

## INTRODUCTION



F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* (1925), one of the great novels in world literature. *Ulysses* (1922) by his idol James Joyce was more influential on ambitious major writers, but *Gatsby* became the most popular model of the ideal literary novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century--one of the first two Modernist novels in American literature, with *The Professor's House* by Willa Cather, both published in 1925. It was a kind of miracle, so much greater than anything else he wrote. His other distinguished novel, *Tender Is the Night* (1934), is a poignant work of psychological Realism based on his tragic relationship with the love of his life, the unstable Zelda Sayre. He also wrote many formulaic commercial stories for magazines to make money. Among the literary stories "Winter Dreams" (1922) is significant because it contains themes and motifs later developed in *Gatsby*, and "The Rich Boy" (1926) is a treatment of his major subject—what wealth does to character. Fitzgerald was so handsome, charming, sensitive, romantic, glamorous, talented, and tragic, he became more well known as a celebrity than his writing. Poe is a gloomy icon of the poor starving artist, Fitzgerald a glittering icon of the tragic successful artist.

## BIOGRAPHY

Frances Scott Key Fitzgerald was named after the patriot who wrote the national anthem and grew up to write a great novel about America. He was born in St. Paul, Minnesota and raised in a conventional Irish family with modest social standing in an atmosphere of upward mobility, golf and country clubs--like what he later depicted in his story "Winter Dreams." His mother lost her other two children just three months before Fitzgerald was born and he later felt that she compensated by spoiling him: "I am a weak character, self-indulgent, but with a powerful will." He was deeply influenced by the family's increasing need for money. They moved to Buffalo, New York, but his father lost his job with Procter and Gamble. Then the family moved back to St. Paul, where his father took a humiliating job for low pay as a wholesale grocery salesman. Fitzgerald's education was financed mainly by an aunt.

## PRINCETON

Fitzgerald attended a Catholic prep school in New Jersey and barely qualified for admission to Princeton in 1913, one of the most elite universities. "Princeton drew him most, with its atmosphere of bright colors and its alluring reputation as the pleasantest country club in America." But his literature professors were a disappointment: "I sit here bored to death and hear him pick English poetry to pieces. Small man, small mind...One of my first discoveries was that some of the professors who were teaching poetry really hated it and didn't know what it was about." Fitzgerald's favorite author was Keats, who died of tuberculosis. "And after reading Thoreau I felt how much I have lost by leaving nature out of my life."

He socialized more than he studied and his academic performance was so dismal he stayed in jeopardy every semester. His alcoholic lifestyle gave him a slight case of tuberculosis. Meanwhile he distinguished

himself socially and creatively, writing theatrical material for the Triangle Club as well as poems, stories and plays for literary and humor magazines. He played a glamorous showgirl in one production and a publicity photo of him in costume looking beautifully feminine appeared in the *New York Times*. All the female parts were played by males for humor.

One of the friends he made among classmates, Edmund Wilson, went on to become for a time the most influential critic in America. By 1917 Fitzgerald's grades were so poor he had fallen a year behind. He never did learn how to spell. He escaped flunking out by accepting a commission as a lieutenant in the U.S. Infantry, apparently transcending disgrace with honor in his willingness to sacrifice his life for his country. Such idealism, shared with Willa Cather as expressed in her novel *One of Ours* (1922), had not yet come to be seen as naïve by writers who were in the war and criticized it, including Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and e. e. cummings. Fitzgerald confided in a letter to his mother that he was not really idealistic about the war at all: "I just *went* and purely for social reasons." He ordered his uniform from Brooks Brothers.

#### U.S. ARMY

Fitzgerald was sent to basic training at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where his platoon captain was Dwight David Eisenhower, later Commander of Allied Forces in Europe during World War II and then President of the United States. He anticipated becoming a hero, but he was unable to stay awake during lectures. When not snoozing, he worked on the draft of a novel called *The Romantic Egotist*, "concealing my pad behind Small Problems for Infantry." He expected to get killed and felt desperate to leave the book as his memorial. Fitzgerald was the only one in his squad of 8 who was not trusted to act as corporal for a week. Once on a hike he hid a piece of stove pipe in his knapsack to lighten it while it appeared to contain the prescribed load. Most of his fellow officers there considered Fitzgerald immature, soft and spoiled. Actually he resented the Army: "My whole heart was concentrated on my book."

He was assigned to a headquarters company in Alabama, which entitled him to wear boots and spurs. He defied mockery by wearing a pair of yellowish boots like the flamboyant Gatsby, the only ones in the division. The company he commanded was composed of tough immigrants from New York City. In trying to be authoritative when giving orders to them, the frail Fitzgerald acquired a strut. Once at the end of a long march he forgot to salute the commanding officer, who ordered him to repeat the march, to the dismay of his exhausted troops. Fitzgerald managed to be heroic on one occasion by saving a number of his men from drowning in a river, but then one blistering summer afternoon some began to complain in a menacing way about the Army food. To gain control, Fitzgerald mounted a horse and marched all of his men double time through the sweltering heat of Alabama. He nearly provoked the mutiny he was trying to prevent. He was relieved of his command and put in charge of a mortar platoon. During maneuvers, he fired a volley of shells into a group of soldiers out of sight on the opposite side of a hill. Luckily, all the shells proved to be duds—like Fitzgerald. Most of the men liked him personally, but did not consider him reliable. "As an officer," said one, "Fitzgerald was unusually dispensable."

In 1918 his regiment was shipped north to Long Island in preparation for embarkation to France, but the war by then was almost over and they were ordered back to Alabama. Fitzgerald went AWOL in New York and missed the troop train. He persuaded an engineer at Penn Station to expedite his travel because he was carrying an urgent Top Secret message to the President of the United States. When his regiment arrived in Washington D.C., the errant Fitzgerald met them at the station, waiting beside the track with two girls and a bottle of liquor.

Back in Alabama, at Camp Sheridan near Montgomery, he was made aide-de-camp to General J. A. Ryan, presumably because of his social skills and his military ineptitude. The General was not amused when he conducted an inspection of barracks and found Fitzgerald in bed rather than standing at attention beside it. On another occasion, during a parade, Fitzgerald fell off his horse. He was ordered to take riding lessons, but then the Army gave up and discharged him early. He regretted for the rest of his life that he had not fought in the war, but his failure to make it to the front was undoubtedly best for all concerned, especially for any troops under his command and for American literature.

#### ZELDA

What mattered most to Fitzgerald was not that he missed the war, but that he fell in love. One evening while he was stationed in Alabama, he went to an officers' dance at Camp Sheridan and met the beautiful young debutante Zelda Sayre, a southern belle, the daughter of a judge in Montgomery. She had just graduated from high school and had a spirited romantic personality that sparked his own. He described her to friends as "the most beautiful girl in Alabama *and* Georgia....I didn't have the two top things: great animal magnetism or money. I had the two second things, though: good looks and intelligence. So I always got the top girl." Zelda needed to feel like the top girl all the time. Lots of men have money. Zelda needed what only Scott Fitzgerald could provide, in the spirit of Gatsby—"romantic readiness." He knew from the start that "the only lover she had ever wanted was a lover in a dream." But she wanted money too. They were engaged but she would not marry him until he was able to support her dream.

Zelda turned down his proposal of marriage--because he was poor. "That was always my experience—a poor boy in a rich town; a poor boy in a rich boy's school; a poor boy in a rich man's club at Princeton....I have never been able to forgive the rich for being rich, and it has colored my entire life and works...The whole idea of Gatsby is the unfairness of a poor young man not being able to marry a girl with money. This theme comes up again and again because I lived it." Later he said, "Remember in all society nine out of ten girls marry for money and nine men out of ten are fools."

#### *This Side of Paradise* (1920)

After his discharge from the Army, he moved to New York and found work in an advertising agency, writing ad copy like Sherwood Anderson had. "I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove." But his enchantment waned: "I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes." His novel had been rejected and the magazines did not want his stories either. "It was about then [1920] that I wrote a line which certain people will not let me forget: 'She was a faded but still lovely woman of twenty-seven'." At one time he had 122 rejection slips pinned around walls of his cheap rented bedroom on Morningside Heights. He had no prospects of advancement. Zelda broke off their engagement and Fitzgerald borrowed money from friends and stayed drunk for three weeks. Then he went home to St. Paul and rewrote his novel, giving it a new ending and a much better title, *This Side of Paradise*.

Fitzgerald was blessed to have his manuscript read by the most highly regarded literary editor in the history of American publishing—Maxwell Perkins, who would also edit Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe. Scribner's published it and Fitzgerald inscribed a copy to H. L. Mencken, saying, "This is a bad book full of good things." One critic listed over 100 spelling and grammatical errors he found in the novel. In *This Side of Paradise* the romantic hero, Amory Blaine, is a rich young man who looks and talks and acts like Fitzgerald and reads the same books and falls in love with the same girls. Based upon his undergraduate experiences, it is the story of Amory acquiring self-knowledge and a vision beyond the eating clubs at Princeton. Critics found his regeneration at the end unconvincing but young readers were enthralled and the book sold 20,000 copies the first week and over 40,000 the first year. "Here was a new generation," the book concludes, "dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success; grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken."

*This Side of Paradise* became a bestseller and the magazines that had rejected him began offering Fitzgerald high prices for his stories. Suddenly he was rich, famous, and celebrated. He was called the voice of his generation and the novelist who defined the Jazz Age. Zelda came like a queen bee to her honey and they were married in New York in early April 1920, in the rectory of St. Patrick's Cathedral. Fitzgerald said, "It was a marriage of love. He was sufficiently spoiled to be charming; she was ingenuous enough to be irresistible. Like two floating logs they met in a head-on rush, caught, and sped along together." They moved into the Biltmore Hotel, just as "America was going on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history." He told a friend, "Sometimes I don't know whether Zelda and I are real or whether we are characters in one of my novels." The Fitzgeralds became "beautiful people" glamorized in magazines like movie stars, embodying the Jazz Age. He said, "The compensation of a very early success is a conviction that life is a romantic matter. In the best sense one stays young."

Scott felt addicted to Zelda: “The helpless ecstasy of losing himself in her charm was a powerful opiate rather than a tonic.” They tried to stay high. “The restlessness...approached hysteria. The parties were bigger...The pace was faster...The shows were broader, the buildings were higher, the morals were looser, and the liquor was cheaper, but all those benefits did not really minister to much delight. Young people wore out early—they were hard and languid at twenty-one...Most of my friends drank too much—the more they were in tune with to the times the more they drank.”

The Fitzgeralds drank like undergraduates at a party that never ended. In Paris, they chewed up 100-franc notes and spit them out a cab window, they did handstands in the lobby of the Biltmore, they turned cartwheels and somersaults down crowded New York streets, they rode on the roofs of taxicabs, they got so drunk they fell asleep over their plates at formal dinners. They jumped fully clothed into the fountain at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan. On another occasion they removed all their clothes while sitting in a theater audience. During one party they snuck around and quietly gathered up all the women’s purses and boiled them in a large kitchen pot. Scott was prone to crawl sneaking around on the floor and play pranks like yanking a leg off somebody’s chair. Once he drove off the road into a pond just to frighten his passenger, his editor Max Perkins. Late at night after parties on the French Riviera, both of them giddy drunk, Scott and Zelda would stay up and dive into the sea from cliffs 35 feet high.

#### *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922)

He published two collections of magazine stories, *Flappers and Philosophers* and *Tales of the Jazz Age*, then his second novel, based on his relationship with Zelda--prophesying disaster. They went on a fling in Europe, but returned depressed. They moved to St. Paul—like Nick returning west after the death of Gatsby: “I am sick alike of life, liquor and literature,” he wrote to his publisher. He hinted at suicide. But then Zelda gave birth to their only child, Scottie, and Fitzgerald wrote a play called *The Vegetable* (1923) that got produced but failed. They moved back east to Long Island, where Scott made friends with the popular writer Ring Lardner, the model for Owl Eyes in *Gatsby*.

The Fitzgeralds spent money as fast as it came in and then some, sustaining the high life, giving big parties like Gatsby, drinking and driving with reckless speed in and out of Manhattan. They gave money away and tipped extravagantly and ran up debts. “I can’t reduce our scale of living and I can’t stand this financial insecurity.” On Long Island he wrote stories to get out of debt and began another novel, about rich people on Long Island who go to big parties and drive with reckless speed in and out of Manhattan. The title was ultimately chosen by Zelda—one of the best things she ever did for her husband. He was a Modernist in that he wanted to do “Something really NEW in form, idea, structure—the model for the age that Joyce and Stein are searching for, that Conrad didn’t find.”

#### *The Great Gatsby* (1925)

They took off to Europe again and Fitzgerald met the leading American writers in Paris--Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway. “Ernest’s book of stories is so much better than mine.” He finished *Gatsby* on the sunny French Riviera, remaining sober enough to consolidate all his talent and gather his major themes into a synthesis that proved to be a literary dream—a masterpiece. He managed to transcend his immature romanticism by narrating from a detached, objective and moral point of view, making us feel along with him the charm and glamour of life among the very rich, while at the same time judging it. With just this one novel he joined the rank of Henry James and Edith Wharton as one of the greatest novelists of manners, while also becoming one of the greatest Modernists along with Willa Cather, who published *The Professor’s House* the same year, dramatizing some of the same themes. Both novels contain “waste lands” in response to T. S. Eliot’s poem of 1922. Eliot called *Gatsby* “the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James.” The novelist Wright Morris was awestruck: “Few books come into this world with the perfection of a bird’s egg, and this is one of them.”

#### WHY *Gatsby* IS GREAT

The alliterative title *The Great Gatsby* is poetic like the prose style throughout the novel, appealing to sensibility, or heart. The modifier “great” becomes both apt and ironic, appealing to intellect, or head. This

double tone is sustained throughout the novel, a thematic counterpoint personified in Gatsby and Nick—the heart and the head of Fitzgerald. Appealing to curiosity, the title raises the main question answered by the story: What is “great” about Gatsby? The name Gat-sby is witty, appealing to a sense of humor, because it sounds genteel but contains a pun on *gat*—slang for gun.

*The Great Gatsby* is a rare novel in the extent to which it appeals to both the common reader and to the literary scholar, like *Huckleberry Finn*, the supreme example. Fitzgerald’s novel is popular in being about basic human interests—romantic love, success, money, passion, sex, murder, death. It is as full of gossip as the tabloids. It is a blend of the literary novel with popular romance, mystery, legend, myth, and fairy tale. Furthermore, the narrator is likeable—straightforward and honest—he makes his story clear, fast-paced and full of action easy to visualize. Fitzgerald uses the “scenic method,” influenced by Edith Wharton and by the movies. *Gatsby* glitters with movie star glamour in a romantic style that sparkles like jewels. The characters are alive and dynamic and clearly recognizable social types. Fitzgerald also expresses views with moral force that remain popular: the rich are too powerful and irresponsible, they get away with murder, government is corrupt, society is going to hell.

Above all, *Gatsby* is economical. It is short. Less is more if it is this good. Economy enhances all the other qualities, making the novel more dramatic, suspenseful, and powerful. Fitzgerald is the most vivid Impressionist since Stephen Crane and Kate Chopin, painting memorable pictures that are also symbolic—as of Gatsby reaching out his arms toward the green light at the end of Daisy’s dock in the moonlight, Daisy and Jordan in the Buchanans’ airy living room, the billboard of the faceless Dr. T. J. Eckleburg brooding with blind eyes over the valley of ashes. These are the images from this novel that most readers never forget. Impressionistic techniques also include the thematic color motifs that unify the book—white, green, yellow, gold, pink—the glimpsing of people and elisions from one image to another in fluid succession in party scenes. With just a few fragments of conversation, in one situation after another, Fitzgerald is able to bring his people to life and evoke their lives and circumstances with incisive Realism. These are some of the qualities that have made *Gatsby* the most popular model of the ideal literary novel in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most inimitable is the poetic style—lyrical, graceful, eloquent, precise, romantic, and enriched by abundant figurative language that is brilliantly apt and often Expressionistic. The average novelist is pleased to come up with a metaphor. Fitzgerald originates metaphors in such abundance they seem an almost “unbroken series of successful gestures.” The synergistic combination of all the literary qualities at a peak in this novel are unique.

The plot is relatively simple, yet is so intricately constructed it generates multiple ironies. Everything in this novel fuses organically into a surprising complexity: Not only does it record in realistic detail the Jazz Age of the 1920s, (1) as most critics finally recognized, Gatsby becomes a symbol of the American Dream and his story an allegory of its fate in the modern world; (2) as a few critics have partially discerned, Gatsby and Nick (heart and head) enact a psychological allegory that expresses the individuation of Fitzgerald, up to the death of Gatsby; (3) Nick’s vision at the end enlarges the scope of the story beyond Gatsby as a symbol of America to an allegory of western civilization; (4) finally, Dr. Eckleburg is a mock-God and Gatsby a mock-Christ betrayed by Daisy in a secular perversion of the Christ story. That *The Great Gatsby* contains multiple coinciding allegories is an intellectual feat achieved by few other American novelists—such as Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Faulkner, and Gordon.

## PARIS

The death of Gatsby was another prophecy of disaster in his own romantic life. “The sentimental person thinks things will last,” Fitzgerald wrote, “the romantic person has a desperate confidence that they won’t.” During the expatriate movement of the 1920s, the Fitzgeralds lived in Paris. Not on the Left Bank with the poor artists like Pound and Hemingway, they resided in a classy neighborhood near the Arch of Triumph. Scott would come across the river and hang out with the poor artists in Left Bank cafes with striped awnings, tanned from the Riviera and strikingly handsome in his orange and white striped T-shirt, smoking a cigarette, gesturing and talking with animated grace. He charmed Sylvia Beach, the owner of Shakespeare & Company bookstore, the expatriate gathering place, and she set up a dinner party for him with his idol, James Joyce. Fitzgerald drew a cartoon of them at the table, he on his knees before Joyce, who is wearing

a halo. *Gatsby* was not recognized at first as a masterpiece and it did not sell well at first, but it established his reputation among other writers and the best critics.

Hemingway admired *Gatsby*, became a strong father figure to Fitzgerald and lamented his marriage: “Of course, his marriage to Zelda was tragic, and I told him that someone as jealous of his work as Zelda was, was always competing with him and out to wreck him—I told him it was obvious to me the first time I met her that Zelda was a crazy. But Scott was in love with her and did not see the obvious. Being a rummy made him very vulnerable—I mean, a rummy married to a crazy is not the kind of pari-mutual that aids a writer.” Zelda was so competitive with Scott she wrote a novel herself, *Save Me the Waltz*, expressing an intense resentment that shocked him when he read it. Failing to achieve fame as an artist in her own right, she set out in her thirties to become a world class ballerina. By then she was crazy enough to be institutionalized, as is evident in any of her paintings. Once on the Riviera, after a night of gambling at Monte Carlo, she and Scott were so drunk that when she laid down behind the wheels of their car and said “Run over me, Scott” he got in and started the engine and she had to roll out of the way. “A strange thing was I could never convince her that I was a first-rate writer. She knew I wrote well but she didn’t recognize how well. When I was making myself from a popular writer into a serious writer, she didn’t understand or try to help me.”

Zelda flirted to make him jealous. Fitzgerald confided later that she had an affair in 1924 while they were vacationing on the Riviera, with a French aviator, Edouard Jozan. He claimed to have challenged Jozan to a duel. By his account, both men fired one shot each and both missed by wide margins. Jozan confirmed the affair, but made no comment about a duel. He later became an admiral in the French navy and Fitzgerald modeled the character Tommy Barban on him in *Tender Is the Night* (1934). “By 1928 Paris had grown suffocating. With each new shipment of Americans spewed up by the boom the quality fell off, until towards the end there was something sinister about the crazy boatloads.”

## THE CRASH

In 1929 the stock market crashed into the Great Depression. In 1930 Zelda crashed. She suffered the first in a series of mental breakdowns that caused her to spend most of the last 17 years of her life in sanitariums. “Our love was one in a century. Life ended for me when Zelda and I crashed. If she would get well, I would be happy again and my soul would be released. Otherwise, never.” Just as the Fitzgeralds represented the jazzy drunken “good times” of the 1920s, they came to represent the bad times of the 1930s. People blamed the frivolity of the Jazz Age for the crash. One critic said of his last volume of short stories, “The children of all ages—from thirteen to thirty—who decorate Fitzgerald’s pages seem as remote today as the Neanderthal man.” Fitzgerald was now seen by many as trivial. His total royalties for 1932 and 1933 totaled \$50, for 1939 only \$33. *Gatsby* was dropped by the Modern Library because it no longer sold. Worrying that his name had become a handicap, Fitzgerald published under a pseudonym.

### *Tender Is the Night* (1934)

By then he could not write without drinking. His doctor warned that it would kill him. But Fitzgerald felt that the stories he wrote when sober were “stupid.” He struggled for years to tell the story of his tragic love for Zelda in *Tender Is the Night*, quoting the title from Keats. Critics gave it mixed reviews, finding problems with the structure and with the emotional effect, while others such as his friend Budd Schulberg found in it a “deeper understanding of human behavior” than in anything else he wrote: “Scott made cynicism beautiful, poetic, almost an ideal.” Nevertheless, the novel is so deeply personal that it lacks the general significance, aesthetic complexity and resonance of *Gatsby*.

Zelda did not get well. “I left my capacity for hoping on the little roads that led to Zelda’s sanitarium.” He had severe hangovers, arrests for public intoxication, and increasing debts. Often his hands shook so badly he could not light a cigarette. In 1936, he crashed, attempting suicide with an overdose of morphine. “When you once get to the point where you don’t care whether you live or die—as I did—it’s hard to come back to life.” He felt depressed not only about Zelda, but about his own deteriorating health, his inability to write as well anymore, and his belief that he was not a first rate writer, that he was only “at the top of the second class.” He was always surprised when someone expressed admiration for *Gatsby*. He published a

confession of his alcoholic degeneration called *The Crack-up* in three installments in *Esquire*, as if seeking absolution from the public rather than a priest.

## HOLLYWOOD

He had done a little scripting in Hollywood and had sworn he would avoid it in the future. “Isn’t Hollywood a dump [valley of ashes]—in the human sense of the word. A hideous town, pointed up by the insulting gardens of its rich, full of the human spirit at a new low of debasement.” Hollywood was the very rich raised to the decadent level of imperial Rome, but it produced movies—potentially works of art. And he was desperate for cash. In 1937 his agent got him a contract as a scriptwriter for MGM, the major studio. He swore off alcohol and rented a bungalow at the Garden of Allah on Sunset Boulevard, where a number of writers and actors were staying. He tried to concentrate without taking a drink. When Hemingway came to Hollywood and raised money to support the Loyalists in the Spanish Civil War, Fitzgerald envied his vitality and dedication, felt embarrassed by his own decline and remained a loyal friend: “Somehow I love that man...I wince when anything happens to him, and I feel rather personally ashamed that it has been possible for imbeciles to dig at him and hurt him.” In humility, he judged Hemingway the better writer: “Ernest has made all my writing unnecessary.”

Though paid a high salary, Fitzgerald worked on numerous scripts but earned only one screen credit. Movies are not prose and his dialogue did not translate well to the screen. He was disappointed, did not like the committee system by which movies are made and could not get along with producers. His contract was not renewed. His last job at MGM was helping to revise *Gone with the Wind*. He is said to have contributed the famous line, “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” As a freelancer, he was sent by a producer to join Budd Schulberg in New Hampshire, where they were to write on the spot a musical about college life set at Dartmouth College, against the background of the Winter Carnival. Fitzgerald was supposed to contribute the love story, but he was ill with a recurrence of tuberculosis. He did not want the assignment and spent his time there drunk and disorderly. He was incoherent at a Dartmouth faculty reception and fell down in the snow. In the end the producer fired him. Schulberg recalls Scott saying to him, “You know, I used to have a beautiful talent once, Baby.”

Meanwhile, with “fundamental decency,” Scott did not abandon Zelda: “So long as she is helpless, I’d never leave her or ever let her sense that she was deserted.” He traveled across the country and took her on vacations, until he went on another drinking binge and she became convinced he was a dangerous maniac. In lonely desperation, a week after arriving in Hollywood he began an affair with the Hollywood columnist Sheila Graham. He rented a cheaper bungalow at Malibu Beach. He had gone without a drink for six months and Graham was shocked by the change in him when he fell off the wagon again. She determined to fight his alcoholism. She looked after him, tolerating his alcoholic violence and threats. He had to be hospitalized. He rented a cheaper house in Encino out in the San Fernando Valley, where he had a nurse day and night and drank gin for the energy to work. “I was going to sleep every night with a gradually increasing dose of chloral—three teaspoonfuls and two pills of Nembutal every night and 45 drops of Digitalin to keep the heart working to the next day.”

Against his better judgment he took Zelda on a trip to Cuba, where he wandered into a cock fight. He tried to stop it and got beaten up. Hospitalized in New York, he had x-rays that revealed a lesion on one of his lungs. He returned to Encino running a fever and spent two months in bed. He tried writing love stories for the magazines, but had lost the necessary feelings. Sheilah Graham continued living in her Hollywood apartment and spent several days a week with Fitzgerald out in the valley. He depended on her and was jealous and possessive, while antagonizing her with his drinking. He kept a loaded handgun for security against prowlers and once struggled over it with Sheila, who feared what he might intend to do with it. Whenever she was busy in Hollywood he got lonely and drank more.

His drinking got worse after a manuscript was declined by national magazines. One evening Sheilah arrived to find him with two hobos he had picked up from thumbing for a ride on Ventura Boulevard. He had them over for dinner and was giving them some of his clothes. Sheilah ordered them out of the house. They left and Scott exploded in rage and threw a bowl of soup against the wall. He struck Sheilah. He kicked the nurse when she tried to intervene and danced around the room taunting Sheilah. He threatened to

kill her! While he looked around for the gun she had hidden, she called the police. After that she did not speak to him on the phone. He sent her threatening notes, warning her to get out of town within 24 hours before he killed her. He snuck into her apartment and took back a silver fox jacket he had given her. Then he sobered up. In shame he mailed her regretful letters, he promised to stop drinking, he sent her roses, he charmed and courted her until she went back to him.

### *The Last Tycoon* (unfinished)

Ashen and frail, Fitzgerald by now was subject to fevers and fits of coughing. He tried to finish his novel *The Last Tycoon*, depicting a powerful Hollywood producer, Monroe Stahr (star), modeled on the real MGM producer Irving Thalberg, a legendary figure known for attempting art films—"though I have put in some things drawn from other men and inevitably much of myself." Fitzgerald was dazzled by Thalberg when he worked at MGM, saw him as a hero and identified with his artistic aspirations. The two had characteristics in common, including Thalberg's tragic early death in 1937, due to an inherited disease that gave his short life a romantic poignancy. Had Fitzgerald been able to write *The Last Tycoon* in decent health, it might have been excellent--though probably not as great as *Gatsby*. The unfinished manuscript is not as promising as his friends saw it after his death. Aptly, he wrote to his daughter Scottie saying that "Life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat. The redeeming things are not 'happiness and pleasure' but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle."

### DEATH

Scott was not drinking anymore and he and Sheilah were happier together than they had ever been. One afternoon in the Fall of 1940 with a strained look on his face. He eased into a chair, slowly lit a cigarette, and told Sheilah: "I almost fainted at Schwab's. Everything started to fade." The next day he went to the doctor and a cardiogram showed he had a heart attack. To avoid climbing stairs, he moved into Sheila's apartment on ground level. He worked on *The Last Tycoon* while confined to bed for six weeks and also scribbled aside, "There was a flutter from the wings of God and you lay dead."

He seemed to recover, until leaving a movie preview he attended with Sheilah. He felt dizzy, stumbled and grabbed the arm of his seat. Everything started to go, he said, the way it had in Schwab's drugstore. She gave him her arm. They made it home and the next day he was cheerful. His novel was half done. After lunch he sat in an armchair eating a chocolate bar, making notes on the Princeton football team in an alumni magazine. Suddenly he stood up as if called to moral attention. He clutched the mantelpiece, then fell to the floor with his eyes closed, gasping for breath a moment before he lay still.

Unlike *Gatsby*, he had plenty of friends and admirers come to his funeral. Fitzgerald was said to look youthful even in death, except for his hands. Paying her respects where he lay in a Hollywood funeral parlor, Dorothy Parker quoted Owl Eyes on *Gatsby*: "The poor son-of-a-bitch." Nathanael West sped back from Mexico to make the funeral in time, ran a red light at an intersection and was killed with his wife. Fitzgerald wanted to be buried with his family in a Catholic cemetery at St. Mary's Church in Maryland, but the Bishop refused to allow it because he had lost his faith. He had a Protestant burial in a different cemetery. Zelda wrote that "He was as spiritually generous a soul as ever was...Although we weren't close any more, Scott was the best friend a person could have to me." In 1948 the main building of Zelda's sanitarium in North Carolina caught fire. She was trapped on the top floor and burned alive with 8 other patients. She was buried beside Scott. Over a quarter of a century later, in 1975, at the request of St. Mary's Church the Fitzgeralds were reinterred in the Catholic cemetery. His epitaph came from *Gatsby*: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Michael Hollister (2014)

### 1920s COMPARABLE TO 1960s

"Scott also said, 'America was going on the greatest, gaudiest spree in history and there was going to be plenty to tell about it'....The gaudiest spree in history was also a moral revolt, and beneath the revolt were social transformations. The 1920s were the age when puritanism was under attack with the Protestant churches losing their dominant position. They were the age when the country ceased to be English and



Scottish and when the children of later immigrations moved forward to take their places in the national life...The 1920s were the age when American culture became urban instead of rural and when New York set the social and intellectual standards of the country, while its own standards were being set by transplanted Southerners and Midwesterners like Zelda and Scott. Most essentially the 1920s were the age when a production ethic—of saving and self-denial in order to accumulate capital for new enterprises—gave way to a consumption ethic...

Young men and women in the 1920s had a sense of reckless confidence not only about money but about life in general. It was part of their background: they had grown up in the years when middle-class Americans...believed in the doctrine of automatic social evolution...Young men and woman in Fitzgerald's time, no matter how rebellious and cynical they thought of themselves as being, still clung to their childhood notion that the world would improve without their help; that was one of the reasons why most of them felt themselves excused from seeking the common good. Plunging into their personal adventures, they took risks that didn't impress them as being risks because, in their hearts, they believed in the happy ending. They were truly rebellious, however, and were determined to make an absolute break with the standards of the prewar generation. The younger set paid few visits to their parents' homes and some of them hardly exchanged a social word with men or women over forty....

The elders were straitlaced or stuffy, and besides they had made a mess of the world; they were discredited in younger eyes not only by the war [WWI comparable to Vietnam War] and what followed it—especially Prohibition—but also, after 1923, by the scandals...So let the discredited elders keep to themselves; the youngsters would then have a free field in which to test their standards of the good life. Those standards were elementary and close to being savage. Rejecting almost everything else, the spokesmen for the new generation celebrated the value of simples experiences such as love, foreign travel, good food, and drunkenness....

They all recognized the value of being truthful, even if it hurt their families or their friends and most of all if it hurt themselves; almost any action seemed excusable and even admirable in those days if one simply told the truth about it...They lived in the moment with what they liked to call 'an utter disregard of consequences'...One heard jazz everywhere...Jazz carried with it a constant message of change, excitement, violent escape, with an undertone of sadness, but with a promise of enjoyment somewhere around the corner...Fitzgerald not only represented the age but came to suspect that he had helped to create it, by setting forth a pattern of conduct that would be followed by persons a little younger than himself. That it was a dangerous pattern was something he recognized almost from the beginning."

Malcolm Cowley  
"Fitzgerald: The Romance of Money" (1953, revised 1973)  
*The Portable Malcolm Cowley*  
ed. Donald W. Faulkner  
(Viking/Penguin 1990) 234-39

#### STATURE OF FITZGERALD (1984)

"From the beginning Fitzgerald aimed for the skies in *The Great Gatsby*...Marvelous it was, though not everyone realized it. Sales were disappointing: during Fitzgerald's lifetime *Gatsby* sold fewer than 24,000 copies in the Scribner's edition, somewhat more than *Tender Is the Night* but less than half the totals for *Paradise* or *Damned*. The initial critical reaction was mixed. Generally the first reviewers failed to divine the remarkable merit of the novel. As G. Thomas Tanselle and Jackson R. Bryer observe in '*The Great Gatsby: A Study in Literary Reputation*,' 'it is difficult for a contemporary commentator to detect a future masterpiece...' The *New York World* attacked the novel as a 'dud'; the *Saturday Review* called it 'an absurd story'; the *New York Herald Tribune* found it a 'trifle...neither profound nor durable.' Worst of all, H. L. Mencken in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, while acknowledging the 'fine texture' of the writing, characterized the plot of *Gatsby* as 'no more than a glorified anecdote.' The novel was 'certainly not to be put on the same shelf with, say, *This Side of Paradise*,' Mencken concluded; the author seemed more interested in maintaining suspense than in getting under the skins of his characters. These judgments would have hurt less had not Fitzgerald respected Mencken so much.

Balanced against such negative assessments was an admiring chorus which pointed to the author's 'admirable mastery of his medium' in permitting 'not one accidental phrase' to be printed in a work as distinct from his earlier novels 'as experience is from innocence.' The praise came primarily from thoughtful reviewers in the better periodicals, yet only a few seemed to recognize the significance of Fitzgerald's accomplishment. One was Gilbert Seldes, whose August 1925 review in the *Dial* stressed the novel's 'artistic integrity and passionate feeling' and exhorted the author to continue in this vein. Another was T. S. Eliot, who sent a 31 December 1925 letter from London referring to *Gatsby* as 'the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James'...

In 1951 Fitzgerald's ascending reputation skyrocketed after the publication of Budd Schulberg's novel *The Disenchanted*, whose alcoholic protagonist was modeled on Fitzgerald of the Hollywood period, and of Arthur Mizener's prize-winning biography, *The Far Side of Paradise*. Two volumes edited by Malcolm Cowley, *The Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* and an amended *Tender Is the Night*, also emerged that year, as did Alfred Kazin's collection of essays on *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Man and His Work*. Clearly, though, it was the man and not his work that interested the average reader. Schulberg's novel and Mizener's biography stayed on the best-seller list for months; *The Stories*, containing all of Fitzgerald's best short fiction, sold only 1,671 copies during the first year after publication. The legend of Fitzgerald as burnt-out case, doomed lover, and tragic figure seized the public imagination, and to some degree militated against sensible and lasting appreciation of his work.

Still, his very notoriety demanded critical attention, and almost everyone who read his work (for whatever reason) was struck by the enduring power of *The Great Gatsby*. In 1951 the *Times Literary Supplement* (London) called it 'one of the best—if not the best—American novels of the past 50 years,' a statement which seemed extravagant then but is a commonplace now. During the intervening three decades more than 300 essays have addressed themselves to this novel."

Scott Donaldson

Introduction

*Critical Essays on F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby*

(G. K. Hall 1984) 1-2, 4

Michael Hollister (2015)



Fitzgerald and Zelda