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Hope for Charlie Wales:

An Economic and Psychological Reading of Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited”

In “Commodifying Character: Why the Past Entraps in ‘Babylon Revisited,’” Terrell L. Tebbetts argues that protagonist Charlie Wales remains trapped by his past because he “mistakenly assumes that human life follows an economic model” and that grievances can be paid off and forgotten like financial debt (148). While Tebbetts understands that “some readers see the story suggesting that the past is entirely inescapable,” he sees hope for Charlie (148). I agree with Tebbetts’s economic argument and would add that a psychological reading of Charlie’s addiction also indicates that there is hope for him in the end.

Set in Paris, “Babylon Revisited” takes place not long after the Roaring Twenties and in the midst of the Great Depression. The story recalls how, during the Twenties, Charlie and his wife, Helen, would venture out onto the bustling streets of Paris and party. A night for the couple consisted of heavy drinking, bar hopping, and overtipping. During this time, Charlie fell victim to alcoholism. He subsequently lost his wife and custody of his daughter, Honoria. When the story opens, Charlie has returned to Paris to regain Honoria. Throughout the story, Charlie frequently describes his struggle with alcohol and how he has adjusted to only drinking a single alcoholic beverage a day so “the idea of alcohol won’t get too big” (82). Charlie’s addiction to alcohol deeply affects his relationships with every character in the story, as most of the events that take place are deeply rooted in his past actions. “Babylon Revisited” ends with a defeated Charlie back in the Ritz Bar. As he sits, he begins to realize his past mistakes as well as understand the emotions of other characters. From this realization, readers are given a sense of hope in Charlie’s development and future.

Tebbetts’s article thoroughly explains Charlie’s misguided economic viewpoint on his interactions and relationships with other characters. Tebbetts describes Charlie’s behavior in terms of “balance sheets,” “assets,” and “liabilities,” noting that he does not take full responsibility for his past actions and expects that his mistakes can be “toted up on a balance sheet where new black-ink assets cover old red-ink liabilities, leaving new net growth” (148). Charlie’s delusions leave him feeling blameless and innocent. Tebbetts also analyzes Charlie’s relationship with others, as he mostly treats interactions as transactions or something he needs to possess.

Tebbetts points to examples of how Charlie continuously views his daughter, Honoria, as an object he needs to acquire. Rather than wanting to build a home for Honoria, Charlie simply wants to have her in it, as if she was a statue he wishes to display (153). Charlie’s relationship with Honoria is seemingly a transactional relationship for him. While Charlie longs to be a part of Honoria’s life, he also believes he can win over Honoria’s love and trust by showering her with gifts and luxury. What Charlie fails to realize is that Honoria simply craves a father-daughter bond with him. Honoria mentions that, “Well, you bought me this doll. And I’ve got lots of things” (5). This moment in the story shows that Honoria does not care about material goods, but really just wants to have a personal relationship with her father. Charlie, on the other hand, is desperately trying to make up for lost time and thinks that buying her things is more important than creating a bond with her. Charlie consistently uses commodifying language when discussing Honoria: “Charlie insists not that he misses his daughter but that he will ‘lose her’” as he attempts to ‘“put a little of himself into her before she crystalized’ as if she were a piece of art glass still in production” (153).

As Tebbetts states, Charlie’s interactions with Marion and Lincoln Peters also illustrate his misconceptions regarding human nature. When Charlie first visits his in-laws in their home, he instantly begins to discuss his salary and his success. While he quickly realizes that Lincoln is not interested in his monetary value, Charlie still fails to understand that interactions with people are more than transactions. Charlie believes that he can have Honoria simply by having a conversation with Lincoln and Marion and by appearing “normal” while they really want to see change in his overall character. Expecting Marion and Lincoln to see his past as over, Charlie does not understand that these situations cannot be “paid off” and forgotten. Marion and Lincoln see Charlie as someone who is gradually falling back into old habits. When Charlie first arrived back in Paris, the first place he visited was the Ritz Bar. There, he provided the bartender with Marion and Lincoln’s address and told him to pass it on to his old drinking buddies. At the end of the story as Charlie is trying to convince his in-laws that he is capable of having custody of Honoria, his friends from the past burst into the home seemingly uninvited — and drunk. Instead of taking responsibility for his actions, Charlie pleads ignorance which further dismantled the trust he was beginning to build with Marion. This scene indicates that Charlie does not understand that he first must mend the broken relationships before being seen as a fit parent.

Nonetheless, Tebbetts does not see Charlie as a lost cause, citing Fitzgerald’s past work: “*The Great Gatsby*,most notably, ends with the protagonist’s death and burial. Here, Charlie is alive, maintaining his reform, and apparently willing to try again” (158). The mere fact that Charlie is alive by the story’s end suggests to Tebbetts that he still has time to realize his past mistakes and grow into a better person who understands that human connections are not economic transactions that can be processed.

A psychological reading reveals that, during the course of the story, Charlie seems to change his thinking regarding his glory days. As Charlie begins to recognize how his past destroyed relationships and effectively made him lose everything, his attitude on his past shifts dramatically. When he first met with Marion and Lincoln, he described the past to Marion, as “Nice while it lasted. We were a sort of royalty, almost infallible, with a sort of magic around us” (4). As the story progresses, Charlie reevaluates his past, and is repulsed by the person he used to be and the shenanigans he took part in. He begins to view his past as a “nightmare” (84). As fuzzy memories and late nights filled with spending money on unnecessary items and people, “He remembered thousand-franc notes given to an orchestra for playing a single number, hundred-franc notes tossed to a doorman for calling a cab” (4). His extravagant and luxurious lifestyle took over his life and Charlie lost himself and everything he ever wanted “in the boom” (84).

The story offers another moment of Charlie self-reflecting on his past, reminiscing not fondly but with guilt and disgust: Again the memory of those days swept over him like a nightmare—the people they had met traveling; then people who couldn’t add a row of figures or speak a coherent sentence...Men who locked their wives out in the snow” (84). In this very moment, Charlie realizes that he really did participate in the horrible things he was disgusted by everyone else for. Charlie put himself on a pedestal most of the story, and oftentimes believed he was better than the people from his past. As he lists the type of people he was ashamed to be associated with, he recognizes that he is indeed one of those people: someone who locked their wife out in the snow. This epiphany, while a strong blow to his ego, helps Charlie evaluate his circumstances from a different perspective. This suggest growth for the future development of his character if Charlie is able to continue to self-reflect on his own actions and choices instead of blaming and criticizing others.

Moreover, Charlie begins to consider the emotions of others at the story’s end. As he sat once again at the Ritz Bar, he thought of his late wife: “He was absolutely sure Helen wouldn’t have wanted him to be so alone” (84). For the first time in the story, Charlie begins to consider others’ emotions and viewpoints rather than strictly his own. If Charlie continues to reevaluate his past decisions and how they affected the people around him, he would be able to recognize his wrong doings and take responsibility for his actions. This fundamental change in Charlie’s mentality is crucial to the development of his character and his hope of regaining custody of Honoria.

Since the story begins and ends in the Ritz Bar, many readers would assume that his drinking is not under control. However, Charlie still managed to restrict his alcohol consumption to one drink a day and never breaks the habit throughout the entirety of the story. He even maintains his limitation at the end of the story when he is in emotional distress — which is when many alcoholics would turn to a drink for comfort. Fitzgerald writes: “His whiskey glass was empty, but he shook his head when Alix looked at it questioningly” (84). This quotation demonstrates the control Charlie is sustaining over his addiction. Despite learning that he will not regain custody of his daughter, he continues to display fortitude in his decision to abstain from another drink.

Moreover, regardless of whether Charlie lied about not knowing how Duncan and Lorraine figured out the address of the Peters’ (it is possible he could have forgotten that he passed that information onto the bartender at the beginning of the story), Charlie does seem genuinely remorseful for the embarrassing moment that took place: “What an outrage!” Charlie broke out. “What an absolute outrage!” Neither of them answered. Charlie dropped into an armchair, picked up his drink, set it down again and said: “People I haven’t seen for two years having the colossal nerve” (84). Charlie’s anger portrays the hopelessness he feels in this scene. It shows that Charlie actually does have deep emotions. Additionally, he maintains his will power by refusing the drink even in his distressed state. Even though Marion immediately rescinds her decision to grant him custody, Charlie finally outwardly presents his true feelings about his past.

In order for Charlie to break free from his past, he must reevaluate himself, his past, how he treats others, and his drinking. Charlie must recognize that his past is not long gone, since his present life is informed by his previous actions. As Tebbetts notes, the main downfall of his character is the fact that he sees his conflicts as something that can be paid off and forgotten rather than something that must be repaired by taking responsibility for his actions and commitment to change. With Charlie’s glimmer of hope that shines through at the end of the story, it is very possible that he will be able to successfully change the course of his life and rebuild the family he was responsible for losing.

Works Cited

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