

THE (IRISH)-AMERICAN DREAM:

Social Insecurity and Disadvantage in Irish Characters in Fitzgerald and Mailer

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AS BOB BATCHELOR DISCUSSES IN HIS ARTICLE “Visions of the American Dream: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Bob Dylan, and Norman Mailer Probe at the Heart of a National Idea,” F. Scott Fitzgerald and Norman Mailer both explore the notion of the American Dream and its dominance in the imagination of the American people and society. Fitzgerald and Mailer are especially in tune with those for whom, for whatever reason, the American Dream slips from their often desperate grasp. In both of their works, the Irish were such a group of people, even though their respective relationships to Irishness were different and complex. Fitzgerald had Irish blood on both sides and desperately wished not to be Irish due to its associated social handicaps. Mailer had no perceptible Irish heritage but had many relationships with Irish people and included many Irish characters in his fiction and film, often admiringly so. While both authors portray numerous Irish-American characters in their work, Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night* and Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* particularly exhibit nuanced Irish-American characters who experience social disadvantage as a result of their Irishness and thus cannot pursue the mythical American Dream. Dick Diver in Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night* and Roy Gallagher in Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead*, because of their Irish identities, both experience deep social insecurity and a persecution complex, which causes them to lash out against others in often self-destructive ways.

Literary and social stereotypes of Irish-Americans and Irish-American characters exploded onto the American national consciousness in the nine-

teenth century following waves of Famine immigrants, and these pejorative notions endured well into the twentieth century. According to Margaret E. Conners, Irish-Americans were depicted in popular culture as an “inferior breed” of “shiftless parasites spawning large families that they were unable to support” (2). Stereotypes and caricatures of Irish-Americans, which included “pipe-smoking Paddies, slatternly domestics, and riotous corner boys” dominated popular and literary portrayals of the Irish (Conners 3). Conners also notes that many of the same traits that racist white Americans attributed to African Americans were also ascribed to nineteenth century Irish-American immigrants, who were characterized as “ignorant, primitive, unstable, boisterous, indigent, and superstitious” (Conners 3). Thus, anti-Irish sentiment ran deep in American society and remained a pervasive influence upon the writings of twentieth-century American authors F. Scott Fitzgerald and Norman Mailer, especially in their literary depictions of Irish-American characters.

Both Fitzgerald and Mailer draw on their own personal experiences with the disadvantages facing Irish-Americans in twentieth-century America, albeit from vastly different perspectives. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s troubled life, ended by an alcoholism-influenced heart attack in Hollywood at the age of forty-four, reflects the deep-seeded social insecurities and difficulties Irish-Americans experienced in their own pursuits of “the American Dream.” Descended from Irish immigrants on both sides of his family, Fitzgerald embodies the struggle of Irish Americans who might experience a modicum of professional and social standing but would never quite gain entry into American society’s most elite ranks. According to Charles Fanning, “despite his considerable artistic gifts, Fitzgerald was no more able to heal his ambivalence about wealth and social status than were his nineteenth-century Irish-American literary forebears” (249). Fitzgerald, while frequently mixing socially and professionally with the upper echelons of society, perpetually felt like an outsider, reflected in his penchant for excessive drinking and profligate spending.¹ Fitzgerald’s correspondence often expounds upon his keen awareness of his disenfranchisement. In a July 1933 letter to John O’Hara, Fitzgerald admits to a “two-cylinder inferiority complex” resulting from his perpetual inability to overcome his Irish background, quipping that “if I were elected King of Scotland tomorrow after graduating from Eton, Magdalene to Guards, with an embryonic history which tied me to the Plantagenets, I would still be a parvenu” (522). In this same letter, Fitzgerald also

complains of “an inner necessity of starting my life and my self-justification over again at scratch in whatever new environment I may be thrown” (522). Fitzgerald’s lifelong struggle with his positioning within American society is reflected in many of his works, including *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *The Great Gatsby*, and especially *Tender Is the Night*.

While Fitzgerald’s depictions of the struggles of Irish-American characters draw directly upon his life experiences, Mailer’s engagement with such characters comes from a deep lifelong admiration of Irish-American people. Mailer often framed his love of Irish-Americans in relation to his own experiences as a Jewish person. Biographer J. Michael Lennon describes Mailer’s dual affinities, remarking that “One side of Mailer was drawn to the dutiful Jews; the other, more daring side, took pleasure in Irish characters”² (267). Mailer stated:

I’ve always loved the Irish and felt very close to them” because “the Irish have what the Jews didn’t have, and the Jews always had what the Irish didn’t have. The Jews have this *funny knowledge* that if you respect life enough, it’s going to respect you back. The Irish have never understood that. On the other hand the Irish have this *great bravura, a style, an elegance* (qtd. in Lennon 267).

Mailer’s sister, Barbara Wasserman, claims that she does not know exactly what triggered Mailer’s “particular sense of affinity” with the Irish but conjectured that Mailer identified with the Irish from his perspective as Jewish-American, commenting that Mailer felt camaraderie with the Irish as fellow outsiders/aliens descended from immigrants in an anti-Semitic, fiercely Anglo-Saxon Protestant America.

In addition to his friendships and personal identifications with the experiences of Irish Americans, Mailer’s admiration for them stems from his own literary and linguistic pursuits. Literary connections between Jewish and Irish-American writers, especially in the twentieth century is not without precedent, perhaps most famously depicted in the character Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*.³ According to Mailer biographer Carl E. Rollyson, while studying at Harvard, Mailer found Irish-American writer James T. Farrell and his character Studs Lonigan “compelling” (56). Rollyson remarks that “in the figure of Studs Lonigan, Mailer found the first of his many Irish alter

egos. Studs swaggers. He is a small guy who has the nerve to take on bigger men . . . He is a romantic who dreams of conquering the world and of mastering beautiful women, but he is also one of the boys, embarrassed by his mother's coddling of him" (56). Barbara Wasserman has described Mailer's fascination with the Irish as linguistically motivated beyond his admiration of Irish toughness and swagger, remarking that both Mailer and the Irish shared a love of language and creative expression. Reflecting this literary admiration, Mailer's novels *The Naked and the Dead*, *American Dream*, and *Barbary Shore* each contain prominent and highly nuanced Irish characters. Through his literature, Mailer showed admiration for and sympathy with the struggles facing Irish-Americans in the twentieth century. Thus, like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mailer's Irish-American characters engaged with Irish-American experiences of prejudice, social ostracism, and lack of access to the mythical American Dream.

While Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* is widely considered to be his most in-depth exploration of the specious and fleeting American Dream, his novel *Tender Is the Night* tragically and unflinchingly exposes its destructive ramifications for Irish-Americans. In *Tender Is the Night*, Fitzgerald portrays the struggles of Dick Diver, a doctor who, like Fitzgerald, is descended from Irish immigrants and, as a result, cannot quite fully achieve the American Dream due to societal prejudices. Fitzgerald draws abundantly on his own life experiences in Dick's depiction.⁴ He explicitly codes Dick as Irish, describing his voice as having a "faint Irish melody running through it" and a face "moving . . . in an Irish way" (69). Dick's insecurity, stemming from his financially and socially insecure childhood as the son of an itinerant clergyman, dictates his behaviors throughout the novel. Even though he becomes a successful physician, Dick receives constant reminders of his inferior social status. For example, Baby Warren, his sister-in-law, repeatedly stresses the superiority of the English in her interactions with Dick, quipping that she does not "think there's any higher type in the world than a first-rate Englishman" (Fitzgerald 216). This pervasive social anxiety leads him to exhibit several inappropriate and self-destructive behaviors that ultimately lead to the loss of his marriage and of his medical practice. One is his desperate need to impress those around him by being overly solicitous in social situations and maneuvering his friends in a puppet-like manner at his social events. According to John Irwin, "Dick always arranged his social events as if they were mini-dramas" (112). When Dick first meets Rosemary, Dick plans

a party to impress her and states his plan to his wife, saying that he wants “to give a party where there’s a brawl and seductions and people going home with their feelings hurt and women passed out in the cabinet de toilette” (Fitzgerald 50). In creating these social dramas, to keep everyone entertained and dependent on him for their entertainment, Dick aims to make himself irreplaceable to his friends and prevent his possible banishment on the chance that they might reject him due to his inferior origins.

Dick’s social insecurity additionally creates in him an overwhelming compulsion to be indispensable. This is related to his social performance and results from pervasive fear that those around him may abandon him as an Irish, “new money” upstart from an impoverished background. His need to be needed causes him to gravitate towards younger, vulnerable women whom he can “save” and, in turn, make him feel important; these women would, in his mind, never willfully abandon him once he has made himself valuable to them. For example, Dick accepts a marriage with Nicole Diver, a mental patient, in which he becomes her servant and personal physician rather than an equal partner in the marriage. Even though Dick recognizes the nature of this arrangement, realizing after a conversation with Nicole’s sister Baby that “the Warrens were going to buy Nicole a doctor” he still consents to the marriage (Fitzgerald 102). This marriage, however, does not fill his insatiable desire to be indispensable to younger, vulnerable women. He engages in an ill-advised affair with the actress Rosemary and an inappropriate relationship with yet another mental patient in his clinic, the latter involvement leading to the demise of his marriage and the loss of his job in that clinic. After the marriage ends, Dick ends up wandering from town to town. He begins to establish a solid reputation in one location, but the narrator quips that he “became entangled with a girl who worked in a grocery store” and had to leave. Dick’s need to be indispensable to susceptible women reflects his anxiety about his lack of standing in society. No matter how much success he achieves as a physician, his financial and ethnic Irish background preclude him from the upper echelons of society. By acting as a savior for women who can benefit from his involvement, he attempts to validate his worth. However, as the novel demonstrates, these “entanglements,” as Fitzgerald terms them, end up destroying his life. The novel’s last image of Dick, the once promising physician is that of a shiftless, itinerant wanderer.

While Dick Diver’s social insecurity results in inappropriate and self-destructive social behaviors, Roy Gallagher in Norman Mailer’s war novel *The*

Naked and the Dead displays a persecution complex as well as religious and racial prejudice, which ultimately both mask and reveal his insecurity at his social standing. Gallagher grew up in a poor home in a South Boston Irish neighborhood with an abusive, alcoholic father, whose habit of only working sporadically forced Gallagher to drop out of high school a year before graduation to work as an elevator boy and his mother to “clean houses for rich people” (Mailer 235). Like Diver, Gallagher is specifically coded as Irish, and Mailer adds an additional layer of Catholicism. Gallagher’s inner thoughts reflect his Catholicism as he often muses about going to confession and makes common Irish Catholic exclamations such as “Mother of Mary” (Mailer 131). His relationships with his fellow soldiers while stationed in the Philippines reflect both his sense of persecution as well as his prejudice. Gallagher experiences almost constant thoughts of not being able to get ahead despite his hard work, which echoes Dick’s inability to gain social advantage despite his success as a physician. These contemplations go hand in hand with the expression of anger against others, mostly those of different ethnic and religious groups. For example, Mailer describes Gallagher as having a “deep resentment” because he “wanted to do big things” but “there was always something to beat him” (Mailer 82–83). Gallagher combines this inner reflection with a comment to his platoon mates that there were “a couple of fuggin Yids in the platoon” and that they should not “trust a fuggin one of them” (Mailer 83). Gallagher also expresses vitriol towards Wilson, a poor soldier from the South who, like Gallagher, experiences difficulties to his social class. However, Gallagher calls Wilson a “fuggin cracker” who only ever wants to “screw and eat” as well as a “nigger-lover” (Mailer 176). In his rant, Gallagher bemoans the fact that he “never had a fuggin break” and that although he “knew [he] was going to be something big” that “there was always something screwing [him] up” (Mailer 176). Later in the novel, Gallagher attacks Wilson again, saying that “fuggin’ crackers” are a “bunch of animals” and then thinks to himself that “a guy like Wilson went around taking life easy and making everybody pay for him” (Mailer 226). In the chapter devoted to his point of view, Gallagher also shows resentment towards Harvard students, stating to a fellow South Boston Irishman that “somebody ought to wipe out all those mother-fuggers” because he is tired of “work[ing] [his] ass off so some of those goddamn fairies can sit around and act like women” (Mailer 237). In this chapter, we also learn that Gal-

lagher belonged to the anti-Semitic and racist group Christians United, devoted to the preservation of white Christian interests.

Gallagher's pattern of feeling persecuted and then lashing out against others who are similarly disadvantaged reflects an attempt to better his position in society by abusing those who are also in vulnerable social situations, such as black people, Jews, and the rural poor. As Noel Ignatiev details in *How the Irish Became White*, Irish-Americans were originally not considered to be "white" when they first moved to America, and they earned their tenuous place in the white race through systematic oppression against African-Americans. Michael Nowlin states that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Irish Americans constantly struggled with "a transcendental 'whiteness' that inevitably had long-standing associations with a specific national history of white (and Anglo-Saxon) supremacy" (12). Gallagher's behavior towards other minorities reflects this pattern. Rather than examine his disadvantage because of his lower-class Irish background, he instead targets other underprivileged groups without considering that, through their shared experience of prejudice, he has more in common with them than he thinks. Instead, his perception that they, especially the poor white Southerner Wilson, are earning advantages that he does not enjoy infuriates him. In this light, Gallagher's involvement with the Christians United group reveals a misplaced desire to keep the seemingly limited amount of societal privileges out of the hands of Jews and to funnel them, instead, to the poor Irish in his neighborhood. In this way, Gallagher strains against the system of oppression that has held him back all his life but directs his anger in the wrong place. Dick similarly attempts to resist the system, though his efforts are less directly offensive and vitriolic than Gallagher's. Both men demonstrate a helpless frustration with a society that will never quite admit them as equals.

In this way, the unattainability of the American Dream for Irish Americans, although not specifically mentioned in either works, looms large in both *The Naked and the Dead* and *Tender Is the Night*. Both Roy Gallagher and Dick Diver heartbreakingly exhibit the futility of attempts to gain social advantage due to their impoverished upbringing and Irish heritage. Dick Diver earns some success as a physician, then loses it due to his self-destructive tendencies, while Roy Gallagher is keenly aware of his lack of success despite his strong desire for it, and he directs anger at others, especially disadvantaged racial and religious groups, rather than at the system that leads to his oppression. His wife's death in childbirth, as sad as it is, acts as

a microcosm for his emotional misdirection. Shortly after receiving word after his wife's passing, Gallagher's thoughts once again turn toward anti-Semitic prejudice rather than deal with his own pain. In the cases of both men, their social frustration and insecurity cause inappropriate and destructive behaviors that harm both themselves and others. Dick Diver loses his family and his career and Roy Gallagher ends the novel as a bitter man whose resentment has driven away his companions in his unit. In this way, Diver and Gallagher rightly experience great frustration with their lack of social standing, but their inappropriate targeting of their anger isolates them, leaving both men alone with their bitterness.

NOTES

1. According to Michael Nowlin, "[Fitzgerald's] dualistic social subjectivity seems to orient Fitzgerald toward positions available to him in the field of cultural production ... Fitzgerald's maternal grandparents were mid-nineteenth century Irish Catholic immigrants who, despite widespread prejudice, realized the American dream of bourgeois success by launching a family wholesale-grocery business. Thus, ironically, it is from the 'black Irish' side that the money came to send him to elite educational institutions such as Newman and Princeton, but not enough money to keep him feeling, in another telling self-description, 'like a poor boy in a rich man's club.' For his symbolic capital, Fitzgerald looked to the more downwardly mobile branch of his pedigree. One this side he descended from a seventeenth-century Maryland household, which spawned Francis Scott Key (author of the national anthem) and a host of Confederate sympathizers" (13).
2. In *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, J. Michael Lennon describes several of Mailer's Irish-American friends. The former middleweight boxer Roger Donoghue, who entertained Mailer with stories about teaching Marlon Brando to box for his role in *On the Waterfront*, gave Mailer boxing lessons for assistance with writing a book. Lennon states that "Mailer was fascinated by Donoghue's stories and easy Irish humor" (267). Mailer also befriended Brendan Behan, a dramatist and memoirist who described himself as "a drinker with writing problems" and whose "radical IRA past and rumbustious escapades were enormously appealing to Mailer" (267).
3. Twentieth-century post-Jungian psychologist James Hillman points to the example of James Joyce in his description of "the peculiar symbiosis of the Irish and the Jews" (qtd. in Russell 157). Hillman states that Joyce prominently featured Irish characters in his books and had a large circle of Jewish friends in each place where he lived (157). According to biographer Dick Russell, "Hillman once contemplated how, despite the vast differences," both the Jews and the Irish "had a common enemy: the bourgeois standard...both [are] in rebellion against British snobbery...the underdogs" (157).
4. "With the character of Dick Diver in *Tender Is the Night* Fitzgerald creates a protagonist much closer to his own situation. Diver is upper-middle class, the son of a clergyman, a graduate of Yale,

with an MD from Johns Hopkins; he has done post-graduate work in Vienna and published a well-received, first book on psychiatry. He is, in short, a young man with a virtually unlimited professional future. But then, because of a character flaw, he commits the professional sin of marrying a mental patient, the young Nicole Warren, whose family is one of the wealthiest, most socially prominent in Chicago, and the drama of the middle-class professional trying to stay afloat, trying to remain his own man, while moving in the society of the big rich begins" (Irwin 109).

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