Mackenzie McAnear

1 May 2022

Importance of the Past in “Babylon Revisited”

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” was published in 1931, in *The Saturday Evening Post*. This story's central topic is how much the past should affect one’s future. In researching this topic, many voices have diverse views on how the past is used in Fitzgerald’s story. The overall theme is of Charlie being haunted or unable to break cleanly from his past, a past that he continues to “pay” for.

Cengage Learning Gale states that “Babylon Revisited” is a portrait of a man “trying to get his life back in order after having made several bad mistakes in the years following his rise to riches during the heyday of the stock market in the 1920s.” Marie-Agnès Gross explains in her article “Fitzgerald’s ‘Babylon Revisited’” how “the opening scene’s primary function is to show how divorced Charlie feels from the blurred life of several years ago.”

Many sources, such as Osborne, Nettels, and Chengying, share a theme: “the choices Charlie Wales has made in the past have generated his present difficulties and will affect all future choices as well” (Osborne 86). The consensus of thought among the sources supports the idea that while Charlie seems to have it all and be in a good place in the present, his past is still coming back to deny him what he truly wants, which is his “honor.” Moreover, many sources use the fact that his daughter’s name, Honoria, has a double meaning. Charlie is trying to reclaim his daughter Honoria and his honor as a man.

There is even a reference to the name of the story: “Babylon Revisited.” Right there, the title suggests looking back at that dark past. The name Babylon is supposed to refer back to a

decadent city referenced in the Bible. The name Babylon itself has ties to decadence or wickedness, so the suggestion of revisiting that further enforces the notion of an evil past returning to haunt him. For the opening scene, there are sources that sit with Charlie showing up at a bar that he used to frequent back in those dark days. It is telling that some reviews question why on earth he would do this if he genuinely was honest about making a clean break from his past and a clean start to his life, why would he "revisit" such a place?

Some authors noted that he even bothered to write down the address of his brother-in-law's place, where people from his past could find him. The "Art and Autobiography in Fitzgerald's 'Babylon Revisited'" is where Richard Allan Davison describes, "why, in a world, is [Charlie] at the Ritz bat at all? If he is attempting to demonstrate his triumph over past weakness and prove to himself that they cannot engulf him, it is a questionable attempt at a bet. For the story begins and ends with Charlies at the scene of his most reprehensible moments" (195).vIt is almost as if he wanted his past to catch up to him, "The appearance of Charlie's old friends - the intrusion of the past in the present - suggests that Charlie is not wholly weaned from his old life and that even if he were, the past at any time can erupt in the present, in evil that cannot be foreseen or controlled" (Nettels 266). It is almost as if he handed his past the key to the destruction of his future. Osborne explains how Charlie is "unable to ignore his bohemian past, assailed constantly by Marion Peters (neurotic and narrow-minded representative of the middle-class at its worst), Charlie Wales suffers the tortures of the damned" (Osborne 87). "Charlie looks back with revulsion upon the escapades of the past- 'in retrospect it was a nightmare' [...] - but he also says nostalgically to Marion and Lincoln Peters, 'it was nice while it lasted ... We were a sort of royalty, almost infallible, with a sort of magic around us'" (Nettels 263).

His sister-in-law Marion is the one to throw his past back into his face, the poor treatment of her sister, his wife. She blames him for her sister's death, although there is no clear indication that that is the case. That is neither here nor there because what she believes is what matters because she has the power to give him back his honor—his daughter—or to continue to claim hold of it.

We are led to believe that he has turned over a new leaf and is trying to start a new life, but some authors touch on how, now that he has money again, he looks down on his brother and sister-in-law and their modest means and where they happen to live. These authors ask whether he has truly reformed and become a better man if he exhibits these attitudes. "Marion Peters asks her brother-in-law [...], making her duty to Honoria dependent upon her judgment of Charlie, which only time can vindicate. Charlie's refusal to take a second drink at the end of the story when he sits alone in the bar with his shattered hopes suggests that he may, as he says, stay sober 'permanently'" (Nettels 265).

The terms that Charlie uses for where his brother-in-law Lincoln lives are lowly, and he even offers to help them financially because maybe he thinks that's the right thing to do to continue on his path towards the light, but other authors note that he is just taking pity on them. A lot of the authors point to the huge moment that is made as a part of his changed man persona; he has just one drink a day and holds it up as a point of pride to show how changed he is. "Charlie lets us know that he too hasn't, 'had more than a drink a day for over a year' [...] yet, it has come up out of the abyss of his past to incite destruction in his life, to prevent him from getting custody back of his little girl" (Bish 6). Is it all that it is made out to be, though? "the bar is one of the story's chief symbols of the relentless impingement of the past on the present,

though it is not until the end of the story after Charlie's defeat, that it takes on this signification. Indeed, ironically enough, Charlie's initial appearance at the Ritz seems to imply precisely the opposite: the apparent separation of the past from the concerns, needs, and desires of the present" (Gross).

The significant conflict is in the form of Marion. She is the one who literally cannot let go of the past, and some authors suggested that nothing Charlie could have done to demonstrate what a changed man he was would have been sufficient to get her to change her mind. She just had a deep hatred for him from the get-go, and it was fait accompli because he would never get his honor back because she would never agree to it. However, the huge event was the night that two ghosts from his past showed up at his in-law's house very drunk and rowdy, causing a disturbance. They provide Marion the excuse she needs on a silver platter, that he has not changed, that his friends just proved it. Furthermore, again, the only reason they knew where to go was because Charlie gave the information away, and that act is kind of what sealed the deal.

As Charlie tries to defend himself from his past mistakes, one of his friends says that he is too good for them and that he would not have hesitated to give them a drink in the past. The friend questions whether Charlie is too good for them or has changed. "Roland even mentioned the past behaviors when Charlie was irresponsible and dissipated in front of all the Marine family with evil. She shouted: 'I remember once when you hammered on my door at four A.M. I was enough of a sport to give you a drink.'" (Chengying 59). The bottom line was calling into question the sincerity of his claims of starting a new chapter in his life, and it is after this incident that Marion slams the door to any chance of him getting his daughter—or his honor— back, so he continues to pay for his sins.

The theme of still paying for the past is revisited at the story's end when he returns to the bar and asks the bartender what he owes him. Many authors point to this moment as Charlie still paying for his past, still in debt, and in constant penance. There was one article with an interesting correlation between Charlie and the myth of the wandering Jew. The Wandering Jew is a mythic tale of someone who committed an offense and was cursed to wander the land for all time in penance for the affront that he committed, drawing a parallel to Charlie, who is also still paying penance for his past sins. "Regardless of all the efforts made by Charlie, it seemed that Marion forgot that Charlie had worked hard for ten years, until he got lucky in the market. She did not lay any trust and faith in Charlie. Charlie's wish for a reunion with his daughter was interrupted again and again. He had no chance to exhibit his sympathy and benevolence to his daughter, which means that he could not achieve his self-salvation. His could not reform from his past sin" (Chengying 59).

From the General Student Scholarship, Vincent Bish explains how Charlie was "marked [...] by his past— his alcoholism. No matter how sweet Charlie is with his daughter Hornoria, or no matter if Duncan Shaffer sees him as 'the perfect father', he cannot escape the episodes of his past branded on his chest by Honoria's aunt Marion" (6). "The most important substantive variant occurs in the last line of Charlie Wales's early rumination of his commitment to guide his daughter and his belief in the sustaining value of character: 'Everything else wore out'" (Curnutt and Sylvester 180). Charlie acknowledges the concept that he will always be in debt claiming that "they couldn't make him pay forever" (Fitzgerald 22).

Knowing all this, the shared consensus is that Charlie is not trying hard enough to become the reformed man he wants to be. He does not want his daughter or honor back hard enough not to implicate his past with his future.

Works Cited

Bish, Vincent. “Liberating the Zeitgeist: Using Metaphor & Emotion to Unlock the Transcendency of The Short Story.” *General Student Scholarship*, 2011. https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/stdtpapers/1.

Bloom, Harold. *F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Facts on File, Inc, 1999. *EBSCOhost*, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=nlebk&AN=38694&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Chengying, D. U. A. N. "The Analysis on Charlie’s Self-Salvation in Babylon Revisited." *Studies in Literature and Language*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2016, pp. 56-61.

Curnutt, Kirk, and Barbra Sylvester. “Whose ‘Babylon Revisited Are We Teaching?” *A Historical Guide to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, NY, 2004, pp. 180–187.

Davison, Richard Allan. "Art and Autobiography in Fitzgerald’s ‘Babylon Revisited’." *Bryer,*

Margolies, and Prigozy, 2000, pp. 192-202.

Eberhardt, Benjamin R., and M. A. J. Knepper. "Two American Stories.”

Eisinger, Ashleigh. "Return of the Redeemed: Charlie Wales in Fitzgerald’s ‘Babylon Revisited’ Ashleigh." *The Corinthian*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2009, pp. 17. Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *Babylon Revisited*. Google, 1931. https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbnxtaXRjaHNhcGxpdGNvbXB8Z3g6NzU1NjUzZTAxMGJkMzJkMQ

Fitzgerald, F. S., et al. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: New Perspectives*, University of Georgia Press, Athens, Ga, 2000.

Gale, Cengage Learning. Study Guide for F. Scott Fitzgerald's “Babylon Revisited". Gale, Cengage Learning, 2016.

Gay, Marie-Agnès. "Making something out of nothing: Dissipating Legacy and the Legacy of Dissipating in ‘Babylon Revisited’." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 96-116.

Gross, Seymour L. “Fitzgerald’s ‘Babylon Revisited.’” *College English*, vol. 25, no. 2, National Council of Teachers of English, 1963, pp. 128–35, https://doi.org/10.2307/373402.

Harrison, James M. "20. Fitzgerald’s Babylon Revisited." *The Explicator* vol. 16, no. 4, 1958, pp. 49-51.

Hess, Heather LN. “The Crash!”: Writing the Great Depression in F. Scott Fitzgerald's “Babylon Revisited,” “Emotional Bankruptcy,” and “Crazy Sunday." *Journal of Modern* Literature 42.1 (2018): 77-94.

Kelly, Lionel. "Ashes to Ashes: Mourning and Social Difference in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Fiction." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 98, no. 3, July 2003, pp. 714-715. *Gale Literature Resource Center*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A106551484/LitRC?u=txshracd2557&sid=summon&xid=c36182 1e. Accessed 14 Mar. 2022.

Malmgren, Carl D. "Revisiting “Babylon Revisited”: A Critical Retrospective." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2017, pp. 81-95.

Marsh, John. “Purging the Rottenness from the System: The Blessed and the Damned in the Great Depression.” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and*

Theory, vol. 72, no. 2, 2016, pp. 121–46. *EBSCOhost*, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=mzh&AN=2016382147&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Matsuura, Kazuhiro. "Morality and the Failure of Redemption: F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'Babylon Revisited' and 'The Curious Case of Benjamin Button'." *Journal of the Graduate School of Letters 10,* 2015, pp. 87-94.

McCracken, David. "Restitution in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 'Babylon Revisited.'" *The Explicator*, vol. 75, no. 2, Apr. 2017, pp. 99–102. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1080/00144940.2017.1312254.

Murphy, Garry N., and William C. Slattery. "The Flawed Text of 'Babylon Revisited': A Challenge to Editors, a Warning to Readers." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1981, pp. 315–18. *EBSCOhost*, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=mzh&AN=198 1008425&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Nettels, Elsa. "Howells's 'A Circle in the Water' and Fitzgerald's 'Babylon Revisited'." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1982, pp. 261.

Nolan, Jennifer. "Reading 'Babylon Revisited' as a Post Text: F. Scott Fitzgerald, George Horace Lorimer, and the Saturday Evening Post Audience." *Book History*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2017, pp. 351-373.

Osborne, William R. "The Wounds of Charlie Wales in Fitzgerald's" Babylon Revisited"." *Studies in Short Fiction* 2.1 (1964): 86.

Prochaska, Bernadette. "Temporality in Fitzgerald's Babylon Revisited." *Destiny, the Inward Quest, Temporality and Life.* Springer, Dordrecht, 2011. 97-102.

Richard R. Griffith. “A Note on Fitzgerald’s ‘Babylon Revisited.’” *American Literature*, vol. 35, no. 2, Duke University Press, 1963, pp. 236–39, http://www.jstor.org/stable/2923428.

Sutton, Brian. "Fitzgerald's the Great Gatsby and Babylon Revisited." *The Explicator*, vol. 65, no. 3, 2007, pp. 164-167, doi:10.3200/EXPL.65.3.164-167.

Sweetman, Charles. "Alcoholic Cases and the Case for Alcohol in" Babylon Revisited" and" A New Leaf"." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 4, 2005, pp. 162-189.

Tachibana, Sachiko. "The Power Relationship between Father and Daughter: Fitzgerald's Babylon Revisited and Lo, the Poor Peacock!." *Osaka Literary Review* 41 (2002): 43-58.

Tebbetts, Terrell L. “Commodifying Character: Why the Past Entraps in ‘Babylon Revisited.’” *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 4, Penn State University Press, 2005, pp. 147–61, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41583095.

Turner, Joan. "Fitzgerald's Babylon Revisited." *The Explicator* vol. 48, no. 4, 1990, pp. 282-283.