

The Research of Thing-Narrative in *Tender is The Night*

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Abstract

Tender is the Night, a 1934 literary masterpiece by F. Scott Fitzgerald, has long been regarded as a cornerstone in the study of American modernist literature due to its profound exploration of the spiritual turmoil of the Jazz Age. By tracing the decline of psychiatrist Dick Diver, the novel critiques how consumerism erodes individual subjectivity. This study employs close reading to examine F. Scott Fitzgerald's thing-narrative techniques in *Tender Is the Night*, contextualizing the novel within its social and historical milieu. The textual analysis bespeaks that consumption objects function as cultural symbols, alcohol acts as a subjective force, and the beach serves as an ontological representation, which collectively propel Dick Diver toward tragedy. The interplay of these material elements not only reflects Fitzgerald's critique of the "Jazz Age" but also underscores how matter intertwines with character fate, catalyzing tragedy. This thesis aims to clarify the influence of things on individuals in *Tender Is the Night* and explore Fitzgerald's literary reflection on the issue of human nature loss in modern society.

Keywords

Thing-Narrative, *Tender is the night*, Consumer Culture, Thing-Power.

1. Introduction

Tender Is the Night was a literary classic written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1934. With its profound analysis of the spiritual dilemma of the jazz era, it has always occupied the core position of American modernist literature research. Through the depraved trajectory of psychiatrist Dick Diver, the novel reveals the devouring of individual subjectivity by consumerism. Its "broken narrative" structure and "American Dream" critical theme have had a profound impact on contemporary writers.

2. The Research of Thing-Narrative in *Tender Is the Night*

2.1. Consumer goods: Alienated relationships

"Things" may become a symbol in the narrative and be used as a metaphor for culture, history and society.[1]

The 1920s witnessed remarkable economic expansion in the United States, accompanied by the rapid development of a consumer-oriented society.[2] Many of the characters in *Tender Is the Night* indulge in the vibrant consumer culture of the 1920s, squandering their youth and seeking pleasure to forget pain and fill existential voids.

There is a long passage in the book about Nicole going shopping in the store with Rosemary: Nicole bought from a great list that ran two pages, and bought the things in the windows besides...She bought colored beads, folding beach cushions, artificial flowers, honey, a guest bed, bags, scarfs, love birds, miniatures for a doll's house and three yards of some new cloth the color of prawns... [3]

Nicole's shopping list outlined above reflects the extravagant spending habits of the American upper class and serves as a quintessential illustration of consumer culture in the 1920s. Jean Baudrillard, a distinguished French sociologist and philosopher, is among the prominent scholars who have examined consumer culture. In his seminal work, *The Consumer Society*, Baudrillard argues that what we consume is not the goods themselves but the relationships between people [4]. Due to the affluent characteristics of consumer culture, people live under the silent gaze of false things and become increasingly alienated from one another. In a consumption-oriented society, interpersonal relationships are mainly controlled by wealth. The maintenance of completely sincere relationships across familial, social, and romantic spheres has grown exceptionally rare. Dick's tragedy also stems from this. [5]

2.1.1. Alienated Friendship in Consumer Culture

The relationship between Dick and his professional associate, Franz, is fundamentally rooted in financial considerations and mutual benefits. Franz is a meticulous and superficial doctor. He once respected Dick's diligence, perseverance, and his abilities in psychiatry. Franz and his spouse reside in a modest dwelling, exhibiting a pragmatic outlook on life that contrasts markedly with Dick's more idealistic perspective. Convinced of Dick's capabilities, he agreed to establish a clinic in partnership with him. His intention was to capitalize on Dick's expertise and the Warren family's fortune to facilitate the launch of their joint venture. When the clinic opened, Franz tried his best to control it. As Dick planned his three-month sabbatical to participate in a psychiatric symposium in Berlin, Franz promptly weighed his personal concerns before voicing objections. After becoming aware of Dick's struggles with depression and habitual drinking, he chose to discontinue their partnership and ceased to maintain their former bond. Dick treated Franz with kindness and generosity, harboring no distrust toward him. However, during a difficult period in Dick's life, rather than helping to alleviate his struggles, Franz chose to sever their professional relationship decisively. The self-serving and instrumental character of this friendship left Dick deeply disillusioned. [6]

In a consumer society, just as genuine blood kinship ceases to exist, sincere friendship among individuals also vanishes. All aspects of existence are quantified through their market worth, with goods, labor, social interactions, and even human beings becoming tradable assets in commercial exchanges. Human-made artifacts, arising from societal endeavors, often cease to fulfill their service-oriented purpose. Instead, these creations encircle and constrain their originators, subverting the initial intent of human innovation.

In an impersonal consumerist society, friendship is often perceived as a marker of social standing, with an individual's status implicitly reflected in the networks of associates they cultivate. When a friend ceases to offer utility, individuals unhesitatingly cast them aside. Eventually, Dick became alienated by his social circle, having lost the utilitarian value he once held in their eyes. His downfall poignantly underscores the hollow nature of friendship within a consumerist society, where connections are predicated on utility.

2.1.2. Alienated Love in Consumer Culture

In social contexts lacking genuine family bonds and meaningful friendships, the quest for true love often proves elusive. The regressive essence of the consumer-fabricated environment is manifested in its ability to strip things and individuals of their authentic existential symbolic value. As a result, things and people are reduced to useful things of exchange value [4]. Under the influence of consumer culture, love transforms into a tradable commodity, with the essence of romantic relationships between men and women often resembling an economic partnership. Prior to meeting Nicole, Dick was an optimistic and aspiring physician. Nicole is attractive, charming, and pitiable, what's more, she is extremely wealthy. His union with Nicole enabled him to realize his aspirations for both material affluence and romantic fulfillment. When he discovered that the Warren family, via Baby Warren, aimed to hire a physician for Nicole,

despite of his anger, he could not resist the temptation of material rewards. From Baby Warren's pragmatic perspective, Dick is a "physician - spouse," an ideal figure who can readily attend to her sister's medical needs.

Over time, the connection between Nicole and Dick evolves into a transactional dynamic akin to buyer and seller, gradually supplanting the intimacy of a romantic partnership. Within the marital union, Dick strived to sustain his economic autonomy. Through his personal endeavors, he sought to demonstrate that he was not a physician procured by the elite. However, Nicole continued to be discontented with their living conditions. Throughout their decade-long marriage, Nicole remained entirely reliant on Dick. Dick was both a doctor and a husband. He strived to heal his wife, providing her with meticulous care while fostering her sense of contentment. But the recurrent relapses of Nicole's illness gradually drained Dick of both his energy and enthusiasm. Ultimately, Dick grew indifferent toward Nicole and descended into self-destruction through chronic alcohol abuse. In fact, Nicole's love for Dick is partly a "transfer", and Dick was not entirely attracted by Nicole either. [7] Dick's choice to marry Nicole reflects his aspiration for wealth and social class elevation. Over time, Nicole's behavior came to mirror that of her father and sister. Nicole overlooked the care and medical attention Dick had provided throughout their decade-long association. She thought that Dick's identity as a doctor was now useless, and she could live without him. Following the crisis in her marriage to Dick, she promptly engaged in ambiguous interactions with Tommy Barban rather than seeking to resolve their conflicts. "Like a happy child wanting to get it over with quickly and vaguely knowing that Dick had planned for her to have it, she lay down on the bed as soon as she got home and wrote a short, provocative letter in Nice." [3] At that moment, she was no different from her sister, convinced that Dick was a physician acquired with the Warren family's wealth. When the patient recovered and the doctor's duty had been fulfilled, she concluded it was time to farewell Dick.

Clearly, within a consumer society where relationships are treated as tradable commodities, genuine love remains unattainable for individuals. When things and individuals are reduced to mere instruments of exchange value, love itself transforms into a tradable commodity, serving to acquire personal comfort and gratification. Individuals are primarily driven by the pursuit of luxury goods, elevated social standing, and substantial wealth. Economic connections serve as the sole foundation for human interactions, with consumer culture systematically reducing both social relations and the broader social fabric to a state of degradation.

2.2. Alcohol: The Body Control and Disintegration of Identity

"Things" are not only the background and tools of human activities; "things" themselves also have life and spirituality. This is an old proposition, in the current wave of "things turn" has been generally recognized [1]. Jane Bennett believes that "things" are not passive things, as agents, "things" can not only promote or hinder human plans, but also have their movement and nature, and she uses the term "thing-power" to summarize this ability of "things".[8] The driving effect of alcohol on narrative reaches its climax in Dick's decadent trajectory, which can be divided into the preliminary, middle and later stages.

2.2.1. Preliminary Stages: The Persistence of Rationality

In the early stage, Dick's career was booming and his relationship with Nicole remained loving and stable. When Dick and Rosemary and their group went to Paris, Abel persuaded Dick to have one more glass of champagne. Dick was still able to remain rational enough to refuse. And in Rosemary's description, Dick indulged in drinking, not to an excessive degree, yet he did consume alcohol. And perhaps this act of his would draw her nearer to him. So, to get closer to Dick, she drank a glass of champagne and did it very quickly. But Rosemary, who was drinking for the first time, couldn't handle it and became drunk. So in the following text, when being alone with Dick, Rosemary put up her face quietly to be kissed. Dick was also under the

influence of alcohol. Suddenly, he was seized by confusion. This wasn't a matter of grappling with ethical dilemmas; rather, the sheer impracticality of the situation was evident from every perspective. He was simply bewildered, and for an instant, his customary poise and the steadfast equilibrium that defined him vanished [3]. Alcohol affected Dick's judgment and led to an emotional entanglement with Rosemary, which also set the stage for the ending of the two in the following text, causing Dick to be abandoned by both his family and his lover, and leading to an even more tragic fate.

At the Paris cocktail party scene, Abbe's persuasion to Dick to "have another glass of champagne" was essentially the first public challenge to Dick's willpower by alcohol as an "actor". At this time, Dick was still in the prime of his career and the stable stage of his marriage. His rejection of alcohol ostensibly demonstrated his rational restraint, but in fact, it exposed a subtle arrogance - he regarded alcohol as a "tool" that could be tamed by reason rather than an independent force with the risk of backfire [9]. This "pseudo-control" mentality laid the groundwork for the subsequent loss of control: although Dick did not accept Abbe's champagne, he tacitly allowed the alcohol to spread throughout the field, suggesting his underestimation of the power of alcohol. Fitzgerald constructs a dramatic irony here: Dick watches the cocktail party as a sober person but is forced into the narrative network of alcohol due to the drunkenness of others. This kind of "passive participation" reveals that the driving force of alcohol not only acts on direct ingers, but also indirectly manipulates interpersonal relationships through the collective state of intoxication in the social field. Dick's "confusion" and "loss of psychological balance" under the influence of alcohol are essentially the process in which his elaborately constructed "gentleman doctor" personality is deconstructed by the violence of alcohol. As a psychiatrist, Dick has long played the role under social discipline: he must maintain an image of rationality, elegance and moral flawlessness to match his professional identity. However, the intake of alcohol triggers its suppressed desires - the longing for a youthful body, the resistance to marital responsibilities, and the doubt about the sublimity of the self.

2.2.2. Mid-term Stages: The Disintegration of Rationality

In the middle of the narrative, the altercation that foreshadowed Dick's abrupt decline also occurred under the influence of alcohol. This incident, which took place in Rome, can be regarded as the climax of the entire story. The subjective effects of alcohol gradually shift from physical deterioration to the erosion of personal identity. Upon arriving in Rome, Dick found himself overwhelmed by a series of pressures: the death of his father, the growing rift in his marriage, and the disillusionment of love. Unable to manage his life, he sought solace in alcohol, which he believed he could control. However, an unfortunate event ensued following excessive alcohol consumption.

For a moment he stood over him in savage triumph--but even as a first pang of doubt shot through him the world reeled; he was clubbed down, and fists and boots beat on him in a savage tattoo. He felt his nose break like a shingle and his eyes jerk as if they had snapped back on a rubber band into his head. A rib splintered under a stamping heel. Momentarily he lost consciousness, regained it as he was raised to a sitting position and his wrists jerked together with handcuffs. He struggled automatically. [3]

In the text, alcohol functions as an active agent with its own trajectory of influence. In the scene where Dick becomes intoxicated, alcohol directly disrupts human actions by altering physiological functions through its material properties (the neuroinhibitory effects of ethanol). This creates a distinct mode of agency that transcends human control, propelling Dick into a state of irrational violence. Sensory descriptions such as "the world spinning" and "blood-red blurriness" vividly illustrate alcohol's direct manipulation of the nervous system. Unlike the earlier instrumental use of alcohol by Dick, the intoxication in this phase was irreversible alcohol forcibly divested him of his role as a "rational supervisor," which he embodied as a

psychiatrist. More significantly, Fitzgerald situates the outbreak of the altercation at the moment of a subtle insult: "that man spat with contempt." Alcohol amplifies Dick's latent class anxiety, thereby manifesting a material-mediated crisis of class identity through his violent reaction. Following this incident, Dick begins to lose control over his body, and his professional identity as a psychiatrist gradually dissolves under the influence of alcohol, marking the onset of his descent into degeneration.

2.2.3. Later Stages: The Demise of Rationality

In the later stage, Dick was completely controlled by alcohol. Because Nicole's condition deteriorated, they chose to live in a nursing home in Switzerland, and Dick continued to be his psychiatrist in this nursing home invested by Nicole. But at this time, he was completely addicted to alcohol.

He drank claret with each meal, took a nightcap, generally in the form of hot rum, and sometimes he tumbled with gin in the afternoons--gin was the most difficult to detect on the breath. He was averaging a half-pint of alcohol a day, too much for his system to burn up. [3]

Alcohol undermined Dick's body control, making it impossible for him to stop drinking. He thought gin was the most unpleasant but was easily exposed by the patient later. At this point, the conspiracy of alcohol had come true, and Dick's body had completely become a vehicle for alcohol. So much so that when the patient's family later exposed the fact that he was dependent on alcohol, He "Dismissing a tendency to justify himself, he sat down at his desk and wrote out, like a prescription, a regime that would cut his liquor in half." Alcohol played its dominant role here, first disintegrating Dick's identity as a doctor and enabling him to be diagnosed by patients in reverse. Then, due to the loss of trust, Dick was advised to "temporarily" leave the nursing home. As a result, Dick completely lost his source of income, his value as a psychiatrist no longer existed, his middle-class identity collapsed, and he could only rely on his wife, leading to an even more tragic ending to their marriage.

Fitzgerald reveals the paradox of alcohol through this transformation: it is both a "weapon" for the characters to attempt to control their fate and a "shackle" that drags them into the abyss. Dick's tragedy stems not only from the weakness of individual will but also from the subjective power of alcohol as a "thing" – it rewrites the fate by changing the characters' choices.

This process reflects the role transformation of alcohol from a "tool" to a "dominator" – it no longer serves the short-term needs of the characters. Instead, it takes the upper hand and becomes the core force that dictates their actions.[8]

2.3. Beach: The Construction of Self-Identity

In narrative theory, "things" can be conceptualized not only as cultural representations and powerful agents but also as ontologies independent of human rationality[1]. A quintessential example of this type of research is Bill Brown's "thing theory," which posits the realism of "things" as its foundation. This theory asserts that real "things" exist beyond the constructs of human language and culture, examining how "things" transcend linguistic and cultural representation to reveal their autonomous and authentic "thingness"/materiality.[10]

The author argues that the beach, through its inherent agency, has constructed two illusory worlds, defeating Dick both spiritually and materially.

2.3.1. Spiritually: A False Space of Salvation

On a spiritual level, in *Tender Is the Night*, the beach, leveraging its intrinsic capacity for action, transforms Dick's quest for redemption into an intricately designed physical performance. Dick's most tragic endeavor was his attempt to convert the beach into a spiritual sanctuary. He reimagined the picturesque beach as a perfect, self-contained space. Here, everything appears so exquisite, akin to a masterpiece of art. At the outset of the novel, there is an extensive passage vividly portraying the seaside of the renowned French Riviera resort.[11]

On the pleasant shore of the French Riviera, about half way between Marseilles and the Italian border, stands a large, proud, rose-colored hotel. Deferential palms cool its flushed façade, and before it stretches a short dazzling beach. Lately it has become a summer resort of notable and fashionable people...

The hotel and its bright tan prayer rug of a beach were one. In the early morning the distant image of Cannes, the pink and cream of old fortifications, the purple Alp that bounded Italy, were cast across the water and lay quavering in the ripples and rings sent up by sea-plants through the clear shallows. [3]

It is in such a picturesque environment that the story unfolds. This description is a reproduction of the Riviera seaside scenery in the narrator's eyes, using a series of words related to colors: "rose", "crimson", "brownish yellow", "pink", "light yellow" and "purplish red", vividly depicting the charming Riviera seaside and the distant mountains, waters, beaches and buildings. The author draws on the relevant concepts of "object-oriented ontology", an important branch of "speculative realism" that emerged in the Western philosophical circle in the 21st century, to examine the narrative style of things in *Tender Is the Night*. As the name suggests, "object-oriented ontology" turns the perspective of speculative philosophy towards "things" and explores the ontological existence mode of "things". In the view of Graham Harman, "Thing" has a reality independent of man, but unlike previous naive realism, Harman considers the reality of "thing" to be infinite and withdrawn, and therefore impossible to be fully grasped or reproduced. The only thing we can grasp about a "thing" is its outward qualities, or the sensuals it gives us, so there must be gaps between the "thing" and its outward characteristics, and between the "thing" and the feelings it gives us.[12] In *Tender Is the Night*, there are only the obvious features of the beaches or the feelings they give to the narrator, while the beaches themselves are mysteriously hidden. Thus, a series of insurmountable chasms are created between Dick and the beaches in a rhetorical way, and an opposing relationship thus arises between the narrator and the "things". This cognitive gap caused by "gaps" made Dick's fantasy about the beach a one-way projection rather than a true grasp of the thing itself, laying the foundation for his subsequent collapse.

Dick regarded the beach as a paradise. While meticulously creating a perfect world to achieve his own complete unity, he is also attempting to save others. On the beach, while people were playing and having fun, "Dick, wearing fleshy shorts, solemnly danced with a rake in his hand. On the surface, it seemed as if he was clearing gravel, but on that serious and solemn face, a comical sense of preserving some kind of mystery gradually emerged"[3]. This image of Dick precisely represents that over the years, he has been undertaking the task of eliminating the superfluous and getting to the root of the matter.

As Wu Jianguo pointed out, Dick aimed "to address and rectify the prevalent psychological disorders within the upper class through a healthy mental attitude and lifestyle..." With this dream in mind, he has been persistently making efforts for more than ten years, with the aim of carving this dream into an artistic masterpiece... The psychiatrist seemed to have become an artist daring to venture into the forbidden zone at this time. Moreover, in a sense, Nicole's mental illness symbolizes the morbidity of the entire upper class. Incest, indifference, selfishness, and indulgence in pleasure. All kinds of people in the upper class living around Dick have their own faults and problems. Baby Warren is an extremely selfish woman who likes to daydream but is emotionally cold... Rosemary was seductive and unrestrained... Dick wants to cure their illness with his kindness, integrity, elegance and grace and build a perfect world. [13] But the real world on the beach is this: No matter how many times Dick holds the rake to clear the gravel, each tide brings back impurities - this is the essence of things mocking Dick's delusion of healing. He wanted to cure the "pathology" of the upper class but failed to discover that the real virus was consumerism - when everyone indulged in pleasure, the sober ones instead became patients. The recurring tidal imagery in the novel constitutes a declaration of

the ontological nature of things: When Dick attempts to tidy up the beach with a rake, the tide brings more seaweed and gravel. This performance of the natural cycle of "materiality" is just like the deconstruction of the traditional value system by the wave of consumerism. Just as Harman said, the "withdrawn" of things is not a passive existence, but rather reveals the limitations of human cognition through the continuous manifestation of their explicit features. [8] The ebb and flow of the beach tide is both an inevitable outcome of physical laws and an irreversible operating logic of the consumer society. When Dick attempts to intervene in this process as a medical practitioner, he is essentially opposing the ontological power of things.

2.3.2. Materially: A False Space of Self-redemption

Materially, In *Tender Is the Night*, the beach occupies a central role in the narrative's physical setting, as much of the story unfolds along its shores. Furthermore, elements such as leisure activities, tourism experiences, and the pursuit of pleasure linked to the beach permeate the entire narrative of the novel. One could assert that *Tender Is the Night* showcases a beach-oriented way of life. The beach constructs a tiny microcosm of the society at that time - the world of consumption: the luxury and warmth of seaside hotels, the comfort and ease of sunbathing on the beach, the relaxation and passion of swimming in the sea, and all these can only be enjoyed by those in a certain social status and with considerable wealth[14]. As "the last glimmer of hope for a fallen family", Dick has been striving for self-improvement, realizing his life value and entering the upper class. For this reason, he "wanted to be an outstanding psychologist - perhaps the greatest psychologist of all time". He did achieve quite a lot in his career, but this did not bring him the expected results. Consequently, the beach has also emerged as a crucial means for him to strive for the establishment of his self-identity. In the "noisy 1920s", in the materialistic society of money worship, only the leisurely life on the beach, luxurious living, wandering around and enjoying oneself to the fullest meant truly gaining the recognition of the upper class. Brown pointed out that in modern society, things exercise "tyranny" in the following ways: when things are encoded as identity symbols, but their materiality will backfire on symbolic meaning; Things influence people's behavior through cultural discipline [10]. In the novel, Dick attempts to achieve class elevation through the beach as a medium but falls into economic bankruptcy and mental breakdown due to the backlash of material nature. So when He ended up with nothing, He raised his right hand and with a papal cross he blessed the beach from the high terrace. Not allowed to enter the beach.

As Baudrillard stated in *The Consumer Society*, consumption "serves as a potent factor in attaining social control by means of differentiating individual consumers"[4]. When individuals engage in the act of consumption, they are, in fact, already under the control of society. Therefore, in a consumer society, the desire to pursue one's own integrity through consumption and achieve self-construction is fundamentally a fantasy, and the result is merely to be controlled more firmly. *Tender Is the Night* embodies such a paradox. As mentioned earlier, in the "noisy 1920s", Dick, who "wanted to save himself", attempted to enter the upper class through beach life in the hope of achieving subject certainty and creating meaning for his life. However, in the end, he was forced to be constrained by the world created by the beach, sinking deeper and deeper, being countervailed by its materiality and unable to extricate himself.

Exhausted both spiritually and materially, Dick found himself increasingly adrift from his redemptive aspirations. Consumed by daily sensory indulgences, his professional pursuits gradually languished. Nichole also pointed out sharply that he "used to have a desire to create but now seems to always want to destroy something". Therefore, Dick's quiet departure was an inevitable outcome of his fate: the gradual loss of his personality, self-esteem and self, and ultimately could not escape the tragic ending directed by the materiality of the beach.

3. Conclusion

This study is based on the theoretical framework of "thing-narrative." Through a close reading of the text, it reveals the core driving role of "thing-narrative" in *Tender Is the Night* for the expression of the characters' fates.

Consumer goods, as cultural symbols, are essentially the carriers of "symbolic value" as described by Baudrillard. Under this consumption logic, friendship and love are all incorporated into the Commodity Exchange system. Consumer culture, through the infiltration of thing symbols, has alienated interpersonal relationships into a cold chain of interests, completely dissolving Dick's pursuit of pure emotions and professional ideals.

Alcohol, in the posture of an "action role", demonstrates the "thing power" as described by Jane Bennett. From its early rational consumption as a social tool, to its mid-stage induction of violent conflicts and disintegration of professional identity, and then to its later complete control over Dick's body and will, the "thing power" of alcohol gradually surpassed human rationality.

As a symbol of "ontological materiality", the beach carries the connotation of Harman's "object-oriented ontology". The real existence of its "withdrawn" constitutes a fundamental challenge to human rationality. The beach, as a spatial symbol of class separation, even forces Dick to fall into the vicious circle of "maintaining identity through consumption" by means of an implicit social discipline, and ultimately crumbles in a double overdraft of material and spiritual resources.

In conclusion, future research can be further expanded in theoretical integration, text expansion, realistic relevance, and methodological innovation to deepen the interdisciplinary understanding of "thing-narrative" in literature.

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