A Comparison of American and German Cultural Pessimism:

A Spenglerian Reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s

*The Beautiful and Damned*

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The first book by F. Scott Fitzgerald that I read was, unsurprisingly, *The Great Gatsby*. I found the author’s style so beautiful that it has ever since been my intention to read all of his novels. When finally finding the time, I bought *The Beautiful and Damned*. I was immediately struck by that same impressive narrative style, as well as by the upsetting pessimistic undertone of the events in the book. The latter reminded me of Oswald Spengler’s philosophy, which he describes in his *The Decline of the West*, first published in German in 1918, later translated into English in 1926. Spengler was a German philosophical thinker of the early twentieth century. It was clear that both authors shared the global pessimistic feeling of the decline of Western civilization as a result of the devastation brought about by World War I. Since Spengler’s theory immediately crossed my mind, I wanted to compare the works of these two authors. I suspected that Fitzgerald might have been influenced by Spengler, be it consciously or subconsciously. The convergence of the cultural criticism these two authors express in their works suggests that they were not only vivid participants in Western culture, but also very accurate observers of the times.

While doing research, I soon bumped into the article “F. Scott Fitzgerald and Romantic Destiny” by Richard Lehan, who discusses the influence of Spengler’s philosophy on Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. When continuing my research, I came across a 1927 interview with Fitzgerald by Harry Salpeter, who asked the American author about the origins of his interest in Spengler. Fitzgerald explains that “Spenglerism signals the death of this civilization¹” (Salpeter 87) and makes clear that he has no hope for Western civilization to make further progress. According to Spengler’s philosophy, every culture evolves into a civilization, which is the ultimate stage of any culture and from which point onwards it is

¹ i.e. the civilization of the West in the 1920s.
doomed to decay. In the interview, Fitzgerald agrees with Spengler’s insight into the state of Western culture at that time, comprising both Europe and North America. He too believes that it is doomed to decline, since it has reached its greatest achievements and cannot evolve any further. Fitzgerald’s statement that he was explicitly inspired by Oswald Spengler for the writing of *The Great Gatsby* pushed me to look for traces of “Spenglerism” in his earlier work. I wanted to examine if Fitzgerald was influenced by Spengler’s philosophy from the very outset of his career or if the two authors rather simply shared a similar view on Western civilization. I believe a comparison of the fictional work of the American author and the historico-philosophical treatise of the German thinker can provide a bigger picture, i.e. on a larger scale (including Europe as well as North America), of cultural philosophy and cultural criticism in the early twentieth century.

This thesis examines to what extent Oswald Spengler’s ideas as advanced in *The Decline of the West* (1918 and 1922) are similar to the themes in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s second novel *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922). My thesis thus builds on previous work by Lehan and Salpeter, but also extends the analysis to Fitzgerald’s earlier work, *The Beautiful and Damned*. By studying works that were published closer to the end of World War I, it will also become possible to establish a firmer connection between the idea of cultural pessimism and the end of the War, that is, between a cultural idea and a particular historical moment.

The main issues that the characters in Fitzgerald’s second novel have to deal with (failure, insecurity, disappointment and disillusionment) coincide with the idea of cultural pessimism that Spengler articulates in his major philosophy. Since I have been studying English and German literature for the past four years, I saw an interesting connection between these two expressions of cultural criticism. I believe it innovative to study the convergence of Spengler’s and Fitzgerald’s thinking, as both authors seem to have a similar response to the

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2 This will be explained in more detail in the second chapter of this thesis.
3 Fitzgerald’s first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, was published in 1920, two years after the first volume of *The Decline of the West* was published.
state of their culture, civilization and society. Since this has already been done by Lehan for Fitzgerald’s most popular novel, I believe it more interesting to see how Spengler and Fitzgerald seem to have expressed similar ideas and opinions earlier on, around the time of the publication of their respective works, *The Decline of the West* and *The Beautiful and Damned*. Even though Fitzgerald claims to have read *The Decline of the West* in 1924 (Lehan 137), which seems impossible since the English translation was published only in 1926, it is striking how much of Fitzgerald’s themes in *The Beautiful and Damned* already correspond to Spengler’s thinking. That Fitzgerald expressed a similar view on Western civilization so close to the publication of Spengler’s philosophy, without having read the German thinker’s work, suggests that a general feeling of impending doom dominated people’s minds on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. I would therefore venture the hypothesis that Fitzgerald was either subconsciously influenced by Spengler’s thinking or that the two authors simply expressed a similar response to their contemporary culture and civilization. I wonder if Fitzgerald was actually influenced by Spengler, be it out of different sources than his actual book. Maybe there was rather more of a confluence of ideas between these two authors, as they were both living in a world characterised by insecurity and despair, due to the traumatic event of the First World War. Since I believe the War can be seen as one of the causes of this cultural pessimism, I will also look for traces of this event in the works discussed here. In order to verify this hypothesis, I will investigate which of Spengler’s ideas are to be found in Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned*.

In this thesis, I will discuss the main themes of Fitzgerald’s novel and compare them to the main ideas in Spengler’s work. Similar ideas could be detected both in Germany (more

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4 The first volume of Spengler’s work was published in 1918, the second in 1922. Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned* was published in 1922. I am aware that *The Great Gatsby* was published three years later already (in 1925), but I want to demonstrate that Fitzgerald expressed a point of view on Western civilization that is similar to Spengler’s thesis about the impending decline of the West before he actually read anything by Spengler.

5 According to *F. Scott Fitzgerald: New Perspectives*, edited by Bryer et al., Fitzgerald did not read Spengler until 1927, which corresponds with Salpeter’s interview. Still, Lehan mentions that Fitzgerald claimed Spengler had influenced his writing of *The Great Gatsby*. 
generally in Europe, since Spengler was very influential) and in the United States around the same time. I will start by shortly contextualizing both authors and theirs works in the first chapter, in order to give a sense of the time in which they lived and wrote. The second chapter of this thesis will discuss Spengler’s philosophy, to give those readers who are not familiar with his work an overview of his thinking about Western culture and civilization. I will point out those ideas that are relevant to the comparison with Fitzgerald’s work and touch upon the reception and influence of Spengler’s philosophy across the globe. I want to demonstrate that The Decline of the West is a very famous – and infamous – work, that has meant food for thought for countless people all over the world. The third chapter examines how Spengler’s general idea of cultural pessimism potentially reached the minds of the American people, and that of Fitzgerald in particular. The final chapter provides a Spenglerian reading of Fitzgerald’s second novel. It reads The Beautiful and Damned in relation to The Decline of the West.

My main goal is to make a comparison of Spengler’s German/European thinking, which envelops the entire history of Western culture, and Fitzgerald’s work, which is confined to the short period of the Jazz Age, defined by materialism in the American world city of New York right before and during the Roaring Twenties. Even though their approach to the matter is very different – a historico-cultural analysis in Spengler’s case versus a fictional narrative based on personal experience in Fitzgerald’s case – the two authors express a similar outlook on Western Civilization.

I read the main characters of The Beautiful and Damned, Anthony and Gloria Patch, as representatives of the decline of Western culture. Their story is one of decline that is based on the early twentieth-century so-called American values of materialism and money. Since

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6 In Chapter Two, I will discuss the reception of Spengler’s philosophy, which shows how widespread his ideas were.
Spengler is very critical of people’s ever-increasing dependence on money\(^7\) and the American culture (of which Fitzgerald is often seen as the perfect example) is defined by materialism and consumerism, a comparison of these two authors seems all the more logical.

1.2 Justification

The reason why I chose Fitzgerald’s second novel – and not his first (*This Side of Paradise*) – to make a Spenglerian reading of his earlier work, is that throughout the criticism of Fitzgerald and his work, *The Beautiful and Damned* has been discussed the least. This is probably due to the fact that many critics have openly called it a bad novel (cf. Way, Hindus, Troy). However, I feel that many of these critics missed out on the strength of the pessimistic atmosphere that dominates the entire novel. Scott Donaldson mentions in his biography of Fitzgerald and Hemingway how, with the publication of Fitzgerald’s second novel, “[a] number of critics, expecting less weighty fare, chose to ignore its pessimistic message” (Donaldson, *FH* 152). I find this strange, since it is hard to disregard the depressing undertone of the events and the subsequent disheartened spirits of the characters in the novel.

One of the critics who dislike *The Beautiful and Damned*, is Brian Way, who states that Fitzgerald “wastefully expended his energies and feelings” on his second novel (Way x).

He even explicitly calls the book an “extremely bad novel” (Way 64). He states that Fitzgerald’s writing of before *The Beautiful and Damned* showed promise and “that Fitzgerald was beginning to find his true bent as a novelist” (Way 64). He then goes on to say that *The Beautiful and Damned*, in contrast to those earlier writings,

> can be seen only as an unfortunate aberration. It is an extremely bad novel by any standard, but what makes it especially disturbing is that it seems to cancel out all the

\(^7\) Cf. Chapter Four for a discussion of Spengler’s concerns about the growing importance of money.
gains Fitzgerald had made so far. It carried him clean out of the path that appeared to be leading directly to the creative climax of 1924-26. (Way 64)\(^8\)

This statement enforces my motivation for studying Fitzgerald’s work. Even though Fitzgerald’s (early) work might not have been perfect formally, it is nonetheless worth considering as a true account of the age. Like Way, William Troy too expresses his doubts about the book’s value. He thinks *The Beautiful and Damned* is a book about failure as well as it is a failure itself (Troy 189). Although it clearly is about failure, I disagree with them calling it a failure as a novel. It is only normal that Fitzgerald was still trying to find his voice as a writer and *The Beautiful and Damned* has certainly benefited his later work, as each previous piece helps an author to improve his writing. A third critic who sees Fitzgerald’s second novel as (formally) not good is Hindus. He writes: “The theme of *The Beautiful and Damned* is failure, but with unintentional appropriateness, it is also failure as a literary experiment. Fitzgerald had not yet learned precisely how to exploit fully his own strength.” (Hindus 27) The fact that *The Beautiful and Damned* is thus perceived by many as a bad novel, leads to the impression that Fitzgerald himself is a failure in his attempt to write a good book. Yet, it must be pointed out that this theme of failure, of which the American author himself can be considered a victim, is what makes his work so powerful.

I agree that, when comparing *The Beautiful and Damned* to his later masterpiece *The Great Gatsby*, his second novel must be categorized as the lesser one. However, I also believe Way is too harsh in directly calling *The Beautiful and Damned* “bad”, since the material is extremely interesting in the way that the author dares to use his own problems to confront his characters with. I believe these critics focused too heavily on the formal aspects of the novel – which are indeed not perfect – and did not pay much attention to the force of the actual narrative. In general, I highly disagree with Way’s view on the novel. I believe Fitzgerald’s

\(^8\) i.e. when he wrote and published *The Great Gatsby*. 
second book to be very powerful in its expression of the times in which the author lived. Fitzgerald’s account of the Jazz Age is not all about the glitter and glamour of the age. He does dare to take on the problems of the period as well, even at times very personal ones, such as his own alcoholism. By demonstrating the weakness of his characters – which is often linked to the context of their society, in this case: consumer culture in the aftermath of World War I – Fitzgerald makes his readers aware of their own dependence upon materialism. Even if his second novel is not as good as his later masterpiece, it does force the readers to pay attention to the inevitable decline of the culture they are part of.

Since multiple critics have called *The Beautiful and Damned* a bad novel and have ignored the pessimism that underlies the story, I am even more motivated to make a study of the book. The striking analogy with Spengler’s philosophy calls for the highly interesting combination of the American author and the German philosopher. I believe I can make a contribution in the field of studies on F. Scott Fitzgerald exactly because these critics have chosen to ignore the novel’s pessimistic message. Since people tend to follow the authorities’ recommendations, *The Beautiful and Damned* has ever since been seen as a less worthy novel to study and that is an opinion I hope to change with this thesis.

1.3 Goal and Method

To work out my thesis statement – that there are pessimistic themes to be found in Fitzgerald’s second novel that are similar to those Spengler expresses in his major philosophy *The Decline of the West* – I will make a Spenglerian reading of *The Beautiful and Damned*. A ‘Spenglerian reading’ implies the application of the main lines of thought that underlie Spengler’s thinking in his major work. I will also look for themes Spengler touches upon in his philosophy that recur in Fitzgerald’s second novel. Aside from an analysis on the story
level, I will also look for similar dominating themes in the personal lives of the two authors. These unarguably influenced the writing process, consciously or subconsciously.

By tracing analogous events and aspects from the authors’ lives into their respective works, I want to show that there is more of a confluence of ideas between the two writers, a similar way of thinking about the Western world and its culture, which is heavily relying on materialism and decadence, than there is an actual influence from one author (Spengler) upon the other (Fitzgerald). As I will show in this thesis, Fitzgerald admits to having been influenced by Spengler later on, but his pessimism was already present before reading the philosopher’s ideas. When he later read Spengler’s work, Fitzgerald discovered a like-minded author in the German philosopher.

1.4 Corpus

For Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, I am relying on an English translation. I believe this version is better suited for the comparison I want to make here, since Fitzgerald himself could not read German (Salpeter 87).

Aside from the two primary sources mentioned above, the main source on which I build my research is Lehan’s article, from which I start the focus of my research. Apart from that single article, there are several critics who have written about Fitzgerald’s work. The corpus on F. Scott Fitzgerald is very broad, but as I mentioned, not much has been written about his second novel. One of the main authorities on Fitzgerald I am relying on is Scott Donaldson.

Where Spengler is concerned, the main source on his life is Frits Boterman. In addition there are plenty of reviews of *The Decline of the West* that I have used to back up my arguments.

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9 Cf. Chapter Three of this thesis for an elaborate discussion of the way in which Fitzgerald might have come across Spengler’s ideas.
All sources are mentioned in the works cited-list at the end of this thesis.

2 Chapter 1: Context of the Authors

This introductory chapter will provide a concise sketch of the two authors who will be discussed in this thesis. Since the connection between their lives and works will be analysed in greater detail in the fourth chapter, this part will merely give an overview of those events and aspects of Spengler’s and Fitzgerald’s lives that have influenced their work.

2.1 Oswald Spengler

2.1.1 Sketch of His Life

Before starting to write, Spengler obtained a PhD in philosophy and afterwards became a mathematics teacher in a secondary school (Reilly 148).

As Frits Boterman mentions in his discussion of the life and work of Oswald Spengler, Spengler has known many misfortunes in his life. The main events that caused him to fall into a state of depression were the death of his mother in 1911, after which he moved to Munich and started writing The Decline of the West, and the fact that he could not physically take part in the war, due to a nervous illness and heart disease. As a result, Spengler felt he had no purpose in life and fell into an ever-deeper state of despair (Boterman 14, 21 and 125).

Therefore, it comes at no surprise that he wrote the pessimistic work he eventually published as a “philosophy of history” (DW, Preface 1st Ed. xv). As will be discussed further on in Chapter Four of this thesis, Spengler attempted to contribute to his nation through the writing of his philosophy. He wanted to guide the German people out of their misery (Boterman 41-42).
2.1.2 Post-War Interpretation of His Work

Spengler expected the First World War to end in a German victory (Helps xv, Werner xxix and Boterman 165). As a result, he was terribly disillusioned when the War turned out otherwise. As Arthur Helps mentions in his introduction to the English abridged edition of *The Decline of the West*, “[t]he military collapse of that year and the triumph of radical ideas plunged him into despair” (Helps xv).

The title of Spengler’s philosophy has often been misinterpreted as the author’s response to the outcome of the War. This is a very logical interpretation, since Spengler initially wanted to publish *The Decline of the West* only after a German victory (Boterman 165). As Boterman mentions, it seemed that Spengler wanted to assert that he was right with his prediction of a German victory (Boterman 165). This anecdote illustrates the interpretation that he entitled his philosophy as an expression of the disillusionment he felt when his great nation turned out to lose the fight. In his preface to the German abridged edition of Spengler’s philosophy, Helmut Werner explains that Spengler’s title for the work was “not inspired by the German defeat of 1918, as has often been believed, but was chosen before the First World War” (Werner xxix). Spengler had been working on *The Decline of the West* for many years before the War, so his work cannot be seen as an answer to his experience of the event.

According to Atkinson, Spengler himself explained that “the impulse to create it arose from a view of our civilization not as the late war left it, but […] as the coming war would find it” (Atkinson ix). Boterman clarifies why Spengler eventually did not wait to publish his work until after the war. Due to personal financial crisis and psychic distress he finally decided to publish it within the period of the war (Boterman 168).

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10 Charles Francis Atkinson, the translator of the original German edition of *Untergang des Abendlandes* into English (1926), states in his introduction that Spengler said that he conceptualized his philosophy before 1914 and worked it out by 1917. Boterman claims that Spengler already conceived the idea for his magnum opus after the death of his mother in 1911 (Boterman 14).
Atkinson also touches more generally upon the impact of the War on the two opposed sides. He observes that “[e]ven after the return to normality, it is no longer possible for men — at any rate for Western men” to return to their previous lives. They cannot simply put the event out of their minds and pick up where they left off four years ago. “And, if it is none too easy even for the victors of the struggle to shake off its sequelae, to turn back to business as the normal and to give no more than amateur effort and dilettantish attention to the very deep things, for the defeated side this is impossible.” (Atkinson ix) That it was not even possible for the victors to forget about the horror of the war is clear from Fitzgerald’s work as well, whose characters belong to the ‘Lost Generation’ that resulted from the war.

In my opinion, the War can be seen as an indication that Western civilization is indeed in decline. This interpretation is also to be found in the works of Dunne and McNaughton. Dunne makes the same observation, be it on a larger scale, as he discusses warfare in general: “Each stage in the decline of the West has been signaled by a period of unlimited warfare. It is as though in a nuclear fission, if such a metaphor be appropriate, the ‘binding energy’ of the community were released in an eruption of unexpected violence.” (Dunne 131) McNaughton too sees the War as announcing the final phase of Western culture, thus becoming Western Civilization\(^\text{11}\). He analyses the life span of Western culture according to Spengler’s cycle of the seasons. McNaughton explains that a culture’s “‘springtime’ is characterized by strong religious faith, which slowly gives way to increasing intellectuality and materialism” (McNaughton 8). During the ‘autumn’-phase then, life becomes dominated by materialism and by purely rational thought; Spengler uses the term ‘Civilization’ to denote this particular phase. Warfare between the culture’s constituent nations increases in intensity, with tensions between various strata of society also reaching a breaking point. Eventually, one state becomes vigorous enough

\[^{11}\text{The evolution from a culture to a civilization will become clear from my discussion of Spengler’s philosophy in the next chapter.}\]
to conquer and absorb all others, imposing an authoritarian *Imperium*. (McNaughton 9)

Thus McNaughton interprets the event of the First World War as a prelude to the last phase of Western Civilization.

### 2.2 Francis Scott Fitzgerald

The fourth chapter of this thesis will discuss the influence of Fitzgerald’s personal failures upon his work. The next paragraph will give a short general look into the American author’s life and the events that have been relevant to his work.

#### 2.2.1 Sketch of His Life and Work

The first aspect of the American author’s life that should be mentioned in the context of this thesis, is that Fitzgerald is known to be a very autobiographical author (Donaldson, *DLB* 5) and his characters always contain something of his own personality or life story.

Donaldson reports that Fitzgerald was a very handsome man, but at the same time he was also extremely arrogant. Donaldson says that “he struck his fellow students as insufferably cocky” (Donaldson, *FH* 29). These characteristics are to be found in his major literary characters. All the men in his novels are intriguing, the best example of course being Jay Gatsby, the enigmatic host whom the narrator first meets at one of Gatsby’s famous parties. This force of attraction Fitzgerald puts in all of his characters, be it in different degrees. Likewise, Anthony Patch, the main character from his second novel, is an attractive—though not traditionally handsome—man:

Physically, he had improved since his undergraduate days—he was still too thin but his shoulders had widened and his brunette face had lost the frightened look of his freshman year. He was secretly orderly and in person spick and span—his friends
declared that they had never seen his hair rumpled. His nose was too sharp; his mouth was one of those unfortunate mirrors of mood inclined to droop perceptibly in moments of unhappiness, but his blue eyes were charming, whether alert with intelligence or half closed in an expression of melancholy humor. One of those men devoid of the symmetry of feature essential to the Aryan ideal, he was yet, here and there, considered handsome—moreover, he was very clean, in appearance and in reality, with that especial cleanness borrowed from beauty. *(BD 14)*

Even if they are not explicitly handsome, Fitzgerald manages to lay a certain allurement in his characters – male as well as female – and makes the readers feel drawn to them.

The second aspect of Fitzgerald’s life I would like to focus on here, is his marriage to Zelda. In the late 1910s, Fitzgerald met the charming Zelda Sayre, whom he married a few years later, around the time when his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, was published *(Donaldson, FH 36)*. Since Fitzgerald is a very autobiographical author, it is not surprising that the couple in *The Beautiful and Damned* is often interpreted as a reflection of Scott and Zelda themselves. One of the most striking observations Donaldson makes in his biography of Fitzgerald, is the suggestion that the author came to realise that his wife might not have been the trophy he thought she was:

Fitzgerald’s tales of rejection and disappointment are far more effective than those where true love unpersuasively conquers all. They are more deeply felt, more true to the life. The stories of rejection also serve to demonstrate the author’s growing maturity of outlook, his disturbing sense that pursuit and capture of the golden girl was not really worth all the trouble and heartache. *(Donaldson, FH 113)*

This observation is also very much present in *The Beautiful and Damned*, where Anthony soon notices his Gloria is much more work than he could have ever known.
Since *The Beautiful and Damned* was published in 1922 and I am focussing on that period for this thesis, there is no need to discuss his further life here. For those who are interested in the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald, I am referring to Donaldson’s work and the recent collection of essays, bundled as *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Context*.

2.2.2 Materialism

As will become clear further on in this thesis, Fitzgerald’s life very much shimmers through in the events in his second novel.

Anthony Patch is rich, thanks to the allowance his grandfather, Old Adam Patch, sends him each month. The young man is expecting to receive his grandfather’s inheritance after the old man dies. When Anthony falls in love with the golden girl, Gloria Gilbert, and eventually manages to win her heart, he finally seems to have a goal in life. However, since he has enough money, he does not feel the need to work. After he and Gloria are married, their only occupation is partying as a way of passing the time until his grandfather passes away. They are very impatient and do not care about Old Adam Patch’s disapproval of his grandson’s hedonistic lifestyle. When his grandfather disinherits Anthony because he keeps on wasting his life, the couple is left in complete despair. They do not know how to live life with less money and it soon becomes clear that they are absolutely incapable of saving money. Clearly, they have their priorities wrong. Through a seemingly ever-lasting trial they try to get Adam Patch’s money back, but throughout the years their inability to maintain their funds leads them into an ever-increasing state of despair and depression. *The Beautiful and Damned* is thus in my opinion a perfect example of how Western Civilization is declining, as Spengler predicted. Anthony and Gloria Patch go down due to exactly those elements – materialism, excessive drinking, money issues – that were characteristic of Western culture at the time, and the culture of the Americans during the Jazz Age in particular.
As Henry Dan Piper mentions, “that atmosphere of dissipation and irresponsibility [is] the book’s most distinguishing feature” (Piper 86). Therefore, the strength of this novel lies in the fact that the author dares to sketch such disagreeable characters. He dares to show the ugly side of their personality and sheds light on the effects of materialism and alcoholism upon a person’s behaviour and life.

2.3 Connection

The connection between the German philosopher Oswald Spengler and the American author F. Scott Fitzgerald lies in the theme of their works. Both are overflowing with pessimism and the feeling of impending doom. Even though Fitzgerald had not yet read *The Decline of the West* at the time he wrote *The Beautiful and Damned*, I perceive a similar notion of decline in the culture of the Jazz Age Fitzgerald depicts in his novel as the one Spengler prophesies in his major philosophy.

3 Chapter 2: Spengler’s Philosophy

Before I start my analysis of Spenglerian themes in Fitzgerald’s work\(^\text{12}\), I believe it best to give a general overview of Spengler’s main statements.

3.1 Main Ideas

3.1.1 General Theory: The Origin, Bloom and Decay of Cultures

For those readers who are not familiar with Spengler’s theory, I will start with a brief overview of the main ideas Spengler puts forward in his philosophy. I will limit myself to

\(^{12}\) which will be discussed in Chapter Four of this thesis.
those trends in *The Decline of the West* that are relevant to my comparison with Fitzgerald’s work.\(^{13}\)

The main idea Spengler puts forward in his philosophy is the prediction that Western Civilization\(^ {14}\) is coming to an end. Like living organisms, Cultures too evolve according to a cycle of origin, bloom and decay. It must be pointed out that Spengler distinguishes between a Culture and a Civilization. He uses the term ‘Civilization’ for the last phase of a Culture only. As Michael D’Orso puts it, “Spengler centered his analyses on the proposition that ‘civilization’ is the sterile, inevitable culmination of ‘cultural’ evolution.” (D’Orso 20). In his introduction to the first volume, Spengler explains what he sees as the difference between a Culture and a Civilization:

> [E]very Culture has *its own* Civilization. The Civilization is the inevitable *destiny* of the Culture […] Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thingbecoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion, intellectual age and the stone-built, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again. (*DW*, Introduction 31)\(^ {15}\)

According to Spengler, every Culture irrevocably evolves towards a Civilization, which is then the ultimate achievement of that Culture. It cannot evolve any further and is doomed to decay from this moment onwards. However, Spengler stresses the fact that a new Culture will always arise, starting its path along the same cycle of growth, bloom and ultimately decay. This citation is also fitting for Fitzgerald’s work, since the society that

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\(^{14}\) Throughout his work, Spengler writes ‘Culture’ and ‘Civilization’ with a capital ‘c’, so I am doing this also to make clear that I am using the terms in his meaning.

\(^{15}\) The italics are Spengler’s.
Anthony and Gloria Patch live in can be described as an example of “the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable”. The couple is living in New York, a city that can surely be described as the “petrifying world-city” Spengler mentions here. Spengler stresses that he sees cultures as living organisms in the cycle of the seasons in saying that he uses the two words – Culture and Civilization – for the first time to express “organic succession”, i.e. the cycle the philosopher perceives in the time span of a Culture. Hitherto they were always used in a periodic sense (DW, Introduction 31).

In his history of the world, Spengler discusses ten great Civilizations – or as he calls them: “high Cultures” (DW, Vol. I 118). He defines a “high Culture” as “the waking-being of a single huge organism which makes not only custom, myths, technique, and art, but the very peoples and classes [who] incorporated in itself the vessels of one single form-language and one single history.” (DW, Vol. II 36) Spengler apparently sees a Culture as the product of a group of people who produce tools, art, language, etc. collectively, as a result of which they can be categorized within the same history.16

In his review of the English translation of Untergang des Abendlandes, Klyce neatly sums up the main cultures Spengler discusses:

the Assyrian-Babylonian, Egyptian, Chinese, Indian (Hindu), Minoan (Crete), classical (Greek-Roman), Mayan (apparently killed in youth), Russian (still young and much confused), Arabian (beginning with the Christian religions), and the Western (ours – beginning with the Crusades, and the Gothic revival of the Christianity that had degenerated into materialism in its original home, and is now again degenerated into authoritative materialism and irreligion). (Klyce 484)

16 Note that Spengler does not use the term ‘high Culture’ in the same way as it is usually interpreted among modernist writers, namely as opposed to ‘low culture’ or popular art.
All of these Cultures live or have lived through the “simple historic principles that underlie all life” (Klyce 484). As is clear from this citation, Western Culture is decaying due to materialism and the loss of belief.

In his discussion of Spengler’s work, Frye gives a clear overview of the cycle Western Civilization has gone through so far according to Spengler. He explains that Spengler finds that the larger social unit, of which man can be seen as a representative, is not the nation, nor race or class, nor the continent, but culture (Frye 2). This means that, even though Spengler’s theory of ‘Western Culture’ at first only enveloped Western Europe, it can now be expanded to the North of America as well. Frye briefly summarizes the cycle of the seasons as Spengler outlines it for Western Culture:

This culture has gone through four main stages, which Spengler symbolizes by the seasons of the year. It had its ‘spring’ in medieval times […]. It reached its ‘summer’ with the Renaissance […]. Its ‘autumn’ took place in the eighteenth century, when it began to exhaust its inner possibilities, of music in Mozart and Beethoven, of literature in Goethe, of philosophy in Kant. Then it moved into its ‘winter’ phase, which Spengler calls a ‘civilization’ as distinct from a culture. Here its accomplishments in the arts and philosophy are either a further exhaustion of possibilities or an inorganic repetition of what has been done. Its distinctive energies are now technological. It goes in for great engineering feats, for annihilation wars and dictatorships; its population shifts from the countryside into huge amorphous cities which produce a new kind of mass man. (Frye 2)

Spengler thinks that Western Civilization around World War I is in its winter-phase, but Frye perceives in Spengler’s discussion of Classical Culture and its similarities to his description of contemporary Western Civilization the author’s hope that “Germany may yet become the Rome of the future” (Frye 3). As I have already mentioned, Spengler expected the
First World War to end in a German victory and Frye’s interpretation of the underlying ideology in *The Decline of the West* underlines this expectation.

3.1.2 Interpretations

The idea of loss of belief described in the previous paragraph is again picked up on by Robert Osgood in his study of limited warfare. John Dunne mentions Osgood’s research in his article “Realpolitik in *The Decline of the West*”. Osgood notices a breakdown in Western Civilization on three different levels throughout history. Each level of breakdown is announced by a major war. According to Osgood, there have been three periods of unlimited warfare in the history of the West, namely the period of the Religious Wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that of the Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century, and the period of the World Wars of the twentieth century (qtd. in Dunne 131). Dunne reflects on Osgood’s study and interprets these phases of warfare as marking respectively the breakdown of the community of belief, the breakdown of the community of reason and the breakdown of the community of fear (Dunne 131-132). Dunne concludes that “[t]he lesson of history, in other words, may be that the community of fear proved to be unstable without the moral restraints provided by the community of reason, and the community of reason itself did not prove to be viable without the more effective motivation furnished by the community of belief.” (Dunne 150) From this reasoning it can be derived that, since Western Civilization was at Spengler’s stage in its final phase, it found itself in a society without belief, without reason and without fear. This conclusion points towards a world that is in decline. It means that the people of the Western world might no longer live in fear, but they could not fall back on reason or belief systems either. In other words: they feel empty and lost. As Frye mentions in his discussion of Spengler’s philosophy, “Spengler wants [art] to decline and exhaust its

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17 It is Dunne who variates between the opposite terms of “limited” and “unlimited warfare” (Dunne 131).
possibilities“, even though Western art is not actually getting better or worse, but simply changing, “because he wants his contemporaries, at least the German ones, to devote themselves to the things required by their cultural age, which for him are technological, national socialist, and military“ (Frye 10). The aspects of contemporary society that Spengler is concerned with depend on ever-evolving technology. Through their eternal evolution and ever-greater dependence upon technology, people have lost the feeling with what used to be their support in times of insecurity, namely belief and reason. Through reason they might have figured out a solution to their problems and through their beliefs they might have kept hoping. When those safety nets disappeared and made room for technology, people started to realise that technology might not be able to give them the consolation they needed in times of uncertainty, such as – in the context of Spengler and Fitzgerald – World War I, which left many in complete despair.

3.1.3 ‘Western Civilization’ Including the USA

In his major work, Spengler perceives ‘Western Civilization’ as enveloping Western Europe only. He hardly ever mentions the USA. In his review of John Farrenkopf’s book *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics*, which discusses Spengler’s work from a twenty-first century point of view
18, Reilly mentions that Farrenkopf too observes that Spengler never treats the United States systematically: “Sometimes, it is just a peripheral region of the English sphere, of no significance to the fate of the West. Sometimes, particularly in his earlier work, the US is a contender for the possible founder of the imperium mundi” (Reilly 153). Even though Spengler himself does not consider the USA part of Western Civilization, I am convinced that his theory can be projected onto the United States as well.

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18 Farrenkopf’s book was published in 2001.
One way of fortifying this assertion is by linking Spengler’s view on the city to the city of New York in the 1910s to 1930s, where Fitzgerald’s second novel is set. Gerlach and Hamilton have made an analysis of Spengler’s view of a metropolis:

In Spengler’s view, the growth of cities is linked to cycles of growth and decline in world history. The city has always been the source of major developments in history, but cities tend to grow into world cities, Weltstädte, where citizens lose their uniqueness and the specificity of their national identities. The urbanite adopts a cold, unfeeling rationality, as the city itself becomes more remote from unspoiled nature. Eventually, the Weltstadt drains the country dry and leaves an uninhabited waste. Without the rural environment to support it, the world city eventually implodes and the cycle renews. (Gerlach and Hamilton 117-118)

The New York of Anthony and Gloria Patch in The Beautiful and Damned can be considered a world city. That people “lose their uniqueness” – as Spengler asserts – might be true if we look at the Jazz Age as a community of like-minded people, who are all set to enjoy life and party every night. To outsiders, this community must look like a group of people who are the same and who want the same things. When looking at each character separately though, I would not want to state that they are not unique. Gloria Gilbert – later Patch – for example is wanted for her liveliness and the fact that she does not care what other people think of her. In fact, Gloria is characterised by exactly these two aspects, a loss of uniqueness, but at the same time an exceptionality that makes her wanted. This is shown by the vague description Anthony gets from his friend Maury Noble: “Well, I can't describe her exactly—except to say that she was beautiful. She was—tremendously alive.” (BD 44) The fact that Maury is not able to “describe her exactly” points to the assertion that girls of the Jazz Age – ‘flappers’ as they are frequently called\(^1\) – have a certain allurement that one cannot put their

\(^{19}\) Rena Sanderson defines Fitzgerald’s version of the flapper, which he based on his wife Zelda, as “a modern young woman who [is] spoiled, sexually liberated, self-centered, fun-loving, and magnetic.” (Sanderson 143)
finger on. That she is “alive” only confirms this, since the Jazz Age was all about enjoying life and partying the night away.

Spengler’s description of how the city becomes ever “more remote from unspoiled nature” is also demonstrated by Fitzgerald’s novel in the part where Anthony and Gloria buy a house in Marietta, a remote village, but soon discover they are extremely bored because there are no activities. They are used to the vivid and fast life in the city and cannot adjust to the calm of the village, which Spengler associates with nature. As Gerlach and Hamilton mention in the above quotation, Spengler predicts the downfall of the city. He notes that people are drawn to these world cities and start to neglect the countryside more and more, which will lead to their end, since they need “the rural environment to support [the city]”.

As these examples show, Spengler’s philosophy of the decline of the West can be productively extended to include the USA. It responds to a general feeling of cultural decline and alienation resulting from early twentieth-century modernity.

3.2 Reception

This paragraph will deal with the reception of Spengler’s magnum opus. I believe it to be relevant for the subject I am discussing here, since contemporary reviews of Spengler’s work might have been the sources from which Fitzgerald drew his information on the philosopher’s ideas. It is also possible that one of Fitzgerald’s acquaintances heard of The Decline of the West and discussed Spengler’s ideas with the American author.

When looking at multiple reviews from European as well as American critics the most general comment on Spengler’s philosophy is that he includes so many different areas of science and so many different events that he cannot possibly have researched them all in

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Brian Way considers the flapper to be “the most important single factor in Fitzgerald’s early success, and helps to sharpen one’s awareness of its paradoxical nature” (Way 61). This “paradoxical nature” again refers to the above explanation of Gloria’s character.

20 In his introduction, Spengler equates the “villager” and the “nature-man” (DW 35).
detail. One example of this most common remark is Klyce’s 1926 review of the English translation of Spengler’s philosophy, in which he says:

I can detect dozens of inaccuracies in my field of competence, and hundreds of little slips in consistency (mostly logical vaguenesses, but sometimes more seriously a tendency to be scientifically exact or materialistic himself). However, in comparison with his whole work, those flaws are, in my judgment, almost negligible. Spengler himself points out that such minor crudenesses are humanly unavoidable in such pioneer work. (Klyce 485)

Decades later, in 1983, Michael D’Orso still gives the same comment in his article “Man Out of Time: Kerouac, Spengler, and the ‘Faustian Soul’”: “When Spengler's two-volume analysis was published in 1926, it was understandably attacked by critics for its proliferation of questionable or unsupported statements; nonetheless, the plausibility of Spengler's broadest observations made *The Decline of the West* a widely read and much discussed work.” (D’Orso 19-20) D’Orso’s article is more recent than the reviews that were published immediately after the release of *The Decline of the West*, but it still states the same general comment as Spengler’s contemporary critics. This observation supports my assumption that Spengler’s prophecy of the decline of the West still applies – and appeals – to our contemporary Western Civilization.

3.2.1 In Europe

Since the English translation of Spengler’s philosophy was not published until 1926, it is logical that earlier reviews of the work are only to be found in Europe. Three countries that are relevant to this study are Germany, since that is the author’s place of origin, France, since Fitzgerald often went there on vacation and even lived there for a while, and England because

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21 i.e. the English translation of *The Decline of the West*.
22 I am aware that D’Orso’s text already dates three decades back, but I feel Spengler’s theory is still present and I hope further research on the recent reception of his philosophy will follow.
it knew a wide and active circle of critics, who reacted to many contemporary events and movements\textsuperscript{23}.

The main critic that should be mentioned when touching upon the land of origin of *The Decline of the West*, is Hermann Georg Scheffauer. It is known that he had contact with H.L. Mencken, one of Fitzgerald’s friends, which leads to the hypothesis that Fitzgerald came across Spengler’s ideas via Mencken before the translation (Rodgers 249-250).

Where France is concerned, there were already articles on Spengler appearing as early as 1920 in *La Nouvelle Revue française*. After the war, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald moved to Paris because they “perceived Europe as the only escape from an America that no longer met their expectations” (Bouzonviller 262). They fled the USA out of disillusionment after World War I and went to settle in the capital of France. During the time they lived there, Fitzgerald might have picked up on the French language and it is thus likely that he read articles on Spengler, which were published in the years immediately following the publication of *The Decline of the West*.

In England, the most striking reaction to Spengler’s philosophy came from the vorticist camp, with Wyndham Lewis’s violent attack on *The Decline of the West* in his *Time and Western Man*\textsuperscript{24} (Frye 7-8). Lewis’s response shows that Spengler’s ideas indeed penetrated the intellectual circles as well. For a more elaborate discussion of this reaction, I am again referring to Frye.

Stating that Fitzgerald might have learned about Spengler’s theory through these European sources is of course speculative. However, it is highly likely that the American writer had heard about Spengler’s ideas before the translation was published.

\textsuperscript{23} Think for example of the “manifesto-craze” (Puchner 50) of the beginning of the twentieth century.

\textsuperscript{24} Lewis’s book was published in 1927, one year after the English translation of *The Decline of the West* was published.
3.2.2 In the USA

Reviews of Spengler’s work in the USA seem much more detailed than the general comments formulated by European critics.

The first American review I could find of Spengler’s philosophy is one by Klyce in 1926, four years after Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned* was published. Klyce reviews the English translation by Charles Francis Atkinson, published in the same year. He sides with Spengler in saying that *The Decline of the West* “is one of the few great books of recent times. It shows by mountains of facts that our Occidental civilization is materialistic, or scientifically irreligious, and hence is dying – if not already practically dead.” (Klyce 482) Klyce too believes that Western Civilization is in decline. From the formulation “our Occidental civilization”, it becomes clear that Klyce sees the USA as part of the Western Civilization Spengler describes. Further on, Klyce mentions that Spengler’s book was immediately picked up on by his German contemporaries and critically acclaimed by critics throughout Europe (Klyce 482). Klyce assumes this to be the result of European readers “starting to repudiate the scientific materialism which led to the World War, and are being reborn into a sound and youthful religion or culture. It is the first widespread gleam of light and hope I have been able to catch since agnostic and materialistic science got the world into war.” (Klyce 482) Thus, Klyce too interprets Western materialism as a trigger for the War. However, in contrast to Spengler, Klyce observes a glimmer of hope. He expects the people of the Western Civilization to be “reborn into a sound and youthful religion or culture”. Klyce also makes his own prediction in saying:

No man can reliably predict when, or just how, the tide will turn. If enough of us follow the dead authorities, especially in orthodox physics and mathematics and biology (and their echoes in shallow cynical novels and plays), we shall disintegrate pretty much as Rome did. As always before, it depends upon each individual’s choice
and character. The materialist’s character at bottom is degenerate – as Spengler irrefutably and convincingly shows. (Klyce 486-487)

As Klyce mentions, Spengler sees materialism as a great threat to Western Civilization. In the final chapter therefore, I want to focus on materialism as a cause of the decline of American culture via the characters of Anthony and Gloria Patch in Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned*.

A second American critic who commented on Spengler’s philosophy at the time of the English translation, is Howard Becker. His response to the philosophy is interesting because he calls the “tremendous popularity” of *The Decline of the West* strange, since it was published “in the lean years just after the war” (Becker 458). I think this is not strange at all, since the title of Spengler’s philosophy has often been misinterpreted (cf. Chapter One). Many readers indeed had the wrong idea when they started to read Spengler’s work.

Another American remark on Spengler’s work I want to mention here is Stuart Hughes’ 1952 book *Oswald Spengler*, in which he attacks Spengler’s work for not being scientific enough. Despite this general criticism, Hughes also accepts the greatness of Spengler’s work:

> [I]t is somewhere between literature and prophecy that *the Decline* has made its most telling contribution. As imaginative literature, if not as history in the strict sense, *The Decline of the West* offers the nearest thing we have to a key to our times. It formulates more comprehensively than any other single book the modern malaise that so many feel and so few can express (qtd. in D’Orso 29).

If critics seem hard on Spengler, since he could not possibly work out every area of expertise he touches upon, they also suggest that his general thesis seems to be correct. Western Civilization is in decline, and precision concerning every single area of expertise will not prevent this from happening.
A last American source on Spengler I want to mention here, is the abridged English edition of The Decline of the West, published in 1962. In his introduction to this edition Arthur Helps gives some comments on Spengler’s work. He notices for example “a certain ‘wheel wobble’ in the last chapters of the Decline, evidence of the stress between optimism and pessimism, faith and spleen, always present in Spengler, and also perhaps of haste to get his task finished” (Helps xviii). Reaching the end of his first volume, Spengler was very eager to finish his massive work and he might not have paid as much attention to the last few chapters as he did at the start of the book. ²⁵ Aside from this remark, Helps also observes that Caesarism is Spengler’s end-product, which causes him to fall victim to dogmatism: “Events must follow prescribed phases of cultures seen from the Spenglerian standpoint.” (Helps xix) It seems that Spengler does not believe a Culture can evolve in any other way than according to the cycle he observes throughout history. As he sees it, every single Culture is inevitably doomed to follow the exact same sequence.

As becomes clear from this entire chapter on Spengler’s philosophy, his ideas were widely discussed, from Europe to America, and continue to be of value up to this very day. In the words of Northrop Frye:

What seems to me most impressive about Spengler is the fact that everybody does accept his main thesis in practice, whatever they think or say they accept. Everybody thinks in terms of a ‘Western’ culture to which Europeans and Americans belong; everybody thinks of that culture as old, not young; everybody realizes that its most striking parallels are with the Roman period of Classical culture; [...] The decline, or aging, of the West is as much a part of our mental outlook today as the electron or the dinosaur, and in that sense we are all Spenglerians. (Frye 6-7)

²⁵ Helps is discussing volume I only here.
When observing Western Civilization in its current state, it must be concluded that Spengler’s prophecy has not yet been fulfilled. Western Culture is still alive, but it is in its final stage and as a Civilization doomed to decay. Thus, it might be that by the end of this century [i.e. the twenty-first] Western Civilization, like Classical, Mayan, Egyptian and all the other preceding Civilizations, will be no more.

4 Chapter 3: Influences from Real Life

4.1 Fitzgerald, American Spenglerian

Oswald Spengler has been of great intellectual influence on a global scale. Ever since the publication of the first volume of his major work, *The Decline of the West*, in 1918 there have been several followers of what has come to be called ‘Spenglerism’. By this is meant the idea that cultures grow and decay like living organisms. In his philosophy, Spengler has prophesied the decline of Western Civilization. As explained in the introduction of this thesis, I want to show how F. Scott Fitzgerald expresses similar ideas in his second novel *The Beautiful and Damned*. I believe the novel’s main characters, Anthony and Gloria Patch, can be seen as representing the West, as they too decline, due to materialism and their extravagance.

The title of this chapter suggests that Fitzgerald can be categorized as a Spenglerian. As Harry Salpeter reports, Fitzgerald has described himself as an American Spenglerian at a certain point in his career (Salpeter 86). This statement about himself was also picked up on by Lehan and other critics, who have found influences of Spengler’s thinking in the later work of the American author. The reason why I believe Fitzgerald could already be called a Spenglerian before that time is that certain themes in the American author’s work can be linked to Spengler’s ideas. That Fitzgerald called himself an ‘American’ Spenglerian, might be because he was aware of Spengler’s ideas, but he applied them to his own material from an
American point of view. I like to compare these two authors in the light of the First World War. Spengler, as a German, and Fitzgerald, as an American, might be seen as opponents in the context of the War. Still, the fact that the Jazz Age author incorporates themes in his second novel that are similar to Spengler’s thinking rouses the suspicion of a certain like-mindedness between American and European thinkers. However, where my argument should be nuanced, is in the fact that Fitzgerald does not express exactly the same ideas as Spengler. He has an American point of view when writing about the cultural pessimism of the times.

4.1.1 How Fitzgerald came across Spengler’s ideas before actually reading *The Decline of the West*

As mentioned before, I want to elaborate on Lehan’s article, since I suspect that Fitzgerald had already come across some of Spengler’s ideas before starting on *The Great Gatsby*. The themes of his second novel *The Beautiful and Damned* seem to back that up. The question is then, how Fitzgerald might have come across Spengler’s ideas if he did not read *The Decline of the West* before the summer of 1924.

As Lehan mentions in his article, Spengler’s ideas were very much present from the moment the first volume of his work was published in 1918:

> When Spengler's ideas appeared in Germany, they created a sensation, and his general theory of the West was debated in intellectual circles in both America and Europe. Spengler's books were reviewed widely with long summary statements, and he was very much in the air, especially in Europe, that summer of 1924 when Fitzgerald, living in France, maintains that he read Spengler while working on *The Great Gatsby*. (Lehan 137)

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26 This will be demonstrated in Chapter Four of this thesis.
As can be deduced from this citation, Spengler’s theory was widely discussed both in America and Europe, which demonstrates that his ideas were already detectable in America before the English translation of *The Decline of the West* came out. Since that translation of Spengler’s work was not published until 1926 and Fitzgerald could not read German (Salpeter 87), it is impossible that he read the whole of *The Decline of the West* the year he was writing *The Great Gatsby*. As Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda often went to France on vacation and even lived in Paris for a while, one might assume that he understood enough of the French language to read Spengler’s work in the French translation, but then again, that translation was published only in 1948. Therefore, it must be concluded that Fitzgerald cannot possibly have read Spengler’s work himself at that time. What is more likely is that Fitzgerald read summaries and reviews of *The Decline of the West* and integrated Spengler’s themes from those sources rather than from *The Decline* itself. This idea leads to the assumption that Fitzgerald found a like-minded intellectual in Spengler through mediation of acquaintances that had come across the German’s ideas, or via reviews and articles on *The Decline of the West*. Fitzgerald expresses analogous themes in his novel and lets his characters express the same doubts and issues that Spengler touches upon in his philosophy. This leads to the assumption that people in the USA as well as in Europe were equally disappointed and disillusioned by the outcome of the War. Even though Fitzgerald and Spengler find themselves in different ‘camps’, respectively that of the victors and of the losers of the War, both sides seem to be lost in this ‘new world’ that tries to rebuild itself after the destruction and chaos caused by the horrifying event.

In his article, Lehan sums up the sources on which he bases his thesis of Spengler’s influence on Fitzgerald. He explains that he has found “nine articles or review-essays in English on Spengler”, all published between 1922 and “the summer of 1924, exactly the time that Fitzgerald tells Perkins he was reading Spengler” (Lehan 137). Since *The Beautiful and
**Damned** was published in 1922, the conclusion might be that Fitzgerald largely drew on Spengler’s ideas from what was up in the air. It is more likely that he heard of Spengler’s philosophy in discussions that were going on in the literary world, rather than that he had actually read anything on or by Spengler himself before starting on *The Beautiful and Damned*. Lehan comes to the same conclusion:

> It would also be hard to believe that Fitzgerald did not pick up a good deal about Spengler from his discussions with Americans like Edmund Wilson and from his contact with European intellectuals while he was on the Continent writing *The Great Gatsby*. In any event, if Fitzgerald did not get his introduction to Spengler firsthand, he had ample opportunity to get it secondhand, and it is Fitzgerald himself who connects Gatsby with Spengler. (Lehan 155)

If this was the case for the period of *The Great Gatsby*, then I believe Fitzgerald may have come across Spengler’s ideas earlier on as well. From the moment the first volume of *The Decline of the West* was published, the ideas were freely debatable and it is possible – and even very plausible – that Fitzgerald discussed Spengler’s themes with his fellow intellectuals.

### 4.1.2 ‘Spenglerism’ reflected in Fitzgerald’s characters

In his contribution to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Scott Donaldson draws up a list of the great thinkers that seem to have influenced Fitzgerald’s work, among others Marx, Nietzsche and, “most influential of all”, Spengler (Donaldson, *DLB* 15). Donaldson mentions that Fitzgerald foresaw “the collapse of capitalism and the democratic institutions of western nations” (Donaldson, *DLB* 15) and I believe this is exactly why he lets his characters lead such a wild and unrestrained life. They want to explore the limits of this rapid world and break the rules of society. This they do by losing themselves in excessive drinking and
partying, while squandering the money they never had to work for anyway. In a way, Fitzgerald is reproaching his characters, and at the same time warning his readers not to do the same. If his characters would have had to work for their money, they would not waste it like they are doing now. Anthony and Gloria Patch realise that they have to pay more attention to their expenses, but they are so used to not having to care that they always forget and perpetually find themselves in debt.

In the same contribution, Donaldson mentions how Fitzgerald himself touches upon Spengler’s influence on his own work. He explains in “Early Success” how his pessimistic themes did not come entirely from Spengler’s Decline of the West: ‘All the stories that came into my head had a touch of disaster in them – the lovely young creatures in my novels went to ruin, the diamond mountains of my short stories blew up, my millionaires were as doomed as Thomas Hardy’s peasants.’” (Donaldson, DLB 15-16) From his claim that his pessimistic themes did not come “entirely” from Spengler, it can be derived that Fitzgerald admits that many of them do. In generalizing all of his stories and characters – “the lovely young creatures” – he confirms the possibility that Anthony and Gloria Patch from The Beautiful and Damned derive from a Spenglerian kind of pessimism as well.

That Fitzgerald had not read anything of Spengler’s work before starting The Beautiful and Damned only pushes me more to find excerpts from the novel that demonstrate that Spengler’s ideas are nonetheless present in it. My suspicion regarding this is fortified by multiple literary critics, among others again Donaldson, who mentions the pessimism in The Beautiful and Damned in his biography of Fitzgerald and Hemingway:

Written under the influence of H.L. Mencken [an American journalist and writer], The Beautiful and Damned is a dark and serious novel that portrays the decline and fall of Anthony and Gloria Patch, a hedonistic young couple obviously modelled after the

27 An article he published in his collection of essays, bundled as “The Crack-Up” (1945).
Fitzgeralds themselves. A number of critics, expecting less weighty fare, chose to ignore its pessimistic message. (Donaldson, FH 152)

That other critics “chose to ignore the pessimistic message” of *The Beautiful and Damned* only enforces my own interest in the matter. Where they avoided it, I will take on the pessimism in Fitzgerald’s second novel directly and put it in relation to Spengler’s highly pessimistic philosophy.

4.2  World War I

4.2.1  Oswald Spengler and the War

At the beginning of the first volume of his work, Spengler explains his reasons for starting *The Decline of the West*:

In 1911, I proposed to myself to put together some broad considerations on the political phenomena of the day and their possible developments. At that time the World-War appeared to me both as imminent and also as the inevitable outward manifestation of the historical crisis, and my endeavour was to comprehend it from an examination of the spirit of the preceding centuries — not years. (*DW, Vol. I* 46)

In this statement, Spengler makes clear that in his work, he wanted to point out “the historical crisis” culminating from past events. By this he means the dawning decline of Western Civilization. As he explains, Spengler wanted to come to an understanding of the source of this “historical crisis” through an examination of the “preceding centuries” – with their own, since long extinct, Civilizations. From his research Spengler deduced the following:

Thereafter I saw the present — the approaching World-War — in a quite other light. It was no longer a momentary constellation of casual facts due to national sentiments, personal influences, or economic tendencies endowed with an appearance of unity and
necessity by some historian’s scheme of political or social cause-and-effect, but the
type of a historical change of phase occurring within a great historical organism of
definable compass at the point preordained for it hundreds of years ago. \((DW, \text{Vol. I} ~47)\)

To Spengler, it is clear that every event of the present is determined by what happened
in the past. The evolution of Western Civilization points towards self-destruction – like the
preceding grand Civilizations too decayed, e.g. that of the Mayans \((DW, \text{Vol. I, Chapter VI})\) or
the Egyptian period of the great pharaohs \((DW, \text{Vol. II, Chapter IV})\).

Concerning the historical event of the First World War in particular, Spengler believed
Germany would win the War (cf. Chapter one). He stated that “Germany [was] destined, as
the last nation of the West, to crown the mighty edifice” \((DW, \text{Vol. II} ~109)\). From this, it
becomes clear that Spengler believed Germany would predominate. Arthur Helps confirms
this in his Preface to the Abridged Edition of the English translation of The Decline of the
West, in which he says that “Spengler, unfortunately, was obsessed by politics, and his
political views were progressively darkened by the frustration of his hopes. […] [H]e foresaw
war and hoped for an imperial future for a victorious Germany, which he feared might
deteriorate like Rome after the Punic Wars” (Helps xv). At the outset of the War, Spengler
was clearly not yet the pessimist he turned out to become in his philosophy.

Although Spengler makes clear that he expects Germany to become a world leader, he
never uses the War as a theme in his work. He does allude to it at times, but mostly focuses on
history that dates further back, like for example the Punic Wars and the destruction of Mayan
culture \((DW, \text{Vol. I, Chapter 6})\). The fact that he does not elaborate on the War is peculiar,
since the War could be seen as proof for his assertion that Western Civilization is declining.
The problem is that he is rooting for one Western power – Germany – in particular, which
causes him to lose sight of the more general “Western Civilization” he is discussing in his
work. This realization consequently makes the objectivity of his work questionable. Therefore, I do not agree with Helmut Werner’s\textsuperscript{28} celebration of Spengler’s “incomparably objective historical perception and […] his genius for historical empathy.” (Werner xxviii) Since Spengler is openly in favour of a War won by the Germans, I would not dare to say that he is objective. It might have been his intention to be so, but it is more likely that he was too subjective concerning other historical events and issues as well.

4.2.2 \textit{The Beautiful and Damned} and the War

In Fitzgerald’s case, the War is mentioned explicitly in \textit{The Beautiful and Damned}. The third part (“Book 3”) of the novel tells the story of Anthony Patch’s enlistment in the army. Henry Dan Piper explains in his critical portrait of Fitzgerald that “[T]he Beautiful and Damned was intended to be a sort of latter-day \textit{Vanity Fair}, a moral commentary on certain aspects of postwar American society.” (Piper 88) As mentioned before, the disorderly lives of Fitzgerald’s characters seem to be a way of reacting against society, which tries to heal and build up a new world after the devastating experience of the War. Their lack of norms and rules, which is obvious in their refusal to work to earn a living, shows that they do not want to yield to a strict frame of quiet order. This would only give them time to think about their lives and the fact that they are growing old, which is exactly what they are eager to avoid and ignore.

The disillusionment that resulted from the War is reflected in the ending of the novel. After Anthony and Gloria have finally managed to get hold of his grandfather’s inheritance, Anthony, who has just gotten back from the military camp, does no longer seem to care about the money:

\textsuperscript{28} editor of the German abridged edition
Anthony Patch, sitting near the rail and looking out at the sea, was not thinking of his money, for he had seldom in his life been really preoccupied with material vainglory, nor of Edward Shuttleworth [his grandfather’s assistant, who apparently committed suicide after losing the money (BD 363)], for it is best to look on the sunny side of these things. No—he was concerned with a series of reminiscences, much as a general might look back upon a successful campaign and analyse his victories. He was thinking of the hardships, the insufferable tribulations he had gone through. They had tried to penalize him for the mistakes of his youth. He had been exposed to ruthless misery, his very craving for romance had been punished, his friends had deserted him—even Gloria had turned against him. He had been alone, alone—facing it all. (BD 363-364)

From this excerpt, it becomes clear that Anthony Patch believes that the prolonged period he and his wife had to endure without the money from his grandfather’s inheritance, took everything from him. He is exhausted and does not seem able to enjoy the money now that they finally have it. He has become completely impassive and does not respond in the way that one might expect from him, since he was so eager to get the inheritance from the very beginning of the novel. This feeling, that he has had to endure the obstacles all by himself, that his friends and wife have let him down, can be linked to his idea that he has served his country well, even though he never actually went to Europe to fight the enemy. He never left camp 29. These events remind us of the author’s own actions during the war. Fitzgerald also served in the Infantry and never actually went to Europe before the War was over. He met his wife Zelda one night when he was allowed to leave camp (Barks 6).

29 Except to go to the village nearby to cheat on his wife.
It is ironic\footnote{Fitzgerald uses the tool of irony multiple times throughout the novel. Brian Way says that “[i]n Fitzgerald […] the lack of timeliness, of conviction, and above all of relevance to the action of the novel, make [irony] seem silly and rather offensive” (Way 66). I do not agree that it is silly, since irony is always inserted for a purpose, so Fitzgerald must have had his reasons for using it at those particular moments in the novel. The fact that it is – or can be – at times offensive is in my view part of the instrument of irony in itself.} that Fitzgerald at the end of the novel mentions Anthony Patch was “never really preoccupied with material vainglory”, since that must be the only aspect of materialism Anthony indeed does not care about. The couple’s entire life revolves around being rich and not having to mind what they are spending, but it is true that Anthony never had the intention of boasting about his wealth.

Concerning the rest of the novel, the War is scarcely mentioned. Brian Way states in his book \textit{F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Art of Social Fiction}, that in “Echoes of the Jazz Age” “[F]itzgerald was concerned […] to evoke the atmosphere of the postwar decade” (Way 15). This statement envelops Fitzgerald’s other work as well. It is demonstrated in \textit{The Beautiful and Damned}, for example in a conversation between Anthony and Joseph Bloeckman\footnote{head of Films par Excellence. He too was interested in Gloria before she chose Anthony.}, where Fitzgerald sketches the situation of the contemporary world: “[A]nd now the three [Anthony, Gloria and Bloeckman] sat like overoiled machines, without conflict, without fear, without elation, heavily enamelled little figures secure beyond enjoyment in a world where death and war, dull emotion and noble savagery were covering a continent with the smoke of terror.” (\textit{BD} 177) They are “secure beyond enjoyment,” which can be interpreted as that they are bored because everything – i.e. the War – is happening far away, across the ocean in Europe. Throughout the book, Fitzgerald stresses that the rich do not realise – or maybe more likely: do not care about – the problems of the world. Almost every mention of the War is linked to the egoistic point of view of Anthony and Gloria Patch. An example:

They discussed with their friends the stupendous problem of their future. Dick and Maury would sit with them agreeing solemnly, almost thoughtfully, as Anthony ran through his list of what they ‘ought’ to do, and where they ‘ought’ to live. ‘I'd like to
take Gloria abroad,’ he complained, ‘except for this damn war—and next to that I'd sort of like to have a place in the country, somewhere near New York, of course, where I could write—or whatever I decide to do.’ (BD 143)

Anthony wants to take Gloria abroad and blames the war for not being able to. He does not consider the simple fact that their funds do not cover such outbursts as going to live abroad. All their life they are awaiting the inheritance, meanwhile planning what they will do when they finally get the money. They do not realise that their plans never actually get specific. They never find, or rather: never look for, a way to get a more stable income.\(^{32}\)

As Way mentions, Fitzgerald combines the futility of the War with the idiocy of materialism\(^{33}\):

[Fitzgerald] brought social changes which had had, up to that time, only an unacknowledged, furtive or shamefaced existence, within the orbit of his contemporaries’ everyday consciousness. He made the unsettling effect of the War clearer to them; he taught them to take a flippant and relaxed view of the decaying puritan restraints on drinking and petting in automobiles; he inspired them with contempt for the material worries of the businessman. (Way 10)

The aversion towards extravagance and “the material worries” Way mentions here are detectable in *The Beautiful and Damned*, for example in the figure of Old Adam Patch, who is a reformer. He is a supporter of the Prohibition and disapproves of the decadent lifestyle his grandson has adopted. Thus, Fitzgerald lets his characters indulge in a wasteful way of life and at the same time draws the readers’ attention to the situation in the real world outside of the novel.

\(^{32}\) Anthony for example does not seem able to keep a job, mostly due to a lack of interest.

\(^{33}\) This egoism and the futility of the behaviour of Fitzgerald’s characters can be linked to Spengler’s statement that Western Civilization is “aimless” (*DW Vol. 21*), which I will discuss further on, in the fourth chapter of this thesis.
4.2.3 Similar Reactions to the Disillusionment Resulting from the Great War

Spengler and Fitzgerald come together in a certain way, concerning the influence of the First World War on their works. As I explained earlier on in this chapter, Spengler and Fitzgerald, though representatives of opposite camps during the War, can be seen to express like-minded ideas in their works. It might not be as much a case of influence of one author on the other, as rather a similar reaction to the state of the world after the end of World War I. Both the losing and the winning camp felt lost after the traumatic experience of the War and needed to reassert their place in a changed – and ever-changing – world. The similarity can be summarised in the following citation from *The Beautiful and Damned*:

> Here surely the victory had come in time, the climax had been scheduled with the uttermost celestial foresight. The great rich nation had made triumphant war, suffered enough for poignancy but not enough for bitterness—hence the carnival, the feasting, the triumph. Under these bright lights glittered the faces of peoples whose glory had long since passed away, whose very civilizations were dead – men whose ancestors had heard the news of victory in Babylon, in Nineveh, in Bagdad, in Tyre, a hundred generations before; men whose ancestors had seen a flower-decked, slave-adorned cortege drift with its wake of captives down the avenues of Imperial Rome… *(BD 289)*

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In this excerpt, Fitzgerald connects contemporary society and its events with what happened to preceding Civilizations. Here he is very near to Spengler’s philosophy, which states that “[e]very Culture passes through the age-phases of the individual man. Each has its childhood, youth, manhood and old age” *(DW 107)*. Fitzgerald points out that what is happening now, the decay of society – and Western Civilization on a larger scale – is an echo of what has happened to multiple Cultures before ours.

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34 It must be kept in mind here, that “the great rich nation” that has “made triumphant war” is the USA, in stark contrast to what Spengler was expecting, namely the victory of the German side.
Chapter 4: Spenglerian Themes in *The Beautiful and Damned*

The last chapter of this thesis will provide an analysis of the Spenglerian themes I see recurring in Fitzgerald’s novel *The Beautiful and Damned*. By pointing out those passages in *The Beautiful and Damned* that are full of the pessimism that Spengler expresses in his general thesis of *The Decline of the West*, I want to point out that Fitzgerald had a mind-set that was similar to Spengler’s. Both responded to the state of their contemporary culture and society.

This chapter consists of two main themes: failure and cultural pessimism. It is not the case that Spengler entitled some of the chapters in *The Decline of the West* with these terms. They are simply a summary of the line of thought I see returning in Fitzgerald’s novel that can be linked to Spengler’s ideas. In this final part of my thesis, I am linking these two themes to the authors’ personal lives. I believe there are striking similarities to be found between Fitzgerald’s personal life and that of his characters. In Spengler’s case, I see multiple reasons for connecting aspects of his writing process to the ideas he expresses in his philosophy as well as a possibility to connect his thinking to the state of mind of Fitzgerald’s characters. The autobiographical aspects in the two works reflect the contemporary context of the culture and civilization they were both a part of.

5.1 Failure

The first theme of this chapter is entitled “failure” as an umbrella term for the drives and motives of the two authors.

Where Spengler is concerned, I will briefly touch upon his writing process of *The Decline of the West* because apparently he was not content with the result when the first volume was published in 1918 (Helps xv). In Fitzgerald’s case I will look for events in his
personal life that can be connected with failure and that are reflected in his second novel. The third part of this section then is concerned with Fitzgerald’s characters in *The Beautiful and Damned*. Throughout the novel Anthony and Gloria Patch come to realise that their youth is fading away. They are struck by the insight that they have not accomplished anything in their lives, but that age is ruthlessly catching up on them.

5.1.1 Spengler

The writing of *The Decline of the West* meant a great burden for Spengler. On the one hand, he wanted to contribute something to society. He wanted his work to serve the German nation (Boterman 62) and felt that, since he could not actively take part in the war as a soldier, he might be able to lead the German people out of the cultural crisis he had begun to observe since 1911. On the other hand, he worked on his philosophy non-stop for over seven years, which afterwards gave him the feeling that he had missed out on his life.

After the first volume was published in 1918, Spengler grew more and more discontent with his work and started to revise it. In the preface to the revised edition of *The Decline of the West*, which was published in 1922, Spengler explains that he felt the need to revise his work because he had the feeling he did not formulate his ideas properly (Spengler, Preface Rev. Ed. xxiv). After having revised them, he was quite confident about his work, the ideas being unique. “Let no one expect to find everything set forth here,” he says. “It is but one side of what I see before me, a new outlook on history and the philosophy of destiny – the first indeed of its kind.” (Spengler, Preface Rev. Ed. xxiv) He warns his readers that not everything expressed in *The Decline of the West* is developed into detail. He is right in stating that his work is the first of its kind. It is an enormous account of the author’s very broad

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35 due to physical weakness, cf. Chapter One
36 After the death of his mother in 1911, Spengler moved to Munich and suffered from a depression, which led him to believe that German culture was failing (Boterman 14 and 21).
37 i.e. considering the first volume only, the second appeared another four years later, in 1922.
38 Emphasis Spengler’s
philosophical view of human history. This second edition made him proud of what he had accomplished: “[T]hat which has at last (and to my own astonishment) taken shape in my hands I am able to regard and, despite the misery and disgust of these years, proud to call a German philosophy.” (Spengler, Preface Rev. Ed. xxv) As he says, he is proud of what he has accomplished, but at the same time he also touches upon the downside of his working process, namely “the misery and disgust” of the years he has been working on The Decline of the West. The fact that he explicitly states that it is a “German philosophy” can be linked to his intention for The Decline of the West to serve as a guide book for the German people. Spengler wanted to adopt the role of a Messiah (Boterman 21) and lead the German people out of their misery.

Even though Spengler was very much pleased with his work after having revised it, when looking back on the whole process and on his life in general, he realised that he had actually missed out on his life. He was so focussed on finishing his massive philosophy that he almost forgot to enjoy life. As Helps observes, “looking back on his life, [Spengler] felt the Decline had cost him dearly in depriving him of marriage and of a more normal existence” (Helps xv). Spengler in a way sacrificed his life to write his magnum opus. The achievement of writing down his philosophy left him personally empty and alone. He had wound up a failure in life itself.

5.1.2 Fitzgerald

In the case of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s life, failure is to be observed in two main areas: firstly, in his family life, with the figure of his father and secondly, in his satisfaction about his work.

In F. Scott Fitzgerald. An Introduction and Interpretation, Milton Hindus mentions that Fitzgerald believed himself to be a self-made man. He felt the need to assert himself against his father, who was, in the eyes of his son, a failure. Fitzgerald found it humiliating that his father had to be supported by his wife after his retirement:
The legend that his father was a failure is derived primarily from Fitzgerald himself, and although many biographers concur in this, it has perhaps less basis in fact than in Fitzgerald’s own need to think of himself as a completely self-made man who, like his heroes Gatsby and Monroe Stahr, apparently sprang full-blown from his own Platonic, or ideal conception of himself. […] Though his retirement was not voluntary or complete, Mr. Fitzgerald was fortunately able to retire, since his wife had inherited money. (Hindus 3)

Because he thought his father a failure, Fitzgerald felt the need to prove that he himself was capable of achieving something. Unfortunately for him, his later addiction to alcohol and his incapability to save money would result in a reputation quite different from the one he had been trying to build up. One of the critics that pierced the reputation Fitzgerald wanted to uphold is Brian Way. Way does not agree with Fitzgerald’s view of himself: “Even in the most sympathetic versions, [Fitzgerald’s life, and his work based upon it] is a story of weakness and failure, of flawed or uncompleted work, of unrealized ambition, of energies and feelings wastefully expended.” (Way x) Way is right in his – quite harsh – description of Fitzgerald’s accomplishments. An example of the way Fitzgerald never managed to realise his ambitions is that he wanted to join in on the War, but never actually went to Europe to fight: “World War I was the most significant event of Fitzgerald’s generation of writers, and Fitzgerald wanted desperately to be on the front lines to experience combat. When that opportunity was lost to him [he never actually went overseas], this loss formed another sense of personal failure among others that plagued him throughout his life.” (Meredith 136) In this respect, Fitzgerald is a lot like his character Anthony Patch, who also never experienced the war first hand.

Apart from this main comment that Fitzgerald can be seen as a failure, there was another person, much closer to him, who did not always support his attempts at making
something of himself. His wife Zelda was often quite unreasonable when it came to showing an understanding for her husband’s writing process. Piper makes the connection between Zelda’s commentary on her husband’s working process and Gloria Patch’s reprimand of Anthony’s attempts at writing in *The Beautiful and Damned*:

’Work!’ she scoffed. ‘Oh, you sad bird! You bluffer! Work—that means a great arranging of the desk and the lights, a great sharpening of pencils, and ‘Gloria, don't sing!’ and 'Please keep that damn Tana [their servant in Marietta] away from me,' and 'Let me read you my opening sentence,' and 'I won't be through for a long time, Gloria, so don't stay up for me,' and a tremendous consumption of tea or coffee. And that's all. In just about an hour I hear the old pencil stop scratching and look over. You've got out a book and you're 'looking up' something. Then you're reading. Then yawns—then bed and a great tossing about because you're all full of caffeine and can't sleep. Two weeks later the whole performance over again.’ (*BD* 175)

In this scene, Piper justly perceives the voice of Zelda, as she is known to have blamed her husband for trying so many things at once but never actually getting to the end of any of it. He writes: “Instead of writing a novel, Fitzgerald is suddenly writing about himself. And Zelda is close beside him, taunting him and jealously begrudging the time he devotes to his writing instead of to her. Before long, her envy of his disciplined habits of work, as well as of his success, will become an insane compulsion.” (Piper 92) This does indeed very obviously return in *The Beautiful and Damned*. It shows that Fitzgerald – like Anthony Patch – did want to make something of his life, but could not do so as easily as he had expected. Where the author differs from his main character, is in the fact that Fitzgerald’s attempts at writing resulted in a decent oeuvre, whereas Anthony never actually achieves his goal of becoming a writer.

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39 For an elaborate discussion of Fitzgerald’s life and his relationship with Zelda, I am referring to the work of Scott Donaldson and the collection of essays, bundled as *F. Scott Fitzgerald in Context*. 
Aside from failure in his family life, the theme of failure can also be perceived in Fitzgerald’s life as an author. Way discusses the oeuvre of the American author, coming to the conclusion that “[t]he popular success of This Side of Paradise in 1920 tends, even now, to obscure the fact that, as an artist, Scott Fitzgerald made a slow start. His first five books are little better than a succession of failures and false starts.” (Way 49) This statement is linked to my motivation for studying Fitzgerald’s work (cf. Introduction).

More generally, Fitzgerald’s life is nowadays often interpreted as mainly defined by failure. In her introduction to The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald Ruth Prigozy gives a very harsh but accurate state of affairs concerning Fitzgerald’s reputation nowadays:

Fitzgerald finally achieved in death a new, if smaller public life, as our American failure – and the legend of Fitzgerald, the failure – would haunt the second stage of Fitzgerald’s life in popular culture. By the 1950s, not only would the public meet the failed alcoholic writer, but they would be reintroduced to his wife, now a pathetic madwoman whose life had literally gone up in flames. (Prigozy 15)

Almost a century after the first books by F. Scott Fitzgerald were published, it seems that the audience only remembers the author’s dubious reputation. He was indeed a troubled person, but he did dare to draw upon his own problems to create powerful characters such as Jay Gatsby in his most acclaimed novel. Still, even the more obscure characters, like the couple in The Beautiful and Damned, deserve attention, because they too represent their creator, as well as contemporary society in general.

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40 Way’s book dates from 1980. I believe the immediate success of This Side of Paradise is not so well known nowadays, but Way’s citation does fit the point I want to make here because he points out that before The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald had difficulties writing good novels and short stories. He was not a spontaneous writer, but had to work hard to come up with a decent text.
41 The Cambridge Companion to Fitzgerald was published in 2002.
42 Zelda died in a fire in a hospital in 1948 (Donaldson, FH 60).
5.1.3 Characters

The influence of Fitzgerald’s own failure upon his characters in *The Beautiful and Damned* is very clear throughout the novel. Spengler’s mind-set too is present in the events, in that the characters feel they have not accomplished anything in their lives\(^ {43}\). From the moment they realise that they are growing old, they start to panic. As Kirk Curnutt observes in his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Fitzgerald*: “For Fitzgerald, there was simply no climax to a story more cathartic than a sudden yearning for the lost paradise of youth.”

(Curnutt 36) The Patches have been wasting time waiting for the inheritance of Anthony’s grandfather and neither Anthony nor Gloria has ever made actual attempts at finding a job to ensure a stable income for their family. Although Gloria has tried to go into the movies, that was more an attempt at getting a confirmation that she is still beautiful, rather than the intention of finding a job in order to bring in money. After she is turned down for the role of the young woman, but offered the part of a “haughty rich widow” (*BD* 327) – which would have suited her perfectly – she completely breaks down: “‘Oh, my pretty face,’ she whispered, passionately grieving. ‘Oh, my pretty face! Oh, I don't want to live without my pretty face! Oh, what's happened?’ Then she slid toward the mirror and, as in the test, sprawled face downward upon the floor—and lay there sobbing.” (*BD* 328) Gloria cares so much about her looks that she cannot imagine a life without being the most beautiful woman. Curnutt has interpreted Gloria’s desperate clingsing to her youth in a similar way: “Fitzgerald also recognized that the fantasy of endless youth must inevitably confront the reality of aging. In his novels in particular, flappers typically enjoy an extended adolescence only to discover suddenly that their decadent, indulgent fun has irreparably weathered them.” (Curnutt 40) It is due to their decadent lifestyle that Anthony and Gloria do not realise the inevitability of their aging. They so love to be young that they do not think for a moment to secure their future.

\(^ {43}\) He calls Western Civilization “aimless”, cf. further on in this chapter.
When Anthony’s grandfather disinherits his grandson because of his hedonistic lifestyle, they finally awake to real life.

The realization that they are growing older, decaying as they see it, can be linked to Spengler’s cycle of the evolution of a Culture. Western Civilization is in its final phase and the decay of American culture in particular is reflected in the characters of Anthony and Gloria Patch. Curnutt has a similar interpretation. He writes:

Far from an aberration then, Fitzgerald’s age consciousness was the product of a culture in which aging became synonymous with deterioration and degeneration. […]

*The Beautiful and Damned* might well be subtitled ‘Countdown to Thirty,’ for Anthony and Gloria so dread the onslaught of middle age that their descent into decadence seems an effort to squander their youth before time can claim it. (Curnutt 45)

I follow this line of thought, linked to Spengler’s philosophy. The realization that life will at one point come to an end resulted in the Jazz Age in a decadent and hedonistic lifestyle. Anthony and Gloria feel they need to make the best of their lives now that they are still young and lively.

In the character of Anthony Patch, Hindus does find a positive element about Fitzgerald’s second novel:

Anthony Patch is gifted with ‘the authority of failure’ much more generously than was his creator. Anthony does very little if anything in the story except wait for his inheritance and, after endless troubles and litigation which leave him only a shadow of himself, he finally succeeds in getting it. But his very detachment from the social order, combined with his native intelligence, make him a shrewd observer and critic of society. (Hindus 28)

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44 The context of the First World War and the disillusionment among the people who had at the beginning such hopeful and patriotic feelings about the event, must also be taken into account here.
Hindus believes that Anthony is indeed a failure, even more so than Fitzgerald himself because he never actually does anything, whereas Fitzgerald did manage to earn a living with his reading material. In the novel, Anthony reflects on himself as having “inherited only the vast tradition of human failure – that, and the sense of death” (BD 181). What interests Hindus about Anthony Patch is that he is a “shrewd observer and critic of society”. Through his characters (another example being Maury Noble) Fitzgerald shows his readers the glamour of the Jazz Age, as well as that he comments on the quirks of contemporary society.

5.2 Cultural Pessimism

The major Spenglerian theme that can be perceived in Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned* is that of cultural pessimism. As I have touched upon before, the deterioration of Anthony and Gloria Patch can be seen as a confirmation of Spengler’s prophecy that Western Civilization is declining. Due to materialism and their decadent, hedonistic lifestyle, Anthony and Gloria completely lose themselves in the adventure of their youth without once stopping to think about possible ways to secure their future. As James West III demonstrates in his contribution to the *Cambridge Companion to Fitzgerald*, the characters in *The Beautiful and Damned* evolve “from young adulthood to a kind of early senility, brought on by too strong an attachment to money and too great a fondness for alcohol” (West 50). Money and alcohol are the aspects that define the Culture of the West and it are these elements that are ultimately the cause of Anthony and Gloria Patch’s decline. For this reason, I believe the couple can be seen as representing Western Civilization, which is declining due to materialism and consumer culture.
5.2.1 Spengler

Cultural pessimism is one of the major themes in Spengler’s philosophy. Not only does his main thesis about the cycle of a Culture state that it is inevitably doomed to deteriorate and decline as a Civilization, in the final chapters of the second volume of *The Decline of the West*, Spengler also expresses his concern about the rising power of money. The main points of Spengler’s criticism on society that can be projected onto Fitzgerald’s work are his comments about this increasing dependence upon money and the emergence of the cosmopolis. In the chapter “State and History,” Spengler demonstrates how money came to be the most important aspect of Western Civilization. In the following chapter “Philosophy of Politics,” he sums up the preceding chapter in one sentence: “The powers of intellect and money set themselves up against blood and tradition.” (*DW, Vol. II* 449) Where family and tradition used to be most important, the power money seems to have over people has alarmingly increased. This is very clear in Fitzgerald’s second novel, where Anthony does not feel the ambition to make a career in order to earn money himself. He is sure he will receive his grandfather’s inheritance when the man finally dies, which consequently makes him lazy and unfit for the job market when he eventually realises he will have to work to make a living. The tradition of inheriting from your family, i.e. your blood, is thus disrupted and causes Anthony to fall into a state of despair because he was heavily depending on the legacy. His lazy lifestyle, in which he took everything for granted, has never made him feel the need to act for himself, to attempt to actually earn a living. Being rich has made him unaware of the harshness of real life outside of the bubble of New York’s Upper Class.

This observation also fits in with Spengler’s view on value. For Spengler, “Civilization” “connotes the death of a culture and a consequent transformation of values” (Helps xiv). When a Culture evolves into a Civilization, people tend to set other priorities,

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45 as transcending the town and the countryside
46 Spengler observes that people did not come to depend upon money until Roman Caesarism (*DW, Vol. I* 36).
money being the main one in Spengler and Fitzgerald’s time. Spengler ponders on the transition of values that comes with the evolution towards a Civilization: “What is the hallmark of a politic of Civilization today, in contrast to a politic of Culture yesterday? It is, for the Classical rhetoric, and for the Western journalism, both serving that abstract which represents the power of Civilization — money.” (\textit{DW, Vol. I} 34) He is thus very clear in his observation that money is becoming increasingly important. The power of Civilization stems from money and Spengler predicts this will become very problematic. This prediction is proven to be correct in the projection of the philosopher’s ideas upon American culture, and Fitzgerald’s second novel in particular.

Spengler dedicates multiple chapters to the emergence and the influence of money. On the one hand, he is warning his readers against the danger of this growing dependence on coin. One of his main arguments in the second volume of \textit{The Decline of the West} is that the material necessity, which used to be hunger with primitive tribes, has evolved into a terrifying dependence on money (\textit{DW, Vol. II} 163). On the other hand, he is also defending the spending of money as not necessarily decadent. He states that “after all, in a dictatorship of money it is hardly fair to describe the employment of money as a sign of decadence” (\textit{DW, Vol. II} 458). This link between money and decadence is also to be found in the American culture of the Jazz Age.

A Civilization, being the final phase of a Culture, means that that Culture has achieved its summit. In Spengler’s eyes, it cannot develop further and it is from this point onwards doomed to decay. Spengler predicted Western Civilization would come to an end in 2000 (\textit{DW, Vol. I} 16) with the Culture living through its height in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, when “the transition from Culture to Civilization was accomplished” (\textit{DW, Vol. I} 32). The hedonistic lifestyle of the characters in Fitzgerald’s \textit{The Beautiful and Damned} can therefore be explained by a sense of impending doom. They have the feeling that life will not be this great
forever and they are trying to get everything from it now that they are still young and still have the energy to enjoy it. Unfortunately for them, it soon becomes clear that grasping the last straws of their youth does not make them happy. They are panicking as they see age catching up on them, desperately clinging to the memories and echoes of the past carefree and light-hearted years.

Where there is the most money, there seem to appear the largest cities. Spengler already calls the world city a “cosmopolis”47. He claims that “[t]he world-city means cosmopolitanism in place of ‘home’” (DW, Vol. I 33) by which he suggests that people no longer settle to find peace and build themselves a home with their family, but instead move to the places containing the greatest power, i.e. the most money. For the world city too, Spengler makes a gloomy prediction:

This, then, is the conclusion of the city’s history: growing from primitive barter-centre to Culture-city and at last to world-city, it sacrifices first the blood and soul of its creators to the needs of its majestic evolution, and then the last flower of that growth to the spirit of Civilization — and so, doomed, moves on to final self-destruction.

(DW, Vol. II 107)

Spengler does not perceive a positive evolution in the transition from “Culture-city” to “world-city” as the capital of a Civilization. He believes it will all end in inevitable “self-destruction” because people are so absorbed with themselves and their own lives, that they no longer take into account the consequences of their actions and the rapid transformation of their Culture. This prediction seems to come true when reading about the downfall of Anthony and Gloria Patch in The Beautiful and Damned.

One of the consequences of this growing occupation with money is an equally growing egoism. The characters in Fitzgerald’s novel are extremely selfish and only

47 New York City as Fitzgerald depicts it in his work is the cosmopolis that will be discussed here.
concerned about themselves. Spengler observed this as a general trend in contemporary humanity. He describes the West European scheme of history as a Ptolemaic system of history, because “the great Cultures are made to follow orbits round us as the presumed centre of all world-happenings” (DW, Vol. I 18). People think everything revolves around them. This idea is very much present in The Beautiful and Damned, where Gloria Patch thinks everything and everyone’s lives revolve around her. One example of this is the moment when Gloria thinks she might be pregnant. She starts to panic because a child would ruin her body and rob her of her beauty. At the end of the scene she says: “‘You see, […] it isn’t that I’m afraid – of this or anything else. I’m being true to me, you know.’” (BD 170) The fact that she does not want a child because it would ruin her beauty, shows all the more how selfish she is. Nothing means more to her than her looks. A child would mean a future, but she would rather not have one and enjoy her beauty for the few years she still can, than to secure her future by starting a family.

A last and very striking comment on Western Civilization – and indeed on all Cultures – Spengler makes is that he calls it “aimless”. He says that “[t]hese Cultures, sublimated life-essences, grow with the same superb aimlessness as the flowers of the field” (DW, Vol. I 21) and further on, he is even as blunt as to say that “the history of humanity has no meaning whatever” (DW, Vol. II 44). Here, he appears to be contradicting himself in saying that Cultures grow towards no goal, whereas elsewhere he states that a Culture achieves its pinnacle when arriving at the phase of its Civilization. I believe Spengler means to say that since every Culture inevitably evolves into a Civilization, which is then doomed to decay and die out, Civilizations are “aimless” because they all end in the same destination. He does not state that Civilizations cannot add to the world, e.g. their art, architecture, scientific discoveries. He simply wants to point out that every Culture, regardless of its prestige or
fame, is programmed to go down according to the same cycle as every other Culture that ever was and ever will be.

This aimlessness returns in the hedonistic lifestyle of Fitzgerald’s characters, since they live in the moment and do not think about the consequences of their actions and what might happen to them later in life, in the future that they so adeptly try to avoid.

Spengler concludes his chapters on money by saying that “[t]he dictature of money marches on, tending to its material peak, in the Faustian Civilization as in every other.” \((DW, \text{Vol. II 506})\) With this statement, Spengler wants to point out that, since Roman Caesarism, every Culture has ended in the same peak of materialism, which eventually destroyed it. Thus, it should not be seen as surprising that Spengler perceived his own period as the final phase of contemporary Civilization. People were living an unrestrained and hedonistic way of life. And this is exactly what Fitzgerald recorded in his work.

This observation of a certain similarity between Spengler’s recordings of his own time and the American culture in which Fitzgerald’s characters thrive, suggests an analogous state of mind on both sides of the ocean. The German thinker as well as the American author perceived their own culture as spiralling down towards an unfortunate ending. This connection demonstrates how Western Culture can indeed be seen as enveloping both Europe and the United States. Even though the two continents are very different from each other, they are at the same time connected through the destructive culture Western man has adopted as his lifestyle.

5.2.2 Fitzgerald

The major aspect of Spengler’s philosophy that can be used for an interpretation of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s personal life is his issue with money. He turned out to be utterly unable to build

\(^{48}\) “Faustian” Civilization is the term Spengler uses for the Civilization of the West.
up savings. He seemed to be always running out of money, squandering whatever he earned with his stories on alcohol. Thus, the two major themes of *The Beautiful and Damned* also return in the author’s own life.

Piper reports on Fitzgerald’s constant lack of funds when explaining that the writing process of his second novel was delayed multiple times due to the author’s chronic financial worries. It is easy to laugh at these, especially since *This Side of Paradise* was selling well and his price for a magazine story had climbed to $1,000. Nonetheless, Fitzgerald had very real fears. Not only were Zelda and he both spending money like water, but he had no sense at all about business matters. (Piper 84)

Every time he managed to sell a story, Fitzgerald and his wife spent the money as fast as they could, saving nothing for possible unforeseen expenses. The major source for learning about Fitzgerald’s lack of money are his letters, in which he often literally begged his editor to pay him in advance because he was once again short on cash. It stands out that every time he is assuring his friend and editor Maxwell Perkins he will never have to bother him again once his books are selling well, but each time there comes a new letter asking for money (Fitzgerald, *LF* 145-146, 154-155, 160-162 and 273). One example is enough to show how much the author is like his characters:

38 West 59th Street, New York City – December 31, 1920: Dear Mr. Perkins: The bank this afternoon refused to lend me anything on the security of stock I hold – and I have been pacing the floor for an hour trying to decide what to do. Here, with the novel within two weeks of completion, am I with six hundred dollars’ worth of bills and owing Reynolds $650.00 for an advance on a story that I’m utterly unable to write. […] I hoped that at last being square with Scribner’s I could remain so. But I’m at my wit’s end. Isn’t there some way you could regard this as an advance on the new novel
rather than on the Xmas sale which won’t be due me till July? And at the same interest that it costs Scribner’s to borrow? Or could you make it a month’s loan form Scribner’s & Co. with my next ten books as security? I need $1600.00. Anxiously, F. Scott Fitzgerald.” (Fitzgerald, LF 145-146)

He is shamelessly asking Perkins for money, but he never seems to stop to think about the cause of his constant shortage of funds. Like Anthony and Gloria Patch in his second novel, Fitzgerald and Zelda are utterly incapable of saving money and find themselves in constant debt because of it.

One of the main items on which they spent their money, was alcohol. As Hindus observes, “[o]ther people – even the most imperceptive – could see that the Fitzgeralds were headed for disaster but were unable to do anything to help the gifted, tragic pair whose actions they were watching” (Hindus 7). Everyone could see that the couple’s lifestyle would mean their doom, but neither Fitzgerald himself, nor his wife, seemed to care. Still, the fact that the couple in The Beautiful and Damned is so much like the Fitzgeralds, does suggest the author was aware of their issues and even of their cause. Donaldson observes that this wild way of living stemmed from “the great ruling paradox of American life: on the one hand the endless sense of possibility, on the other the lack of any stable identity or place where one belongs” (Donaldson, FH 228). Because of the rapid pace of life, people did not seem able to find their own place in the world and turned to other means as a way of escaping their feelings of insecurity. This links back to Dunne’s observation of Spengler’s society as being an uncertain context that the people live in, since the communities of belief, reason and fear have broken down⁴⁹, leaving them with nothing to fall back on in times of insecurity.

All these elements are clearly returning in The Beautiful and Damned, in the squandering and wastefulness of the characters. In a letter to his wife, written in the summer

⁴⁹ Cf. Chapter Two of this thesis.
of 1930, Fitzgerald even admits their resemblance to the couple in the novel. He writes: “I wish the Beautiful and Damned had been a maturely written book because it was all true. We ruined ourselves – I have never honestly thought we ruined each other”. (qtd. in O’Meara 34)

This quote suggests that he did not fully think about what he was writing during the process of this second novel. Afterwards, he was struck by the similarities that are to be found between the Fitzgeralds and the couple in the book. The statement also expresses a wish for the novel to be better written, and demonstrates how taken aback he is by the destructiveness of his relationship with Zelda.

More than just the title of his second book, “the beautiful and damned” also went on to become an element that defined Fitzgerald in his own reputation (Daniel 14). He is a very autobiographical author and his characters are very often an obvious projection of his own personal life.

5.2.3 Characters

It is therefore not a surprise that the characters of *The Beautiful and Damned* are so much like their author and his wife.

As to the entire Western Civilization, money is very important to the young couple in Fitzgerald’s second novel. Even when they finally start to realise they will not be able to live equally disorderly as they are living their life at the present moment, they still try to keep up appearances. They do not want their wealthy acquaintances to know about their money issues because that would mean that they no longer belong to their circle. In fact, they are outsiders already, since they have to drop certain expenses in order to be able to have food on the table every day. Still, no matter how hard they (seem to) try to save their money, they always end up being broke. A good, and astonishing, example of this is the scene with the squirrel coat Gloria so longs for. In this case, Gloria is the one who realises they cannot afford it, while
Anthony tells her she can have everything she wants. The scene ends in a fight, with each blaming the other for their inability to manage money:

‘And while I was reading [the magazine] I could think of nothing except how I wanted a gray squirrel coat—and how we can't afford one.’ ‘Yes, we can.’ ‘Oh, no.’ ‘Oh, yes! If you want a fur coat you can have one.’ Her voice coming through the dark held an implication of scorn. ‘You mean we can sell another bond?’ ‘If necessary. I don't want you to go without things. We have spent a lot, though, since I've been back.’ ‘Oh, shut up!’ she said in irritation. ‘Why?’ ‘Because I'm sick and tired of hearing you talk about what we've spent or what we've done. You came back two months ago and we've been on some sort of a party practically every night since. We've both wanted to go out, and we've gone. Well, you haven't heard me complain, have you? But all you do is whine, whine, whine. I don't care any more what we do or what becomes of us and at least I'm consistent. But I will not tolerate your complaining and calamity-howling——’

From this example, it is clear that Gloria already does not care anymore about what becomes of them. The fact that Anthony does want her to have the coat is linked to his wish to keep up appearances. After this quarrel, Gloria eventually does not buy the coat – the narrator observes that “gradually it began to stand as a symbol of their growing financial anxiety” (BD 316) – but a few nights later, they end up spending even more than the coat would have cost them (BD 317). Like the Fitzgeral ds in real life, Anthony and Gloria “found themselves as a pair quite unable to save” (BD 305). This fact returns in their choice of home. Once they realise they can no longer afford the house in Marietta as well as Anthony’s apartment in New York, they decide to give up the apartment, but soon find they are not happy in the little house in the country. Thus, they decide to return to the city, where Anthony first tries to regain his old apartment, but it turns out to be above their pay. From then on, they get caught in an ever-
dwinding move of apartments. They keep wandering to ever-cheaper apartments, still further from their social life and deeper into the suburbs. This decline links back to Spengler’s worry about the rise of the cosmopolis. The world city of New York appeals to Fitzgerald’s characters. So much so, that they are blind to the consequences, that their exuberant expenses, which are necessary to fit in with New York’s high society, will eventually seal their fate and ruin them because they have run all out of money.

Anthony and Gloria have engagements almost every night and always drinking is involved. Although they live in New York, “the cultural capital of the nation” as West observes, it is not the great museums and libraries or the concert halls that interest the couple and their circle of friends. Instead, they enjoy themselves at “hotels, bars, cabarets, movie theaters, and retail stores” (West 50). From the tone of West’s statement, it is clear that he does not consider the couple’s occupations to fit in with what is considered to be ‘high culture’. West also seems to suggest that this shallow consumer culture degrades people. They seem more and more attracted to low culture, rather than to invest their time and money in the prestigious artwork and performances that the city offers.

Like F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Anthony and Gloria Patch do not seem able to enjoy themselves without the haze of alcohol. Whereas West observes Gloria’s “deterioration [as] caused by idleness and alcohol” and calls this “one of the least pleasant aspects of the novel” (West 51), I believe it only adds to the novel’s allurement. I also disagree with his saying that “[a]fter marriage she prods Anthony, hoping that he will choose some career or goal that will give structure to both of their lives” (West 51). Gloria does not want Anthony to get a job in order to give structure to their lives. That structure is defined by the social events

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50 Hindus interestingly observes that the only character in the novel who has money, Anthony’s grandfather, no longer has the desire to enjoy it: “One of the cruellest ironies of the social order stressed by Fitzgerald is that the same man who has seventy-five ‘winters on his head’ also possesses, thanks to the $75,000,000 he has accumulated, privileges and prestige enjoyed by few others among us. He alone, who has lost all taste for living, retains the motives that make life worthwhile”. (Hindus 32)

51 Here, the term is not used in Spengler’s meaning.

52 I am taking this opportunity to refer to Clement Greenberg’s highly interesting article “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), in which he discusses the difference in value between (high) culture and Kitsch (low culture).
that they have planned almost every evening and by their habit of excessive drinking, because "like many alcoholics they learn to arrange their days and weeks around the consumption of spirits" (West 55). The most important thing in their life is their money and the fact that they have a reputation among the rich of being a ‘fun’ couple, which they are eager to uphold: “A scattering of younger married people who had been their friends in school or college, as well as a varied assortment of single men, began to think instinctively of them whenever color and excitement were needed, so there was scarcely a day without its phone call, its ‘Wondered what you were doing this evening.’” (BD 189) Their friends admire the couple’s wild lifestyle and they have the idea that they need to invite them in order for their party to be glamorous and remembered.

The couple’s hedonistic lifestyle entirely revolves around the delight of being young. As Hindus observes, this obsession with youth and beauty, with “youth [being] an attribute of beauty, a precondition that must at all costs be met” (Fobes 89), is typical of Fitzgerald’s writing: “In Fitzgerald’s writings, the pathos of age and the sense of reverence due to the aged is constantly outweighed by a realization of its unaesthetic qualities.” (Hindus 32) It is all about beauty and the characters – Gloria in particular – know very well that that characteristic will not last forever. The best example here is Gloria’s attempt to go into the movies. As Fobes interprets her act: “It is only when Gloria attempts to capture her momentary beauty [by going into the movies] that it fades— and fades fast.” (Fobes 90) From the moment the role of the young woman is denied to her, it strikes Gloria that her youth is fading and this throws her into a nervous fit.

The most striking aspect about this fixation on youth in my opinion is the contrast with the figure of Old Adam Patch, who is literally decaying due to old age: “The old man suddenly remembered, but this was made apparent only by a partial falling open of his mouth, displaying rows of gray gums. Eying Anthony with a green and ancient stare he hesitated
between confessing his error and covering it up.” (BD 171) Anthony sees how his grandfather is starting to forget things, where he used to be such a great mind. By depicting Adam Patch as such, Fitzgerald too seems to suggest that growing old is undesirable, even shameful and insulting. It is “disgusting” (Hindus 31) and unfashionable and should be postponed as long as possible. Still, despite all their attempts at preserving their youth, Anthony and Gloria too decay, be it morally, rather than physically as in the case of Old Patch.

Even though his memory starts to wear off, Adam Patch still knows his own morals and strongly despises his grandson’s hedonistic lifestyle. This aversion to Anthony’s wild way of living results in a very tense and complicated relationship between grandson and grandfather. Adam Patch can be seen as representing the civilization (Hindus 28\textsuperscript{53}) and Anthony’s reaction to it is an escaping of the norms and values of that strict society. As a reformer, Adam Patch simply cannot agree with his grandson’s decadent lifestyle and this ultimately causes him to disinherit him. Anthony and Gloria are aware that Anthony’s grandfather does not approve of them, but they do not care and in thinking this way, they are also opposing society. However, at the same time that Fitzgerald is warning his readers for such a decadent way of life, he also disapproves of the reformers. This becomes clear from the fact that he lets Adam Patch fall from grace once the Prohibition is installed. All of a sudden, he is not so popular anymore. Morality quickly disappears when one robs people of their fun.

The fact that his grandfather was always nagging about the need for Anthony to find a job can be linked to the aimlessness Spengler perceived in Western Civilization. Adam Patch thinks his grandson should do something with his life instead of simply hanging around. He does not approve of his way of partying the night away, without ever trying to actually achieve anything. Anthony is aware of this himself. Throughout the novel, there are multiple

\textsuperscript{53} Hindus interprets the character of Anthony Patch as follows: “This character, with its lights and shades, seems to lie wholly in the shadow of his grandfather and his civilization.” (Hindus 28)
scenes wherein he expresses his doubts about his use in the world. At one point he even goes as far as to blame Gloria for the fact that he has not succeeded in doing something with his life. He exclaims: “As a matter of fact I think that if I hadn't met you I would have done something. But you make leisure so subtly attractive—” (BD 175). It is not only Gloria’s fault that he is not able to write or keep a job when he has one. First, he gets a job on Wall Street, which he quits because he thinks his colleagues are silly and he decides he is just not cut out for the job (BD 191). When he later starts to work as a salesman, he again abruptly quits because he does not immediately manage to sell anything (BD 306 ff.). He has no patience. Anthony’s rejection of the job market – and of Wall Street and sales in particular – can be interpreted as a critique on capitalism and money. However, it is my opinion that Anthony is not aware of this. He simply wants to get money the easy way, from his grandfather’s inheritance, and not by having to actually work for it. The interpretation of it being a critique can thus be seen as a suggestion of the author, who does not approve of his characters’ squandering lifestyle and wants to warn his readers for the effects of too much dependence upon money. This existential problem of not knowing what do to with one’s life is what eventually drives Anthony and Gloria to drinking. As West interprets it: “Lack of vocation and purpose for […] Anthony opens the door to a common problem among both writers and the wealthy: alcoholism.” (West 54-55) As the novel proceeds, it becomes ever-clearer that Anthony cannot do without alcohol:

Only for a brief moment every day in the warmth and renewed life of a first high-ball did his mind turn to those opalescent dreams of future pleasure—the mutual heritage of the happy and the damned. But this was only for a little while. As he grew drunker the dreams faded and he became a confused spectre, moving in odd crannies of his own mind, full of unexpected devices, harshly contemptuous at best and reaching sodden and dispirited depths. (BD 315)
Anthony needs alcohol to lift his spirits, but because he cannot stop drinking once he has started, that haze quickly turns into a state of depression, which leads him to drink even more in the hope that it will make him feel better again. It even goes so far that he no longer enjoys the company of his friends. He finds their occupations abhorrent and longs to get away from the circles he used to indulge in himself:

But he hated to be sober. It made him conscious of the people around him, of that air of struggle, of greedy ambition, of hope more sordid than despair, of incessant passage up or down, which in every metropolis is most in evidence through the unstable middle class. Unable to live with the rich he thought that his next choice would have been to live with the very poor. Anything was better than this cup of perspiration and tears. (BD 338)

All of a sudden, the events and behaviour that used to be his repulse him and he hides from his former friends. This is also partly due to the couple’s forced move to a cheaper apartment, which makes that they are no longer close to the bars and theatres they used to visit almost every night.

It is sad to see that the only goal in the young couple’s life is getting hold of the inheritance. They do not plan their future and do not want to think about it because that means they would have to admit their aging. The loss of their youth and beauty is probably more tragic than the main story line of losing the inheritance they so craved.

5.3 Comparison

From this discussion of the major Spenglerian themes in Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned* and from the comparison between the lives of the two authors and the characters, I believe I have pointed out that a Spenglerian reading of Fitzgerald’s early work is a very plausible interpretation. Both authors seem to respond to their current context in a way that
makes clear that the two societies they are part of are filled with a similar atmosphere of doom and despair. When looking at both works from this point of view, it can be said that both the American author and the German philosopher respond to their current situation from a personal-fictional, respectively a cultural-philosophical angle. Where Fitzgerald incorporates his own feelings about the state of Western Civilization in his fictional narrative of the declining couple, Spengler observes history and gives the readers an objective analysis of the evolution and the current state of the Culture of the West.

In depicting the fall of Anthony and Gloria Patch, Fitzgerald is giving an account of the condition of the times, as well as that he is warning his readers for what might happen when one lives life unrestrainedly. He is providing his readers with a view on contemporary society and its decadent, wasteful decline into nothingness. “Without a calling, Fitzgerald tells us, we risk deterioration and ruin. Alcohol and idle pleasure cannot sustain us, nor can wealth. We must have a purpose and vocation to give direction to what we do.” (West 56) Because his own life clearly shimmers through in the events in the novel, the readers realise that what happens to the couple in the book is indeed very likely to happen if one does not have a goal in life. In Spengler’s view then, when this goal is ultimately achieved, there is nothing left but to decline, because after the summit is reached, man – and in extension his Culture – has realized his greatest achievement and from that point onwards can only decay.

6 Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated how a Spenglerian reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned* can shed a new light on the novel. Since many critics have chosen to ignore the dominating pessimistic message that rules the characters’ lives, I believe it to be necessary to concentrate on this depressing atmosphere, which is actually quite hard to ignore.
In the first chapter, I have given an introduction to the two authors, so as to give the readers insight into their lives and the times in which they lived and wrote. I believe this context to be relevant to this study, since both Spengler and Fitzgerald respond to the state of the Civilization they are a part of. According to Donaldson, Fitzgerald was aware of the fact that his own story “paralleled that of the nation” (Donaldson, FH 159). Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda have indeed often been seen as representing American civilization, which was – and arguably still is – highly characterised by consumer culture (Prigozy 1). Fitzgerald is said to be “a prototypical representative” of his time (Donaldson, DLB 4).

The second chapter introduced Spengler’s philosophy. Because not all readers may be familiar with the fundamental ideas Spengler expresses in his *The Decline of the West*, I devoted an entire chapter to his philosophy. I have also analysed it in the light of Fitzgerald’s novel and the context of materialism and consumer culture that dominated the Jazz Age in New York.

The third chapter of this thesis traces the ways in which the American author F. Scott Fitzgerald might have come across the ideas of the German philosopher Oswald Spengler before he stated he had read anything about or by him (cf. Lehan). By making the connection between Spengler’s 1918 volume and Fitzgerald’s 1922 novel, I wanted to demonstrate how a similar reaction to the current state of Western culture and its civilization was expressed in Germany as in the United States. As I touched upon earlier, when considering the recent event of the aftermath of the First World War, the two authors can be seen as representing opposite camps during the War. Still, both produced works that can be interpreted as similar ventilations of disillusionment after the War had ended and it became clear how much was lost. With this thesis, I wanted to make a connection between two very different and distant, but apparently like-minded authors.
The final chapter provided an elaborate analysis of the Spenglerian themes in Fitzgerald’s second novel, namely failure and cultural pessimism. I believe these themes can also be regarded as underlying a general view of Western civilization. As Frye states in his article, most people at the time were aware that the end of Western Civilization was near, whether they had read or heard about Spengler’s theory or not. This leads Frye to conclude that “we are all Spenglerians” (cf. Chapter Two, paragraph “In the USA”) because “[t]he decline, or aging, of the West is as much a part of our mental outlook today [Frye wrote this piece in 1974] as the electron or the dinosaur” (Frye 7). In that way, every person is a Spenglerian, even when he or she has never heard of The Decline of the West. I believe this feeling of decline is still to be perceived today, in the early twenty-first century, as well. Science keeps evolving at a rapid pace and people are more and more dependent upon technology and money. Western man is no longer independent. If we take into account the process of global warming as well, it must be concluded that Western culture/civilization is not the only thing that is in decline. Man has spoiled nature and it is only a matter of time before Civilization destroys the entire world. We cannot predict how many times the cycle Spengler observed will be renewed, but mankind does seem to evolve eventually towards destruction.

Scott Donaldson perfectly captures Fitzgerald’s own view on his times and the way in which he tried to make his readers aware of the consequences of too great an indulgence in consumer culture:

Part of [Fitzgerald] was romantic, forever seeking the uncapturable ideal. Part was realistic, aware of the rot festering beneath the glittering surface. And linked with this double vision of himself and his times was a remarkable verbal gift which cannot be adequately described, only quoted. (Donaldson, DLB 16)
As an additional remark, I would like to mention a study by Michael D’Orso that I came across while doing research. D’Orso has made a Spenglerian reading of Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel *On the Road*. He has come to a conclusion that is very similar to mine in the case of Fitzgerald’s *The Beautiful and Damned*: “Kerouac himself [like Fitzgerald], through the autobiographical nature of his writings and through his own lifestyle, represented this contemporary man, and he filled his novels with characters who exemplify the ‘passionate thrust’ of Spengler's ‘infinity-craving’ Faustian.” (D’Orso 25) This citation recalls the characters from Fitzgerald’s second novel, who crave eternal youth. They do not want to grow old and enjoy life to the fullest now that they are still young and lively. They thrive in their culture, which is characterized by an extreme dependence on consumerism and money. In Harry Salpeter’s 1927 interview of F. Scott Fitzgerald, the latter too expressed a need for the readers to realise the condition of Western Civilization.

I believe D’Orso’s study of Kerouac’s novel shows that multiple decades after *The Decline of the West* was published, Spengler’s mind-set was still very much up in the air among intellectuals all over the world. Even though his prophecy was not fulfilled, the general idea behind it seems perceptible up to this day. I believe further research on the present perception of Spengler’s philosophy is extremely interesting, but I unfortunately do not have the space here to elaborate on the contemporary reception of the German philosopher’s thinking.

Even though I was not able to find indisputable evidence that Fitzgerald had heard about Spengler before the summer of 1924 when he claims to have read *The Decline of the West* (Lehan 137), my analysis of the themes of *The Beautiful and Damned* does demonstrate that there was a certain atmosphere of impending doom detectable on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Both Fitzgerald and Spengler responded in their work to the notion of the decline of Western Civilization, be it in a different way, respectively in fiction and in a
philosophical treatise. In the interview with Salpeter, Fitzgerald admitted that *The Decline of the West* was his new “bed-book” (Salpeter 86). From my analysis of *The Beautiful and Damned*, it can be concluded that the American author already shared a similar view on Western civilization with the one Spengler expressed in his philosophy before he read the actual work that confirmed their like-mindedness. Before Fitzgerald read *The Decline of the West*, he too expressed his concern about the current state of his culture and civilization.

Being part of this worrisome Western Civilization unites the American author Fitzgerald and the German philosopher Spengler. A comparison of their works demonstrates how two apparently opposed thinkers turn out to be like-minded when it comes to an observation of their Civilization.
7 Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


