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Morality and the Failure of Redemption: F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Babylon Revisited" and "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button."

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Abstract: This paper examines thematic similarities between the mythical story of the Wandering Jew and the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald; more specifically his short stories "Babylon Revisited" and "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." Permeating all three tales are themes of wandering, inability to escape the repercussions of the past, and debt, particularly to the dead, that can never be repaid. I argue that the protagonists of "Babylon Revisited" and "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" have serious and unredeemable moral debts they acquired spontaneously. I argue that in both stories, Fitzgerald deliberately draws on the myth to explore issues of moral redemption, guilt, suffering, and the impossibility to revisit the past to retrieve and heal previous transgressions; and that these themes are exemplified in the stories circular narrative structures.

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Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald is well known for novels that depict individuals who struggle with repercussions from the past. Protagonists in many of the author's short stories, such as "Winter Dreams" (1922), the Pat Hobby stories (1939-1940), and "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" (1922) (hereafter, "Benjamin"), all experience the same struggle: they cannot find a way to escape their pain. "Babylon Revisited" (1931) (hereafter, "Babylon") is typical of Fitzgerald's work in its exploration of this theme. The protagonist, Charlie Wales, has not only lost his wife, Helen, due to her "heart trouble," but has, since Helen's death, lost custody of his daughter Honoria. Thus, like many Fitzgerald protagonists, he finds that he is unable to redeem himself, unable to escape the negative aspects of his situation, and unable to escape his pain because he cannot repay his moral debt.

Strikingly, many of Fitzgerald's stories contain characters who wander as a result of their inescapable circumstances, such as Charlie, the protagonist of "Babylon"; Dexter Green, the protagonist in "Winter Dreams," who is concerned with his fading memory of the beautiful Judy Jones; and Benjamin, the protagonist in "Benjamin," who destined to wander in exile. In this

paper, I posit that the key to understanding motifs common to “Babylon” and “Benjamin” lies in the myth of the Wandering Jew. Fitzgerald references this myth directly in “Benjamin”: some boys amidst a throng of onlookers at the train station who gawk at Benjamin say of him, “[H]e must be the Wandering Jew” (169).

When one understands these stories involve unresolvable moral problems and dilemmas, the problems of the protagonists become clear. Criticism to date on “Babylon” has focused on Charlie’s financial problems and the consequences of his past. For example, Brian Sutton points out that “Babylon” is a story about Charlie’s struggles with money and the past. Cecil D. Eby focuses on money and Charlie’s spiritual problems (176), and Joan Turner suggests that the theme of “Babylon” is that “the past cannot be escaped” (282). In this paper, I argue that money is less of a problem for Charlie than other scholars have suggested.

On the other hand, Roy Male points out that “Babylon” is a story of the return of a hero after a long absence or exile from home (271). This is an important insight, because as I will show, the idea of exile and a failure to return home are themes implicit in both “Babylon” and “Benjamin.” However, Male does not link the idea of exile to the biblical myth of exile, one who must wander the earth alone because of his sins. As Matthew J. Bruccoli, editor of *The Collected Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* argues, Fitzgerald’s short stories comprise a “cluster” which “introduce[s] or test[s] themes” (XVII) developed in larger works such as *The Great Gatsby*. However, the question remains as to why the protagonists in these particular two stories struggle with their pasts and are destined to wander.

1. The Myth of The Wandering Jew

An overview of the myth will assist in showing how the themes of exile, guilt, and the failure to find redemption underpin “Babylon” and “Benjamin.” As George K. Anderson points out in his *The Legend of the Wandering Jew*, the story is a Christian allegory of the Jewish diaspora, where a Jewish shoemaker, Ahasuerus, also referred to as Cartaphilus, Ahasverus, Ahasuer, and Malchus in different versions, denies Jesus respite as he travels toward Golgotha where he will be crucified. Jesus asks the shoemaker for a glass of water; however, Ahasuerus denies Jesus’ request and, as a result, Jesus declares that Ahasuerus will not die until the Second Coming, “I sure will rest, but thou shalt Walk, and have no journey stayed” (62). Ahasuerus realizes that he has made a catastrophic mistake; however, it is too late for him to atone for it. In anguish, Ahasuerus leaves his wife, son, and homeland to wander the earth ceaselessly, suffering the guilt and pain of exile as the consequence of his momentary lack of compassion. Importantly, Ahasuerus cannot ever pay his debt and redeem himself because Jesus has died. Here, there seems to be two morals of the story, the first is that non-believers can never be redeemed from sin, and, more importantly, that actions of the past can never be undone.

To provide to reading of how the myth of the Wandering Jew underpins both “Babylon” and “Benjamin,” which, I argue, are morality tales, I begin by examining how the themes and motifs of the myth are invoked in “Babylon.” I will then show how the circular narrative structure of both stories exemplifies the theme of recurring exile as destiny implicit in the myth.

2. The Wandering Jew as the Basis of “Babylon”

In this section, I will argue that the motifs of asking for a drink, and the inability to repay a debt for past transgressions, implicit in the myth, are recurring motifs in “Babylon Revisited.” To begin with, it is important to note that Fitzgerald uses the title to invoke the myth of the Wandering Jew as a story of an unredeemable antichrist, because, as George Anderson points out, Babylon is the home of Ahasuerus to which he can never return (38).

Fitzgerald’s “Babylon” concerns the protagonist Charlie who becomes an alcoholic and loses his wealth during the Great Depression. He also loses his wife Helen, and her sister Marion blames him for her death. This chain of events results in Charlie losing custody of his daughter Honoria to Marion. Even though Charlie subsequently recovers his fortune, Marion cannot fully trust him and she refuses to return Honoria, so Charlie’s past actions are unredeemed, and, like Ahasuerus, he loses his family.

Interestingly, there are three instances in “Babylon” involving someone giving or refusing to give someone else a drink. When confronted by Lorraine, an old friend from Charlie’s debauched days as a drunk, she recalls, “But I remember once when you hammered on my door at four A.M. I was enough of a good sport to give you a drink” (221). Lorraine, also an alcoholic, but unlike, Charlie, not reformed, had previously asked Charlie for a drink when they accidentally met in Paris, the city where Charlie had lost his fortune. As the narrator records, “Between the acts they came upon Duncan and Lorraine in the lobby where the band was playing. ‘Have a drink?’ ‘All right, but not up at the bar. We’ll take a table’” (212). In the final instance, Claude Fessenden, a customer at a bar in Paris, asks for a drink; however, the bartender refuses (206). The idea of asking for or refusing to give a drink is not in itself unusual. However, in a short story whose title invokes the myth, the motif is obvious, although, unlike the myth, the symbolism of water as a curative is replaced by alcohol. Furthermore, unlike the myth, the refusal to drink is ironically the source Charlie’s partial redemption.

3. Monetary and Moral Debt

In this section, I will discuss how the protagonists of both the myth and “Babylon” struggle with guilt and the denial of redemption. Charlie misunderstands his problems as being monetary in nature and thinks he can repay his moral debts through money or valuable gifts. Charlie recovers from his financial difficulties in Prague and becomes quite wealthy. As he says, to Marion and her husband Lincoln, he is doing rather “extremely well [...] There is a lot of business there that isn’t moving at all, but we’re doing even better than ever. In fact, damn well [...]. My income last year was bigger than it was when I had money” (207). At this point, in his quest to regain his daughter Honoria, he suddenly understands that money is not quite the problem he thinks it is. Fitzgerald writes, “[Charlie] stopped, realizing that he was blundering. [Marion and Lincoln] couldn’t be expected to accept with equanimity the fact that his income was again twice as large as their own” (216). However, for Marion and Lincoln, the problem is whether Charlie can be relied upon as a morally responsible agent. Marion has lost a sister, Helen, partly because of his actions in the past. This means his debt is unpayable; he cannot adequately

compensate others for his past deeds. His daughter, who he cannot regain custody of, functions in the story as a type of collateral that is withheld from him.

Although Charlie is mistaken in thinking that he can repay his debt, he realizes that his past deeds have caused him to owe a debt he cannot repay. The word “owe,” used in the opening and close of the story, is symbolically important. Various scenes in the story also emphasize owing, as opposed to owning, as a crucial factor for Charlie. For example, the narrator begins the story with the observation that, “It was not an American bar any more” (205). This implies that Charlie and other rich Americans at one time, culturally speaking, owned the bar. At the end of the sorry, Charlie, who cares deeply about settling all his debts, asks a waiter for his bill, “What do I owe you?” (223). Owing and paying back what is owed—or returning what has been received—are key themes in “Babylon.”

Charlie’s inability to retrieve his daughter Honoria (his moral collateral) further emphasizes the unpayable nature of his debt. Charlie’s sister-in-law, Marion, legally holds the right to decide his daughter’s fate. Fitzgerald describes Charlie’s attempts at reconciliation with Marion in monetary terms, “He thought rather angrily that this was just money [...] they [Helen, Marion, and Lincoln] couldn’t make him pay forever” (223). Indirectly, if he hopes to retrieve his daughter, he must continue to repay his debt to his wife. Marion blames Charlie for his poor past treatment of his wife, her sister, saying, “My duty is entirely to Helen” (214). In addition, Charlie calls Honoria “pie,” a term that can reference wealth as in “a piece of the pie.” When he goes to Marion’s house to visit Honoria as in the following passage, the narrator observes, “From behind the maid who opened the door darted a lovely little girl of nine who shrieked ‘Daddy!’ and flew up, struggling like a fish into his arms. She pulled his head around by one ear and set her cheek against his. ‘My old pie,’ he said” (207). Figuratively speaking, one can view Honoria as part of a financial transaction similar to a loan. This motif resonates on multiple levels because Marion’s husband, Lincoln, works at a bank (218). These analogies connecting Charlie’s life situation with the world of finances reinforce the reading that Charlie mistakenly believes he can financially redeem an unpayable moral debt that money cannot buy.

Marion’s lack of “confidence” in Charlie further supports the notion that his problem is not monetary, but moral in nature. Charlie grieves because he, like Marion, believes that his past deeds caused his wife’s death. This is a key issue for Charlie because his wife’s death means that Marion’s confidence in him can never be restored. As a result, Charlie never regains custody of his daughter; this constitutes the final evidence that his debt is indeed unredeemable. Marion describes her misgivings regarding Charlie in terms of a “question of confidence” (220) and “distrust” (215). Lincoln concurs: “I think the main point for [Marion] is whether she has confidence in you or not” (215). Still, Charlie insists, “I think she can have entire confidence in me” (215), again failing to acknowledge the true nature of his debt which is moral rather than financial.

Claude, an old friend of Charlie’s, parallels Charlie’s problem of a moral debt, but Claude’s debt is financial as well as moral. At the beginning of the story, Charlie learns that bar staff have permanently barred Claude from the premises. Over the course of a year, Claude had run up a large bill on credit, and, when the head barman demanded he pay, his “bad check” did not clear and the manager finally lost confidence in him (206). Similarly, Marion’s loss of confidence in

Charlie means she will not return his daughter to his care. Charlie's moral debt can never be repaid. This problem is not resolved at the end of the story and will likely never be resolved.

As in Ahasuerus' case with Jesus, Charlie has no way to repay his moral debt because his debtor, his wife Helen, is dead. Furthermore, although, like Ahasuerus, who was not directly responsible for the death of Jesus, and just as Charlie was not directly responsible for Helen's "heart troubles," both are in some way morally responsible for their past deeds. In both cases, they cannot redeem their past mistakes and must suffer this misfortune.

4. Failure of Redemption as Circular narrative

In this section, I argue that both the myth and "Babylon" have circular narratives that prevent a full return to home as the consequence of their protagonists' past deeds. Charlie's problems, which stem from his past behavior, constantly resurface in new situations, such as his interactions with his old friends. For instance, the "sudden ghosts out of the past" Duncan and Lorraine, have a kind of moral claim on Charlie as his friends as does his sister-in-law and his deceased wife (211). When Marion and Lincoln finally invite Charlie to dinner at their house, it seems likely that Marion will at last agree to grant Charlie custody of his daughter. However, Duncan and Lorraine suddenly arrive without notice, and, Marion, angered by these uninvited drunken guests from Charlie's past, refuses to continue custody negotiations. Significantly, it is at this point in the story, that Lorraine cites Charlie's past deeds and requires that he repay Duncan and her for their earlier kindness to him with the offer of a drink. She says, "I remember once when you hammered on my door at four A.M. I was enough of a good sport to give you a drink" (221). Lorraine formulates her past attention to Charlie as a type of loan, adding to Charlie's moral debt, and she requires recompense; however, Charlie cannot repay her. More importantly, he calls these intruders "sudden ghosts out of the past," alluding to the dead, including his late wife. Just at the point when Charlie seems poised to succeed, he loses his opportunity because past actions and an unredeemable moral debt comes back to haunt him. Once again, like Ahasuerus, he cannot redeem actions committed in the past.

Another similarity between Charlie and the Wandering Jew is that they face similar punishments. As Christopher Morrison explains, the Wandering Jew cannot die (400), and his age continues to reset itself, "On reaching old age he miraculously regenerates to a younger age" (400). Once he becomes approximately 100 years old, his body changes back to that of a 30-year-old. This process is automatic and goes on *ad infinitum*; he cannot escape the cycle and cannot die. In "Babylon," Charlie cannot help repeating the same actions, whose consequences he is trying to overcome. In fact, "Babylon" has an overall circular structure: the story opens and ends in the same bar, with Charlie having the same conversation with the bartender, and the plot is unresolved. Moreover, as the title implies, "Babylon Revisited," this story demonstrates Charlie's compulsion to repeat the same actions. For example, he visits and will revisit his daughter, and he pays and will continue to repay his sister-in-law and her husband who are unforgiving, "He would come back some day; they couldn't make him pay forever" (223).

Interestingly, in "Babylon," the idea of a return has dual symbolic meaning both as repayment of a moral debt and a return to origins. As noted, the story begins with Charlie's return

to Paris. In his conversation with the bartender, Alix, Charlie describes his family as an investment that has failed to yield a return. When Alix comments, "I heard that you lost a lot in the crash," Charlie replies, "I lost everything I wanted in the boom" (222). In the ending, as mentioned earlier, the story echoes this theme of return, as the narrator speaks of Charlie's future plans return to Paris to pursue his dream of regaining Honoria.

Other significant motifs connect "Babylon" to the myth. The protagonists of both stories lose their families. As noted, Charlie's wife dies, and his sister-in-law and her husband take custody of his daughter. The Wandering Jew is separated from his family during his eternal period of wandering. Both protagonists are also surprised at the drastic changes that occur in their surroundings during their absence. When Ahasuerus' arrives at the village in which he grew up, he notices how dramatically it has been transformed. This idea is captured in the Anderson edition of the myth as follows, "Forth with he went into foreign lands, one after another, until the present time. When, after many centuries, he came back to his land, he found it all laid to waste and Jerusalem destroyed, so that he could no longer recognize it" (46). Furthermore, "He has a wife and child (or children), whom he must abandon because of the curse" (48). When Charlie arrives at the bar in Paris, he finds that many of his friends have already left the city, and, as noted above, he observes that the atmosphere is completely different, "It was not an American bar any more — he felt polite in it, and not as if he owned it. It had gone back into France" (205).

5. The Wandering Jew as Benjamin

In considering the relationship between the myth and "Benjamin," I argue that the two stories share similar plot points, motifs, and circular structures; also, that fundamental problems addressed by both protagonists are moral in nature. Fitzgerald makes the connection between these stories particularly clear in the episode in "Benjamin" where the protagonist is rejected by Yale University. He walks to the train station, followed by a curious throng of onlookers and some boys cry out, "He must be the Wandering Jew!" (169). Here, Fitzgerald makes explicit the links between the two protagonists. Furthermore, elsewhere in the story, Fitzgerald links Benjamin to images of crime; for instance, it is rumored that he "had been in prison for forty years" and "was John Wilkes Booth" (172). Booth was famous for being a Shakespearean actor who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln. Benjamin's time in prison and having the identity of an assassin are consequences of his alleged crime. Interestingly, by associating Benjamin with the works of Shakespeare, in context, the character is identified with scenes of violence and murder. Furthermore, many of his neighbors and colleagues metaphorically refer to Benjamin's marriage as "criminal" (172). Like the Wandering Jew, Benjamin's unusual aging process and his past deeds, whether actual or imagined, also affect his experience of the world.

The similarities between these stories become especially clear when we focus on the theme of immortality and the circular story structure therein. Benjamin is born with the body of a seventy-five-year-old man and his body becomes progressively younger throughout his life. In the end, it seems that he does not die, but instead simply disappears. The most important point to understand about the ending of "Benjamin" is that it indicates a kind of rebirth. At the story's

end, Benjamin disappears and, as Fitzgerald writes, “Then it was all dark, and his white crib and the dim faces that moved above him, and the warm sweet aroma of the milk, faded out altogether from his mind” (181). In this scene, the specific details warrant attention. When he is born, nurses take him from the crib; he is then “[w]rapped in a voluminous white blanket, and partially crammed into one of the cribs” (162). Then, as Benjamin puts it in the voice of an old man, “I asked for something to eat and they brought me a bottle of milk!” (163). The scenes described at the beginning and ending of the story are virtually identical. In the ending, the story comes full circle because Benjamin, who is placed by a nurse in a white crib shortly after birth, also disappears from a white crib (162; 181).

Throughout, characters in “Benjamin,” do not die, but simply disappear and this recalls the fate of the Wandering Jew who also cannot die. Despite having appeared as central supporting characters, Benjamin’s parents, grandfather, and father-in-law all disappear silently; Fitzgerald does not describe their exits from the story. These characters must have died because he is born an old man and by the end of his life, he has become an infant again. However, the lack of explicit mention of their deaths implies a world without death, particularly because his death is not described, but rather implied where a nurse uses a word “ghost” (161) when she refers to Benjamin shortly soon after his birth; furthermore, his father calls him an “apparition” (163). This suggests that Benjamin had been reborn: to be seen as a ghost is to be recognized as someone who has died. According to his wife, nobody, not even Benjamin, should interfere with the cycle of birth and rebirth. She wonders why he insists on aging backward, “I should think you’d have enough pride to stop it [...] If you’ve made up your mind to be different from everybody else, I don’t suppose I can stop you, but I really don’t think it’s very considerate” (175). The Wandering Jew also cannot die. When Ahasuerus reaches old age, his body becomes young again, and this cycle goes on *ad infinitum* because he cannot control it.

In both stories, the protagonists, Benjamin and Ahasuerus, are condemned to wander the earth. The Wandering Jew must roam the earth until the Second Coming. Benjamin, wanders endlessly as others often reject him, including the hospital where he was born (162). Although he is a newborn and may require standard hospital care, the nurse insists strongly that Benjamin must leave right away, saying, “We’re going to ask you to take him home with you as soon as possible — some time to-day” (162); and “You’ll have to take him home immediately!” (163). Later in the story, the school registrar insists that Benjamin leave Yale University and the town, “Well, I’ll give you eighteen minutes to get out of town” (169). In addition, Benjamin must frequently leave his home due to arguments with his wife and son. Homeless, Benjamin attempts to rejoin the United States armed forces, but is refused.

Benjamin’s physical problems also are entwined with moral issues, as is the case with the Wandering Jew. His mere existence causes embarrassment and anger in others, which indicates there is a moral deficiency in him. Everyone at the hospital appears to be annoyed at his birth. Doctor Keene is a representative example. The doctor helps Benjamin’s mother give birth; he knows the Buttons well because he has a strong relationship with them as their “family physician” (160). Despite this, he says to Benjamin’s father, “I brought you into the world, young man, and I’ve been physician to your family for forty years, but I am through with you! I don’t want to see you or any of your relatives ever again! Good-by!” (161). The doctor is angry and his response

indicates that Benjamin poses potential problems, moral in nature, from the moment of his birth. Benjamin, as a newborn, presumably could not have done anything to trigger this anger. As his response to the birth, the doctor even exclaims to Benjamin's father, "Outrageous!" (160), and seemed to be "in a perfect passion of irritation" (160). The nurses behave in a similar way; one "[gives] a little scream" when she meets Benjamin's father, who reminds her of Benjamin (161). Another nurse is greatly surprised when Benjamin's father asks to look at his child; she drops a basin (161). The nurse "[regains] control of herself, and [throws] Mr. Button a look of hearty contempt" (161). These instances reveal that from the moment of his birth, the mere existence and presence of Benjamin reveals a moral deficiency, perhaps from his past, that he cannot overcome.

6. Conclusion

In demonstrating that Fitzgerald reimagined the myth in "Babylon" and "Benjamin" I have shown that this allegory is the key to understanding themes that typify many of his stories and also their connection with other Jewish allegories and myths. The aspects I have outlined reveal that "Babylon" is not a story primarily about financial affairs, but concerns the protagonist's failure to secure moral redemption. As a result, the protagonist cannot resolve his past transgressions and regain custody of his daughter. The themes in that story and "Benjamin" — specifically, of wandering and dealing with unpayable debts and unsolvable problems — echo those of the myth and occur throughout Fitzgerald's short stories.

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