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Madness and Identity: Female Mental Illness and Health In “Tender Is The Night”

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Abstract: Madness, identity, and female mental health constitute the central concerns of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*, where psychological illness is intricately linked with gender, trauma, and social expectations. This paper examines the representation of female mental illness through the character of Nicole Diver, whose psychological condition reflects the emotional consequences of abuse, patriarchal control, and the limitations imposed on women's autonomy. Employing feminist literary criticism, trauma theory, and psychological perspectives, the study explores how Nicole's identity is fragmented by mental illness and gradually reconstructed through her journey toward independence and self-awareness. It argues that Fitzgerald portrays madness not simply as a clinical disorder but as a cultural and social condition shaped by unequal power relations and restrictive gender roles. The paper further analyzes the influence of marriage, medical authority, and societal perceptions in defining female sanity and identity. By investigating the intersections of madness, gender, and selfhood, this study demonstrates that *Tender Is the Night* provides a powerful critique of the stigmatization of women's mental health while emphasizing the possibility of identity reconstruction and female empowerment despite psychological suffering.

Keywords: Madness, identity, gender, patriarchal, autonomy, agency.

Introduction

Mental health has become one of the most significant concerns in contemporary society, drawing attention not only from medicine and psychology but also from literature and cultural studies. Literary texts have long served as powerful mediums for exploring the complexities of the human mind, particularly the experiences of individuals suffering from psychological distress. Representations of madness in literature often extend beyond clinical definitions to reflect broader social, cultural, and political realities. For women, mental illness has historically been interpreted through patriarchal assumptions that associate emotional vulnerability with femininity, frequently leading to misunderstanding, marginalization, and institutional control. Feminist scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert have argued that the label of madness has often been imposed upon women who challenge social expectations or resist oppressive gender roles. Consequently, female

mental illness in literature cannot be viewed merely as a medical condition; it must also be understood as a response to trauma, silencing, abuse, and unequal power structures. Literary narratives therefore provide valuable insight into the relationship between psychological suffering, gender identity, and the search for autonomy in societies governed by patriarchal norms.

The twentieth century witnessed a growing literary interest in psychology, psychoanalysis, and the inner workings of the human mind. Influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung, modernist writers shifted their focus from external events to the psychological experiences of their characters. This transformation enabled novelists to portray mental illness with greater complexity and realism, emphasizing memory, trauma, identity, and emotional conflict. Within this literary tradition, madness emerges as both a psychological condition and a metaphor for fractured identity, social alienation, and emotional repression. Women's mental health, in particular, became a significant theme as authors explored how domestic expectations, marital relationships, and cultural restrictions contributed to psychological instability. Such representations challenge conventional distinctions between sanity and insanity, suggesting that mental illness often reflects the oppressive conditions in which women are forced to live rather than an inherent personal weakness. Modern literature thus becomes an important space for examining the intersection of gender, identity, and mental health through nuanced psychological characterization.

Among the most influential American novelists of the twentieth century, F. Scott Fitzgerald occupies a distinctive position for his exploration of psychological conflict, disillusionment, and the fragility of human relationships. Although he is widely remembered for portraying the glamour and excess of the Jazz Age, Fitzgerald's fiction also reveals profound concerns about emotional suffering, identity, and mental instability. His 1934 novel *Tender Is the Night* presents one of the most compelling literary examinations of female mental illness through the character of Nicole Diver. Inspired partly by Fitzgerald's personal experiences, including the mental illness of his wife Zelda Fitzgerald, the novel portrays Nicole's psychological struggles within the context of childhood trauma, psychiatric treatment, marriage, and social expectations. Rather than reducing Nicole to a passive victim of illness, Fitzgerald presents her as a multidimensional character whose journey reflects both vulnerability and resilience. The novel explores the complexities of healing, dependency, emotional recovery, and the gradual reconstruction of identity, making it a significant text for understanding the relationship between gender and mental health in modern literature.

This paper examines the representation of female madness and identity in *Tender Is the Night* through the perspectives of feminist literary criticism, trauma theory, and psychological analysis. It argues that Nicole Diver's mental illness is inseparable from the patriarchal structures that shape her experiences, relationships, and sense of self. The study investigates how trauma, medical authority, marriage, and social expectations contribute to the fragmentation of female identity while also exploring Nicole's gradual movement toward autonomy and self-realization. The intersections of madness, gender, and identity, this paper demonstrates that Fitzgerald's novel challenges traditional assumptions about female insanity and exposes the social forces that contribute to women's psychological suffering.

History of Madness and Female Mental Health

The history of madness has often been closely connected with the social position of women. In ancient and medieval societies, women's emotional and psychological problems were rarely understood as medical conditions. Instead, they were often explained through superstition, religion, or moral weakness. Women who expressed anger, grief, fear, or independence were frequently labeled as "mad" or "hysterical." The term hysteria comes from the Greek word *hystera*, meaning uterus, reflecting the old belief that women's mental illness was caused by their reproductive system. Because of these

beliefs, many women were misunderstood, isolated, or confined rather than treated with care and compassion. As feminist critic Elaine Showalter observes, "Mental illness is a social as well as a medical category" (*The Female Malady*), emphasizing that society has played an important role in defining female madness.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, advances in psychology and psychiatry changed the understanding of mental illness, but women continued to face unequal treatment. Influenced by the theories of Sigmund Freud and other psychologists, mental illness began to be studied scientifically. However, many female patients were still viewed through traditional gender stereotypes that expected women to be obedient, passive, and emotionally controlled. Women who questioned these expectations were often considered unstable or irrational. Philosopher Michel Foucault argues that "**Madness exists only in society**" (*Madness and Civilization*), suggesting that ideas of sanity and insanity are shaped by cultural values and systems of power. This perspective highlights that female madness cannot be understood only as a medical problem but also as a reflection of social control and gender inequality.

Modern literature has played an important role in challenging these traditional ideas about female mental illness. Many twentieth-century writers portrayed women's psychological struggles with greater sympathy and realism, showing that trauma, abuse, discrimination, and lack of freedom often contribute to emotional suffering. Literary works began to present mentally ill women as complex individuals rather than merely victims or patients. F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* follows this modern approach through the character of Nicole Diver, whose psychological condition is deeply connected with childhood trauma and patriarchal control. Her story demonstrates that healing involves more than medical treatment; it also requires dignity, independence, and the opportunity to rebuild one's identity. Thus, the history of female madness provides an important foundation for understanding Nicole's psychological journey and the broader relationship between gender, mental health, and identity in the novel.

Psychological Struggles and Gender Roles in *Tender Is the Night*

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* presents psychological suffering as inseparable from the rigid gender roles that shape individual identity and social relationships. The novel depicts a world in which women are expected to embody beauty, emotional dependence, and domestic stability, while men are burdened with the responsibility of authority, rationality, and protection. These expectations become psychologically destructive for both Nicole Diver and Dick Diver. Nicole's mental illness originates in the trauma of sexual abuse by her father, but her identity is subsequently defined by psychiatric diagnosis, medical surveillance, and her role as a dependent wife. Rather than being recognized as an autonomous individual, she is viewed as someone whose existence requires constant supervision. Dick, as both psychiatrist and husband, embodies the patriarchal assumption that masculine authority can cure feminine instability. However, this unequal relationship gradually weakens his own psychological well-being, demonstrating that gender expectations damage both women and men. As Judith Butler observes, "**Gender is the repeated stylization of the body**" (*Gender Trouble*), suggesting that socially constructed gender roles often constrain authentic identity. Fitzgerald exposes how these cultural performances become sources of emotional conflict, making psychological suffering not merely an individual condition but also a consequence of oppressive social structures.

Nicole's psychological struggles illustrate how female identity becomes fragmented under patriarchal control. Although she initially appears fragile and emotionally dependent, Fitzgerald gradually reveals her resilience and capacity for recovery. Her illness is continually interpreted through the perspectives of male authority figures, particularly psychiatrists and her husband, limiting her ability to define herself independently. Feminist critic Elaine Showalter argues, "Madness has been the historical label

applied to female protest and suffering” (The Female Malady). This observation resonates strongly with Nicole's experience, as her mental illness reflects not only psychological trauma but also the silencing of female agency. Fitzgerald captures Nicole's gradual transformation through the significant declaration, “I am not going to be just a case history.” This statement symbolizes her rejection of being reduced to a psychiatric subject and marks the beginning of her search for an independent identity. As the narrative progresses, Nicole increasingly distances herself from the dependency that once defined her existence, suggesting that psychological healing requires freedom from restrictive gender expectations as much as medical treatment.

Dick Diver's psychological decline further reinforces Fitzgerald's critique of traditional gender roles. Initially presented as an intelligent, compassionate, and successful psychiatrist, Dick gradually loses his professional confidence, emotional stability, and personal identity while attempting to fulfill the impossible expectations placed upon him as healer, husband, and protector. His identity becomes inseparable from Nicole's illness, causing his own emotional collapse. Fitzgerald poignantly observes, “The change came a long way back—but at first it didn't show.” This understated sentence captures the slow and almost imperceptible deterioration of Dick's mental state. Literary critic Lionel Trilling notes that Fitzgerald's fiction consistently explores “the cost of emotional idealism in a changing society,” a description that aptly characterizes Dick's tragic decline. Through the intertwined psychological journeys of Nicole and Dick, *Tender Is the Night* demonstrates that rigid gender roles produce emotional suffering by denying individuals the freedom to construct authentic identities. Fitzgerald therefore presents psychological illness not simply as a medical disorder but as a condition profoundly shaped by trauma, gender inequality, and the social expectations imposed upon both women and men.

From Victimhood to Agency: Nicole Diver's Psychological Transformation

Nicole Diver's journey in *Tender Is the Night* is one of the most powerful examples of psychological transformation in modern American fiction. At the beginning of the novel, Nicole is presented as a woman deeply affected by childhood trauma and mental illness. Her father's sexual abuse leaves lasting emotional scars, and she becomes dependent on doctors and her husband, Dick Diver, for care and guidance. Nicole is often treated as a patient rather than an independent person. Fitzgerald describes her fragile condition through the words, “She was sick a long time” (Fitzgerald 196). This simple statement reflects the depth of her suffering and the years she spends struggling with psychological pain. Her identity is shaped by illness, making her appear powerless and dependent on others.

As the novel progresses, Nicole gradually gains emotional strength and begins to question the control that others have over her life. She realizes that she cannot remain dependent forever and starts making her own decisions. Her recovery is not sudden but develops through experience, self-awareness, and growing confidence. One of the most important moments in the novel comes when Nicole declares, “I'm not going to be just a case history” (Fitzgerald 301). This statement shows that she refuses to be known only as a psychiatric patient. Instead, she wants to be recognized as a complete human being with her own thoughts, desires, and identity. Her words symbolize her determination to move beyond the role of a victim and take control of her own future.

By the end of the novel, Nicole becomes a stronger and more independent woman. While Dick Diver's life falls into decline, Nicole gains confidence and builds a new life for herself. Fitzgerald observes that “She had made a successful attachment with another man” (Fitzgerald 311). Although this decision has different interpretations, it also represents Nicole's freedom to make her own choices instead of living under Dick's authority. Her transformation shows that healing is not only about overcoming mental illness but also about recovering self-respect, independence, and personal identity. Through Nicole's character, Fitzgerald suggests that even after deep psychological trauma, a person can regain confidence

and agency. Her journey from victimhood to self-determination makes *Tender Is the Night* a significant novel about female resilience and emotional recovery.

Conclusion

Tender Is the Night presents a powerful exploration of madness, identity, and female mental health through the character of Nicole Diver. Fitzgerald demonstrates that psychological suffering is closely connected to trauma, gender roles, and patriarchal expectations rather than being only a medical condition. Nicole's journey from victimhood to independence reflects her gradual emotional healing and reconstruction of identity. The novel also reveals how social attitudes toward women influence the understanding and treatment of mental illness. By portraying Nicole as a resilient woman who reclaims her selfhood, Fitzgerald challenges traditional ideas about female madness and dependency. *Tender Is the Night* remains an important literary work because it encourages readers to view mental health with empathy while recognizing the significance of personal agency, dignity, and emotional recovery in women's lives.

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