



NARCISSISM AND THE ABSENT MOTHER IN  
FITZGERALD'S *TENDER IS THE NIGHT*

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**Abstract**

*Tender is the Night* inscribes themes of mental breakdown, narcissism, and death.

Through the lens of Modern Psychoanalytic theory, developed by Hyman Spotnitz, and the False Self theory of D.W. Winnicott, the essay examines Dick Diver's psychological unraveling, which involves a descent from a position of power and adulation into shame, and disgrace. In contrast to Freudian theory, which focuses on the role of the Oedipal Complex, Modern Psychoanalytic theory explores the turning of early preverbal aggression inward against the self, a process described by Spotnitz as the narcissistic defense. Both Spotnitz and Winnicott explore how failures in the early maternal environment, such as an emotionally absent mother, can lead to narcissistic self-hatred and the development of the False Self personality. The manifestation of the False Self personality in Dick Diver is discussed.

**Keywords:** Narcissism, False Self, death, Modern Psychoanalysis

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Themes of mental illness, breakdown, and death permeated the lives and fiction of one of the Jazz Age's most famous couples, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald. For many years, Fitzgerald's novel *Tender is the Night* (1934) was seen as a portrait of Gerald and Sara Murphy, wealthy American expatriates who lived on the French Riviera. However, a *New York Times* review of *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda* (2019), a recently published collection of letters between the two, describes *Tender is the Night* as a roman-a-clef about the decline of the Fitzgeralds' marriage. In revisiting *Tender is the Night* through the lens of Modern psychoanalytic theory and also Winnicott's theory of the False Self, I read it as a narrative of Dick Diver's psychological breakdown in response to early unmet needs for nurturance and mirroring. The absence of an emotionally available mother, a depressed mother, contributes to Dick's narcissism, self-hatred, and eventual death.

One of the concerns of Modern psychoanalysis is the study of self-hatred and self-destructive behavior. Unlike Freud, who focused on conflicts of the Oedipal period, Modern psychoanalytic theory studies the conflicts of the preOedipal period, preverbal period, birth to age three. Hyman Spotnitz, founder of the Modern school, observes that undischarged tension from the preverbal, preOedipal period may be turned inward against the self in a process he called the narcissistic defense. Spotnitz (2004) writes that while self-hatred and self-love are linked in the psyche, the nuclear problem from the preverbal period is self-hatred. Spotnitz developed the concept of the relationship between self-hatred and the self-attack of the narcissistic defense in the context of the Greek myth of Narcissus. Narcissus, an extremely handsome young man, was unwanted and rejected by his mother Liriope because he was the offspring of her rape by the river god Kephissos. Narcissus' famous preoccupation with his reflection in a

pool of water symbolizes his unfulfilled desire for maternal mirroring. Since the mirroring mother was absent, Narcissus is doomed to a relentless search to fill the internal emptiness by attempting to love himself. But without the experience of feeling loved, Narcissus cannot love. Eventually he dies of self-neglect brought on by turning his aggression inward against himself -- refusing to eat and shunning all life-sustaining relationships. The case of Narcissus is a story of self-hatred that masks itself as excessive self-love. Spotnitz and Resnikoff (1997) write, “[A] primitive, helpless self-destructiveness [is] concealed behind the camouflage that Narcissus was loving and admiring himself, when actually he was behaving in a way to produce his own death” (p. 179). The pattern of hatred directed inward against the self in response to a flawed maternal environment – for instance, a rejecting mother – is also found in the story of Dick Diver as he engages in behaviors of self-attack -- alcoholism, rages ending in physical altercations, the neglect of his psychiatric patients – which eventually lead to his undoing.

Like Liriope, the mother of Narcissus, Dick’s mother is largely absent from the story. An unnamed woman who lost two daughters a few short months before giving birth to her only son, Dick’s mother is mentioned just once, and only in relation to the death of her two daughters. We may read this textual absence of the mother as symbolic of her emotional absence. It seems likely the death of the daughters contributed to an inability to sufficiently nurture and mirror her newborn son. Dick’s father, fearing the debilitating effects of his wife’s grief upon his son, took it upon himself to “save his son from spoiling by becoming his moral guide” (p. 264). He raised Dick to believe that nothing was superior to “good instincts, honor, courtesy, and courage” (p. 264). This is a strict code of behavior more in keeping with military discipline than child rearing. Nowhere is there any mention of affection or love. Dick appears to have been

raised in an emotional vacuum. This rupture in the early maternal environment leaves him with a hollow, empty core.

Winnicott's theory of the False Self is also useful to an analysis of Dick's character. Polite and mannered, associated with a highly developed intellect, the False Self is a persona that hides distress from the rest of the world. According to Winnicott, the False Self develops in response to the mother's inability to sense the infant's needs and meet the infantile need for omnipotence. Instead, she substitutes gratification of her own needs in place of the infant's. The infant's compliance with the mother's narcissistic gratification is the beginning of the False Self. As Demetria DeLia (2019) observes, the False Self is a desperate attempt on the part of the infant to enliven the depressed, emotionally deadened mother and win her approval, a hopeless and impossible task. While the False Self often serves many healthy adaptive purposes such as enabling social relations, a complete dependence on external qualities such as charm and good looks masks self-destructive impulses that are enacted in pathological withdrawal from life-giving experiences. Spotnitz's theory of narcissistic self-hatred in response to an emotionally absent mother and Winnicott's theory of the development of the False Self in the face of a narcissistically preoccupied mother are parallel tracks on which to study Dick as a narcissistically damaged character.

We first meet Dick through the adoring gaze of a beautiful young Hollywood starlet, eighteen-year-old Rosemary Hoyt, who becomes enamored with him on a beach in the French Riviera. That the text's initial introduction to Dick takes place through Rosemary's eyes is significant. Just as the mythical Narcissus was infatuated with his own reflection, Dick can only experience himself as interesting and worthwhile through the eyes of adoring young women who idolize him and reflect him – mirror him -- as he wishes to see himself: powerful, attractive, heroic. On the Riviera beach of that first

encounter Dick returns Rosemary's admiring glance; the two go for a swim together in the sea and sunbathe on a floating dock while Nicole sits quietly on the sand with her two children and their governess, witness to this scene of seduction. Later Dick's seductive behavior is repeated when he invites Rosemary to a dinner party that night on the Divers' terrace where he publicly continues his flirtation, ignoring how hurtful and humiliating this behavior is to his wife. Nicole leaves the party and has a fit of sorts, crying and carrying on in the bathtub. Rosemary learns of Nicole's behavior and is shocked to discover Nicole suffers from mental illness.

The narrative then goes backward in time to introduce readers to the meeting of Dick and Nicole. Nicole, the wealthy daughter of a Chicago business magnate, meets Dick, a promising young psychiatrist ten years her senior, when she is a 16-year-old patient at a sanitarium in Zurich. I couldn't help but wonder if the sanitarium was modeled after the famous Burgholzli, the Zurich hospital where Carl Jung worked from 1900 to 1909. James West (2011) notes that Fitzgerald was familiar with the theories of Jung and Freud, having read widely in the literature of mental illness in an effort to better understand Zelda, who suffered a breakdown in 1930. Not unlike Jung, who crossed boundaries by entering into a romantic and sexual liaison with his former patient, the brilliant, mercurial Sabina Spielrein, Dick falls in love with his patient, the beautiful, spirited Nicole, who has suffered a psychotic break following an incestuous relationship with her father. After a brief meeting with Dick, who subsequently leaves the hospital, Nicole writes the psychiatrist infatuated letters laced with hallucinatory references; he writes back to her with careful circumspection. When Dick returns to the hospital as her psychiatrist the pair take long walks together on the hospital grounds. Dick's supervisors strongly discourage him from pursuing his romantic interest in Nicole but the two marry just after she leaves the hospital. In recovery from a psychotic breakdown precipitated

by incest, Nicole is highly susceptible to boundary disturbances in her environment, especially Dick's tendency to flirt with other women. In these seductions, Dick violates marital boundaries with Nicole, a repetition of his earlier violation of the doctor-patient relationship as well as the violation Nicole experienced with her father's incest. According to Chessick (1997), the boundary violation between patient and doctor symbolizes "the sexualization of serious psychopathology in the doctor-analyst," suggesting Dick is narcissistically damaged and that Dick and Nicole's relationship is doomed from the start (p. 219).

Rosemary's youthful crush on Dick is a repetition of Nicole's earlier infatuation. Nicole is twenty-four when Dick meets Rosemary. She is a young wife, still beautiful and in love with her handsome, charming husband. But Nicole is now the mother of two young children; her worship of Dick has been diluted by the responsibilities of motherhood and household management, as well as her own struggles with fragile mental health. Dick's emotional gratification depends on a woman's idealization and single-minded adoration. Without the mirror of worshipful glances reflecting him back to himself, Dick does not feel he exists. When Dick experiences himself as the center of the universe, the sun around which the planets revolve, he feels powerful and complete. Nicole's presence is no longer enough; like an addict he craves more gratification -- more attention, more devotion, more adoration, more praise.

Although Nicole is presented as the novel's identified patient, Dick is the one who eventually unravels, descending from paternal authority to infantile helplessness. In the beginning of their courtship, Dick is Nicole's chevalier; she calls him *Mon Capitaine*. Later he is her physician, husband, and the father of their two children, and, in his elevated status, a symbol of the father who sexually violated her. Dick mistakenly believes that he, as Nicole's doctor-husband, is the only one qualified to take care of her,

to provide a stable environment that will protect her against future breakdowns.

However, it soon becomes clear that Dick's narcissistic, unmet needs for constant approval, adoration, and attention signify he is not at all well-suited to protecting and caring for Nicole.

As the narrative progresses Dick begins to behave erratically, seducing young girls in an unsuccessful attempt to reassure himself of his potency and desirability. This unstable, self-destructive behavior may be related to the loss of Rosemary, who, disappointed that Dick is not available as a mate, eventually moves on to explore her film career and other romantic relationships. However, Dick cannot function without a woman's single-minded devotion. His flouting of social convention through drink and brawls attracts considerable negative attention and ostracizes him from the denizens of the glamorous social world he inhabits with Nicole, a descent – a dive -- that coincides with his father's death. Murphy (1973) believes Dick's descent from authority to ignominy has been triggered by the loss of his father and unresolved Oedipal issues relating to an unfulfilled search for his father's approval. However, I believe the death of the father also triggers in Dick a deeply buried longing for the earlier, primal absence of a nurturing mother. Since Dick never experienced a mother's love, he relies on Nicole's adoration to fill the internal void. When Nicole is no longer available to function as a symbolic mother to Dick – she is the mother of two young children who claim her energy and attention -- he turns to other women to gratify his unfulfilled needs.

The absence of the nurturing mother seems to have left Dick trapped in a state of narcissistic self-absorption and hopelessness hidden behind a mask of grandiosity and charm, the façade of the False Self. He is a character that seduces "everyone quickly with an exquisite consideration and a politeness that moved so fast and intuitively that it could be examined only in its effect" (p. 35). Like the mythic Narcissus, he is, initially,

greatly admired for his looks and seductive charm. He is respected for his intelligence, which has enabled him to write a series of scholarly treatises on psychological techniques for psychiatrists. However, his grandiosity is a defense against terrifying feelings of emptiness and is expressed in his overweening ambition, “to be a good psychologist, maybe the greatest one that ever lived” (p. 132). The characters who are drawn to him, chiefly females but a few males as well, believe he recognizes their “proud uniqueness”; they clamor for the warmth of his approval (p. 35). These admirers are deeply affected by Dick’s grandiose sense of himself as godlike and unique. He flatters their own early needs for approval; they, in turn, provide him with the admiration he needs to shore up his empty core. Nicole shrewdly guesses that the “excitement of his moods,” magnetic and contagious, are followed “by his own form of melancholy, which he never displayed but at which she guessed” (p. 35). This diagnosis from Nicole sounds much like what was known as manic depression, which we now call bipolar disorder. Unable to bear the thought he is not uniquely special, that he is not a charismatic, powerful savior bound for an extraordinary destiny, he asks himself in despair and disappointment, “God, am I really like the rest after all?” (p. 172).

The manic disturbance exhibited by Dick’s False Self, which drives him to create festivity, excitement and diversion, masks a deep depression, as Nicole suspects. This depression surfaces after his mother’s death about two-thirds of the way through the novel, when Dick embraces alcohol and embarks on a path of self-destruction. Isolated in a hotel room far from Nicole Dick reflects, “Being alone in body and spirit begets loneliness, and loneliness begets more loneliness” (p. 262). But Nicole’s teenaged infatuation with her handsome doctor=husband never matures into an adult relationship. While the two share a spirit for adventure and enjoy the lavish lifestyle easily available to them thanks to Nicole’s great wealth, they do not share a close emotional bond. Dick

cannot love Nicole as a companion, as an equal. He must experience himself as superior and more powerful than his mate. To compensate for the disappointment that Nicole no longer plays the role of supplicant, Dick's eye continuously falls on starry-eyed young girls infatuated with his good looks and sexual magnetism. But these sexual liaisons are emotionally empty and lead nowhere. Five years after meeting the actress Rosemary Hoyt he renews his romance with her only to find she's now interested in another man. Although she explains to Dick her new romantic attraction is a practical solution to her situation – Dick is already married, he cannot marry her – Dick experiences her withdrawal as abandonment, a repetition of his mother's rejection. The False Self that hides Dick's self-hatred and insecurity cannot tolerate Rosemary's defection. He drinks himself into a stupor, becomes involved in a violent argument, strikes an undercover policeman, and ends up in jail.

For reasons that are not explicit and may be related to the unraveling of the False Self personality and the narcissistic defense of turning self-hatred inward against the self, Dick begins to founder following his incarceration. His use of alcohol becomes even more intense and impossible to hide; the physician with whom he had entered into a partnership to oversee a psychiatric hospital dissolves their business arrangement and insists it's time for Dick to leave. Dick begins to insult the very same society people whose approval he once sought. His fashionable acquaintances avoid him, making it clear his presence is no longer welcomed or wanted. His marriage disintegrates; Nicole seeks comfort and stability with another man. Eventually Nicole asks for a divorce. Dick is no longer able to take care of Nicole, if indeed he ever could. He is vulnerable, childlike, helpless – the newly identified patient that replaces Nicole – except there is no one to take care of him. He is beset by a need for (m)others that cannot be satisfied. Young women no longer find him attractive or seek his attentions. He has become

repugnant, as he may have been to the mother who wished him away because he could not replace the daughters she had lost. Dick has returned to a state of infantile helplessness and aloneness like the mythical Narcissus who drowns in a pool of water, the mirror of his unmaking.

As Dick descends from his social position he disappears from the narrative. His narcissistic preoccupation that makes no room for the well-being of others (which is ironic, given his profession as a psychiatrist) cannot be sustained indefinitely. At the end of the novel he is depicted as a homeless wanderer, traveling from one small town to even smaller, more remote villages in a downward spiral that symbolizes disintegration and death. Eventually Nicole remarries and Dick chooses to cut off all contact with his children, signifying the death of his future. Dick's sense that it is easier to be loved than to love is diagnostic of his narcissistic pathology. Without the ability to love he is like Narcissus; he can love only himself. As Spotnitz observes, self-love is not love but rather destructive self-hatred that ends in alienation and isolation. It appears Dick mistook the admiration and envy of his acquaintances and female admirers for the early maternal love of which he was deprived.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961), Freud writes, "the aim of all life is death" (p. 46). Freud discovered Thanatos, the death instinct, after his discovery of Eros, the libidinal, life-preserving instinct. Without realizing it, the reader of *Tender is the Night* is initially seduced by Eros -- the beautiful French landscape, elegant dinner parties, witty conversation, and attractive characters, only to realize the novel is about Thanatos and death, foreshadowed early on by an accident in which Nicole nearly drives her car off a mountain cliff. We initially believe Nicole is the one at risk; after all, as a victim of incest, she has already encountered death in the form of boundary violations and betrayal by a

parent. Dick's stalking of death in his courtship of self-destructive behavior comes as a great surprise.

At the end of the novel, Nicole receives a letter from Dick postmarked from Hornell in upstate New York, a tiny, unremarkable village that is a far cry from the lavish wealth of the French Riviera in the novel's opening. One has the strong sense when the novel ends that Dick will end as well; his death appears imminent. His final gesture before he leaves Europe to return to America is to make the sign of the papal cross from aboard the ship that removes him from his former glory. It's an ironic sign for a character who has lost all status and authority. Dick's removal and isolation from the social world, combined with his psychic and financial impoverishment, are a far cry from a man once described as a paragon of "self-control and self-discipline" (p. 24). The blessing he confers as he departs is as empty and hollow as his False Self persona. Unloved and unloving, Dick is doomed to the loneliness and emptiness of a narcissism related to unsatisfied early longings for maternal love.

The writing of *Tender is the Night* coincided with a breaking point in the Fitzgeralds' marriage. During the nine-year period when Fitzgerald worked on the novel, Zelda wrote her own retelling of the couple's marital struggles in *Save Me the Waltz* (1932). Fitzgerald demanded that she significantly rewrite the novel's autobiographical material before its publication by Scribner. After her breakdown in 1930 Zelda moved in and out of hospitals; the Fitzgeralds lived together for brief periods afterward but the heady days of luxury hotels, travel, and extravagant parties were over. Both died violent deaths: Zelda in 1948 in a fire at the hospital where she was a psychiatric patient, Scott in 1940 in Hollywood at the age of 44, from a heart attack related to alcoholism. In writing about Dick Diver's descent from glory to ignominy (the writer's time in Hollywood

was an artistic and financial disaster), Fitzgerald may have been imagining his own demise.

Winnciott's False Self and Spotnitz's theory of self-hatred may also be relevant to an analysis of *The Great Gatsby*. Gatsby's chameleon-like personality is very consistent with the False Self: polite and charming, but essentially hollow. Gatsby's narcissistic qualities include his idealization of Daisy and his obsession with image and appearances. Like Gatsby, Dick, is obsessed by wealth and appearances, as was Fitzgerald. In his short story "The Rich Boy (1926)," Fitzgerald wrote, "Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early . . ." (Brody, 2009). Fitzgerald seemed to share Jay Gatsby's and Dick Diver's attraction to wealth as a way to win approval and acceptance, a kind of substitute for love. Like his characters, Fitzgerald experienced betrayal at the hands of the wealthy and died alone.

Fitzgerald took the name *Tender is the Night* from a John Keats poem, "Ode to a Nightingale," in which the speaker complains of a heartache so intense he feels as if he has consumed poisonous hemlock. The mythical Narcissus, consumed by the frustration of his unmet needs for love, metamorphoses after his death into a poisonous plant. The toxic, destructive qualities of narcissistic self-absorption resonate in Dick Diver's disappearance into an abyss, a dive into death.

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