises unexpected influence. She is very popular among people as an actress. It ironically shows that the public which admires her films is also immature and frivolous: ‘. . . there [in her picture] she was —embodying all the immaturity of the race,. . .’ (p. 80) The spirits of the age prefer trifling dreams offered by Hollywood to serious and grave dramas such as what Dick intently tries to give: ‘. . .they [the majority of the film company] were risen to a position of prominence in a nation that for a decade had wanted only to be entertained.’ (p.232)

The difference between Dick’s play and Rosemary’s can be said to be difference between a stage play and a film play. In the former from the beginning till the end Dick has to keep playing a role with deep concentration not to reduce the tension and to unite the whole theater so that he may make ecstatic oblivion of the chaotic reality. Yet it is not suitable to the age, because it easily breaks down when obtrusive factors, even if so little, get into it. On the other hand, the latter is more discursive. Actions in a movie need less concentration and isolation, because they are shot separately and arranged into a film with unnecessary things cut off. They do not require separation from the chaotic reality. Dick’s performance is protected by tender night, while Hollywood’s play is congruous with turbulent reality revealed by harsh day. The sets of films are described as a confusing and bright place where fiction and reality are entangled with each other.

Abruptly, Brady broke off, calling something to the lights that startled them into a humming glare. Los Angeles was loud about Rosemary now. Unappalled she moved once more through the city of thin partitions, wanting to be back there. . . . The Mediterranean world

was less silent now that she knew the studio was there. (p. 33)

#### IV

Next I will analyze the relation between laughter, such as observed in Rosemary's farce, and awakening from ecstatic state, a break of Dick's play. The laughter in Rosemary's performance is provoked by stupidity or ridiculousness, for example her exaggerated sentimentality with her self-complacency. This kind of laughter is the last thing that is expected in a serious tragedy or a moment of romantic ecstasy. The laughter breaks intensity of a play and makes the actors and the audience get back to the reality. It exists at the boundary of ecstatic oblivion and reality.

In the last part of the story, while other characters debase Dick's tragedy playing slapstick comedies, his loss of ability to perform appears with his self-irony. When he realizes that he is desperately enacting a play in an unsuitable circumstance, he cannot go on playing. At last he notices his own clumsiness. The destruction in this work is not so dynamic that it can arouse strong feelings. It shows helplessness of Dick's deprivation of tragedy, the glory of being a hero. We can see the state of mind Dick finally attains in the scene just before he disappears from the story, in which he encounters one of his old friends, Mary. The ironic laughter provoked inside of himself prevents him from playing a serious role.

His glance fell soft and kind upon hers, suggesting an emotion underneath; their glances married suddenly, bedded, strained together. Then as the laughter inside of him became so loud that it seemed as if Mary must hear it, Dick switched off the light and they were back in the Riviera sun. (p. 337)

For a moment, cutting off the bristle of the bright beach, Dick makes up darkness of night, a suitable stage for acting in which they experience the extraordinary union of the soul sensually expressed. Yet he himself refuses to go on acting as laughter takes him. It is an ironic

laughter against himself playing serious role. It is this laughter that destroys Dick Diver.

At first Dick's performances are disturbed by laughter which Rosemary and other absurd people unintentionally raise. When the closed space is opened by the laughter' the more helpless Dick appears, the more seriously he plays a role. Sometimes he looks even ridiculous; he himself raises laughter against his will. In a comedy they often excite laughter by playing too dramatically, hyperbolically, on purpose. When seriousness is exaggerated in an inappropriate situation, it sometimes makes laughter, not pleasant but sardonic. Acted on the stage illuminated with light revealing various disturbances, a tragic play exposed its fictitiousness and becomes an object of derision.

The process can be seen in Dick's failure in his performances. Not only laughter spoils his plays, but also his performance itself makes laughter. The hero is finally conscious of his dramatics and cannot help mocking at useless seriousness of his own. Dick's failure in his play proceeds from the outside to the inside of his consciousness. His deterioration is not described arbitrarily. The fragmentation of his character can be followed as that of his dramatics.

## V

There is always some skeptical and ironic view as to graveness and seriousness in Fitzgerald's novels. It is no exaggeration to say that it is one of the characteristics of the Lost Generation. Nevertheless, it is not easy to tell how occurs this impassive feeling filled with Fitzgerald's works. In *The Great Gatsby*, the skeptical view invades the perspective of Nick Caraway, the narrator, while Gatsby has very romantic ideas in striking contrast to it. These opposite views contend with each other and give the tension to the work.

In *Tender Is the Night* the hero is swallowed up his own ironic notion. The romantic feeling symbolized by the title, what Fitzgerald had described with ambivalence, is completely given up at the end of the work. *Tender Is the Night* shows how the enthusiasm is lost.



The old American dream is a kind of romanticism. It had been relished and flourished in the inner part of America. Yet, in much wider perspective in which America is thought to be only a part of the whole world, it reveals itself as a mere show without reality. The spirit after the War, whose representative Fitzgerald is said to be, is tend to mock at it as an old-fashioned idea. In such an era, what the hero tries to embody believing in the American dream is an insubstantial illusion. What he does can be said playing a drama.

The American dream is originally insubstantial, at least in this work, but in a closed space separated from the turbulent outside it can be an excellent fantasy. A drama is also essentially a fiction without reality. Yet, when with sublime performance the actors and audience are united and oblivious what is real and what is unreal, it gives ecstatic excitement. Malcom Cowley says various elements without relation to the proceeding of the story spoil the harmony of the work. But it is Dick's play what they disturb rather than the work itself. They trivialize his drama and it changes into a farce. If what is represented in *Tender Is the Night* is so-called tragedy of Dick Diver, the work is a discursive one whose tragic harmony is spoiled by various disturbances as Malcom Cowley says. Yet it is more valid to say that Dick's disaster is loss of tragic dramatics. What he gets at the close is not a tragic end but fragmented state filled with ironic laughter and feelings towards absurdity or triviality.

## NOTES

\*This is a revised version of a paper I read at the Monthly Meeting of the Kansai branch of the American Literature Society of Japan at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies on June 19, 1993.

- 1) Malcom Cowley, *Introduction to the Revised Edition in Three Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1953), p.v.
- 2) Arthur Mizener, *Twelve Great American Novels*. (New York: New York American Library, 1967), p. 115.
- 3) Brian Way, *F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Art of Social Fiction*. (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1980), p. 122.

- 4) F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender Is the Night* (London: Penguin Books, 1982, reprinted 1986). All further references will be to this edition and will be cited in the text by page numbers.
- 5) I use the word 'dramatic' for double meaning usually used separately to signify attribute of actual drama or play and to signify appearance or quality like that of drama sometimes used instead of 'striking.'
- 6) William E. Doherty, *Tender Is the Night and Ode to a Nightingale*, in Harold Bloom ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985), p. 187.
- 7) John Keats, *Ode to A Nightingale* in *Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. Milliam Allot, (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1970), 11. 19-22.
- 8) William E. Doherty, pp. 193-194.
- 9) Brian Way, p. 118.
- 10) Malcom Cowley, pp. i-v.