

193 QUOTATIONS



F. Scott Fitzgerald

(1896-1940)

F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which became the most popular model of the ideal literary novel in America, influencing many writers thereafter. He is a Romantic who wrote social novels of manners in the Realist tradition of Edith Wharton. In *Gatsby*, Fitzgerald transcends his Romanticism by narrating from the perspective of Nick Carraway rather than Gatsby. The novel is also lyrical in style, Impressionist in the tradition of Stephen Crane and Kate Chopin, and Modernist in techniques such as the mythic method advocated by T.S. Eliot. Fitzgerald was handsome, sensitive and charming. In a play at Princeton he played the part of a beautiful young woman. Women readers in particular have appreciated his fascination with romantic love, though Feminists have deplored his women characters still adhering to the Victorian paradigm of gender roles—as most women still did in the 1920s. Gentlemen are no longer Politically Correct. Calling himself a “spoiled priest” who lost his religious faith, Fitzgerald inclined to hedonism and alcohol and married his own version of Daisy Buchanan, except that Zelda the southern belle eventually had to be confined in a mental asylum. *Tender Is the Night* (1934) is his poignant tragedy based on his own marriage. The more Fitzgerald felt like a tragic figure, the more he drank, until he died in his 40s of a heart attack while eating a chocolate bar in Hollywood.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, character, morality, Princeton, “Unreal City,” waste land, jazz age, alcohol, breakage, Zelda, the crack-up, America, the rich, *Gatsby*, vision, society, happiness, men, sex, romantic attraction, love, disillusionment, Victorianism, pornography, Modernism, literature, Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, theory of writing, motivation, genius, writing, understatement, wit, multiple viewpoints, Impressionism, Expressionism, autobiographical, drinking and writing, status, Existentialism, death:

YOUTH

Everybody’s youth is a dream, a form of chemical madness.

It was always the becoming he dreamed of, never the being.

I don't want to repeat my innocence. I want the pleasure of losing it again.

Youth is like having a big plate of candy. Sentimentalists think they want to be in the pure, simple state they were in before they ate the candy. They don't. They just want the fun of eating it all over again.

It is youth's felicity as well as its insufficiency that it can never live in the present, but must always be measuring up the day against its own radiantly imagined future.

Grown up, and that is a terribly hard thing to do. It is much easier to skip it and go from one childhood to another.

The compensation of a very early success is a conviction that life is a romantic matter. In the best sense one stays young.

CHARACTER

I am a weak character, self-indulgent, but with a powerful will.

Three months before I was born, my mother lost her other two children and I think that came first of all though I don't know it worked exactly. I think I started then to be a writer.

I tip heavily to be loved. I have so many faults that I must be approved of in other ways.

MORALITY

There is literally no standard in life other than a sense of duty.

A sense of the fundamental decencies is parceled out unequally at birth.

I am slow-thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on my desires.

I am too much of a moralist at heart, and really want to preach at people in some acceptable form, rather than entertain them.

PRINCETON

Princeton drew him most, with its atmosphere of bright colors and its alluring reputation as the pleasantest country club in America.

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.

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."

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.

The world, as a rule, does not live on beaches and in country clubs.

Rich girls don't marry poor boys, Jay Gatsby.

THE "UNREAL CITY"

New York had all the iridescence of the beginning of the world.

The city seen from the Queensboro bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world.

He was going to live in New York, and be known at every restaurant and café, wearing a dress suit from early evening to early morning, sleeping away the dull hours of the forenoon.

I began to like New York, the racy, adventurous feel of it at night and the satisfaction that the constant flicker of men and women and machines gives to the restless eye. 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.

At the enchanted metropolitan twilight I felt a haunting loneliness sometimes, and felt it in others—poor young clerks who loitered in front of windows waiting until it was time for a solitary restaurant dinner— young clerks in the dusk, wasting the most poignant moments of night and life.

And with the awful realization that New York was a city after all and not a universe, the whole shining edifice that he had reared in his mind came crashing down.

Isn't Hollywood a dump---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.

THE WASTE LAND

This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the form of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air.

It is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams.

“...and I said ‘God knows what you’ve been doing, everything you’ve been doing. You may fool me, but you can’t fool God!’”

Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night.

“God sees everything,” repeated Wilson.

“That’s an advertisement,” Michaelis assured him.

A new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about...like that ashen, fantastic figure gliding toward him through the amorphous trees.

THE JAZZ AGE

Here was a new generation...dedicated more than the last to the feat of poverty and the worship of success, grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.

Though the jazz age continued it became less and less an affair of youth. The sequel was like a children’s party taken over by elders.

ALCOHOL

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 to the times the more they drank.

Here’s to alcohol, the rose colored glasses of life.

First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you.

The hangover became a part of the day as well allowed-for as the Spanish siesta.

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.... There was kindness about intoxication—there was the indescribable gloss and glamour it gave, like the memories of ephemeral and faded evenings.

BREAKAGE

There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again. The first sort of breakage seems to happen quick—the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed.

ZELDA

It seemed that the only lover she had ever wanted was a lover in a dream.

Riches have never fascinated me, unless combined with the greatest charm or distinction.

The helpless ecstasy of losing himself in her charm was a powerful opiate rather than a tonic.

Remember in all society nine out of ten girls marry for money and nine men out of ten are fools.

Often a man can play the helpless child in front of a woman, but he can almost never bring it off when he feels most like a helpless child.

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.

The sentimental person thinks things will last—the romantic person has a desperate confidence that they won't.

I can't reduce our scale of living and I can't stand this financial insecurity.

[Zelda is working] under a greenhouse which is my money and my name and my love.... She is willing to use the greenhouse to protect her in every way, to nourish every sprout of talent and to exhibit it—and at the same time she feels no responsibility about the greenhouse and feels that she can reach up and knock a piece of glass out of the roof any moment, yet she is shrewd to cringe when I open the door of the greenhouse and tell her to behave or go.

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, a big-shot, she didn't understand or try to help me.

THE CRACK-UP

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.

I left my capacity for hoping on the little roads that led to Zelda's sanitarium.

Vitality shows not only in the ability to persist, but in the ability to start over.

So long as she is helpless, I'd never leave her or ever let her sense that she was deserted.

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.

In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning.

To a profound pessimist about life, being in danger is not depressing.

There are no second acts in American lives.

I'm not much like myself anymore.

I'm a cynical idealist.

AMERICA

For a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate with his capacity for wonder.

France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter—it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.

I look out at it—and I think it is the most beautiful history in the world. It is the history of me and of my people. And if I can here yesterday...I should still think so. It is the history of all aspiration—not just the American dream but the human dream and if I came at the end of it that too is a place in the line of the pioneers.

Americans, while occasionally willing to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry.

The best of America was the best of the world.

THE RICH

Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes them soft where we are hard, and cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand. They think, deep in their hearts, that they are better than we are because we had to discover the compensations and refuges of life for ourselves. Even when they enter deep into our world or sink below us, they still think that they are better than we are.

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy—they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made.

GATSBY

If personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him.

He stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn he was trembling. Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock.

He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it.

It was an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again.... Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed

on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men.

“They’re a rotten crowd,” I shouted across the lawn. “You’re worth the whole damn bunch put together.”

He must have felt that he...paid a high price for living too long with a single dream.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further... And one fine morning--

VISION

Never confuse a single defeat with a final defeat.

He had gathered that life for everybody was a struggle, sometimes magnificent from a distance, but always difficult and surprisingly simple and a little sad.

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.

One should...be able to see things as hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

SOCIETY

Either you think—or else others have to think for you and take power from you, pervert and discipline your natural tastes, civilize and sterilize you.

HAPPINESS

Happiness is only the first hour after the alleviation of some especially intense misery.

MEN

Men get to be a mixture of the charming mannerisms of the women they have known.

You don’t call a man a coward or a liar lightly, but if you spend your life sparing people’s feelings and feeding their vanity, you get so you can’t distinguish what should be respected in them.

SEX

The kiss originated when the first male reptile licked the first female reptile, implying in a subtle way that she was as succulent as the small reptile he had for dinner the night before.

A woman should be able to kiss a man beautifully and romantically without any desire to be either his wife or his mistress.

ROMANTIC ATTRACTION

I wasn’t actually in love, but I felt a sort of tender curiosity.

Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope.

It takes two to make an accident.

The girl really worth having won’t wait for anybody.

They slipped briskly into an intimacy from which they never recovered.

LOVE

I love her, and that's the beginning and end of everything.

There are all kinds of love in the world, but never the same love twice.

Mother says that two souls are sometimes created together and—and in love before they're born.

All life is just a progression toward and then a recession from one phrase—"I love you."

If I knew words enough, I could write the longest love letter in the world and never get tired.

At any rate, let us love for a while, for a year or so, you and me. That's a form of divine drunkenness that we can all try.

As he held her and tasted her, and as she curved in further and further toward him, with her own lips, new to herself, drowned and engulfed in love, yet solaced and triumphant, he was thankful to have an existence at all, if only as a reflection in her wet eyes.

He knew that when he kissed this girl, and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never romp again like the mind of God.

They were still in the happier stage of love. They were full of brave illusions about each other, tremendous illusions, so that the communion of self with self seemed to be on a plane where no other human relations mattered.

They had never been closer in their month of love, nor communicated more profoundly one with another, than when she brushed silent lips against his coat's shoulder, or when he touched the end of her fingers, gently, as though she were asleep.

DISILLUSIONMENT

At eighteen our convictions are hills from which we look; at forty-five they are caves in which we hide.

It is in the thirties that we want friends. In the forties we know they won't save us any more than love did.

The faces of most American women over thirty are relief maps of petulant and bewildered unhappiness.

He felt often like a scarcely tolerated guest at a party she was giving.

VICTORIANISM

A pathetic appealing look is one every girl ought to have.

Dishonesty in a woman is a thing you never blame deeply.

Dick tried to plunge over the Alpine crevasse between the sexes.

Good manners are an admission that everybody is so tender that they have to be handled with gloves.

She had an air of seeming to wait, as if for a man to get through with something more important than herself, a battle or an operation, during which he must not be hurried or interfered with. When the man had finished she would be waiting, without fret or impatience, somewhere on a high stool, turning the pages of a newspaper.

Their point of resemblance to each other and their difference from so many American women, lay in the fact that they were all happy to exist in a man's world—they preserved their individuality through men and not by opposition to them. They would all three have made alternatively good courtesans or good wives not by the accident of birth but through the greater accident of finding their man or not finding him.

Perhaps they promised that there would always be women in the world who would spend their brightest, freshest, rarest hours to nurse and protect that superiority he cherished in his heart.

Women are so weak really—emotionally unstable—and their nerves, when strained, break. They can endure more physical pain than men, and also more boredom. The boredom they endure is incredible, but they can't take nerve or emotional strain. The greatest women of all time are those of conquered passion or no passion. Women like Florence Nightingale, Jane Adams, Julia Ward Howe. Theirs has been a sublimated and useful work. They had no conflicts as Zelda had. This is a man's world. All wise women conform to the man's lead.

PORNOGRAPHY

It's disgusting [the pornographic memoirs of Frank Harris]. It's the kind of filth your sex is often subjected to, the kind of lavatory conversation men indulge in. It bores me—you don't know how disgusting men can be!

MODERNISM

Trying to preserve a century [the 19th] by keeping its relics up to date is like keeping a dying man alive by stimulants.

His career as Trimalchio was over. [freed Roman slave; this correspondence is an example of the "mythic method" advocated by T.S. Eliot in his essay on *Ulysses* in 1922]

Something really NEW in form, idea, structure—the model for the age that Joyce and Stein are searching for, that Conrad didn't find.

LITERATURE

Biography is the falsest of the arts.

Great art is the contempt of a great man for small art.

A classic is a successful book that has survived the reaction of the next period or generation. Then it's safe, like a style in architecture or furniture. It's acquired a picturesque dignity to take the place of its fashion.

That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you're not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.

For awhile after you quit reading Keats all other poetry seems to be only whistling or humming.

And after reading Thoreau I felt how much I have lost by leaving nature out of my life.

Mrs. Wharton, you have no idea what it means to me to come out here. [meeting Edith Wharton]

HEMINGWAY

I'd look him up right away. He's the real thing. [advice to editor Max Perkins about Ernest Hemingway]

Ernest's book of stories is so much better than mine.

I am a plodder. One time I had a talk with Ernest Hemingway, and I told him, against all the logic that was then current, that I was the tortoise and he was the hare, and that's the truth of the matter, that everything that I have ever attained has been through long and persistent struggle while it is Ernest who has a touch of

genius which enables him to bring off extraordinary things with facility. I have no facility. I have a facility for being cheap, if I wanted to indulge that.

With Ernest I seem to have reached a state where when we drink together I half bait, half truckle to him.

Somehow I love that man [Hemingway], no matter what he says or does.

I wince when anything happens to him [Hemingway], and I feel rather personally ashamed that it has been possible for imbeciles to dig at him and hurt him.

THOMAS WOLFE

You have a great find in him [advice to Perkins about Thomas Wolfe]—what he'll do is incalculable.

Tom's genius [Wolfe] is gigantic, tremendous, immense in its prolific scope, but he'll have to learn to cut down, choose, condense.

THEORY OF WRITING

My whole theory of writing I can sum up in one sentence. An author ought to write for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward.

MOTIVATION

You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say.

If you have anything to say, anything you feel nobody has ever said before, you have got to feel it so desperately that you will find some way to say it that nobody has ever found before, so that the thing you have to say and the way of saying it blend.

You're a slave, a bound helpless slave to one thing in this world, your imagination.

GENIUS

Genius is the ability to put into effect what is on your mind.

WRITING

I had 122 rejection slips before I sold a story.

No decent career was ever founded on a public.

Reporting the extreme things as if they were the average things will start you on the art of fiction.

Draw your chair up close to the edge of the precipice and I'll tell you a story.

To write it, it took three months; to conceive it three minutes; to collect the data in it all my life.

A short story can be written on a bottle, but for a novel you need the mental speed that enables you to keep the whole pattern in your head and ruthlessly sacrifice the side shows as Ernest did in *A Farewell to Arms*.

All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath.

You can stroke people with words.

A writer wastes nothing.

Action is character.

Character is plot, plot is character.

Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.

Great books write themselves, only bad books have to be written.

This is a bad book full of good things. [*This Side of Paradise*, inscription to H.L. Mencken]

Murder your darlings.

UNDERSTATEMENT

Cut out all these exclamation points. An exclamation point is like laughing at your own joke.

Of course restrained emotion and understatement are valuable in writing. And never forget to listen to the way people talk.

WIT

The victor belongs to the spoils.

Nothing is as obnoxious as other people's luck

Our lives are defined by opportunities, even the ones we miss.

I like large parties. They're so intimate. At small parties there isn't any privacy.

MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS

Writers aren't people exactly. Or, if they're any good, they're a whole lot of people trying so hard to be one person.

An artist is someone who can hold two opposing viewpoints and still remain fully functional.

Life is much more successfully looked at from a single window.

IMPRESSIONISM

Nancy had a mouth like a remembered kiss.

You're the only girl I've seen for a long time that actually did look like something blooming.

It was only a sunny smile, and little it cost in the giving, but like morning light it scattered the night and made the day worth living.

There was a jauntiness about her movements as if she had first learned to walk upon a golf course on clean, crisp mornings.

It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again.

A stirring warmth flowed from her, as if her heart was trying to come out to you concealed in one of those breathless, thrilling words.

For a moment the last sunshine fell with romantic affection upon her glowing face, her voice compelled me forward breathlessly as I listened—then the glow faded, each light deserting her with lingering regret, like children leaving a pleasant street at dusk.

The Montana sunset lay between the mountains like a giant bruise from which darkened arteries spread across a poisoned sky.

In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars.

Then, as though it had been waiting on a nearby roof for their arrival, the moon came slanting suddenly through the vines and turned the girl's face the color of white roses.

We walked through a high hallway into a bright rosy-colored space, fragilely bound into the house by French windows at either end. The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea. The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor. [*Gatsby*]

Wedging his tense arm imperatively under mine, Tom Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square.

EXPRESSIONISM

Her voice was full of money.

He dispensed starlight to casual moths.

The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high.

So he waited, listening for a moment longer to the tuning-fork that had been struck upon a star.

The invitation to Miss Myra St. Claire's bobbing party spent the morning in his coat pocket, where it had an intense affair with a dusty piece of peanut brittle.

The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the washstand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace.

I see it as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lusterless moon.

He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL

Sometimes I don't know whether I'm real or whether I'm a character in one of my novels.

My characters are all Scott Fitzgerald. Even my feminine characters are feminine Scott Fitzgeralds.

DRINKING AND WRITING

What people are ashamed of usually makes a good story.

When I drink, it heightens my emotions and I put it in a story. But then it becomes hard to keep reason and emotion balanced. My stories written when sober are stupid—like the fortune-telling one. It was all reasoned out, not felt.

STATUS

Your pride is all you have, and if you let it be tampered with by a man [any book reviewer] who has a dozen prides to tamper with before lunch, you are promising yourself a lot of disappointment that a hard-boiled professional has learned to spare himself.

I had been generally acknowledged for several years as the top American writer both seriously and, as far as prices went, popularly.... I honestly believed that *with no effort on my part* I was a sort of magician with words—an odd delusion when I had worked so desperately hard to develop a hard, colorful prose style.

[In the end he considered himself] at the top of the second class.

And so we beat on, books against the critics, borne back ceaselessly into rewrites.

EXISTENTIALISM

The world only exists in your eyes. You can make it as big or as small as you want.

DEATH

To die so completely and unjustly, after having given so much. Even now there is little published in American fiction that doesn't slightly bare my stamp—in a *small* way I was an original.

Get out of town, Lily Sheil [his lover the columnist Sheila Graham], or you'll be dead in 24 hours... Leave town or your body will be found in Coldwater Canyon.

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 Digitalis to keep the heart working to the next day.

You know, I used to have a beautiful talent once, Baby.

I almost fainted at Schwab's. Everything started to fade.

