Return of the Redeemed: Charlie Wales in Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited” Ashleigh

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There is no question that Charlie Wales has made mistakes in his past. He has lived in excess, wasting time and money on drinking and childish games, eventually costing him more than francs and months. After losing his wife to the grave, his child to the control of his sister-in-law, and his sense of self to a sanatorium in an attempt to overcome his alcoholism, Wales returns to Paris where we encounter him in the beginning of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Babylon Revisited.” Critics question whether “Charlie is … ‘the old Wales,’ as his former friends call him, or the new” (Male 273). Despite their reservations, Charlie is indeed a changed man, one who has control over his past and is now ready to spend his time and money on what matters most to him – his daughter.

Critics cite the fact Charlie does not gain custody of his daughter, Honoria, as a sign of his “inevitable” doom, stating that his lust for both the past and present worlds keeps him from obtaining the household and family that he so desires (Davison 193). Despite this claim, it is Marion, Charlie’s sister-in-law, who keeps his daughter from him. Unconvinced of his change, Marion searches for any reason to refuse Charlie his daughter, having “lived for a long time with a prejudice… [that] had turned to hatred for him” (Fitzgerald 1667). This hatred is the only reason that Charlie is not successful in retrieving Honoria from Marion’s care. Although he is denied this time, and although critics say otherwise, Fitzgerald hints to his audience that Charlie will be successful in the future, his steadfastness in his newfound sobriety and moderate living the key to the happiness that he longs for.

Charlie Wales is indeed a reformed man, having left his alcoholism and outrageous spending behind him. He is first seen at the Ritz Bar, inquiring after friends from his past and learning that all of these men, save Duncan Schaeffer, are either broke or in sanatoriums, as was Charlie himself. This shows the end of an era that, unlike many of his former friends, Charlie has come back from fully recovered. By giving the Peters’ address to the barman and allowing himself to be accessible to Duncan, Charlie is showing resoluteness in his sobriety and his conquering of the past, refusing to skulk away silently by facing up to anything that Duncan can bring. Charlie is also under the impression that Duncan will be changed the way that he is; Fitzgerald tells us “Charlie had left his address for the purpose of finding a certain man”
and, upon spotting Duncan drunk alongside Lorraine Quarrels, another “[ghost] out of [Charlie’s] past” (1663). One can be sure that this was not the kind of man Charlie believed he would encounter.

Duncan and Lorraine make more than one appearance in the piece, first drunkenly disrupting Charlie and Honoría’s lunch, then barging into the Peters’ household unannounced, ultimately upsetting Marion and leading her to deny Charlie custody of Honoría. On both occasions, although taken by surprise, Charlie handles the situation with as much control as one may have over other people, politely declining their invitations to dinner and motioning to his daughter when they begin to speak of inappropriate things. When Duncan and Lorraine show up at Marion and Lincoln’s house, Charlie shoos them away as delicately and quickly as possible: “Come and dine. Sure your cousins won’ mine. See you so sel’om. Or solemn. ‘I can’t,’ said Charlie sharply. ‘You two have dinner and I’ll phone you’” (Fitzgerald 1671). While unable to control the reactions of Lincoln or Marion, Charlie does take control of the situation and assert himself to Duncan and Lorraine, proving to both them and the Peters’ that when the past barges in suddenly, he will be able to put it down without temptation to backslide. Charlie’s reaction to Lorraine, a woman whose “passionate, provocative attraction” used to call to him, is also proof in how he has changed. Although Charlie is still aware of this attraction, he shows little regard for Lorraine, dismissing her pneumatique at his hotel and appearing distracted when in her presence, more taken with Honoría than with her: “Listening abstractedly to Lorraine, Charlie watched Honoría’s eyes leave their table, and he followed the wistfully about the room, wondering what they saw” (Fitzgerald 1664).

Many critics cite the fact that Charlie left his address for Duncan at the Ritz Bar as proof that, despite his cleaning up, Charlie wants to remain in the past world as well as the present. Roy Male states that “Fitzgerald… insists upon the reader’s seeing more clearly than Charlie does. For the trouble with Charlie is that he still wants both worlds,” adding that, “[t]he harsh fact is that if he had not stopped in the Ritz Bar in the first place, had not tried to get in touch with Duncan Schaeffer, he would have won back his daughter” (276). Carlos Baker insists that his telling Marion that “it was nice while it lasted” (Baker 271), combined with his leaving the Peters’ address for Duncan, proves that he has not put his past entirely behind him because he is still in love with it. Richard Allen Davison asks “why… Charlie at the very beginning of the story … plant[s] the seed of his own destruction by leaving the Peterses’ address with the Ritz barman after inquiring about former acquaintances, willing accomplices from his period of dissipation?” (195). Davison seems, however, to answer his own question, mentioning that Charlie is “horrified by [Duncan and Lorraine’s] drunken disruption… at the Peterses’ apartment”
and “deeply disturbed by [their] unwelcome intrusion into the loving intimacy of his luncheon with Honoria” (194). For someone who allegedly wants to live in both worlds, Charlie certainly seems to have a problem when those worlds collide, “horrified” and “deeply disturbed” at the people from his past appearing in his present. Also, Charlie never seeks Duncan and Lorraine out to socialize, ignoring Lorraine’s pneumatique and refusing to give them his hotel address after encountering them for the first time during his lunch with Honoria. In fact, the only time that Charlie seeks out his past is after they barge into the Peters’ residence and cost him his daughter, therefore, leading the reader to believe that Charlie is not seeking out the players of his past in order to live in it, but to make them aware of what they have cost him so far.

While Charlie looks back at that period of his life somewhat fondly, remembering wealthy Americans then as “a sort of royalty, almost infallible, with a sort of magic around [them]” (Fitzgerald 1661), he does not want to return, telling the barman at the end that “I lost all I wanted in the boom” (Fitzgerald 1672), those things he wanted referring directly to the home and family that he so longs for now. Without Honoria in his household, Charlie is free to go back to his wild ways for the next few months after the story is over. But because Charlie has sincerely changed, making Honoria and family-life his only real desire, he will continue to refuse that second drink and will avoid the Duncans and Lorraines and Bricktops’ all in order to share the rest of his life with his daughter.

There are other signs to indicate that Charlie has put his drunken past behind him and is now focused entirely on building a home for Honoria. After his first visit to the Peter’s house, Charlie heads out “to see Paris by night with clearer and more judicious eyes than those of other days” (Fitzgerald 1661). He takes in a show, then heads down to Montemartre, his old stomping ground in the days that “came along one after another, and then two years were gone, and everything was gone, and [he] was gone” (Fitzgerald 1660). Charlie passes by Bricktop’s “where he had parted with so many hours and so much money” as well as another, unnamed club that he used to frequent, but when he sticks his head inside and finds them unchanged he “withdr[aws] quickly” thinking “You have to be damn drunk” (Fitzgerald 1661). His avoidance of these once so appealing places leads us to believe that Charlie has, indeed, moved on.

One of the more ridiculous critical claims is that Charlie does not want Honoria—that “what he was begging for subconsciously [was] Marion’s rejection of his plea for [his daughter]” (Toor 162). If this is so, why does Charlie make a trip to Paris in the first place? Couldn’t he have easily communicated with his daughter via letter? Toor does say that “one part of him… wants his Honoria (honor) back, but in the deeper man, the guilt-ridden one, he knows he doesn’t deserve her” (156). But Charlie does not seem to
carry guilt around; he is ready to admit to Marion that he locked Helen out in the snow and is forthcoming with the fact that he was living in excess, both of which show signs of a man who is not particularly proud of his past but lives on despite it. Even when Marion attempts to shame him over Helen’s death, Charlie answers with sorrow, not guilt: “Helen died of heart trouble,’ Charlie said dully” (Fitzgerald 1667). This last adverb, “dully,” is the key, guilt being such a permeable emotion that it would have changed this last adjective were it present in his response. Charlie has come to terms with his past, meeting it face to face in many forms during the length of the story, and, therefore, is not wishing that Honoria be kept from him on account of guilt.

Charlie also shows how he has conquered his past by taking a drink a day. Like his situation with Duncan, he does not ignore his past by denying alcohol altogether. Instead he takes control through applying moderation, taking one drink a day in order to maintain conscious of his past problems while continuing to maintain the upper hand. Throughout the story, Charlie maintains his one-drink-a-day regiment keeping true to his resolve and never faltering at the temptation of being offered a second drink, even when his brother-in-law offers it to him: “Don’t you want a cocktail before dinner?’ Lincoln asked. ‘I take only one drink every afternoon, and I’ve had that.’ ‘I hope you keep to it,’ said Marion” (Fitzgerald 1661).

Charlie explains his idea to his in-laws, stating: “I haven’t had more than a drink a day for over a year, and I take that drink deliberately, so that the idea of alcohol won’t get too big in my imagination” (Fitzgerald 1665) allowing both the Peters’ as well as the audience to understand that, while he is still drinking, he is doing so in a controlled manner as opposed to the excessive manner which lost him Honoria.

Richard Davison believes that Charlie’s one drink a day ritual does not allow him to control his past, but rather “contains both the past and the present and threatens in itself to poison the future” (196). But Charlie’s one drink a day is nowhere near the excessive drinking he exercised in the past, making it more a part of the present and the future than of the past. While it may seem that Charlie cannot let go of an old habit, Charlie’s move from drinking until he was drunk to taking one drink a day is a more concrete way of him having left the past behind him, taking only the memory along to remind him of what that excess cost him. By taking one drink a day, Charlie is keeping the idea of the past from “get[ting] too big in [his] imagination” (Fitzgerald 1665), both acknowledging his past and exerting control over it, showing that he will not romanticize it and go back to his life of excess. Charlie is a changed man and exercises his one drink a day rule in order to maintain his new lifestyle.

Wealth is another element of the past that Charlie exercises control over, using his money to fulfill the wants and needs of family members instead
of squandering his money on frivolous things as he did in the past. Instead of tipping a thousand-franc note for a song, Charlie focuses his spending on his daughter—buying her dolls and toys and taking her to a vaudeville show. He even thinks about helping to “get Lincoln out of his rut at the bank” (Fitzgerald 1670), not offering money to Duncan or Lorraine but to the family that he is indebted to for the care of his daughter. Even after Marion denies him Honoria, Charlie is controlled and focused on his family, resigning to “send Honoria some things; he would send her a lot of things tomorrow” regretful “that this was just money—he had given so many people money…” (Fitzgerald 1672). Charlie wants to use his wealth to the benefit of his daughter but knows that it would take much more than that to build the family he wants.

Critics see Charlie’s wealth or his spending of that wealth as yet more evidence that he has not changed his ways, using his money to buy material things or to prove his power because he cannot have the home-life that he wants with Honoria. Toor states that Charlie’s thought of “get[ting] Lincoln out of his rut at the bank” (Fitzgerald 1670) is less about generosity and family and more about jealousy over the family-life that Lincoln has: “a warm homelife that Charlie envies, children who love him, a neurotic wife, yes, but a reasonable contentment” (156). But Charlie is not found so wanting, having at least one of those things already in Honoria and, at the time, the promise of gaining custody over her again, Duncan and Lorraine not having made their appearance at the Peters’ house just yet. Therefore it is highly unlikely that Charlie is attempting to make Lincoln jealous because he secretly wishes to have a neurotic wife to the likes of Marion, but rather that he is wondering if he could generously help out a friend and family member, using his wealth to benefit those close to him instead of wasting it as he has done before.

Critics also say that Charlie’s spending on Honoria is his way of avoiding having to deal with her, instead “turn[ing] back to the new old ways and instead of dealing with people, deal with things” (Toor 162). David Cowart states that the tragedy of the story is that Charlie fails “to recognize … the radical incompatibility of his money and the home he seeks” (21) saying that Charlie “lasps[es] back into blindness about the limits of money, fail[ing] to achieve the insight reserved for the reader: that by some cruel irony of fate a real home, though proof against even the mean spiritedness of a Marion Peters, is incompatible with wealth” (24–25). Charlie’s wealth will enable him to “be both parents to [Honoria]” (Fitzgerald 1662), allowing him to provide for her where he may not have been able to were he not wealthy. In the scene that most criticize, at the end of the book, Charlie resigns to sending Honoria “things” because he cannot have more at that moment, Marion’s temper seeming too outrageous for him to push for more contact with his daughter. In this case, Charlie is doing the smarter thing by making his presence known in
inoffensive ways, still keeping in contact with Honoria by doting on her while not offending Marion any more than he can help in hopes that, the next time he comes to the Peters’, he will leave with his daughter in tow.

Even in examining Marion, the character who condemns Charlie the most, one must still conclude that Charlie is a new man. Like the critics, Marion, Charlie’s sister-in-law and Honoria’s guardian, refuses to believe that Charlie has changed, her “dislike… evident in the coldness with which she spoke [to Charlie]” (Fitzgerald 1661). She continuously remarks on his drinking and being in bars as well as his spending habits and the amount of money that he is making now, insinuating that he has not changed his ways or that, if he has redeemed himself and gained control over his past vices, that he will fall into old habits regarding booze and money soon enough: “‘How long are you going to stay sober, Charlie?’ she asked. ‘Permanently, I hope.’ ‘How can anybody count on that?’” (Fitzgerald 1665). When Charlie tries to prove himself financially able to provide for Honoria, Marion again comments angrily, showing her distaste for him and her insistence that he has not changed his ways: “‘I suppose you can give her more luxuries than we can,’ said Marion. ‘When you were throwing away money we were living along watching every ten francs… I suppose you’ll start doing it again’” (Fitzgerald 1666). Marion is willing to go to any length to cast doubt on Charlie’s reform. Despite her antics and disbelief, Charlie is a new man who does not and will not go back to his past behaviors.

Marion shows her prejudice in this piece, blaming Charlie for Helen’s death and going so far as to discount any of Helen’s own decisions that could have possibly lead to her death or to the reactions of Charlie on that night that she “remembered so vividly” (Fitzgerald 1667). When Charlie mentions Helen while attempting to explain his excessive drinking of years ago, Marion interrupts him, saying “‘Please leave Helen out of it. I can’t bear to hear you talk about her like that’” (Fitzgerald 1665), completely disregarding any debauchery that Helen may have willingly participated in. In regard to Helen’s death, Marion considers Charlie responsible; “‘I can’t help what I think!’ she cried out suddenly. ‘How much you were responsible for Helen’s death, I don’t know. It’s something you’ll have to square with your own conscience’” (Fitzgerald 1667). Even while speaking this quote, Marion has already decided in her mind that Charlie is entirely to blame. Lincoln attempts to come to Charlie’s defense, saying “‘Hold on there… I never thought you were responsible for that,’” and Charlie confirms his thoughts: “‘Helen died of heart trouble,’” but Marion cannot keep from blaming Charlie: “‘Yes heart trouble.’ Marion spoke as if the phrase had another meaning for her” (Fitzgerald 1667). In this line, Fitzgerald insinuates that, to Marion, “heart trouble” meant trouble in matters of the heart, the reader’s cue stated earlier in Marion’s “disbelief of
her sister’s happiness” (Fitzgerald 1667).

Marion also shows her prejudice by being constantly disagreeable when it comes to Charlie. While in meetings with him over the possible exchange of Honoria, Marion seeks out opportunities to be offended over Charlie’s actions or words, even going so far as to be affected when she normally would not. One instance of this is during her second meeting with Charlie as he is speaking of why he now deserves custody over his daughter:

“’I’m functioning, I’m behaving damn well, so far as –’
‘Please don’t swear at me,’ Marion said.
He looked at her startled. With each remark the force of her dislike became more and more apparent… But he pulled his temper down out of his face and shut it up inside him; he had won a point, for Lincoln realized the absurdity of Marion’s remark and asked her lightly since when she had objected to the word ‘damn’” (Fitzgerald 1666).

Twice she insists that she doesn’t understand what he’s talking about while Lincoln, her own husband, seems to understand perfectly well. After Charlie describes his theory of taking one drink a day “so that the idea of alcohol won’t get too big in [his] imagination” he asks, “You see the idea?” (Fitzgerald 1665). While Lincoln agrees, answering with “I get you,” Marion’s reaction is snippy and short, allowing the reader to hear the contempt in her voice: “‘No,’ said Marion succinctly” (Fitzgerald 1665).

Marion shows her dislike for Charlie in another instance, retorting sharply at one of Charlie’s few attempts at winning her understanding, possibly her sympathy: “’[I]f we wait much longer I’ll lose Honoria’s childhood and my chance for a home.’ He shook his head, ‘I’ll simply lose her, don’t you see?’… ‘Why didn’t you think of all this before?’ Marion asked” (Fitzgerald 1666). These examples show that, despite Charlie’s best attempts at courtesy, Marion is always ready to strike, trying to provoke him into losing his temper and, therefore, giving her a reason to deny him his daughter. Regardless of Charlie’s obvious change in behavior, Marion refuses to see him for what he is: a new man.

It is clear by her actions that Marion is steadfastly against Charlie in any way, shape, or form, Fitzgerald telling us as much in the text where he inserts two perspective shifts allowing the audience to hear Marion’s thoughts and to experience her feelings. The first of these shifts occurs on page 1667, after Charlie admits that he had “worked hard for ten years” then “got lucky” in the market, insisting that his spending won’t get out of hand as it did before. Fitzgerald then gives the audience insight into Marion’s point of view, telling us that:
Part of her saw that Charlie’s feet were planted on the earth now, and her own maternal feeling recognized that naturalness of his desire; but she had lived for a long time with a prejudice — a prejudice founded on a curious disbelief in her sister’s happiness, and which, in the shock of one terrible night, had turned to hatred for him… circumstances made it necessary for her to believe in tangible villainy and a tangible villain. (Fitzgerald 1667)

The second shift occurs further down on the same page, allowing the audience to see the way in which she tries to provoke Charlie’s temper in order to appear somewhat justified in denying him what he wants: “Then, in the flatness that followed her outburst, she saw him plainly and she knew he had somehow arrived at control over the situation. Glancing at her husband, she found no help from him,” (Fitzgerald 1667). Upset that she was not successful in her attempt, she reacts hysterically, effectively ending Charlie’s ability to successfully ask for custody of his daughter. Through giving the audience glimpses of Marion’s inner thoughts, Fitzgerald allows us to see that Marion dislikes Charlie from the start and, due to this prejudice, would do anything necessary to keep him from getting what he wants, even if it is his own daughter.

Critics claim that Marion’s behavior, while not entirely justified, is directly associated with Charlie’s actions, insinuating that he is getting only what he deserves. Carlos Baker states that, at the point just before Duncan and Lorraine arrive, “Even Marion seems at last to have ‘accepted the inevitable’” (Stories 398) and that “[t]he wall that Marion has erected against [Charlie] has fallen now” (273). But “Marion [has] locked Charlie out psychologically as totally as Charlie locked Helen out physically” (Hostetler 113) and although she may have resigned to allow him to have his daughter, Marion has not forgiven Charlie for the sins she has held against him for so long.

Norman Hostetler argues that, instead of just holding his past against him, Marion is “defensive and destructive towards [Charlie], who [is] seen as [a] change [agent] and therefore threatening toward the system with which the former identifies” (115), but this is inaccurate because Marion refuses to see Charlie as changed, which is precisely the reason she continues to bring up his past and audibly doubts his recovery.

Kevin Jett focuses more on Lincoln, claiming that his “indecisiveness and domestic impotence all contribute to Charlie’s setback” (6) and that both “Marion and Lincoln Peters… have control over the direction Charlie’s life will take” (7). This point is wrong on both accounts, Marion being the sole guardian of and, as made obvious in the text, the decision-maker for all things regarding Honoria. Jett’s argument also falters in assuming Lincoln’s assertions would
alter the outcome of Charlie’s situation, Marion’s upset causing Charlie to lose his chance at obtaining Honoria. If Lincoln were to assert himself, it is doubtful that Marion would listen and, one can gather from the story, it is much more likely that she would respond to him in the same manner she seems to respond to anyone who opposes her: by doing anything possible to keep what they want from them.

It is apparent that, despite what is best for Honoria, Marion refuses to put her into Charlie’s custody, keeping her to punish Charlie for what she believes he is responsible for: the unhappiness and death of her sister.

Critics prove to be the ultimate pessimists when it comes to Charlie’s future, asserting that “[a]lmost masochistically, Fitzgerald has placed Wales in an atmosphere of an impending doom,” a doom later described as “inevitable” (Davison 193-194). Baker believes it to be stemmed from Charlie’s past, claiming that the reader feels sympathy for Charlie, “who tries so hard to measure up, only to be defeated by a past that he can never shed” (269). Although these critics are quick to label Charlie as “Down and Out,” Fitzgerald does not distinctly say that his main character will forever be unfulfilled. Marion seems to have gotten the last word this time but Charlie is indeed a new man and he will persevere towards what matters to him most: regaining custody of Honoria and rebuilding his family.

Despite his immediate failure to obtain Honoria, Fitzgerald assures his audience that Charlie will eventually succeed in gaining the family that he so desires, giving us textual hints to lead the reader to this conclusion. After Charlie has lost Honoria, at least for the next six months, he finds himself in the Ritz bar again, the same place he was at the beginning of the story. Although he can only send Honoria gifts tomorrow, and although this is “just money,” he refuses the offer of a second drink and thinks that “they couldn’t make him pay forever” (Fitzgerald 1672). Critics have said that this is an ironic statement on Fitzgerald’s part, but, in a piece devoid of irony, that is highly unlikely. It is much more likely that Fitzgerald includes this statement in order to show that, like his alcoholic situation, Charlie will overcome his adversities, Marion hopefully being a less threatening foe than alcoholism and overspending. This fact gives readers a clue that, although the chips are down now, Charlie will keep trying for Honoria, maintaining his sobriety and focusing on her until the day that he can have her in a home of their own.

While Charlie has certainly acted badly in the past, drinking and spending in excess, one should conclude that he has come out of that era as a reformed man, confronting his past on a daily basis and controlling it through focusing on what is really important: the family and home-life that he longs for. While critics claim that Charlie still longs for both worlds, his refusal to chase the past, as well as his refusal to drink or spend in excess, lead the reader to know
that the only world Charlie longs for consists of a home including himself and Honoria. While Toor says that guilt keeps him from obtaining Honoria, textual examples point to Marion, who refuses to see Charlie as the new man that he is. Marion does her best to upset Charlie, looking for any excuse to deny him his daughter and, when she finds it in Duncan and Lorraine’s visit, critics say that Charlie has no hope of ever gaining the family he so wants. Fitzgerald tells us otherwise in his text, allowing readers a glimpse of hope in Charlie’s determination to continue living in moderation in order to, one day, have the family that he wants and deserves.

REFERENCES


