



# Spectacular Case of Wintry Dreams: A Debordian Reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams"

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*"First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you."*

*F. Scott Fitzgerald*

## Abstract

A constant failure and frustration of relationships can be traced in most of Fitzgerald's works of fiction. The most prominent instance seems to be the case of Gatsby and his elusive and obscure object of desire Daisy, yet Fitzgerald's short stories can be considered as no exception. "Winter Dreams" is one of the short stories in which the prospect of an imminent downfall of relationship always haunts the protagonist. This essay attempts to shed light on the roots of this meltdown through Guy Debord's theories. As a founding member of Situationist International (SI), Debord believed that the modern world's defining characteristic is spectacle which mediates the relationships among the members of society. The lack of directness and immediacy which is caused by the Society of the Spectacle (*La Société du Spectacle*) seems to be the originator of the unremitting failure between the characters in the case of "Winter Dreams" and therein lies the rub.

**Keywords:** F. Scott Fitzgerald, Guy Debord, The Society of the Spectacle (*La Société du Spectacle*), Sign-value, Exchange-value

## 1. Introduction

"Be careful. Don't get hit by a golf ball. That's how Ray Becker died." These words are Jasmine's. When she is in the middle of a nervous breakdown after the tragic fall of her wealthy and deceitful husband in Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine*, she starts shouting these words on the street in a fit of hallucination. After years of immersion in wealth and popularity, Jasmine simply cannot grasp the fact that she is not a socialite in New York anymore. She practically does everything in her power to experience events that may be remotely related to her aristocratic past. Her delusions of grandeur continue to annoy her sister and the people around her. Similarly, what we first encounter in Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams" is golf. The protagonist of the story, Dexter Green, is a caddy who caddies only for pocket-money because his father is rich enough. The writer brings up this fact at the beginning of the story to pave the way for discussing class relations:

"Some of the caddies were poor as sin and lived in one-room houses with a neurasthenic cow in the front yard, but Dexter Green's father owned the second best grocery-store in Black Bear--the best one was "The Hub," patronized by the wealthy people from Sherry Island--and Dexter caddied only for pocket-money." (Baym659).

Throughout the story we witness an endless chain of failures and disappointments in Dexter and Judy's relationship. Judy Jones who plays the role of an irresistible nymph and the unattainable daughter of Mortimer Jones represents the upper class of society in "Winter Dreams". This chain of failed relationships which is the focus of this essay is present almost everywhere in the story. This type of doomed relationship is not the only one in Fitzgerald's works. From *Great Gatsby* to his collections of short stories we can trace these relationships which are condemned to downfall from the outset. Likewise, we see halfway through Woody Allen's movie that Hal, the affluent husband of Jasmine, starts cheating on his wife and their relationship starts to collapse. In fact, these meltdowns in relationships seem to be common among those who play golf. My purpose in this essay is to shed light on the roots and causes of the frustrated relationship between Dexter and Judy which seems to be problematic in the text.

Helge Normann Nilsen in a similar research attempts to focus on failure to love and "an unsparing portrait of the essential shallowness of a certain type of American upper-class man" (Nilsen 41). What seems to be missing in the mentioned research is a concrete theoretical underpinning to substantiate the claims made by the author. By contrast, this review tries to gain a solid grasp of the problematic point raised in the text which is the failure to love through the lens of Guy Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle.

## 2. Approach and Methodology

Using the theories of Guy Debord, the French Marxist theorist, I will try to show how capitalistic elements affect the creation of the relationship between Dexter and Judy negatively and in the end spoils its roots. Guy Debord put forward his theory of the society of the spectacle and degradation of human life in his book of the same title published in 1967:

“The first stage of the economy's domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of being into having. Human fulfilment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely dominated by the accumulated productions of the economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing - all "having" must now derive its immediate prestige and its ultimate purpose from appearances. At the same time all individual reality has become social, in the sense that it is shaped by social forces and is directly dependent on them. Individual reality is allowed to appear only if it is not actually real” (Debord 10, 11).

Debord asserts that “The fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations conceals their true character as relations between people and between classes: a second nature, with its own inescapable laws, seems to dominate our environment” (Debord 13). He maintains that the quality of life has subsided and critical thinking is hindered by the society of the spectacle. In a spectacular society (in Debordian sense of the word), Exchange-value of the objects around us are all considered a top priority for every member of society and use-value is completely drained. But this supersession of use-value by exchange-value is just the stage of an earlier phase of capitalism. Debord takes this theory further and says that the spectacle “is a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 7). His theory is in line with the theories put forward by Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno who believed that “the extension of commodification ultimately empties out what Marx termed the “use value” of commodities, leaving in place empty forms, freed from the need to be useful...” (Murray 47).

To translate this approach into methodology I will try to have a close reading of Fitzgerald's story in the light of Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle in the next section of this essay. We can detect the effects of the society of the spectacle on the romantic and emotionally-charged relationship between Dexter Green and Judy Jones throughout the story and see how those effects totally destroy and demolish the relationship. In the analysis of the text I will try to focus on the experiences of the characters in different places and visual imageries used by the narrator to reinforce the thematic network of the work. I believe in this story the protagonist experiences a type of relationship that is mediated by images and Debord theories seem to be the best avenue to help us understand the nature of not only the relationship in “Winter Dreams”, but also the constantly-frustrated relationships which are present in most of Fitzgerald's stories.

“Winter Dreams” is a short story in Fitzgerald's collection titled *All the Sad Young Men*. “Fitzgerald wrote the stories at a time of disillusionment. He was in financial difficulty, he believed his wife Zelda was romantically involved with another man, she had suffered a series of physical illnesses” (Petry 99,100). This story has a lot in common with *Great Gatsby* and it goes to show how the idea was developing in Fitzgerald's mind. There is also another short story in this collection which is tightly linked to the theory of the society of the spectacle. “Rich Boy” is thematically close to “Winter Dreams” and *Great Gatsby*. The failure to love is the thread that brings together the mentioned stories. In his “Rich Boy” Fitzgerald “through the figure of Anson Hunter, has delivered a damaging blow against the American rich and their frequently inflated image of themselves as the leaders of their nation” (Nilsen 43).

## 3. Analysis of the Text

In the first paragraphs of the story, the references to seasons seem to have symbolic significance. Out of four seasons, winter is the one that affects Dexter intensely and emotionally:

“At these times the country gave him a feeling of profound melancholy--it offended him that the links should lie in enforced fallowness, haunted by ragged sparrows for the long season. It was dreary, too, that on the tees where the gay colors fluttered in summer there were now only the desolate sand-boxes knee-deep in crusted ice. When he crossed the hills the wind blew cold as misery, and if the sun was out he tramped with his eyes squinted up against the hard dimensionless glare” (Baym 659).

From the outset, winter gives Dexter a sense of melancholy which haunts him throughout the events narrated in the course of his relationship with Judy. He is in search of summer and spring and he desperately yearns for them but the dream in this story is wintry and winter's “profound melancholy” always makes Dexter brood over his status in the society.

When winter is gone literally, Dexter still finds something “dismal about the northern spring”. The snow melts and runs into Lake Erminie to fill it with fresh water and wealth. It is noteworthy that Lake Erminie is associated with wealth and aristocracy throughout the story. Dexter's first encounter with Judy takes place on the golf course and he is in the inferior position of a caddy. His first impressions of Judy are described by the narrator filtered through the images that are formed in Dexter's mind:

“The little girl who had done this was eleven--beautifully ugly as little girls are apt to be who are destined after a few years to be inexpressibly lovely and bring no end of misery to a great number of men. The spark, however, was perceptible. There was a general ungodliness in the way her lips twisted, down at the corners when she smiled, and in the--Heaven help us! --in the almost passionate quality of her eyes. Vitality is born early in such women. It was utterly in evidence now, shining through her thin frame in a sort of glow” (Baym 660).

These first images are the first ones that show the readers Dexter is on the path of idealizing and glamorizing Judy. He is simply making her position transcendental and godly which is really ironic and the narrator tells us about the “general ungodliness in the way her lips twisted down”. This strange comment demonstrates that it is Judy’s status and position in the society which makes her godly. There is always a sense of melancholic understanding that makes Dexter’s object of desire irresistible. Judy from the very beginning is associated with Dexter’s dreams of the future. Her smile, although absurd, is the kind of memory that according to the narrator “half a dozen men were to carry to the grave.” When asked by the caddy-master to carry Judy’s clubs, Dexter simply quits, but “the enormity of his decision frighten[s] him”. He cannot and will not accept the humiliation of being a caddy in front of Judy who represents the core of his dreams: “he had received a strong emotional shock, and his perturbation required a violent and immediate outlet” (Baym 661). This incident is the first one that his winter dreams make happen, but not all of them are on a conscious level:

“It is not so simple as that, either. As so frequently would be the case in the future, Dexter was unconsciously dictated to by his winter dreams. Now, of course, the quality and the seasonability of these winter dreams varied, but the stuff of them remained” (Baym 662).

Unconsciously, the dreams function as a driver whose destination is material success. The dreams are not just limited to winter. Winter ignited the dreams, but now the metaphorical winter seems to haunt Dexter with melancholy. The narrator tells us that we should not think that Dexter wants association with wealth, but he wants “glittering things themselves”:

“But do not get the impression, because his winter dreams happened to be concerned at first with musings on the rich, that there was anything merely snobbish in the boy. He wanted not association with glittering things and glittering people--he wanted the glittering things themselves. Often he reached out for the best without knowing why he wanted it--and sometimes he ran up against the mysterious denials and prohibitions in which life indulges. It is with one of those denials and not with his career as a whole that this story deals” (Baym 662).

We are told that Dexter is constantly in the need of possession. He simply does not want association; he is in a constant struggle to possess the objects themselves. He does not even know the reason why he wants them, but there is always a sense of melancholic lack that he tries to get rid of to no avail. He likes to push the boundaries and limits, but sometimes he feels unable to transgress and obtain what he wants. As the narrator says, the story is about one of these “denials” which is related to his relationship with Judy that is mediated by the images and dreams in his mind. At the age of 27 Dexter reaches the wealth he desired on the golf course, but that sense of emptiness is reinforced by the fact that he utterly fails to establish a permanent and everlasting love between himself and Judy.

Throughout the story we are told about different encounters of Dexter and Judy. One of the most significant ones is the one in the lake near the golf course. The peaceful scene of the lake is disturbed by Judy’s motor-boat. Dexter was listening to the sound of piano which was interrupted by the roaring motor of the boat. He instantly finds himself near the boat and it drowns out “the hot tinkle of the piano in the drone of its spray”. Dexter drives the boat while Judy is surf-boarding on the lake behind it. The visual images filtered through Dexter’s mind show how these Debordian images mediate his love for Judy:

“Then she was in the water, swimming to the floating surfboard with a sinuous crawl. Watching her was without effort to the eye, watching a branch waving or a sea-gull flying. Her arms, burned to butternut, moved sinuously among the dull platinum ripples, elbow appearing first, casting the forearm back with a cadence of falling water, then reaching out and down, stabbing a path ahead... He kept thinking how glad he was that he never caddied for this girl. The damp gingham clinging made her like a statue and turned her intense mobility to immobility at last.” (Baym 664,666).

This mediation by images are not just restricted to Judy, but they are generalized to the objects and places associated with Judy. Dexter feels a sense of mystery in the house inhabited by his object of desire. According to the narrator Dexter had known “for a long time that [Jones’s] house was the finest on Lake Erminie. With a Pompeian swimming pool and twelve acres of lawn and garden. But what gave it an air of breathless intensity was the sense that it was inhabited by Judy Jones” (Baym 665). These sentences substantiate the fact that the protagonist has been enchanted with all the things associated with Judy, but as mentioned before he does not want the association; he wants “the glittering things themselves”. The winter dreams unconsciously dictate him and direct his thoughts and imagination. He thinks obsessively about the rooms, flowers and all the detailed images of Judy’s house. According to Debord these are not just about collection of images but the social relationship that is mediated by images. The adjectives like gay, breathless and radiant are used to describe Judy and the house she resides in. These adjectives indicate the ecstasy Dexter experiences in the course of his melancholic relationship with Judy.

On his first date with Judy, Dexter contemplates and thinks about all the men she had loved before. When she comes downstairs to meet him he is disappointed because her dress is not as elaborate as he expected. The materiality of his love comes into the open in the mentioned disenchantment. His image of Judy is an unblemished one with the spectacular clothes she wears and he cannot withstand even an iota of difference in the image shaped in his mind. Dexter is relieved when he understands that Judy’s parents are not home because he is perfectly aware that Judy’s father knows him from the golf course and his humble origins are the source of anxiety which he cannot handle. After the dinner Judy talks to him about her last boyfriend who had told her “out of a clear blue sky that he was poor as a church-mouse” and she had not been able to “survive the shock”. In a shocking sentence that shows the commodification and

fluctuation of love and relationship for her, Judy whispers: "I don't know what's the matter with me. Last night I thought I was in love with a man and tonight I think I'm in love with you." It is highly ironic that this sentence, Dexter thinks, has a beautiful and romantic sense. This opinion can be justified in the light of the fact that commodification of his relationship is in line with all the spectacular images of Judy in her mind. He simply thinks of this relationship as a commodity that he has claimed and he does not care if yesterday this commodity was someone else's. When Judy says that she has not kissed the other man, Dexter totally knows that she is lying, but he takes pleasure in the fact that she has bothered to lie to him. Falsity of his relationship is covered with the physical loveliness of Judy and all he cares about is the commodity that he has claimed. The commodity which satisfies the winter dreams of Dexter is precisely this emotionally-charged relationship with Judy. The narrator appropriately tells us that "no disillusion as to the world in which [Judy] had grown up could cure his illusion as to her desirability."

Even after arrangements are made to marry Irene Scheerer, Dexter cannot take Judy off his mind. The images associated with her continuously haunt him. "Summer, Fall, Winter spring, another summer, another fall-so much he had given of his active life to the curved lips of Judy Jones." After a while he is even numb against jealousy when he sees Judy with new men, but that sense of melancholy from the beginning never leaves him alone. Dexter goes to war to run away from all the images of Judy and leave them behind and when he understands that she has married and become an average woman in beauty a sense of loss comes over him:

"A sort of dullness settled down upon Dexter. For the first time in his life he felt like getting very drunk... He had thought that having nothing else to lose he was invulnerable at last--but he knew that he had just lost something more, as surely as if he had married Judy Jones and seen her fade away before his eyes. The dream was gone. Something had been taken from him. In a sort of panic he pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes and tried to bring up a picture of the waters lapping on Sherry Island and the moonlit veranda, and gingham on the golf-links and the dry sun and the gold color of her neck's soft down... Why, these things were no longer in the world! They had existed and they existed no longer" (Baym 674,675).

#### 4. Conclusion

The sense of loss never fades away. On the contrary, it gains strength and intensifies when Dexter understands Judy's beauty has faded. Even if he had married Judy, it would have been no different because the nature of his relationship could not be directly lived and it was always mediated by images that had roots in materialistic and ephemeral elements. The relationship Dexter desired had its grounds in the temporary and material beauty of Judy. On the whole, we can say that all his dreams were rooted in the materiality of his environment and that is precisely the underlying reason of constant frustration in his relationship. According to Debord the images that distort the reality is a product of that reality:

"The spectacle cannot be abstractly contrasted to concrete social activity. Each side of such a duality is itself divided. The spectacle that falsifies reality is nevertheless a real product of that reality. Conversely, real life is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle, and ends up absorbing it and aligning itself with it. Objective reality is present on both sides. Each of these seemingly fixed concepts has no other basis than its transformation into its opposite: reality emerges within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real. This reciprocal alienation is the essence and support of the existing society... In a world that is really upside down, the true is a moment of the false" (Debord 9).

The material roots of spectacle can be traced in all the imageries used by Fitzgerald to depict Dexter's framework of mind. The golf course, the motor-boat, Judy's house and its rooms, her physical loveliness, etc. all strengthen my argument that their relationship was mediated by images that had material origins. Dexter Green and Woody Allen's Blue Jasmine are all of the same kind. They were both after empty forms that had taken the shape of dreams. Even love for them was a commodified type of emotion that could not be truly claimed because of the temporary and material grounds. Spring, summer, fall and winter are all wintry for these characters which are present in most of Fitzgerald's works like *The Great Gatsby*.

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