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The Price Not Given for Nothing: Capitalist Alienation in Fitzgerald's Babylon Revisited

Yang Tiantong

Shandong University, Jinan, Shandong, China

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Abstract: This essay analyzes F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Babylon Revisited* through a Marxist literary lens to explore the theme of capitalist alienation in 1930s post-crash Paris. It argues that the story reveals how capitalist values corrode genuine human connection by distorting individual self-perception and interpersonal relationships. The essay identifies three key manifestations of this alienation: the commodification of selfhood, where personal worth is reduced to market value; the reification of human relationships, transforming individuals into objects; and the instrumentalization of others, where people are treated as means to an end. Through the character of Charlie Wales, the essay demonstrates how these intertwined phenomena—commodification, reification, and instrumentalization—undermine the possibility of true redemption and expose the dehumanizing impact of capitalist social relations, ultimately cautioning against the erosion of human connection and ethical values by market logic.

1. Introduction

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. But it hadn't been given for nothing

——F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Babylon Revisited*(11)[1]

This eclipse of memory from F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story *Babylon Revisited* also suggests the price given for the corrosive effect of capitalism on human relationships, leaving individuals alienated from themselves and each other. The story is set in 1930s Paris, a city still reeling from the aftershocks of the 1929 stock market crash and the onset of the Great Depression. At a glance, it brings Charlie Wales to Paris in a failed attempt to overcome his past dissipation and build a future with his daughter. Dig deeper, however, what underlies the story is an economic landscape depicting a post-crash world where capitalism has eroded identity, and strained relationships.

By and large, scholars have explored the economic dimensions of Fitzgerald's *Babylon Revisited*. Hess connects the relationship between economic crash and emotional bankruptcy, arguing that *Babylon Revisited* reflects how "he internalized the trauma of the Great Depression"(77)[2]. Gay, focusing on aesthetic considerations, examines the depiction of dissipation and its economic significance(96)[3]. Mangum delves into the theme of money throughout Fitzgerald's short stories, highlighting the dual status of *Babylon Revisited*, as both a "popular bestseller and a masterpiece"(97)[4]. These studies collectively demonstrate the significant role economics plays in

shaping the narrative and characters of *Babylon Revisited*.

Extending this economic reading and through the lens of Marxist literary theories, one can see that F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Babylon Revisited*, set in post-Crash Paris, offers a poignant exploration of the conflict between capitalist values and genuine human connection. Through characters distorted by a system of alienation—where self-worth is commodified, relationships are reified, and others are instrumentalized—I argue that the story reveals this distortion undermines the possibility of genuine human connection and true redemption.

2. Commodification of Selfhood

To begin with, *Babylon Revisited* reveals the insidious influence of capitalist alienation, particularly through the commodification of selfhood. Commodification, in Marxist theory, refers to the process by which human beings, their labor, and even their identities are reduced to commodities, which are "things to be bought and sold in the market"(Hermann 21)[5]. This process is central to the functioning of capitalism, where everything, including personal selfhood, is defined in terms of its market value rather than its intrinsic or human qualities. This commodification of selfhood is evident in Charlie Wales's tendency to frame life through an economic lens. The narrative suggests that market values increasingly shape selfhood, diminishing personal identity to an object bought, sold, and evaluated according to its exchange value rather than its inherent human essence.

In the story, Charlie puts an emphasis on character, "want[ing] to jump back a whole generation and trust in character again as the eternally valuable element"(Fitzgerald 10)[1]. However, this seemingly noble sentiment ironically reveals his entanglement with consumerist logic. He views character not as an intrinsic quality but as a commodity to be acquired and managed. This is evident in his assessment of his daughter Honoria's potential character traits, where he hopes she avoids "the traits of both that had brought [he and his wife] to disaster". This perspective aligns with the principles espoused by advertising leader Bruce Barton, believing that a "best" and thus "real" self can emerge from trying out all the "many different personalities" sold in the cultural marketplace(Curnutt 91)[6]. His concern for Honoria's character is a testament to his misbelief of character, which is treated as commodities to sell in the market rather than something "constitute[s] the individual's fuller human nature"(Tebbetts 151)[7].

Beyond the commodification of character, Charlie's worldview is deeply entrenched in a business model paradigm. His assertion that "they couldn't make him pay forever"(Fitzgerald 24)[1] reveals his perception of his reformed behavior as a form of payment for past transgressions. He implicitly equates his improved conduct with financial assets, believing they should offset past liabilities, much like balancing a ledger(Tebbetts 148)[7]. This suggests that Charlie has internalized an economic model, applying it to the realm of human emotion and experience. He attempts to use good behavior and social graces as a means of erasing past misconduct. Such economic framing of personal redemption further underscores the pervasive influence of commodification on Charlie's understanding of self and his place in the world.

3. Reification of Human Relationships

The pervasive influence of capitalism extends beyond the commodification of self to the reification of human relationships. The proliferation of commodities in market-driven economies contributes to a social environment where objects assume greater significance, intensifying the objectification and depersonalization of human interactions. This phenomenon, termed "reification" by Georg Lukács, describes the process of "taking social relations for things"(Feenberg 13)[8]. Through an examination of Charlie's language and actions, it becomes evident that individuals are reduced to mere functions or problems to be solved, rather than being understood as complex, dynamic beings. In other words,

F. Scott Fitzgerald critiques how capitalist society, through its emphasis on exchange value and market-driven social roles, reifies personal relationships, stripping them of their human features.

This reification is particularly evident in Charlie's interactions with Honoria and his pursuit of her custody. His language consistently portrays her as a possession rather than a beloved child. Upon their reunion, he describes her as "struggling like a fish into his arms"(Fitzgerald 8)[1], an image that evokes a cold fish to be acquired. Moreover, he regrets not so much Honoria's removal from his presence and his love but rather that she was "taken from his control"(Fitzgerald 11)[1], as though "she were an investment portfolio lodged in a blind trust"(Tebbetts 153)[7]. Although he tries to recover Honoria, his statements are reminiscent of a capitalist's preoccupation with ownership accumulation and workforce expansion. He is not willing to make a home but to have one and "to have Honoria in it"(Fitzgerald 15)[1]. He attempts to put "a little of himself into her before she crystallized utterly"(Fitzgerald 14)[1], as if "she were a piece of art glass still in production"(Tebbetts 153)[7]. Charlie is solicitous of Honoria, yet he seems to reify her like the diners "staring at her as if she were something no more conscious than a flower"(Fitzgerald 13)[1].

Furthermore, the very name "Honoria", as Hess points out, "is reminiscent of 'honorarium'"(84)[2], a payment made for professional services. This association subtly reinforces the commodified nature of their relationship, linking Honoria to Charlie's pursuit of wealth and status. This reification, as Lukács argues, results in individuals' "qualities and abilities" becoming "things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world"(Lukács 68)[9]. Thus, capitalism not only commodifies the self but also extends this process to human relationships, stripping individuals of their subjectivity and transforming them into objects or functions to be evaluated, exchanged, or utilized within a market-driven framework.

4. Instrumentalization of Others

In addition to commodifying selfhood and reifying human relationships, Charlie also demonstrates another aftermath of capitalism and consumerism in the 1920s, that is the instrumentalization of others. According to Marx's concept of instrumentality, individuals are treated as "tools or means to an end"(Eagleton 42)[10], rather than as ends in themselves. In other words, people's lives, actions, and relationships are instrumentalized, meaning they are seen not for their intrinsic worth as individuals but for their utility or functionality in achieving economic or social objectives. In *Babylon Revisited*, instrumentalization is hidden deeper under Charlie's interaction with other characters.

Charlie's desire to regain custody of Honoria is not solely motivated by paternal love; it is also instrumental in his quest for social redemption and the restoration of his damaged public image. This instrumentalization of his daughter is a direct extension of the reification discussed earlier. Now, she becomes a tool for achieving a specific goal: social rehabilitation. Throughout the story, Charlie consistently attempts to manipulate situations so that others initiate the discussion of Honoria's custody. During their lunch, he vacillates between "what had she said" and "what had he expected"(Fitzgerald 14)[1], revealing his desperate need for Honoria to express her desire to live with him. When she finally does, Charlie's internal satisfaction confirms his manipulative intent: "he had wanted it to come like this"(Fitzgerald 14)[1]. This reveals his desire to cultivate the image of a caring, non-coercive father, reinforcing his carefully constructed narrative of redemption. Likewise, in his interactions with Marion and Lincoln, Charlie "wanted them to initiate the discussion of what they knew had brought him to Paris"(Fitzgerald 10)[1]. He seeks their voluntary approval of his custody, attempting to position himself as deserving of their trust. These seemingly passive actions are strategic maneuvers designed to elicit the desired response from his in-laws. Their approval, like Honoria's expressed desire to live with him, becomes a crucial piece of evidence in his self-constructed narrative of reform. Thus, both Honoria and the Peters are instrumentalized, their actions

serving as external validation of Charlie's supposed transformation.

This instrumentalization is further underscored by Charlie's dream, in which his deceased wife, Helen, affirms that "he was perfectly right about Honoria and that she wanted Honoria to be with him"(Fitzgerald 19)[1]. In this dreamscape, Helen is reduced to a mouthpiece, reinforcing the legitimacy of Charlie's pursuit. The dream's unsettling imagery, where "[Helen] was in a swing in a white dress, and swinging faster and faster all the time, so that at the end he could not hear clearly all that she said"(Fitzgerald 19)[1], subtly critiques this instrumentalization. The increasing speed and inaudibility suggest a loss of control and distortion of Helen's agency, highlighting the manipulative nature of Charlie's subconscious desires. This dream, therefore, serves as a powerful symbol of how Charlie instrumentalizes even the memory of his deceased wife to validate his own self-serving agenda.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Babylon Revisited, through its portrayal of Charlie Wales, offers a profound critique of the detrimental and alienating effects of capitalism and consumerism in the 1920s. The story not only depicts the commodification of selfhood, where individuals and their personal qualities are reduced to objects of market exchange but also exposes the reification of human relationships as well as the phenomenon that others are instrumentalized as means to an end. These intertwined phenomena constitute a powerful indictment of the dehumanizing and alienating impact of capitalist social relations, cautioning against the erosion of human connection and ethical values by market logic.

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