

## **The Last Tycoon: The Absurd Destiny**

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### **Abstract**

One of the most striking phenomena of American literary history seen after World War II is the extraordinary enthusiasm for F.Scott Fitzgerald both as a man and a writer. In his career of twenty years, as a writer he wrote three of the great American novels. In 1937 Fitzgerald moved to Los Angeles, California where he worked as a script writer. There he started working on *The Last Tycoon*. The unfinished novel was edited by renowned literary critic Edmund Wilson and published posthumously in 1941. The work is an indictment of Hollywood where Fitzgerald had had a disappointing career as a screen writer.

Financial failure, literary oblivion, wife Zelda's mental collapse and Piper's last installment due to be paid made Fitzgerald collapse and he died of heart attack at the age of 44. Had the **absurd destiny** permitted Fitzgerald to finish the novel he would have added a major character and a major novel to American fiction.

The novel deals with one phase of American life- Hollywood and the movies. It reflects the fine grasp which Fitzgerald had over the material on which he was working the day before his death. It brings the story little more than half way to its conclusion. The paper is a reading of the fate of the last of Fitzgerald's "lost" hero - Monroe Stahr in which he felt his identity as an American. It also makes a reading into Fitzgerald's experiences in Hollywood during the last years of 1930's which contributed to the writing of *The Last Tycoon* and his tragic destiny.

Key Words: Hollywood, absurd destiny, American life, individualist.

### **1. Introduction**

Now they were different people as they started back. Four times they had driven along the shore road today, each time a different pair. Curiosity, sadness and desire were behind them now; this was a true returning—to themselves and all their past and future and the encroaching presence of tomorrow (*The Last Tycoon*, p.94).

It is with Edgar Allan Poe that American literature started having an international recognition. Poe was deeply moved by the uncertainty of man's destiny in this world. The absurdity of existence created existential anxiety, the problem of being, of identity, of death. There was a quest for ideals. For Hemingway and Scott the consciousness for life is by ever present awareness of death and a complete collapse of values as illusion. It was a heavy loss to American literature with the sudden departure of F. Scott Fitzgerald in his forties when he was working on *The Last Tycoon*.

Fitzgerald with his early success has moved into the world of literary innovations. He wrote to Mencken, while working on the novel, that it "will have the most amazing form ever invented" (*The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, p.182). *The Last Tycoon* deals with the life of Hollywood and the movies. The note appended to the draft proves his fine observation of Hollywood life.

*The Last Tycoon* which was published posthumously is a testimony of Scott's talent as a writer. "When *Tender is the Night* was published there was reason to doubt whether the

fine talent which had first fully realised itself in *The Great Gatsby* eight years before would develop sufficiently to arrive at the greater achievements of which it was capable” (<http://partners.nytimes>). Scott’s sudden death was tragic and so was of Monroe the last tycoon. To Perkins he writes, “But to die, so completely and unjustly after having given so much” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, p.445).

## **2. Fitzgerald and The Hollywood**

Fitzgerald was writing a love story, about a great leader, about Hollywood. He researched his subject. The film was beneficial in making him repay his debts and provide time to start his last novel. *The Last Tycoon*. It provided him with a plot. The novel is a unique portrayal of film industry in his rhythmic prose style. The complete version would have been greater.

In the opinion of J. Donald Adams:

“Of all our novelists, Fitzgerald was by reason of his temperament and his gifts the best fitted to explore and reveal the inner world of the movies and of the men who make them. The subject needs a romantic realist, which Fitzgerald was, it requires a lively sense of the fantastic, which he had; it demands the kind of intuitive perceptions which were his in abundance. He had lived and worked in Hollywood long enough before he died to write from the inside out, the material was clay in his hand to be shaped at will. One comes to the end of what he had written—something less than half the projected work—with profound regret that he did not live to complete the job” (<http://partners.nytimes>).

Fitzgerald was fascinated by movie making. He had mixed feelings about film making as an art form and understood “the impact it had on audience”. He wrote in 1936:

“I saw that the novel, which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest medium of conveying thoughts and emotions from one human being to another, was becoming subordinated by a mechanical and communal art whether in the hands of Hollywood merchants or Russian idealists, was capable only of the tritest thought, the most obvious emotion” (*Crack-Up*, p.78).

There are about sixty thousand words of the novel in this uncompleted draft, but, as the appended outline shows, the chapter on which he was working the **day before his death** brings the story little more than half way to its conclusion.

The book begins with a brilliant description of a flight. It breaks off with an equally brilliant drunken scene between Stahr the producer and Brimmer the communist. In between we get to know Stahr and Hollywood. Monroe Stahr is a studio executive who worked obsessively to produce high quality films without considering their financial prospect. He takes interest in every aspect of the studio and the welfare of his employees. At an early age of 35 he is burned out. Ultimately he loses control of the studio and his life. Cecilia Brady was based partly on Fitzgerald’s daughter. His relation with Sheilah Graham was translated partly into the relationship between Kathleen Moore and Stahr.

So, the greatness of his final novel partly rests on how well it reflects his feelings about Hollywood. *Crazy Sunday* is another of Fitzgerald’s Hollywood stories that prefigures

*The Last Tycoon*. Calman is like Monroe. Some of Fitzgerald's earliest writing was for silent screen. In *The Beautiful and Damned*, he drew his first major film character, Joseph Bloeckman. During this early period many of his works were translated in films. Fitzgerald's last Hollywood period was a golden period for American film history. *Lost Horizon*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone With the Wind*, and *The Grapes of Wrath* are few famous films of that period.

Fitzgerald was exposed to films and other writers. And he said that "Pictures have a private and complex grammar, a sort of crossword puzzle game" (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: Manuscript, The Last Tycoon*, p.133).

In 1939 Scott worked for David Selznick for two weeks polishing one of the many versions of *Gone with the Wind*. "That winter, Fitzgerald worked with writer Budd Schulberg on Walter Wanger's production of *Winter Carnival* set at Dartmouth College. Later he was fired" (*The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, p.201). While working on *The Last Tycoon*, he thought of using some of Dartmouth material. Fitzgerald was writing a love story, about a great leader, and about Hollywood. He researched his subject. The notes appended to *The Last Tycoon* include "references to Terry Ramsaye's two -volume history of the silent screen, *A Million and One Nights*, director William de Mille's autobiography, *Hollywood Saga*, and articles in *Fortune* about MGM and Thalberg...and research about Thalberg's life" (*The Cambridge Companion to F.Scott Fitzgerald*, p.206).

Stahr was the exemplification of the great leaders, as Thalberg has been for Fitzgerald. He writes to *Collier Magazine*: "Stahr... is Irving Thalberg – and *this is my great secret...*". (*The Cambridge Companion to FSF*, p.206). But Thalberg was only one of the many such leaders. Cecilia Brady was partly based on his own daughter. The greatness of this novel reflects Fitzgerald's ambiguous feelings about Hollywood in his rhythmic prose style, and the description of the film studios has yet to be equalled.

### **3. Stahr the individualist**

Fitzgerald was a lifelong hero-worshipper, but he was not able to create an unflawed hero until he himself was in his forties. Monroe Stahr is the first hero in a Fitzgerald novel with a successful career: Amory Blaine and Anthony Patch have no occupations; Gatsby's business activities are shadowy; and Dick Diver abandons his promising medical career. But Stahr is totally committed to his work and the responsibility that goes with it. He is Fitzgerald's only complete professional. Moreover, Stahr is immune to the emotional bankruptcy that is epidemic in Fitzgerald's work after 1930. A lonely young widower with a prevalent sense of loss, Stahr is not broken by loss, and he retains the capacity to love again. Stahr makes a mistake when he delays the decision to go away with Kathleen by one day—and during that day he loses her. If someone desires to see a flaw in Stahr, it is in his excess of reason or discipline.

"He (Stahr) could have said it then, said "It is a new life" for he knew it was, he knew he could not let her go now...It is your chance, Stahr. Better take it now. Many thousands of people depended on his balanced judgement—you can suddenly blunt a quality you have lived by for twenty - years" (*The Love of the Last Tycoon*, pp.116-17).

One of the familiar lines of Fitzgerald criticism is that “his women are tougher than his men; that in what almost amounts to a reversal of traditional sexual roles, the men tend to be romantically weak, whereas the women are strong” (*The Love of the Last Tycoon*, p. xvi). In *The Last Tycoon* Fitzgerald created his only strong novel hero. As a consequence, perhaps, the characterisation of Kathleen is not compelling. Stahr so commands the reader’s attention and imagination that no one else in the novel can compete with him. It is possible that at forty-four Fitzgerald no longer felt as keenly about women as he once had. That Fitzgerald sensed a deficiency in his treatment of Kathleen is revealed by his note: “Where will the warmth come from in this. Why does he think she’s warm? Warmer than the voice in Farewell. My girls were all so warm and full of promise. The sea at night. What can I do to make it honest and different?” (*Novel*, p.xvi)

But it is character that dominates the book, the complex yet consistent character of Monroe Stahr, hitched to the wheels of his own preposterous chariot, at once dominating and dominated, as much a part of his business as the film that runs through the cameras, and yet a living man. Had **the absurd destiny** permitted Fitzgerald to finish the book, we think there is no doubt that it would have added a major character and a major novel to American fiction. As it is, *The Last Tycoon* is a great deal more than a fragment. It shows the full powers of his author at their height and at their best.

When the novel opens with a description on a transcontinental plane and we get to know Stahr, “the last tycoon” **the individualist**, the man who has to make the decisions, who has to be right, or the whole machine will break down, yet the man who feels personally responsible to all the men who work for him. It is an extraordinary portrait. For you no more questions for Stahr’s curious creative drive than you do his limitations. As and the tragedy of the book is implicit in Stahr himself, in his strength as well as his weaknesses. The machine and the life that he had helped to create are bound to destroy him in the end. But – at least as Fitzgerald had planned it - he goes down whole (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work*, p.131).

Fitzgerald created his own legends. His life frequently overshadows his work, as he has become an archetypal figure; the drunken writer, the ruined novelist, the spoiled genius, the personification of The Jazz Age and the sacrificial victim of the Depression. He dramatised his success and failure, and embraced his symbolic roles. The glamour, the euphoria, the triumph, the heartbreak and the tragedy of his life were genuine but the most important thing is what he wrote.

Fitzgerald was working out an idiom which is universal, American and individual. He (Stahr) is more like a receptacle for all the more familiar contradictions of his author’s own sensibility—his arrogance and generosity, his fondness for money and his need for integrity, his attraction toward the fabulous in American life and his repulsion by its waste and terror (<http://partners.nytimes>).

There is a feeling of strange existence which spreads through the vision of life beyond Hollywood. When the pilot in Nashville tells “the awful-looking yet discernibly attractive drunk that they will not take him on the next flight, he says earnestly, “Only going up in the air.” “Not this time, old man,” the pilot says. And Cecilia observes, “In his disappointment the drunk fell off the bench—and above the phonograph, the loudspeaker summoned us respectable people outside” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.164).

Through Stahr Fitzgerald wished to present a social character, a national type that fascinated and repelled him, in which he felt his **identity** as an American, and in which he saw the history of America. As Wilson observes in his all too brief foreword: “Monroe Stahr, the movie big shot about whom the story is centred, is Fitzgerald’s most fully conceived character. Monroe Stahr is really crafted from within at the same time that he is criticized by an intelligence that sure of itself and knows how to assign him to his proper place in a large scheme of things” (*The Last Tycoon*, p.x).

In the end, however, Stahr is fighting a losing battle against a fast changing society and his own approaching death. He is an aggressive individualist in a make-believe world where everyone suffers from the stifling feeling of a loss of identity.

“I didn’t feel I had any rightful identity until I got back to the hotel and the clerk handed me a letter addressed to me in my name” (*The American Fictional Hero*, p.26).

#### **4. The Absurd Journey**

The critics observe that “*The Last Tycoon* is far and away the best novel we have about Hollywood”. Perhaps it is, but this kind of sociological understanding is at most a minor aspect of *The Last Tycoon’s* perception. “A similar assumption underlies the description of Fitzgerald’s literary career as a gradual shift from the technique of the novel of selection. Fitzgerald was not the kind of writer—if there are any—for whom understanding consisted in the command of a technique. These judgements of Fitzgerald’s perception represent what we ordinarily call a neo-classic attitude: somewhere not very far back of them is a conviction that fiction is a theory to advantage dressed” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Collection of Critical Essays*, p.158).

In *The Last Tycoon* the theme of destruction prevails. Cecelia says that Stahr is losing his battle with Schizophrenia. There is not a single character that does not go to pieces. Wylie Whites career had reached a dead end. Manny Schwartz shot a bullet into his head, and somebody played “lost” in the Juke box, Minna Davis is dead and quickly forgotten Pete Zavras has gone to pot and attempts suicide. Roderiguez is “through”. Marcus is slipping and Brady has fallen. Kathleen had been educated to the end that she might read Spengler, and the grunion throw themselves away “relentless and exalted and scornful” upon the beach. Cecelia ends in a Sanatorium with consumption, and Stahr, deathly tired “ruling with a radiance that is moribund” loses his power. “In love with Minna and death together,” he beats his wings “finally frantically” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and his Work*, p.221) like the plane in which rides and then falls to his death. Fitzgerald had planned to end the novel with a funeral, the funeral which he did not live to write as the consummate symbol of decadent individualism. All that is evil must be destroyed before the self can reign again pure and alone.

Stephen Vincent Benet observes in his article *The Last Tycoon*:

“When Scott Fitzgerald died, a good many of the obituaries showed a curious note of self righteousness. They didn’t review his work; they merely reviewed the Jazz Age and said that it was closed. Because he made a spectacular youthful success at one kind of thing, they assume that that one kind of thing was all that he could ever do. In other words they assume that because he died in his forties, he had

shot his bolt. And they were just one hundred percent wrong as *The Last Tycoon* shows” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and his Work*, p.130).

Any study of Fitzgerald’s career traces its “familiar trajectory” says Ruth Prigozy, “early success, then public oblivion , and finally posthumous resurrection ; had he lived a few years longer he might have proved the exception to his own belief that there are no second acts in American lives” (*The Cambridge Companion to F.Scott Fitzgerald*, p.1).

Fitzgerald knew that he has lost his celebrity status in the 30’s. “A whole new generation grew up in the meanwhile to whom I was only a writer of Post Stories” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, p.466). Mrs. Rings recalls Fitzgerald at the end, and asserts: “He wasn’t finished. He wasn’t a failure though he was poor....He believed in the talent; he believed in *The Last Tycoon*. So let us give him credit for his own resurrection and let’s finally pour the gin down the drain” (*The Cambridge Companion to F.Scott Fitzgerald*, p. 24).

There are many ironies in Fitzgerald’s career, but none is more eloquent than that the “laureate of the Jazz Age” became the admiring creator of a worker boss. “He never knew his strength”, Glenway Wescott says of him (*The Crack Up*, p.329). There was always a judging process operating in him –combined in his finest work, with a quality of aspiration. Zelda Fitzgerald observed after her husband’s death—“I do not know that a personality can be divorced from the times which evoke it...I feel that Scott’s greatest contribution was the dramatization of a heart broken despairing era giving it a new *raison d’ etre* in the sense of tragic courage with which he endowed it” (<http://www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/preface.html>).

Out of very heart of the American dream at the top most pinnacle of American success Fitzgerald “plucked alien, a “mere” producer, and gave him back to us as one who might have been with White Jacket and Huck Finn, Lambert Strether and Sister Carrie. And if the success did not bring home the “old white light” of the heart, if Monroe Stahr stood among tinsel miracles; what would? What had brought it home? Fitzgerald had found *Mon Semblable Mon Frere*; (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and his Work*, p.182) he gave him everything he knew and suddenly he died.

This kind of particularised and precisely controlled realisation of the miracle—the often absurd miracle—at the heart of the ordinary, even fake, is the essential achievement of Fitzgerald’s late fiction, and Hollywood made it possible for him to convey that perception without forcing his materials in the slightest. How strictly he held himself accountable for the actuality of his material is evident from the frequency with which people repeat Edmund Wilson’s praise of *The Last Tycoon* as a picture of Hollywood. But this verisimilitude, though vital to the novel’s success, is only a part, and the less significant part, of its achievement, just as the brilliant account of Long Island society in *The Great Gatsby* is a vital but relatively minor part of its achievement. The Particularised world of *The Last Tycoon* is an image of experience.

“Stahr is miserable and embittered towards the end,” Fitzgerald writes, in one of his last notes for the book. Clearly it was to end in a sensational and not too meaningful irony: Stahr, on his way to New York to call off a murder which he had ordered for the best of motives, is himself killed in an air-plane crash. It is symbolic of the image of the modern Icarus soaring to disaster in that “universe of ineffable gaudiness” (*The Great Gatsby*, p.96) which was Fitzgerald’s vision of the America of his time.

Alfred Kazin in his article *An American Confession* observes:

“Most of all in Hollywood he found Monroe—the sad, skilled, burned out genius of manipulation who was as much the refracted image of himself at 40 as Gatsby had been at 25. Stahr is unquestionably the greatest of Fitzgerald’s achievements; even in the half pages of the unfinished *The Last Tycoon* he has the depth, a variety of human knowledge, that were missing from the young dancers of the twenties. The nostalgia of Gatsby or the arbitrary break down of Dick Diver. Stahr was a man whose true life was all inside, who was a success in the worldly sense and yet above success, an artist of gravity and importance and immense responsibility, but one who did his work casually and quietly, he was preoccupied with a tragedy. It was important to Fitzgerald to create Stahr, it was even more important for us to have him for no very good American writer had ever taken the movies seriously even before. Dos Passos in *The Big Money* caricatured and mauled Josef Von Sternberg, and the caricature remains a caricature. Fitzgerald did something deeper and more enduring.” (*F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and his Work, p.181*).

John Dos Passos rightly comments on the merit of the novel *The Last Tycoon*:

“I have an idea that it will turn out to be one of those literary fragments that from time to time appear in the stream of a culture and profoundly influence the course of future events. His unique achievement, in these beginnings of a great novel, is that here for the first time he has managed to establish that unshakable moral attitude towards the world we live in and towards its temporary standards that is the basic essential of any powerful work of the imagination. A firmly anchored ethical standard is something that American writing has been struggling towards for half a century” (*The Crack Up, p.339*).

Actually, “the old loyalties were tumbling now—there were clay feet everywhere—but still he was their man, the last of the princes.” (*The Love of The Last Tycoon, p. 27*).

In *The Last Tycoon* Fitzgerald leaves one in no doubt of the fate of the last of his “lost” heroes. Monroe Stahr, the hero of this novel, is presented as an anachronism in the changing world of Hollywood. He is the only surviving member of a lost group of Hollywood tycoons who had established personal relationships with their subordinates. In the Hollywood of the 30’s the old values were crumbling down and the old loyalties being systematically destroyed by the unions of the workingmen. Monroe Stahr stands for the old solidarity of people belonging to the same profession.

## **5. Conclusion**

To understand any work of Fitzgerald one has to connect with his life and in the case of *The Last Tycoon* the most. It is important to know both because the novel drew on the detail from his own experiences from the concrete structure of his vision. It speaks of the age he lived in, which has shed its illusion, the age which know evils but not god. In Kafka’s

work we find its purest expression. Where, the action is lifted out of the internal self and put on to the objective plane. We find the history and the times vivid in the novels of Scott. It speaks of author's neglect and heart break of later years, his struggles against defeat and triumph he gathered in finally creating a hero. In him he represents human spirit in one of its permanent forms. Where, impossible remains impossible. In the hero, frustration creeps in and there is desire for death. So, Monroe Stahr, the aggressive individual in course of death seeks salvation.

There is a wonderful message from Fitzgerald, the moral commentator that attempts should be made to save individuals to save the society at large. While observing both the lives (Fitzgerald and Monroe Stahr) we see the remarkable awareness of the actual in all its simplicity and awe. It is the absurdity of destiny in untimely death of Fitzgerald and also Monroe Stahr both fighting a losing battle against a fast changing society and their approaching death.

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