

The life and literature of f scott fitzgerald

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR The Life and Literature of F. Scott Fitzgerald By Jillian Thompson May 16, 2012. English newspaper, The Guardian, once asked Jonathan Franzen, the Pulitzer Prize nominated author of *The Corrections*, to contribute what he believed were the greatest rules to abide by for aspiring fiction writers. His response was “ Fiction that isn't an author's personal adventure into the frightening or the unknown isn't worth writing for anything but money” (Franzen). The novels of Francis Scott Fitzgerald suggest that he would agree wholeheartedly with Franzen.

In his Notebooks, Fitzgerald wrote, “ There never was a good biography of a good novelist. There couldn't be. He's too many people if he's any good” (Fitzgerald 61). Fictionalizing emotions and backgrounds are an unparalleled resource to writers, and some of the greatest stories in literature have grown from the personal lives of novelists. Dickens' *David Copperfield*, Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms*, and Kerouac's *On the Road* are famed illustrations of autofiction techniques, featuring a protagonist that has been modeled after the author, and a central plotline that mirrors the events of their lives.

A close examination of the known facts of Scott Fitzgerald's life is enough to establish that there is a profound relationship between his personal dispositions and the subject matter of his novels. It is also fair to conclude that he was deeply concerned with class, wealth, and their effect on the corruption of “ The American Dream. ” The novels and short stories of Scott Fitzgerald are documents that illustrate the hazy and glamorous Jazz Age, and had Fitzgerald's own life been any less hazy and glamorous, some of

America's greatest literature may not have come to pass. THE LIFE OF SCOTT FITZGERALD

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born September 24th, 1896 in St Paul, Minnesota, the only son to middle class parents, Edward and Mary Fitzgerald. His parents instilled him with a fear of failure, and an obsession with wealth that would haunt his life's ambitions. At an early age, he proved himself an imaginative and talented writer, and despite some academic struggles, he was accepted to Princeton in 1913. Intent on following his family's advice, Fitzgerald dedicated himself to the pursuit of social and intellectual attainments, the path he believed would lead him to fame and fortune.

He joined any extracurricular activity that he believed would increase his social standing on campus, but the beginning of WWI put an end to any possible fruition of his efforts. He left Princeton for the army in 1917, and was stationed at Camp Sheridan in Montgomery, Alabama, where he began work on a novella called *The Romantic Egotist*. It was also there that he met the woman who would change the course of his life forever. Her name was Zelda Sayre, the "golden girl", and in her, Fitzgerald met his match in both ambition and extravagance.

They had a whirlwind romance, but in the summer of 1919, Zelda grew tired of waiting for his success, and ended their relationship. Devastated by her rejection, he moved back to St. Paul, more determined than ever to become rich enough to win Zelda back. He rewrote *The Romantic Egotist* and in a letter to his publisher wrote, "I have so many things dependent on its success—including of course a girl" (Bryer and Barks 149). In 1920 *This Side*

of Paradise was published. The novel was an overnight sensation with postwar youth, and two weeks later Fitzgerald and Zelda were married.

They became the icons of success and youth, the first “ it” couple if there ever was one, but the tumultuous beginning of their relationship never quite faded away. He and Zelda lived far outside their means, and Fitzgerald continually sunk into debt. Zelda’s impulsiveness, once interpreted as charming, had become erratic, and emotionally draining for Fitzgerald and his writing suffered. While living in Europe, Zelda overdosed on sleeping pills, and flung herself down a flight of stairs in a jealous fit. Fitzgerald had Zelda institutionalized, and she was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Fitzgerald’s dream of his muse had become a nightmare, and he worked through his emotions the way he always had, through writing, and *Tender is the Night* was the result. Fitzgerald died of a heart attack in 1940, while writing his final novel, *The Last Tycoon*. Zelda died not long after, locked in a room awaiting treatment as the sanitarium set fire. They are buried together, with a shared headstone that quotes the final words of Fitzgerald’s masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*. “ So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (172). FITZGERALD AND THE JAZZ AGE

Perhaps the most vivid and poetic character of any Fitzgerald novel is “ The Jazz Age” itself. The historical backdrop of the glamorous world of Flappers and speakeasies that’s envisioned when one thinks of the “ Roaring Twenties”, make the perfect canvas for Fitzgerald to place his characters, who share Fitzgerald’s own conflicted feelings on Jazz Age morals. *The Great Gatsby* and *This Side of Paradise* both center on the theme of love warped by

status seeking. They can be read as harsh criticisms of 1920s America, and its disintegration during an era defined by material excess.

With the end of WWI the American economy soared and brought about an era, from 1920-1931, which was marked by unprecedented national wealth and prosperity. The rise of the stock market and the shock of the war left America with a generation that compensated for the chaos by creating a society centered on materialism. People began to spend and consume like never before. The conservatism and modest values of Victorian society that marked the previous generation were too suffocating for the youth who grew up fast during the " Great Crusade. A person from any background now had the opportunity to earn a fortune, especially if they were helping to supply the demand for bootleg liquor, such as Jay Gatsby was. But this giddiness was short lived, and after the stock market crash, those that had enjoyed the rapid succession from penniless to millionaire as a bootlegger, quickly lost everything as the economy crumbled. Even before the stock market crash, Fitzgerald portrayed the decay of the Jazz Age as the self-consuming society of excess that couldn't possibly be sustained through its greed and cynicism. Fitzgerald always idolized the luxurious lifestyle of the rich.

As the Fitzgerald's fame rose in the early 1920s, he found himself slowly being seduced by the opulence of his newfound life. But despite the excitement of his new life, Fitzgerald struggled with the mixed feelings of hypocrisy associated with falling in love with a girl who was everything he'd ever dreamed of, but who led him toward the materialism he had once despised. Fitzgerald developed his characters as representations of these inner conflicts. Arthur Mizener, Fitzgerald's most noted biographer, wrote

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that Fitzgerald's work so perfectly defined the Jazz Age because Fitzgerald infused both sides of himself into what Mizener called "the middle-western Trimalchio and the spoiled priest" (297). The symbol of the green light on Daisy Buchanan's dock in *The Great Gatsby* represents Fitzgerald's hope for the future, but also the awareness that it may never be realized. Writing *The Great Gatsby* allowed Fitzgerald to confront his feelings on the superficiality of his world and its inhabitants. Even the title *The Great Gatsby* is a reflection on the Jazz Age as a masterful illusion. THE AUTHOR AND THE HERO The heart of any study on Scott Fitzgerald is of course his work.

However, Fitzgerald wrote only about himself and the people and places with which he was familiar, therefore his life and his work are inextricably bound together. "There were four or five Zeldas and at least eight Scotts," as James Thurber once put it in his book *Credos and Curios*, "so that their living room was forever tense with the presence of a dozen desperate personalities, even when they were alone in it. Some of these Fitzgeralds' were characters out of a play or a novel, which made the lives of the multiple pair always theatrical, sometimes unreal, and often badly overacted" (63).

In fact, reading *This Side of Paradise* is like reading a biography of Fitzgerald. A young man from the Midwest serves in the army, falls in love with a rich socialite, and they break up, leading him to search for success by any means available. Jay Gatsby and Amory Blaine, the young dandy protagonists of *The Great Gatsby* and *This Side of Paradise*, pursue and glorify wealth to win the affections of the woman they love, much like Fitzgerald himself did to win Zelda Sayre.

Gatsby and Blaine are perpetually romantic adolescents whose lives are based on the mistaken idea that enough money and fame can keep the love and beauty of the past crystallized forever. The romanticism of Gatsby and Blaine, which at first rises above the frivolity Fitzgerald associated with Jazz Age society, eventually disintegrates to unveil the corruption wealth causes. The Great Gatsby's narrator, Nick Carraway, is a young man from the Midwest with an Ivy League education, exactly like Fitzgerald.

Nick's background makes him an ideal narrator because he is able to see past Gatsby's superficialities to the man underneath. Fitzgerald uses Nick to express his opinion that an ideal based on a materialistic foundation is a self-defeating and ultimately destructive goal. Then lastly, there's the girl. The object of all-consuming affection. Fitzgerald's muse for his female protagonist was of course his wife, Zelda. In fact, she was more than just a muse. After sharing her personal diaries with Fitzgerald, he used verbatim quotes to write the character of Rosalind Connage in *This Side of Paradise*.

He wrote, " all criticism of Rosalind ends in her beauty" (Bryer and Barks 201) and told Zelda " the heroine does resemble you in more ways than four" (230). Like Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, Zelda never took to motherhood and was never particularly domestic. According to Fitzgerald's Notebooks, the famous line from *The Great Gatsby*, " I hope she'll be a fool-- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool" (Fitzgerald 22), is based on what Zelda said after her daughter, Scottie, was born. The most accurate portrayal of Zelda is most likely in *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald's last completed novel.

This is a story of a man of almost limitless potential who makes the fatal decision to marry a beautiful but mentally ill woman, and who ultimately sinks into despair and alcoholism when their doomed marriage fails. He wrote it about their time in Europe, and the Lost Generation community of writers, a term coined by Fitzgerald's close friend Ernest Hemmingway to describe those who came of age during World War 1, including Gertrude Stein, T. S Eliot and Waldo Peirce. In the novel, he chronicled the decline of Zelda's mentalhealth, and his discovery that she would never return to the way she was.

The Zelda in this novel not was the glorified beauty of *This Side of Paradise* or *The Great Gatsby*, and she a wrote a semi-autobiographical account of her own as a form of revenge against Fitzgerald after their marriage dissolved. After she was committed, Fitzgerald wrote in his Notebook, " In an odd way, perhaps incredible to you, she was always my child (it was not reciprocal as it often is in marriages) ... I was her great reality, often the only liaison agent who could make the world tangible to her" (478). " SO WE BEAT ON..." (Fitzgerald, 172)

The beginning of *The Great Gatsby* is prefaced by a poem written by a fictional character from *This Side of Paradise*. It reads, Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her; If you can bounce high, bounce for her too, Till she cry ' Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover, I must have you! (6) If the words of Jonathan Franzen are true, then it can be assumed that Fitzgerald's greatest adventure into the unknown was his relationship with Zelda. Their relationship became the basis of his life's work, which made him one of the greatest storytellers American literature has known to date.