

ABSTRACT

The Age of Epic Grandeur: F. Scott Fitzgerald and America's Cultural Memory of the 1920's

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F. Scott Fitzgerald is remembered as one of the most candid and influential writers of his era, the "Roaring Twenties." From the swinging parties to the increased use of the automobile, Fitzgerald chronicled the dramatic social changes that were occurring during one of the most memorable periods in American history. But how far was his fiction from actual fact? Fitzgerald saw the world of the 1920s through an upper class lens and glamorized the lifestyle of the wealthy youth who partook in the swinging life of the Jazz Age. And because Fitzgerald saw the 1920s through such a narrow lens, his stories only reflect the experience of one class. As such, Fitzgerald has influenced the modern understanding of the 1920s because he focused on one social group, leaving present-day readers to accept his chronicle as the norm for the day. With an analysis of the social history of the 1920's, we as modern Americans can clearly see how skewed Fitzgerald's interpretation is and how little we really know about the era as a whole.

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THE AGE OF EPIC GRANDEUR: F. SCOTT FITZGERALD AND AMERICA'S CULTURAL
MEMORY OF THE 1920'S

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Influence of the Romantic Egoist

Fredrick Lewis Allen called the 1920s the era of “youth in revolt.” (Allen 76) Women’s skirts were getting shorter, men and women were smoking and drinking together for the first time, and the car was providing a new measure of freedom for the youth away from their strict Victorian parents. Dating and parties replaced the old system of courting and calling, and the Protestant parents of the younger generation, alarmed by reports of petting parties and other immoral behavior, worried about their children’s salvation (Bailey 13). Jazz music was sweeping the country, from New Orleans northward, and became the soundtrack for one of the most memorable decades in American history. As F. Scott Fitzgerald himself described it the essay “My Lost City,” “The parties were bigger, the pace was faster, and the morals were looser” (Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, 23).

In many ways, F. Scott Fitzgerald came along at just the right time in American history, just as the 1920s began to roar. On the one hand the 1920s produced an extremely talented, albeit arrogant, young writer obsessed with the idea of celebrity and wealth, and simultaneously there emerged a fast-paced culture of consumers who constantly craved new ideas and innovations. Luckily for the 1920s American reader, F. Scott Fitzgerald constantly published short stories when he was not publishing his novels.

Those short stories, mostly published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, shocked conservative parents around the country who were unaware that their children were engaging in activities like kissing and binge drinking in mixed company. But the youth, liberated from the confines of their parents' front parlor experienced the world without the same constrained outlook on sex and morality. And the more Fitzgerald wrote about this new swinging lifestyle, the more his readers bought the literary magazine and they came to believe his interpretation of the social changes as acceptable behavior. Fitzgerald glamorized and glorified this behavior. Even to this day, we accept Fitzgerald's account of the 1920s as an accurate reflection of the era, though historical facts suggest that the day was much less glamorous than Fitzgerald made it seem.

Perhaps without even realizing it, Fitzgerald had stumbled upon his most meaningful contribution not only to American literature but also to our understanding of the culture of the 1920's. Seizing the opportunity to write about the culture of his generation and the social changes that were taking place, Fitzgerald became famous for his gripping literature about the Roaring Twenties. Contrary to Fitzgerald's depiction, the decade that many Americans remember for its swinging parties and loose mores was actually much more complex and multi-dimensional than is sometimes recorded in our history books. As a country, the United States underwent an identity crisis in the 1920's: having come out of the First World War, the most brutal war up until that point, the youth found themselves struggling to make sense of America's place as a civilization while

struggling with the rapid developments that were taking place in the sciences and in philosophical thought.

When he wrote his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald was already having dreams of fame and riches, especially because he was aware of his budding talent from his days as a writer for his boarding school literary magazine and collegiate thespian societies. But Fitzgerald's antics and attitude made him infamous rather than famous among the literary community. The celebrated literary critic Edmund Wilson, and friend of Fitzgerald's, even recalled how another writer described Fitzgerald as being like a "stupid old woman with whom someone has left a diamond; she is extremely proud of that diamond and shows it to everyone who comes by, and everyone is surprised that such an ignorant old woman should possess such a valuable jewel." (Wilson 30). Fitzgerald may have been remembered by the masses for his writings but those who knew him personally remembered him for his unshakable pride.



Fig. 1.1, A portrait of the young author.

The grand dreams Fitzgerald conjured up were such that when he joined the army after his days at Princeton University, which he left before graduating, he

hoped to write an immortal novel that would leave its mark on the world. A successful writing career also meant that Fitzgerald could marry the love of his life and settle down to a comfortable lifestyle. When he missed his chance to serve in active combat overseas in the First World War, Fitzgerald decided instead to base his novels on what he knew best: the lifestyle of an upper-middle class youth plagued by failures of various sorts who were struggling to find purpose and meaning in life. Fitzgerald's first novel was so autobiographical that the final line of dialogue in the story revealed more about the author than at first glance: Fitzgerald rants his frustration through the guise of his protagonist Amory Blaine in proclaiming "'I know myself' he cried, 'but that is all'" (Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, 261). Likewise, Fitzgerald is a more complex man than he has been generalized to be, as his critical essays and reflections reveal.

Fitzgerald is often credited by present-day literary critics for effectively preserving the thoughts, struggles and culture of the American public during the tumultuous 1920's. It is more accurate to say that Fitzgerald documented and preserved the culture of the upper and middle class American youth (teenage to mid-twenties) who were experiencing an identity crisis as their Protestant upbringings were being challenged by, and came into conflict with, the new trends and discoveries in several areas of American culture, as noted by Warren Susman in his analytical work *Culture as History* (Susman 106). But when we look further into the reason why Fitzgerald chose such a narrow focus when writing, it is hinted to us as readers that Fitzgerald may have chosen to write about the upper class because he was criticizing something lacking in their nature. In general, Fitzgerald's

treatment of his heroes reveals that they did not have the resourcefulness and perseverance, due to their privileged upbringings, to escape tragic circumstances and ultimate failure. Fitzgerald's tantalizing focus on one class of American citizens and their lifestyles, however, left an impression on Americans who then accept this narrow interpretation of the decade and apply it to all people who lived through the 1920's.

As a society, Americans tend to refer to the literature of an era to understand the complex thought processes that were taking place. Author Thomas Cummings expounds on this phenomenon and why it is important that we study American literature to understand the past, and how "literature functions throughout time as a decoder of the causes and the effects that characterized a period of time" (Cummings 1). This method in itself is often acknowledged as a legitimate way by which to examine the events of history, though there are many problems with using literature to examine history.



Fig. 1.2, Tom Hiddleston portrays F. Scott Fitzgerald in the film *Midnight in Paris* (2011).

The downside of using literature as a trustworthy source is that most writers tend to present a skewed and romanticized version of the truth that is accepted as

fact by later consumers of that literature. And even today, Fitzgerald is everywhere. *The Great Gatsby* has been adapted into movie versions several times, the first starred Robert Redford as the title character. The next adaptation is due for release this summer. In Woody Allen's cinematic tour de force, *Midnight in Paris*, English actor Tom Hiddleston, who has an uncanny resemblance to the infamous author, portrays Fitzgerald in all of his partying, drunken glory. Fitzgerald's masterpiece short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" was also adapted into a successful movie, with Brad Pitt playing the cursed title character doomed to live life backwards.

Beyond the cinema, American students still enjoy the novels of Fitzgerald in their regular curriculum. Since most American students and intellectuals have read the work of Fitzgerald, whether it be *The Great Gatsby* or *The Beautiful and Damned*, or even "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," they tend to accept a view of the 1920s that is glamorous, sexy, and sophisticated. In actuality, the 1920s was an opulent era for only the select few.

This study seeks to prove that Fitzgerald unduly influenced the modern American impression of 1920s popular culture because his writings focused on the lifestyles of the upper classes and not, in fact, on the entire American experience of the decade. Though Fitzgerald's ultimate goal may have been to provide a critique of the shallow personalities of the upper classes, his work has come to be celebrated for his descriptions of glamorous parties, copious consumption of illegal liquor, and of course the infamous "petting parties." Fitzgerald's depiction of the 1920s is still so prevalent in American culture that Baz Luhrmann is producing a big-budget

adaptation of the *Great Gatsby* starring Leonardo DiCaprio as the title character, Tobey McGuire as the narrator Nick Carraway, and Carey Mulligan as the trapped siren Daisy Buchanan. The still prevalent popularity of Fitzgerald's stories perpetuates a distorted interpretation of the 1920s.



Fig. 1.3, Movie poster for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2009).

Because his writings focused on such a specific social group, twenty-first century Americans looking back on the era generalize and accept this glamorized portrayal of the population in the higher classes as universal truth, though Fitzgerald neglected both the working class population, the agrarian populations, as well as the older Protestant core who were attempting to preserve the conservative culture of the previous decades. Perhaps it was not Fitzgerald's intention to give later generations such a glittering picture of the 1920s, but then again, maybe it was. It would also not be reaching too far to assert that Fitzgerald was writing his novels to appeal to the wealthier classes themselves in order to sell his works and to find

patronage with the aristocratic consumers who were the taste-and-trendsetters of the decade.

In order to see just how Fitzgerald influenced American's perception of the 1920s, this study's research will focus on the experience of the author and why his interpretation of the events is suspect, coupled with an analysis of the actual trends that were taking place during the late 1910s leading through the 1920s. Additionally there will be a section analyzing the main characters presented in Fitzgerald's fictions. But the study will also include a detailed analysis of the themes presented by Fitzgerald in the novels and short stories he published while living through the 1920s along with an analysis of some of his non-fiction essays, which reveal his purpose behind writing those stories. Finally, this study will reveal that Fitzgerald's purpose behind writing his novels has been generally misrepresented, and it will show how he dealt with specific themes and characters. Furthermore the analysis will reveal that the author believed those characters to be unworthy of success and how their inadequacies of personal character lead to their own demise.

That being said, we will explore the infamous era that was the 1920s and the life and writings of one of America's most influential writers, to determine if fact is, in reality, far from fiction.

CHAPTER TWO

Fitzgerald's "High-Brow" World

Before one can fully understand how and why Fitzgerald chose his subject matter and why that is important, the discussion must begin with an analysis of the writer himself and his background information. This task, however, is much more difficult than initial appearances prove. Understanding the complicated personality that was Fitzgerald is about as difficult as it is to understand the 1920s as a collective era. Fitzgerald's life was full of the very same contradictions that characterized the Jazz Age as a whole. Fitzgerald's experience during the 1920s would not be complete without a history of his marriage to Zelda Sayre, the woman he would use as a model for his heroines. Their marriage would define their experience of the 1920's, and like the collapse of the American economy on Black Tuesday of 1929, their cantankerous marriage and partying ways led to a steady decline that ultimately ruined them both.

Fitzgerald was a complicated man. In his reflective essays, he had no qualms about emphasizing his own importance as a writer, yet he understood his vulnerability as a man and a father who struggled to earn a living to feed his family. Moreover, he was constantly gripped by a fear of poverty and failure. Fitzgerald also found it very difficult to overturn the attitudes he had cultivated as an educated elite when it came to saving money. Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda struggled with finances for most of their married life because the beautiful couple, intoxicated by

their own fame, spent their money indiscriminately and without regard for their future (Fitzgerald, *A Short Autobiography*, 37). And as he was writing stories about the moral decline of his generation, Fitzgerald, who was raised a Catholic, would feel some guilt as he wrote about the immoral pastimes of the youth around him. His faith was saved and reaffirmed by his close relationship with the priest Father Sigourney Fay, who corresponded with Fitzgerald for most of his adolescent years and while he was in the Army (Mizener 71). Taking advantage of the post-war years to gather as much material as possible, Fitzgerald hoped he was setting himself up for eventual success. The young author would also experience failure later in his career due to the struggle between his own great expectations of his talent and the actual reception of his work by the reading public. His upbringing colored his fiction, as did his experiences during the 1920's.



Fig. 2.1, Fitzgerald, age three.

Fitzgerald had a fairly normal upbringing in the high society of St. Paul, Minnesota. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born into a well-to-do family in St. Paul, in 1896, and his family and friends affectionately knew him as “Scott.” (Turnbull 7) The future author was named after his famous extended relation, Francis Scott Key, the author of our national anthem. A very traditional Irish family, the Fitzgeralds raised their son in the Catholic Church and took him to attend mass regularly.

Despite both of his parents coming from successful business families and “claiming past[s] that were brighter than their present,” Fitzgerald’s parents found it rather difficult to maintain their standard of living (Miller 4). Edward and Mary (“Mollie”) McQuillan Fitzgerald experienced a series of misfortunes early in their marriage that made the young family fear for their place in society in St. Paul and impacted their young son by making him fearful of poverty. The Fitzgeralds’ two eldest children, both daughters, died before Scott was born, and Edward constantly struggled to find employment as a salesman for Procter & Gamble (Miller 4). Though he was born into a middle class family, Edward could not boast of family wealth nor did he have the business mind to keep shops functioning as successful businesses. Edward Fitzgerald often had to rely on connections through his wife’s family to find a stable source of income. Scott, though he loved his father, was often frustrated that he could not sustain the type of lifestyle that he saw the other children of their community enjoying (Rielly 2).

When Scott was a toddler, Edward’s wicker furniture business failed and the family moved from upstate New York to St. Paul to be near Molly’s family, the very

wealthy grocery store dynasty, the McQuillans (Miller 4). Even when his father's failed business ventures cost the young family huge amounts of money, the Fitzgeralds could rely on the McQuillan fortune to keep them from destitution. Fortunately for future literature, none of these early struggles curbed Scott's love for reading and writing. If anything, these early experiences helped in adulthood to spur the author into writing enough material to keep himself from poverty.



Fig. 2.2, Scott and his father, Edward (1899).

After moving to St. Paul, the Fitzgeralds settled into the McQuillan family home in the fashionable community of Summit Avenue. It was there, among the old families of St. Paul where Scott's "personality quickly asserted itself" (Turnbull 19). Fitzgerald was cocky and confident, traits that the other boys found irritating and the girls found irresistible. Quickly popular among the other children of the community, the future author captured the hearts of the young girls, several of which "confessed that he was their favorite boy" (Turnbull 19).

To further his education, the Fitzgeralds sent young Scott to the St. Paul Academy, a private school attended by the children of wealthy St. Paul residents (Mizener 16). During Scott's time at the Academy, C.N. Wheeler, one of his English professors, noticed how the handsome and quick-witted Scott "wasn't popular with his school-mates" mostly because "he saw through them too much and wrote about it" (Turnbull 20). While his peers appreciated, or politely ignored, Scott's theatricality and eccentricities, his vivacious personality "was coupled with an attitude more difficult to ignore—a vague cockiness and aggressiveness as if to say 'I'm not much now, but wait and see'" (Turnbull 21). Scott would use all of his experiences at boarding school in his first novel, for which he was already taking notes in his journal, which he called his "Thought Book." Though he found it more difficult to connect with the other boys of his class, "girls, as a rule, liked Fitzgerald," and he liked them in return (Turnbull 24). In his maturity, Fitzgerald would come to enjoy the company of liberated women and would often write about them.

From an early age young Scott's talent as a storyteller was obvious and difficult to control. Instead of doing his schoolwork, young Scott instead wrote short stories for hours in the back of his mathematics and geometry textbooks and refused to do his assigned lessons (Mizener 20). He indulged his love for writing by submitting stories to the school magazine and having his stories published. But writing took up too much of his time and Fitzgerald's frustrated parents decided that their son "needed disciplining" and concluded that sending him East to boarding school would teach Scott the necessary discipline (Turnbull 31). The Fitzgeralds decided the most suitable place for their son would be the Newman

School, a small Catholic preparatory school in New Jersey, which attracted the sons “from wealthy Catholic families all over the country” (Turnbull 32). Given the Fitzgerald’s poor financial standing, a wealthy spinster aunt, Annabel McQuillan, agreed to pay for Scott’s tuition. She would also fund Fitzgerald’s education at Princeton after prep school (Miller 4).

It was at the Newman School where young Scott also learned the social value of being accomplished in sports. Not wanting to fall into obscurity, Fitzgerald joined the football team but had little real talent for the game. Always a slight and delicate young boy, Fitzgerald had short legs that made him an awkward runner and “being a bit clumsy on his feet he often seemed on the verge of falling” (Turnbull 38). But Fitzgerald played with all the ferocity he could muster, and was accepted at least provisionally by the other boys on the team. Scott was known, however, to sometimes fall victim to his own cowardice and could not be trusted with the important plays of the game.

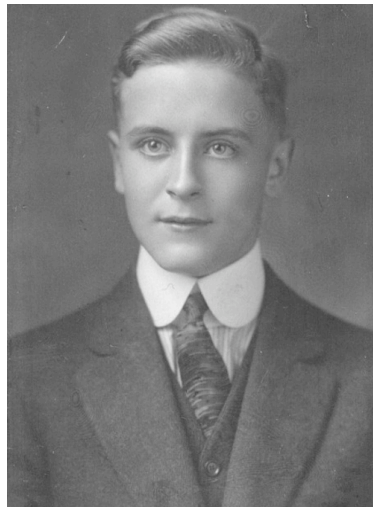


Fig. 2.3, Fitzgerald, age sixteen.

Though Newman was only an educational stepping stone to Scott, his time there would give him the most influential mentor and friend he would come to know in his youth; someone who helped him curb his attitude of superiority. That person was Father Sigourney Webster Fay, a trustee of the Newman School. Father Fay was portly, jolly, good-natured, and had an infectious love for life and stimulating conversations (Turnbull 39). Fay and Fitzgerald quickly became friends and spent a good deal of time in each other's company, discussing faith, philosophy, and other subjects. Fay also sometimes served as a proofreader for Fitzgerald and recognizing the blossoming talent in his young pupil, encouraged Scott to continue writing.

When reminiscing about his boarding school days, Fitzgerald admits that going away to school made the situation worse, but not because he did not have the opportunity to write. In fact, Fitzgerald wrote and published several short stories for Newman's school newspaper (Mizener 18). Even though he spent a great amount of time reading in the libraries, Fitzgerald earned only satisfactory marks in all of his classes since none of what he read or wrote was his assigned schoolwork. As one of his classmates observed, Scott "got poor grades because he read so many books" (Turnbull 42).

Now, out from under the watchful eye of his mother and father, Scott was free to be distracted and wrote stories unchecked. But, given his tendency to be influenced by his peers, Fitzgerald took on the "silly ideas" of the other boys at school and decided that he should go to college just like all of the others (Fitzgerald, *A Short Autobiography*, 53). Fitzgerald thought these ideas silly because they were

not his own. Instead of going to college, he wanted to go straight into writing on a more regular basis for his career. But he was also compelled to conform. One of the traits that Fitzgerald allowed to influence him during his time away at boarding school was his politician-like desire for everyone to like and accept him as a superior intellectual. Scott, however, found himself blindly conforming to the norms and socially acceptable behavior of the other youths, even though he believed the other boys, in his own words, to be “dull” (Fitzgerald, *A Short Autobiography*, 1). Consequently, instead of writing his own thoughts and ideas, Scott would write to please the popular crowd in school. This trait would later influence the subject matter he chose as an established writer.



Fig. 2.4, Father Sigourney Fay.

When it came time to choose where to go to college, Fitzgerald narrowed his choices to Yale and Princeton. After reading a script from Princeton’s thespian organization, the Triangle Club, Fitzgerald became enamored with the idea of attending Princeton and writing scripts for the Club (Mizener 26). With his mind made up, the Fitzgeralds and the McQuillans sent Scott off to school with high hopes

that he would perform much better academically than he had in boarding school. While at Princeton, Scott met and became friends with the future literary critic Edmund Wilson and the young poet John Beale Pope.

In later years, Fitzgerald recalled how he spent his freshman year using all of his energy writing a play worthy of being accepted by the Triangle Club. In order to finish the play, Fitzgerald failed most of his classes and even neglected his hygiene and personal health (Turnbull 49). His script was accepted, however, and he was invited to play a small part in the show. Fitzgerald's second year of school was spent in much the same way, though poor health kept compounded his inability to improve his grades and once again he failed most of his courses. Scott was also recovering from a failed relationship with the debutante, Ginevra King, who refused to marry the young writer because of his limited prospects (Turnbull 54). At a party in Ginevra's house in Lake Forest outside of Chicago, Fitzgerald overheard Ginevra's friends commenting on how "Poor boys should not think of marrying rich girls" (Miller 5). The discouraged Scott returned to school and Ginevra's letters became much less frequent and then stopped altogether (Miller 5). Distraught, Fitzgerald left school but would return at the beginning of the next semester.

By his junior year, Fitzgerald decided to focus his energy on poetry and set himself to publish a book of poetry before he turned twenty-one years old because, as he put it, "every great poet had written great poetry before he was twenty-one" (Fitzgerald 2). Due to his poor grades, Scott was ineligible to participate in the Triangle Club on an official basis though he continued to write stories and lyrics for their productions. Fitzgerald continued to fail his classes and was placed on

academic probation (Rielly 15). With graduation unlikely and Scott's unwillingness to seek out tutors to help him improve his grades, Fitzgerald dropped out of Princeton and enlisted in the Army. The war, as it turns out, saved Fitzgerald from complete academic failure and expulsion from school, something much more demoralizing and embarrassing than dropping out to enlist in the Army.

As the First World War raged on in Europe toward the end of 1917, Fitzgerald reported for duty at the Officer's Training Camp at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (Turnbull 78). The captain in charge of Fitzgerald's company was a good-natured, wide-grinned young captain with bright blue eyes named Dwight David Eisenhower (Miller 5). But before he was to leave for Europe, Fitzgerald was determined to leave behind a work of fiction that would preserve his place in history. In his possession at Ft. Leavenworth was a manuscript he had begun at Princeton, a novel called *The Romantic Egoist* (Rielly 19). Fitzgerald had a feeling that this was the novel that would make him famous. The novel would use all of Fitzgerald's experiences at boarding school and at Princeton to detail a coming of age story that would be popular among the reading consumers. Fitzgerald hoped to target his own generation and sell to them a chronicle of their development, thus making him a financial success.

First Lieutenant Fitzgerald wrote feverishly every spare moment he could afford, after his training and during his time off on the weekends, determined to leave behind an "immortal novel" about a "somewhat edited history of me and my imagination"(Fitzgerald 2). Due to his romantic and idealistic view of authorship, Fitzgerald adhered "to the conception of the writer as a man of action who

experiences his material first hand—not from lack of imagination, but so he can write about it more intensely” (Turnbull 75). Fitzgerald’s empirical philosophy about writing would get him into trouble quite often in the future, for he never stopped collecting ideas for stories and he never quit looking for new experiences and sensations.



Fig. 2.5, 1st Lieutenant Fitzgerald in uniform.

After receiving his officer’s commission, Fitzgerald reported to Camp Sheridan outside of Montgomery, Alabama, and sent his book off to the publishers at Charles Scribner’s Sons in New York City (Mizener 75). Lieutenant Fitzgerald, satisfied that he had written a novel and confident that his work would change the face of American literature, “went to his regiment happy” and “the war could go on” (Fitzgerald, *A Short Autobiography*, 3). While stationed in Alabama, Scott attended a country club dance and was introduced to the spoiled and exuberant Zelda Sayre, the daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge (Mizener 74). Zelda was the picture of perfection in Scott’s eyes. Zelda was a flapper by definition, and Scott loved flappers. She was “supple and boyish...the very incarnation of a Southern

belle...gracious and feminine,” coupled with her bobbed blonde hair and arresting blue eyes (Turnbull 86). She was a “woman of two cultures: the traditional, genteel culture of the Old South; and the world of the new woman of ambition, independence, and iconoclasm” (Rielly 25). Zelda’s flaw, however, was that she “was lazy” and had a “lack of discipline” which made her detest the simplest household chores (Turnbull 86).

Madly in love, Fitzgerald proposed to Zelda. Scott had finally found a woman whose “uninhibited love of life rivaled his own and whose daring, originality, and repartee would never bore him” (Turnbull 87). Zelda, with cautioning advice from her levelheaded parents, delayed her decision because she was in love with the romantic author but had doubts about his future.

Once again, Fitzgerald would be denied an opportunity to show his worth. Just as he and his company were boarding a transport carrier that was to ship them to war in Europe, Fitzgerald and his company were ordered to leave the ship (Turnbull 89). The Armistice had been signed. The Great War was over. Also, Scribner’s had rejected his novel but his manuscript caught the eye of an influential young editor named Maxwell Perkins who personally wrote to Fitzgerald how much he enjoyed the story. With no prospects of becoming a war hero or making a career out of the Army, Fitzgerald embarked for New York City with his revised manuscript and some short stories, determined to try again. He took a job at an advertising agency writing taglines for new products and worked on more short stories at night, most of them dealing with the themes of love and money (Mizener 104).

When he visited Montgomery that summer, Zelda had given up hope that Scott would be famous and gave him back the ring he had sent her. Scott, distraught, went back to New York and indulged in “an epic three-weeks’ drunk which provided him with one of the best scene” for his developing novel (Mizener 83). Scott’s binge was only broken by the implementation of Prohibition. Depressed and broke, Scott returned to St. Paul, much to his family’s disappointment, and resigned himself to revise his novel (Turnbull 97). Scott secluded himself in his room for weeks on end, his mother leaving sandwiches and cigarettes by his door so he could work uninterrupted. His parents, sensing their son’s troubled state, restricted his allowance. While he was at Princeton, the Fitzgeralds had “given him all the money he needed, which was only a fraction of the money he wanted, for he dreamed of splurging” (Turnbull 97). Fitzgerald, humiliated by having to return home, feverishly edited and rewrote his novel so that he may “break away from his humiliating dependence” on his family’s money (Turnbull 97).



Fig. 2.6, Zelda Sayre.

In September, Fitzgerald sent his rewritten novel to Scribner's, in the care of Max Perkins, and found employment working for the Northern Pacific Railroad as a railcar repairman. A former coworker recalls how he told Fitzgerald to show up in old clothes that could be ruined and Scott came to work in a polo shirt and white flannels, sticking out like a sore thumb amongst the other workers in ratty overalls and torn boots (Turnbull 99). Two weeks after he sent his novel to Scribner's, Fitzgerald received the letter that would change his life. Max Perkins wrote that the manuscript had been accepted and would be published in the spring. Overjoyed, Scott "ran up and down Summit Avenue stopping cars and telling all his friends and a good many mere acquaintances that his book had been accepted" (Mizener 87).

In its first year, *This Side of Paradise* sold 50,000 copies and went through twelve printings, more than the skeptical publishers at Scribner's had expected. The coming of age story about a boy named Amory, uncannily similar to Scott, was widely popular among consumers in the South and in the West yet sold poorly in the Northeast where the story took place, possibly because Ivy League students were not interested in reading about themselves and their culture had not spread west of the Mississippi River (Brucoli, Smith, and Kerr 61). The novel received generally positive reviews yet many critics were turned off by the "literary pretentiousness" of the writing style and the novel's anticlimactic conclusion (Rielly 36). Those same critics could not deny the originality of the story or the promise and talent of the author.

With his novel accepted and now fairly financially stable, Fitzgerald once again asked Zelda to marry him, and this time she accepted. Exactly one week after

his book hit the shelves, Scott and Zelda were married in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City on April 3, 1920 (Rielly 31). The affair was very modest and very out of character for the young couple. Rosalind Smith, Zelda's oldest sister and matron of honor at the wedding, recalled how the day was "a bare-bones event...no music, photographers, flowers, celebratory meal or friends" (Rielly 31). Only five people attended the wedding and neither set of parents came. One cannot help but think that the debutante from Alabama would have been disappointed with such an unremarkable beginning to her married life. The young author was simply happy to finally have won the woman of his dreams.

Married and happy, the Fitzgeralds began their honeymoon in New York City, where they would be evicted from several hotels for causing disturbances and for destruction of property. Scott and Zelda "were a perfect pair...that is, when they were behaving themselves" (Turnbull 107). For the first year of their marriage, the Fitzgeralds occupied their time with "little work and much partying and heavy drinking" with friends up and down the East Coast (Rielly 39). They rented a house in Connecticut but were evicted after a particularly outrageous party. What's more, Zelda took advantage of her husband's success by spending "lavishly on fine clothes and jewelry" and refused to do basic household chores.



Fig. 2.7, Scott and Zelda, shortly after their marriage.

Perhaps their saving grace, Zelda discovered she was pregnant in early 1921 and the couple was forced to put their partying ways on hold until the child was born (Mizener 136). The Fitzgeralds then decided to travel to Europe but returned after only a month. They found that sightseeing was not as much fun as socializing with their friends in America. Scott even wrote to Edmund Wilson how “France made [him] sick. Its silly pose as the thing the world has to save. I think it’s a shame that England and America didn’t let Germany conquer Europe” (Turnbull, *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, 326).

Brimming with a newfound patriotism and “nationalistic superiority,” the Fitzgeralds returned to America and rented a home on White Bear Lake near St. Paul to await the birth of their child (Turnbull 43). Not willing to completely give up their social lives, however, the Fitzgeralds held parties at their new home and were soon evicted. On October 26, 1921, Zelda gave birth to a daughter they named Frances Scott, and nicknamed her “Scottie” (Rielly 42). With two mouths now to feed and no new income, Scott hastily finished his second novel, *The Beautiful and*

Damned, and traveled with his family to New York where he could finish and publish the novel. Fitzgerald also put together a collection of his short stories and titled it *Tales of the Jazz Age*, which is how the 1920s came to be known as the Jazz Age (Rielly 38).

After being evicted once more from a residence at White Bear Lake, the Fitzgeralds decided to move to Great Neck, Long Island (Mizener 150). The location was ideal for Fitzgerald to work peacefully but it was also only a short drive to New York City should the Fitzgeralds require some distraction. Their time at Great Neck provided Scott with ample material for his next novel, *The Great Gatsby*, because they were surrounded “by famous and wealthy neighbors, luxurious estates” who threw parties worthy of the Fitzgeralds’ approval (Rielly 45). In fact, a large party hosted by the magazine editor Herbert Baynard Swepe provided the details that Scott used in his description of Gatsby’s first party in Chapter 3 of the novel (Rielly 45).

Fitzgerald and his family seemed to be on the top of the world. Scott had just sold the rights to *This Side of Paradise* for adaptation into a movie in March 1923, and he had a play that was going to be produced the following April (Mizener 140). Both projects, however, did not prove successes. The movie was cancelled at the last minute and the play opened badly with terrible reviews. But all was not lost, for Fitzgerald had secured a spot writing short stories for *The Saturday Evening Post*, with the help of his Princeton friend Edmund Wilson, which paid him a handsome \$1,750 for every story he wrote (Mizener 158). Tempted by the promise of a steady income, Fitzgerald neglected writing his novel and wrote ten short stories in the

first three months of 1924. Most of the stories Scott sold to the *Post* tested the themes he was considering for the novel. For instance, the story “The Sensible Thing” dealt with a poor Southern man who falls in love with a wealthy woman who rejects him for his lack of wealth. The young man earns his fortune and returns to claim the woman he loves only to realize that their love “had been lost and that the past cannot be reclaimed” (Rielly 48).

While it was no secret that Scott relied heavily on his life experiences for themes in his fiction, he and Zelda often argued about which experiences belonged to whom. Zelda, an aspiring author herself, hoped to draw on her shared experiences with Scott for her stories but was usually beaten to the finish by her husband, much to her chagrin.



Fig. 2.8, Zelda and Scottie, 1921.

As he revealed in his intimate essay, “How to Live on \$36,000 A Year,” Scott and Zelda found it difficult to manage their finances and desired a more economical living arrangement (Fitzgerald, *A Short Autobiography*, 35). Because he had never paid much attention to finances, “Fitzgerald did not care enough about money to

ever manage it in a businesslike way” (Mizener 127). Putting his dislike for France aside, Scott moved his family to the French Riviera in the summer of 1924. Whatever money they saved on the rent the couple spent extensively “at area restaurants and other night spots...the money went about as rapidly as it did anywhere else” (Rielly 48). The Riviera was also a pivotal moment in the Fitzgeralds’ marriage. Zelda, growing quickly bored, struck up a friendship with a handsome young French airman named Edouard Joze, which quickly developed from a flirtatious relationship into romance (Milford 109). Sara Mayfield, Zelda’s close friend, defended Mrs. Fitzgerald by explaining that Zelda “was looking for some momentary diversion rather than for a passionate attachment” (Milford 110). Scott, after discovering the relationship, would constantly remain suspicious of Zelda for their remaining time in the Riviera. This could also have contributed to Scott’s hasty decision to move his family to Rome in October 1924 (Rielly 48).



Fig. 2.9, Scott and Scottie in Rome (1924).

While in Rome, Scott finally finished his manuscript of *The Great Gatsby*, and sent it to Scribner’s. The Fitzgeralds’ time in Rome was even unhappier than their

time in France for Scott “drank heavily and was involved in an altercation with the police” that landed him in jail. Scott was beaten badly by his arresting officers and had to remain in jail for several days because the U.S. embassy was closed for a holiday and could not intervene on Fitzgerald’s behalf. He would include the incident in his fourth novel, *Tender is the Night*.

Further complications arose when Zelda underwent an operation in late December to allow her to become pregnant but developed a painful infection that caused her discomfort for many months. The operation was intended to repair damage that had been caused by an abortion Zelda had back in 1922 to avoid having two children so close in age (Rielly 41). With his wife ill and the weather in Rome wet and dreary, Scott moved his family to Capri in 1925. Scott continued to write and Zelda found a soothing pastime in painting.

In April 1925, *The Great Gatsby* went on sale in America and yielded earnings for the author just above \$6000 from its first printing. The sale of the novel fell short of “the blockbuster [Fitzgerald] had hoped it would be” (Rielly 50). Despite favorable reviews of the book by respected critics like Conrad Aiken of the *New Criterion* and Gilbert Seldes of *The Dial*, the sales continued to be low.

As the second half of the 1920s began, the social life and marriage of the Fitzgeralds was on course for collapse. Money troubles and their unbridled lack of discipline continued to cause problems between Zelda and Scott. Tiring of quiet Capri and desiring more social interaction, the Fitzgeralds moved to Paris for the spring of 1925. It was there among the bohemian community of American expatriates where the Fitzgeralds met a young Ernest Hemingway and the ever-

maternal Gertrude Stein. Hemingway, changed by the experience, documented his time with the Fitzgeralds in his 1957 work *A Moveable Feast*. Hemingway wrote the book almost thirty years after his meeting with Fitzgerald and some of the details were a bit exaggerated. His account of the fighting between the Fitzgeralds, Scott's inability to hold his liquor and his inappropriate behavior when intoxicated, are in line with descriptions from other acquaintances of Fitzgerald. Hemingway and Fitzgerald quickly became friends. The relationship between Zelda and Hemingway, however, was much less congenial. Hemingway openly commented on how Zelda's jealousy for Scott's talent was keeping the writer from reaching his full potential, while Zelda believed that Hemingway was trying to take advantage of her husband and his connections to editors and other prominent literary figures (Rielly 59).

When the summer of 1925 began, the Fitzgeralds once again sought the sunshine and distractions of the Riviera and moved to the resort at Cap d'Antibes (Mizener 113). While there, the Fitzgeralds met and became close friends with Sara and Gerald Murphy, fellow artists. The Murphys were concerned about the constant bickering that took place between the Fitzgeralds but noticed that Scott and Zelda managed to keep their arguments secret from their daughter, Scottie, and their affection for their daughter was not hampered by their disagreements. In fact, in adulthood Scottie looked back on their time in the Riviera as "especially happy years" (Eleanor Lanahan, Scottie *The Daughter of...The Life of Frances Scott Fitzgerald* Lanahan Smith, 38-40).

Christmas of 1926 found the Fitzgeralds finally back in America. It seems odd that an author who claimed to know so much about the 1920s in America spent so much time abroad during the decade. Leaving his family in Montgomery with the Sayre Family, Scott traveled to Hollywood to resurrect his career as a screenwriter and to earn some desperately needed money. Hired by United Artists, Fitzgerald wrote a script, entitled "Lipstick," in two months (Mizener 205). The script failed to sell and Scott found himself once again writing short stories in order to earn enough money to keep his family comfortable and to maintain their standard of living. Scott knew that if short story writing became his main source of income, he would lose respect as a writer among the literary high brows. He also knew that he would have to write another novel soon, one that would sell more successfully than the last two.

While in Hollywood Scott had become close to a beautiful young actress named Lois Moran, to whom he became very attached (Turnbull 170). The relationship, though never physically consummated, ignited Zelda's fury, literally. In a jealous rage, Zelda burned some of the expensive clothing Scott had given her in their bathtub and threw away a diamond wristwatch Scott had given her for Christmas (Rielly 62).



Fig. 2.10, Fitzgerald at his desk.

In the Spring of 1927, the Fitzgeralds moved to Wilmington, Delaware and achieved a small level of relative normality. They rented a small mansion, called Ellerslie, which was extravagant for a small family but its surrounding gardens provided a place for Scottie to play, for Zelda to paint, and for Scott to write in peace (Turnbull 171). The quiet of Ellerslie was indeed the ideal writing environment for Scott who was beginning a draft of his next novel and hoped to prevent further debt by publishing the book before the end of the year (Mizener 231). What Scott could not prevent, though he would try, was Zelda's declining mental state.

Restless and feeling she had accomplished nothing during her lifetime, Zelda threw herself into all sorts of creative activities including ballet, home decorating, and more serious painting. Zelda also wanted to reignite her dreams of being a published author and succeeded in publishing several stories. Even though she was a published authoress, Zelda was discouraged by her husband's success and knew that she would never "come close to achieving the level of success enjoyed by Scott"

(Rielly 63). Zelda's friends encouraged her to focus on the success that she had achieved: she was a mother, married to a well-known author, and she had seen Europe with her husband. Such suggestions only further discouraged Zelda because, despite her pampered life, she had not "discovered something deeper and richer" nor had she found "her own personal identity established through her own individual proof of excellence" (Zelda Fitzgerald, *The Collected Writings*, 408). She believed that ballet could be the key to her missing proof of excellence and delved into dancing with a feverish diligence.

Fitzgerald, making very little headway on his novel and running out of unused autobiographical material, moved his family back to Paris in April of 1928 . Frustrated with Zelda's new obsession and her reluctance to miss a practice that kept her from going out, Scott's alcoholism worsened and he was jailed several times for disorderly conduct. While the short stories produced a steady and reliable stream of income, Fitzgerald wanted to complete his novel without further delay and moved his family once again back to America in October, only to move back to Nice, France the following spring of 1929 (Rielly 66). It had now been five years since he had published a novel and Fitzgerald began to fear for his legacy as an author. That spring he wrote seven short stories for *The Saturday Evening Post*, who had increased his income per story to \$4,000, the largest sum he would earn per story (Rielly 66).

Scott's drunken behavior began to take its toll on his relationships towards the end of 1929. Even Hemingway found reasons to avoid his friend, not wanting his behavior to interrupt his writing of his new book *A Farewell to Arms* (Rielly 67).

When Hemingway finally reconnected with Fitzgerald, he invited Scott to his boxing match as a timekeeper. But Fitzgerald, engrossed by the excitement of the fight, lost track of time and only realized his mistake after Hemingway was knocked out. Hemingway never forgave Scott for the incident and even alleged that he had let the fight run long so he would see him get hurt (Rielly 67). Scott apologized and spent the next several years patching up the new divide between them.

The final months of the 1920s brought about a collapse in the lives of the Fitzgeralds that mirrored the financial collapse in America. Zelda's obsession with ballet, and her religious devotion to practicing for long hours every day, led to a debilitating mental breakdown that she would never recover from for the rest of her life. Fitzgerald even noted in his diary: "Crash! America and Zelda." Zelda's behavior became so erratic and unpredictable that Scott was forced to institutionalize her. Once when the family was out for a drive, Zelda attempted to kill herself and her family by grabbing the wheel and forcing it off a cliff. After what had begun as a beautiful marriage full of promise, the Fitzgeralds ended their experience of the 1920s in the Malmaison Mental Health Clinic near Paris, trying to save what was left of their marriage and their sanity (Turnbull 194).

For the rest of his life, Scott remained a nurturing husband to a broken Zelda and a devoted father to Scottie. He moved Zelda to a clinic in Baltimore so he could be near her and so her family could visit (Turnbull 204). The Sayre family would always blame Scott, his alcoholism, and his partying ways for Zelda's breakdown. When the doctors made it clear to Scott that his wife would never again be healthy and sound of mind, Scott moved once again to Hollywood where he produced scripts

for Metro-Goldwyn-Myer Productions (MGM) (Rielly 95). While in Hollywood he met and fell in love with gossip columnist, Sheila Graham. Sheila would help Scott turn his life around not only by functioning as a friend and lover, but also an editor, nurse, and sobriety coach. He also succeeded in publishing his fourth novel, *Tender is the Night*, and was working on his fifth, *The Love of the Last*, toward the end of his life. *Tender is the Night* would use Fitzgerald's years in the Riviera and his time in mental institutions with Zelda as material for his characters Dick and Nicole Diver.



Fig. 2.11, Fitzgerald, shortly before his death, 1940.

The long years of heavy drinking would take their toll on the author. While working in Hollywood, Scott began to feel ill and his doctors discovered in late 1939 that he had a heart condition that required plenty of bed rest and abstinence from alcohol (Turnbull 320). While waiting for the doctor in the apartment he shared with Sheila on the morning of December 21, 1940, Scott felt an unbearable tightness in his chest. He rose from his chair and tried to walk to the kitchen to alert Sheila

but collapsed on the floor. A desperate Sheila ran for help, but there was nothing that could be done. A massive heart attack would deprive the author of the Jazz Age from his triumphant comeback at the age of forty-four (Mizener 298).

The world had come to know Scott Fitzgerald more intimately than they realized. Through his novels and short stories, Fitzgerald had detailed the events of his life for the consumption of the reading public. From his first novel to his last, Fitzgerald used the most memorable episodes in his life as the details for his fiction. Fitzgerald adhered to the principle that an author can only effectively write about what they had experienced. Through the characters of his novels, Fitzgerald was providing a detailed window into his life. But as will be discussed in the following chapters, to take Fitzgerald's fiction as the only accurate interpretation of the 1920s neglects the inclusion of other demographic groups, such as the working class, and the agrarian populations. Fitzgerald's fiction also glamorizes the experience of the upper classes, and because his writings are used to characterize the 1920's, our knowledge of the era is distorted. Fitzgerald's interpretation of the Jazz Age is misused because he wrote exclusively about his own experiences, and not about the universal experiences of the population at large. But his fiction about the trends in America is suspect also because he spent a great deal of time away from his home country.

In order to see just how narrow Fitzgerald's interpretation is, one need only to look more deeply into the history of the decade as a whole and into the experiences of other populations.

CHAPTER THREE

How the Bottom Half Lived

What we as a society remember about the 1920s follows a specific pattern that goes something like this: the youth were liberated from their Victorian parents by the use of the automobile, jazz music was blared in the nightclubs by a hired negro band, and there were parties—lots of them, where the men wore tuxedos, the women wore short dresses and the champagne flowed as long as there were guests to be served. All of these elements paint a lovely picture. Who would not want to have fun, throw all rules to the wind and party until the early morning hours? Scott Fitzgerald loved this new post-war America and embraced all of the new sensations and opportunities that came with it. The glitz and glamor of this new society graced the pages of Fitzgerald's journals and would become immortalized in his fiction.

This beautiful picture of the 1920's, as much as twenty-first century Americans may want to believe was the norm for the Roaring Twenties was, in fact, not so common. Economic repercussions of the First World War limited the experience of the Jazz Age to only the wealthy, leaving the working classes to struggle with inflation and the reduced purchasing power of the dollar. While the wealthy may have enjoyed the new liberated American spirit, the middle and lower classes were simply struggling to survive. An outbreak of the boll weevil in the South coupled with low crop prices nearly destroyed farming in the Midwestern and

Southern states. Farmers would struggle for the rest of the decade to produce enough crops to meet the demand, which affected the working class by fluctuating food prices.

Before one can fully appreciate how Fitzgerald skewed the modern perception of the 1920s, a general understanding of American attitudes during and immediately after the First World War is essential. Fitzgerald's tendency to focus on only the most positive aspects of the 1920s neglected the experience of a majority of the population because their experience was anything but glamorous. Furthermore, Fitzgerald's novels portray a period of peace among the population when in reality the 1920s was a period of domestic unrest centered around suspicions of Communist sympathizers, minorities and foreigners. That being said, the 1920s proved to be a much less prosperous era than our collective consciousness remembers.

The Red Scare

To a large extent, the free-spirited attitude of the Roaring Twenties was a reaction to the violence and the death toll of the Great War, the most gruesome war in memory. In the summer of 1914, Europe erupted into turmoil with a dizzying web of alliances forming among the Great Powers. In spite of his best effort to keep the United States from becoming militarily involved in the war, President Woodrow Wilson could not keep his country out of the war especially since Germany refused to recognize American neutrality. With the American people hungry to go to war all that was necessary was a reason to become involved. American opinion turned

toward involvement in the war after Germany sank *The Lusitania*, a passenger ship transporting military materials to the Allies overseas, even after Germany had made it perfectly clear that they would sink any ship carrying military supplies.

By the time the Armistice was signed in 1918, America had lost around 116,000 troops. Those troops who survived the war received a rude awakening when they arrived home. Returning soldiers found their jobs occupied and their apartments rented upon their return to the United States, forcing “haunted and lonely former soldiers to wander the streets of cities and towns vainly hunting down elusive jobs, some still in their old uniforms because they had nothing else to wear” (Miller 39). Uneducated soldiers usually settled for the low-paying industrial jobs at large companies like the Ford Motor assembly plant, earning just enough to buy basic necessities.



Fig. 3.1, The Ford Motor Assembly Plant circa 1922.

Because supplying the troops during the Great War caused a reduced supply of goods, high food and commodity prices threatened to overturn the economy of the U.S. Working class laborers, unable to bargain for fairer wages and struggling to pay for the most basic commodities, “perceived themselves as a permanent

members of an economic underclass with distinctive interests at odds with the well-to-do" (Kyvig 165). "Raging inflation" hit the working class severely and by early 1920, "the purchasing power of the dollar was less than half of what it was in 1913" (Miller 40). The reduced purchasing power of the working class showed where "demarcations clearly existed between the small minority who had achieved abundance and security...and the largest segment of the population who at best enjoyed limited and irregular comforts and more often wrestled with poverty" (Kyvig 165). The persistence of the American dream, and the idea that laborers could "improve their lot and achieve economic success" continued to uphold the weak hope the lower classes had of changing their fate and bringing their families out of poverty.

During the war, industrial workers had begun to unionize in order to demand higher wages to keep up with the high price of goods. The upper classes, however, with the suspicions they inherited from the war, saw the influence of Bolshevism in the labor movements of the wage laborers and were determined to support politicians and legislation that would limit or outlaw organized labor unions. The American population was on high alert because "they were listening to ugly rumors of a huge radical conspiracy against the government and institutions of the United States" spearheaded by communist immigrants (Allen 39).

In what would be the first major Red Scare in 1919, "millions of otherwise reasonable citizens" believed that a Communist revolution was about to break out in America and destroy the very democracy and freedom they held so dear (Allen 39). Such was the suspicion of the day, that any organized strike against an employer for

higher wages was immediately believed to be a Communist-led demonstration bent on overthrowing capitalism. During the war, the labor movement had been building momentum and even the government “had encouraged collective bargaining” in order for laborers to demand higher wages to keep up with the exorbitant prices “of everything that the laboring man needed in order to live” (Allen 40).

With President Wilson fighting with Congress over ratification of the Treaty of Versailles and the establishment of the League of Nations, wage laborers felt that they had no power to affect their dire situation except to organize and to strike. Thus in 1919, across the country and across different industries, laborers went on strike. Almost a third of the working population, from “the building trades, among the longshoremen, the stockyard workers, the shipyard men, the subway men, the shoe-workers, the carpenters, the telephone operators” voluntarily refused to work and brought those industries to a halt (Allen 40). And even more people, many of whom may not have been members of unions or another organized group, voluntarily abstained from working until their demands were met. Fitzgerald was working as a railcar repairman, though he did not stay employed there long enough to feel the long-term effects of the poor pay and to catch the fever of unionizing.

The newspapers portrayed these strikes as an attempt by the proletariat to displace the capitalist system of America and institute a Communist regime, fueling the anger of the business owners and the intensely patriotic businessmen. These fears were exacerbated by the 1919 declaration by the United Mine Workers union, which “boldly advocated the nationalization of the mines” (Allen 41). With

socialistic trends taking root among the poor laborers, the Socialist Party grew from relative obscurity to 39,000 members and the Communist Party doubled from 30,000 to more than 60,000 members (Allen 40).



Fig. 3.2, Steel mill workers on strike.

But the middle and upper classes, the business owners who were the employers of the striking workers, came out of the war as a class with a stubborn determination to return to work and to a more normal state of affairs. Businessmen “had come to distrust anything and everything that was foreign” and asserted their right to deny employment to members of unions for “labor stood in [their] way and threatened [their] profits” (Allen 42). Furthermore, any worker that exhibited Communistic behavior or was caught talking about unionizing, “was summarily fired and blacklisted” (Miller 43).

Even the police force of Boston, overworked and underpaid, voiced their frustration with low wages by threatening to strike. Future President Calvin Coolidge, who was the governor of Massachusetts, attempted to negotiate with the mayor of Boston and the police commissioner, but to no avail. The Commissioner responded by bringing charges against nineteen of his officers and suspended them

from the force. In retaliation, “a large portion of the police walked out at the time of the evening roll call” (Allen 45). The spirit of revolution also spread among the steel and coal workers, threatening to put a hold on all industry. Despite the Attorney General securing an injunction against the strike, “several hundred thousand steel workers walked out of the mills,” followed by thousands of coal miners (Allen 47). Coolidge would secure his place in national politics by taking a tough stance on the striking workers. In a statement to the President of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers, which was released to the press, Coolidge asserted that there was “no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time” (Allen 46).

The Red Scare was, essentially, igniting economic warfare among the classes, where the business owners rejected the labor strikes as Communist rebellions that would eventually die out, and where the laboring poor fiercely demanded higher wages in order to afford the postwar commodity prices. To make matters worse, actual Communist cells were attempting to bomb the homes of prominent men they considered enemies of the Socialist movement, wealthy men like J. P. Morgan and John D. Rockefeller, as well as government officials like the Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the Postmaster General, Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, and the Secretary of Labor. Theodore Roosevelt recalled how one night, when he and his wife were heading to their home off Embassy Row in Washington, D.C., a bomb shattered the quiet of the neighborhood, sending “flames and a cloud of acrid yellow smoke soar[ing] into the air” (Miller 33). Though only the bomber

himself was killed, Palmer and other officials living in the quiet neighborhood were shaken by the incident.



Fig. 3.3, American citizens protesting the presence of Communism.

Fueled by the bombing and not willing to put up with the striking anymore, Attorney General Palmer coordinated and directed a “series of raids in which Communist leaders were rounded up for deportation to Russia” under the authority of the wartime Sedition Act (Allen 49). On May Day of 1920, Palmer’s coalition arrested Communist leaders of different cells as they were meeting at their respective headquarters. In order to fight the spread of Communism on the civilian front, Palmer released anti-Bolshevik “boiler-plate propaganda to the press” and laborers were “learning to hold their tongues if they wanted to hold their jobs” (Allen 50). Workers, for fear that they would be arrested and accused of being Communists, radically changed their tune and became more muted leading into the summer of 1920. The strikes themselves became less frequent around 1925 when

the U.S. Supreme Court delivered the *United Mine Workers v. Coronado Coal* (1925) decision.

The Court ruled that the unions had no legal right to strike because their strike violated the Sherman Antitrust Act. Not only did this decision virtually kill the coal workers' strike across the country, but also it called into question the legal right of any organized union to strike. Had Fitzgerald been working as a railcar repairman during this trying time, his fiction possibly might have been colored by a different tone, one more in line with the pursuit of social justice. Union demonstrations would continue to be a part of the 1920's, but membership in unions plummeted "from 600,000 in 1920 to 100,000 in 1929" due to the Coronado case and also because laborers feared that they would be suspected of being Communists (Miller 112). Despite the frequent strikes that took place in the earlier half of the decade, by early 1929 "those who worked earned only about half what they had made in 1920" (Miller 112).

The Great Migration, Foreigners, and Race Riots

The populations that suffered the most from the Red Scare were the minorities that had occupied the jobs vacated by the enlisted men who left to fight in Europe. By 1920, Blacks, Jews and Slavs formed a large part of the labor force and drew the ire of a very suspicious American public. It was around this time that Colonel William Joseph Simmons was resurrecting the infamous Ku Klux Klan, which had been nearly eradicated in the years after Reconstruction.

But the new Klan was radically different from the old Klan because it expanded its membership outside of the South and into the cities, where a new black population was struggling for employment and housing. The Klan fed off the suspicions and fears of the city dwellers and expanded its use of intimidation tactics to keep the colored populations in a diminished social state. The new Klan also organized a sister organization for women to participate in, the Kamellia, to increase its membership and to expand their influence (Miller 143).



Fig. 3.4, An African American family packed for their journey North.

By 1924 the Klan had attracted a nationwide following “of nearly four and a half millions” and had the political power to steer politics in states like Arkansas, California, Oklahoma, Ohio, and Texas (Allen 58). But as the Red Scare waned and the labor strikes subsided, the power of the Klan likewise waned and it sank once more into obscurity though its membership continued to be constant.

With the outbreak of WW I, the men who left to serve their country in Europe left an enormous number of jobs vacant. The African-American community of the South saw its opportunity to find employment and traveled in vast numbers to the industrial centers of the Midwest and the East Coast. Minority populations are

noticeably absent in Fitzgerald's work, except for a few minor encounters of African-American youths working at the lunch counters at the eateries on Princeton's campus. Their experience of the decade is largely forgotten.

By the end of the war, more than a million black workers had left the South to seek the higher-paying industrial jobs in Northern cities vacated by the departing soldiers (Miller 49). For the first time "there were enormous black communities in the heart of the big cities, made up mostly of unsophisticated country folk unfamiliar with the complexities of urban living and indoor plumbing" (Miller 50). The uneducated black workers found themselves competing with poor urban white families for unskilled job openings and for low-cost housing in the cities. The black workers, even when they found a job, were expected to vacate the position to make way for the returning servicemen. When the black workers did not voluntarily resign their positions they were fired without a second thought.

The black workers were not the only population of social undesirables that occupied the low-paying jobs. Most of the men working at the steel mills "were illiterate immigrants, usually from Central and Eastern Europe..." (Miller 43) These workers, black or foreign, lived in deplorable conditions near the factories and mills where they worked. More often than not there was no running water or plumbing to speak of and sanitation was likewise nonexistent. White blue-collar workers, unused to living in such close proximity with people of a different race, resented their new neighbors and the competition for work and housing they brought to the already overcrowded cities.

Tensions boiled over in an outbreak of race riots that left hundreds of Negroes and whites alike either dead or maimed. The spark that started the fire was a small incident on the shores of Lake Michigan by a Chicago beach, where a young Negro boy who had wandered onto the exclusively white side of the beach was stoned and drowned in the water. The Negroes on the beach began fighting with the whites and for nearly a week, “Chicago was virtually in a state of civil war; there were mobbings (sic) of Negroes, beatings, stabbings, gang raids through the Negro district, shootings by Negroes in defense, and wanton destruction of houses and property” (Allen 55). Similar riots broke out “wherever the colored population had spread” and planted the seeds for the Ku Klux Klan to make its triumphant return.



Fig. 3.5, The Ku Klux Klan, circa 1923.

Fitzgerald’s fiction presented the 1920s as a period of peace, yet the civil unrest between the races was far more rampant than his impressions lead us to believe. Fitzgerald failed to mention the state of near “civil war” as Allen describes it, something that should be included in our interpretation of the era because it was such an important part of the experience of the lower classes.

Jews and Eastern Slavic workers were also competing for jobs with the poorer white native-born American populations. After the end of World War I, an influx of Eastern Europeans from Hungary, Greece, Italy, Romania, and the Slavic regions poured into the United States looking for work and a life free of persecution. Estimates hold that as many as seventeen million immigrants passed through Ellis Island between 1917 and 1929, changing the demographic outlook of America drastically (O'Neal 71).

The poor Jews and Slavs from Eastern Europe brought even more laborers needing work and housing to compete with the Blacks and the poor whites. Native-born Americans became concerned that "the United States was in danger of becoming the dumping ground for Europe's 'scum'" and demanded that their elected officials take tougher stances on immigration to limit the number of immigrants flowing into the country (Miller 145). The first piece of legislation to address immigration was the Emergency Immigration Act of 1921, which restricted the number of immigrants from each European country to only three percent of the total number of immigrants residing in the United States (O'Neal 75). In further response to this influx of immigrants, Congress passed the National Origins Act in 1924 and President Coolidge signed it into law (Miller 147). The new law limited the number of immigrants allowed into the country from three percent to only two percent, and hoped to curb permanently the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe and encourage immigration from Western Europe. Furthermore, conservative traditionalists believed that most of the violators of Prohibition were of Eastern European descent and should thus be suspected as criminals.



Fig. 3.6, A line of immigrants at Ellis Island, circa 1921.

Petty crime in the cities also increased, with most of the blame heaped on the immigrants. One of the most controversial court cases of the 1920s was evidence of the tension between the native-born American population and the incoming immigrant populations. Two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were accused of killing a paymaster and a guard during a robbery in Braintree, Massachusetts (O'Neal 68). Their trial was swift and full of bias. Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted of murder and sentenced to death by the electric chair. The immigrant populations of the cities held boycotts and demonstrations to protest the verdict. Benito Mussolini himself contacted the Governor of Massachusetts, Alvan T. Fuller, to pardon the two Italians (Miller 59). Though the presiding judge, Webster Thayer, believed Sacco and Vanzetti to be guilty, the Governor pressured the judge into calling together a committee to review the evidence (Miller 59).

The committee found Sacco and Vanzetti guilty and on the night of August 22, 1927, Sacco and Vanzetti went to the electric chair, dashing the hopes of millions around the world who had rallied for their freedom. Many Americans, mostly the families of Eastern European immigrants, believed that the trial was unfairly

conducted and biased against foreigners, symptomatic of the prejudice Americans held for immigrants they considered to be criminals bringing nothing but lawlessness, disease and filth to the cities of America (O'Neal 71).



Fig. 3.7, Protestors calling for the release of Sacco and Vanzetti, 1925.

The Dearborn Independent, a newspaper owned by automobile mogul Henry Ford, made a habit of publishing anti-Semitic articles that blamed Jews for feeding the efforts by laborers to unionize. Ford, who hated unions by nature, fueled anti-Semitism by boldly proclaiming that the Jews were an unscrupulous race who “scheme to interrupt work. A union is a neat trick for a Jew to have in hand when he wants to get a clutch on an industry” (Miller 146). Having pushed his anti-Jewish campaign too far, Ford was sued for libel in 1927 by a Jew named Aaron Sapiro. Embarrassed by the suit and not wanting the sale of his cars to plummet, Ford settled the case outside of court and took full responsibility for his actions (Miller 146). Not that Ford had to worry; by 1927 fifteen million Model T’s had been sold (O’Neal 88).

The Advent of Birth Control

Another challenge faced by the lower classes was overpopulation, propagated by the medical community's belief that there was no effective method of contraceptive birth control. Desperate immigrant mothers turned to unsafe abortions to keep the number of their offspring low (Miller 266). These abortions were often hastily done in unsanitary apartments with unclean tools, and often the mothers would die of infection after the procedure. Margaret Sanger, a pioneer in providing contraceptive information to the urban poor, sought to reverse this trend and to provide more options for the poor wage laborers to avoid unwanted pregnancies and alleviate the fear of overpopulation (Miller 264).

Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn in a storefront in an immigrant neighborhood. The clinic provided handbills and pamphlets translated into English, Yiddish, and Italian. Sanger's controversial methods, however, attracted unwanted attention from the local authorities. She was arrested and convicted for "illegally disseminating birth control information," a topic that was still very taboo among the middle and upper classes (Miller 268).

When the law hindered her grassroots programs, Sanger turned to national politics to gain support for her movement and organized the American Birth Control League "to bring physicians and middle class women into the birth control movement" (Miller 268). Sanger was met with strict opposition from the traditionalist core of society and took her efforts to an international level by organizing the first World Population Conference in Geneva in 1927 (Miller 267). Though her efforts would yield little in the way of providing birth control on a wide

scale in the 1920's, Sanger's efforts moved the population toward awareness that overpopulation among the poorer classes was an issue that needed to be addressed by the government.

Zelda Fitzgerald, against the wishes of her husband, had an abortion in 1922 to avoid having two children born close to each other. Little did she know that the damage from the abortion would keep her from getting pregnant later in her life (Rielly 41).

The Commanders-in-Chief

If elected officials are evidence of the attitudes and values of the voting public, then the popularity of President Calvin Coolidge is especially revealing. After the death of Warren G. Harding in 1923, Calvin Coolidge was sworn in as president. When Coolidge took office, the nation seemed on the verge of a financial uplift, and the people of America wanted to continue this upward trend. During the Harding Administration, Andrew W. Mellon, one of the richest men in the country and a brilliant businessman, was appointed Secretary of the Treasury and encouraged the President to cut taxes, which would stimulate investment in business. Mellon also directed the federal government to propose and approve a budget for all of the operations of the departments as a whole, and not on a department-by-department basis (O'Neal 37). In two years, from 1920 to 1922, Mellon reduced the federal budget by \$3.1 billion and raised tariffs to protect American business. When Harding died, Coolidge asked Mellon to continue serving as the Treasury Secretary.

While the martini-drinking and gambling Harding fit in perfectly with the 1920s, Coolidge should not have been popular during the 1920s for his strict moralism and stern demeanor. Yet Silent Cal was so popular in his day that he was easily reelected, revealing something about the tastes and values of the voting public. Coolidge was the son of a farmer who as a child split wood, milked cows, and collected the chicken's eggs, quite different from the wealthy urban upbringing of Fitzgerald and his counterparts. Coolidge was also a very well educated politician who kept a detailed record of his finances and was careful never to overspend his salary (O'Neal 54). Calvin Coolidge was an unremarkable man, slight of frame with "a hatchet face, sandy hair, tight lips, and the expression...of one 'looking down his nose to locate the evil smell which seemed forever to affront him'" (Allen 157). Coolidge lived by a philosophy "of hard work and frugal living and piety" which would eventually yield success to the one who diligently followed this path. This philosophy was a far cry from the "eat, drink, and be merry" credo of the characters in Fitzgerald's novels.



Fig. 3.8, President Calvin "Silent Cal" Coolidge.

Coolidge's successor, Herbert Hoover, continued the tradition of strict moralism in the executive branch. Hoover was a devout Quaker, who abhorred gambling and drinking and was devoted to charitable work. Harding had appointed Hoover to be Secretary of Commerce and he continued to serve in that capacity under Coolidge. By 1928, Hoover had already built an unshakable reputation as a savvy businessman and a generous philanthropist, which made him popular with voters. Hoover easily won the Republican nomination and defeated Alfred Smith in the national election to succeed Coolidge as president.

This tradition of electing moralists to the presidency is symptomatic and revealing of the voting population during the 1920's. If the majority of the voting population was as liberalized and party-centered, then a president more in line with those values would have been elected.

The Farmers

Like most other conflicts of the 1920s, the conflicting morals between the city and the country made the two worlds more distinct. The country had come to believe that it was the protector of the traditional values and morals of America and the city came to represent moral decline and depravity.

While in office, Harding "did little to alleviate the plight of the farmers" who were the "worst hit by the collapse of the wartime economic boom" (Miller 87). In response to the wartime need for food, farmers had expanded their production and increased the efficiency of their methods. When the First World War ended and the demand was no longer present, crop prices dropped to about a third of what they had been during the war. The dramatic drop in crop prices also affected land values,

which also plummeted. Nearly a million farming families lost their homesteads to foreclosure, and were left to either become tenant farmers on another landowner's property or to migrate to the city in search for jobs (Miller . But the overcrowding in the cities meant that five million workers, about twenty percent of the workforce, were unemployed (Kyvig 35).



Fig. 3.9, Sugar beet farmers, 1920.

The experience of most of the population of the 1920's, as we have just seen was rather unpleasant, contrary to the interpretation provided by Fitzgerald in his writing. This more accurate picture of the United States in the 1920s is a far cry from the beautiful picture described by Fitzgerald, mostly because his fiction never focused on the lower classes or the unrest caused by the race riots and the Red Scare. In the next chapter the characters of Fitzgerald's fiction will be analyzed to see how their surroundings and their class affected their experience of the Jazz Age.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fitzgerald's Heroes and Heroines

In view of the history covered in the previous chapter, the experience of Fitzgerald's characters will seem much more rare than the author acknowledged in his fiction. Fitzgerald's overemphasis on the culture of the upper classes, which is characteristic of all of his works, becomes much less believable as the median experience of the 1920s in America.

In a poignant reflective 1933 essay, F. Scott Fitzgerald acknowledged that his own shallow nature was a product of high society and of the shallow influence of his peers. Overwhelming a moral compass that had survived from his intensely Catholic family, Fitzgerald loved the life of the young and the rich. He loved being in the company of artists, poets, philosophers, and liberated women who gave the young author the material he needed to make his stories evocative and memorable. As a young man, Fitzgerald had engaged in the very same behavior that characterized the encounters of his heroes, and thus presented his experiences as the normal experience one would partake in if one had lived in the 1920s.

The only difference between Fitzgerald and his characters is that the author doomed the heroes of his novels to failure and misery due to a lack of personal qualities that were necessary for those characters to thrive when they reached maturity. Most of Fitzgerald's characters were raised in wealthy homes where their development was stunted and thus they were unequipped to sort through

challenging situations, even in the face of self-preservation. Though some of his characters would achieve success and separate themselves from the opulence and distractions of the Roaring Twenties, others would descend into poverty with no foreseeable escape and lacking the perseverance to bring themselves out of destitution.

While ruminating on his writing in the same 1933 essay and how he treated his characters in certain situations, Fitzgerald unapologetically asserted that he let his characters fail because of their own vain egotism, the tragic flaw that dooms his protagonists to failure. This vanity keeps his characters from internal development and maturity, an argument others in his generation would use in the 1930s to describe why America had fallen into the Depression. A generation of rebellious and thrill-seeking youth had made the incoming business class feel entitled yet weak, and unable to cope with failure or difficult situations. Likewise in his fiction, Fitzgerald's characters developed into dependent, shallow, and egotistic personalities. An unsympathetic Fitzgerald leaves no room for success in their future because their weak personalities prevent them from taking the initiative over their own lives in the age of personal responsibility. So while Fitzgerald may have enjoyed the new liberalism of the 1920's, he could also see the diminished ability of his generation for productivity and success due to its indulgence and weak personalities.

In the same vein, Fitzgerald criticized any story of survival that gave the protagonist any advantages aside from his or her own instinctual resourcefulness and other intangibles that would prevent them from succumbing to ultimate failure.

And in this opinion, his reading of Darwin possibly influenced Fitzgerald to believe that true resourcefulness comes from the persons' character and not from the material objects they have at their disposal. Princeton friends who used Charles Darwin's arguments to praise the Nordic race over other minorities in America exposed Fitzgerald to Darwin while he was attending college. Fitzgerald included a scene in *The Great Gatsby* in which a similar argument was explained from the dialogue of Tom Buchannan in the first chapter of the novel.

Fitzgerald used examples of classic literature, such as *The Swiss Family Robinson* and *Robinson Crusoe*, to make his point clear. Fitzgerald believed the characters in both novels "cheated" when they utilized those tools. To Fitzgerald, those characters would have had the resourcefulness necessary to survive an impossible situation if they had started their journey with only their bare hands and their reason to work with. Fitzgerald, therefore, praises the imagination to create something from nothing. Fitzgerald further makes his point clear when he briefly describes how he would have written the story: the family wakes up washed on the beach with no supplies but the clothes on their backs. Fitzgerald found *The Swiss Family Robinson* and *Robinson Crusoe* "old, old" and clichéd. The author found the stories so unstimulating that he was more likely to "be stimulated...by my signature or the beat of my feet pacing the floor" (124).

By placing totally unequipped characters in impossible situations, Fitzgerald hoped to expose the inadequacies in their character, stimulate his reader and evoke critical thinking. He would also claim in later years that his writings provided a critique on how a privileged upbringing could slow the maturation and

development of a person because of a class-characteristic egotism. Fitzgerald believed that a novel's characters either possessed the intangible qualities and motivation in order to survive their difficulties, or they did not. Those that eventually succumbed to crippling failure were inhibited by their upbringing or another influence that prevented them from succeeding.

Harsh as this outlook may have been, Fitzgerald certainly made clear in all of his novels which of the characters possessed the necessary intangibles and which did not. The characters of Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise*, and Anthony Patch in *The Beautiful and Damned*, provide examples of privileged young men with debilitating arrogance and a crippling lack of the intangibles that would have allowed them to triumph over their difficult situations. There is hope, however, in the tragic hero of Jay Gatsby, the title character of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald's most celebrated novel. While even Gatsby could not prevent his own demise, it is quite obvious that he had the intangibles and motivation that made him a financial success and a resourceful personality.

This Side of Paradise (1920)

Beginning with Fitzgerald's first novel, one can see that Fitzgerald recognized how vain egotism could blind a person to the point of delusion. A much more detailed analysis of Fitzgerald's first novel than his later works is critical because the book is a fictional account of what Fitzgerald observed during his time at Princeton and his development as a person. Though each of Fitzgerald's characters possesses traits that are similar to their creator, none is more autobiographical than Amory Blaine. Amory and Fitzgerald not only have similar life events, but they

share an arrogant personality that defined their relationship with others and their levels of personally achieved success.

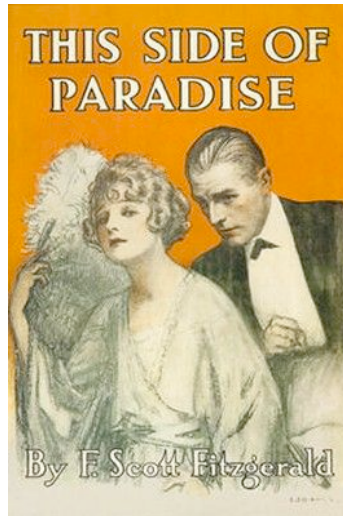


Fig. 4.1, 1st edition cover of *This Side of Paradise*(1920).

In *This Side of Paradise*, Amory Blaine is an intelligent, well-educated young man whose lack of prudence and perseverance led to his self-induced failure, despite his initially privileged circumstances. From a young age, Amory is well liked by his circle of friends, all wealthy children of high-society parents. Amory is invited to their parties and mostly accepted by his peers. Despite his popularity, Amory has an air of superiority that keeps him from connecting with the other children his age and he concludes that they simply do not appreciate his intelligence and his wisdom. Amory's "chief struggle had been concealing from the other guys at school how particularly superior he felt himself to be" (Fitzgerald 10). How anyone could "fail to notice that he was a boy marked for glory," astounded the young scholar.

In the home, Amory is smothered by an over-attentive mother and struggles to have a relationship with his distant father. Amory's mother, Beatrice Blaine, is a

refined woman of class who takes her son with her on elaborate trips to Europe so that her young son may be as refined and educated as she aspired to be. Beatrice loves her son not only as a mother but as a friend, partially because she is immature and unsure of herself. Beatrice does not deny Amory anything, she indulges his love for reading, spends exorbitant amounts of money on fine clothes for him, and travels all over the country with her son in tow (Fitzgerald 6). It is also revealed that Beatrice married Amory's father, Stephen Blaine, out of boredom because her frenetic life as an elite socialite had become too taxing for her to continue. Such an upbringing gives Amory a romantic and unrealistic outlook on the world and he does not understand why the other children do not share his perspective.

Just like all of the other boys of his class, Amory wants to be sent away to school and is sent to a prestigious preparatory school, the St. Regis Academy. It is at St. Regis where Amory's personality begins to make itself clear. Remarkably, Amory is a mirror image of his creator in terms of personality and in his unwavering belief that he is superior to all the other children of his class. Amory strives to excel in sports, knowing that a victory in football could mean the difference between reluctant acceptance and a heroic personage. Spurred on by the promised popularity, Amory's "mind was so crowded with dreams of athletic prowess at school" that his academic work was "a tiresome prelude to the great adventure" (Fitzgerald 23).

But it is in his pursuit of athletic glory that Amory discovers glaring weaknesses in his character, among which is an easily bruised ego. Amory despairs because he is "a slave to his own moods and felt that though he was capable of

recklessness and audacity, he possessed neither courage, perseverance, nor self-respect..." (Fitzgerald 19). The antidote to Amory's vanity came in the form of the fathering advice of the lovable Monsignor Thayer Darcy, a character with a striking resemblance to Fitzgerald's mentor, Father Fay. Monsignor Darcy keeps the overzealous Amory from falling into complete despair, because at St. Regis the romantic egoist is "unbearably lonely, desperately unhappy" (Fitzgerald 27).

At the age of seventeen, Amory is sent to Princeton. Amory had found a home at Princeton; he loved "its lazy beauty, its half-grasped significance, the wild moonlight revel of the rushes," and found companionship with the poet Thomas Parke d'Invilliers and the vivacious Kerry Holiday (Fitzgerald 41). Kerry and Tom would both provide voices of reason to the lazy Amory, who neglected his work yet dreamed of joining the Triangle Club. Kerry constantly reminded Amory that in order to participate in the Club, he would first have to avoid academic probation.

Earning poor marks in his first year, Amory continued to sleep through his sophomore year and "even more than in the year before, Amory neglected his work..." (Fitzgerald 74). Failing most of his classes, Amory becomes ineligible to run for editor of the school newspaper, the *Princetonian*, and is no longer eligible to travel with the Triangle Club. Instead of admitting that it was his own laziness that caused his failure, Amory insists that he "was meant to lose this chance" (Fitzgerald 91). While his peers were developing into mature and hard-working men, Amory remained "idle, imaginative, rebellious, and had been nearly snowed under. He had conformed, and he had succeeded...but he had listlessly, half-accidentally chucked the whole thing..." (Fitzgerald 92).

To add insult to injury, Amory's father dies, leaving the irresponsible Beatrix in charge of the family finances. Beatrix wrote to her son he should not worry about money, for "there is still plenty for everything if [they] are not too extravagant" (Fitzgerald 94). On a trip to New York City with a group of friends, Amory finds himself, partially drunk, in a dark apartment with a young girl and "temptation swept over him like a warm wind and his imagination turned to fire" (Fitzgerald 104). But before Amory can fulfill his fantasies, he locks eyes with a ghoulish figure in the corner of the room who frightens him. Amory, in his brief moment of immorality, sees a vision of the devil and runs from the apartment in a feverish panic. He boards the first train back to Princeton and cannot shake the feeling that the specter has followed him. Caught in a moral crisis, Amory is even more restless and unproductive than previously.

Luckily for Amory, the war comes to his rescue. He and Tom d'Invilliers both enlist and share one final evening together. During the war, Amory writes to Monsignor Darcy and Tom with nostalgia for his time at Princeton. It is also while he is deployed that Amory learns of his mother's sudden death, leaving the young egoist an orphan.

When he returns to America, Amory is introduced to his intellectual and characteristic match, the femme fatale Rosalind Connage. The sister of Alec Connage, a schoolmate of Amory's Princeton days, Rosalind is described by her own sister as "a sort of vampire," a flapper who does and says what she pleases with complete disregard for other people's opinions of her (Fitzgerald, *This Side of*

Paradise, 158). Rosalind smokes, has her hair bobbed, and has kissed many men, giving her the reputation of a “fast girl” (Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, 159).

Amory Blaine’s match in every way, Rosalind Connage is the first woman to challenge Amory on the level of personality. Neither of them is weak enough to fall for the spell of the other, yet they are similar enough that they recognize the desirable qualities in the other. From the moment they meet, Amory and Rosalind have an intense connection due to their striking beauty and complementary egotism. Their romance is intense and passionate, but happiness was not in the future for these star-crossed young lovers. As the daughter of a wealthy socialite, Rosalind is expected to marry someone with wealth comparable to that of her own family. Amory’s declining fortune and equally disappearing family make him an ineligible bachelor in the eyes of Rosalind’s mother.

Rosalind’s observant and socially ambitious mother begs her daughter to see past the short-term romance to the long-term poverty that is surely to follow if Rosalind married Amory. Rosalind’s mother attempts to appeal to the materialistic side of her daughter by pointing out that Amory’s \$35 a week income “wouldn’t buy [her] clothes” (Fitzgerald 179). Marrying Amory would be something Rosalind “would spend [her] days regretting...marrying a theoretical genius who hasn’t a penny to his name” and she would be much better off marrying Dawson Ryder, a very wealthy suitor who is also in love with Rosalind (Fitzgerald 179).

Seeing the truth in what her mother says, and recognizing that Amory is both without a family and without a future, Rosalind makes the painful decision to break off her romance with Amory and marry Ryder. One of the most painful scenes in the

novel is where a desperate Amory begs Rosalind to reconsider his proposal and reaffirms his unfailing devotion to her. Rosalind, fighting every urge to succumb to Amory's pleas, insists that there is no future for their relationship and sends Amory away in a flood of tears.

Completely devastated by his failed romance with Rosalind, Amory quits his advertising job and spends three weeks in a "bar-to-bar" drunken stupor broken only by the advent of Prohibition. As Amory sobered up, his life "had settled back to an ambitionless normality" reuniting with his friend Tom enjoying "an occasional play, or dinner at the Ritz..." (Fitzgerald 198). Yet there was something fundamentally different about the post-Rosalind Amory; instead of a care-free laziness, Amory had descended into an existential depression trying to find a reason to continue living his meaningless life. Monsignor Darcy began to worry about his pupil whose letters were "not a bit like himself" (Fitzgerald 205). As Darcy observes, Amory had lost most of his romantic outlook on life and had become very cold and harsh. Amory would go on to find love again, in another rebellious youth named Eleanor, but would again be disappointed. Eleanor's recklessness, which Amory initially found exciting, manifested itself in dangerous behavior in a way that Rosalind's had not. For instance, just to feel the thrill of excitement and the threat of death, Eleanor rides her horse at full speed towards the edge of a cliff and jumps off just in time to save herself, but her unfortunate horse falls to its death. The end of the novel finds a frustrated Amory back on the campus of Princeton, broke, depressed, proclaiming to the empty sky "I know myself...but that is all" (261).

Fitzgerald attempts to evoke some sympathy for Amory as the reader watches the egoist's successes fall apart and as he falls deeper and deeper into despair. There is very little room for sympathy, however, because it is clear from the beginning that Amory's failure was brought on by his own laziness and apathy. Where the other stronger young men succeed, Amory fails because he does not even care to attempt. Amory had the opportunity while at Princeton to make something of himself. He was poised to become the editor of the school newspaper and he was planning to run for the presidency of the Triangle Club. Instead, Amory was lazy and allowed his schoolwork to fall by the wayside. Amory arrogantly assumed that the money his family had would support him after college, and thus had very little motivation to work hard in his classes. Not even the social pride of being a member of the Triangle Club and the prestige of being the editor of the *Princetonian* could motivate the young egoist to excel in his schooling.

Furthermore, Amory's emotional breakdown after the loss of Rosalind prompted him to think irrationally about committing suicide and quitting his well-paying advertising job, showing how little value he placed in himself. Amory was raised with very little discipline and never experienced any consequences for his actions. When this spoiled and undisciplined student was unleashed on the Princeton campus, instead of achieving the success that his talent promised, he became a lazy lout who let his future slip away without any feeling of immediate remorse. Amory would later feel the consequences of his apathy, such as when he loses Rosalind to Ryder, but he lacked the foresight to understand the long-term impact of his laziness.

Amory is as Fitzgerald would have been if he had not succeeded in his literary career. Both young men had great promise and an air of superiority, but Amory's situation fell apart in many ways that Fitzgerald's did not. Fitzgerald had the luxury of his family's money and did eventually achieve enough success to marry his love, Zelda. Fitzgerald also had the supportive net his parents provided, and had that lifeline until he was middle-aged. Fitzgerald also gives life to his idea of the flapper in Rosalind. She is the liberated and worldly woman Fitzgerald idolized and would come to make permanent in his writings.

The Beautiful and Damned (1922)

In the same way Amory Blaine was apathetic toward improving his situation, Anthony Patch allowed his reckless behavior to jeopardize his lifestyle and drove a rift between the young heir and his materialistic wife. Though Anthony had several opportunities to improve his situation, his laziness and egotism prevented him from doing so. Just as Rosalind and Amory were kindred spirits, Gloria Patch matched her husband in terms of her irresponsibility in handling money and in her materialism. Gloria's obsession with buying all the new fashionable clothes, drove her to make imprudent purchases when she and her husband were on the brink of poverty.

Anthony Patch, grandson of millionaire Adam Patch, lives in a luxurious apartment in New York City. His butler wakes him at the same time every morning, and Anthony's days are spent visiting his broker to make sure his grandfather transferred money into his account, and eating meals with his friends in the various eating clubs in New York. Anthony attended Harvard University, though not much

detail is given about his time there. Fitzgerald hints that Anthony was a lush while a student, who drank quietly and out of sight for fear that being seen drunk would ruin his reputation. His parents died when he was a young boy and he was left in the care of his stern and traditional grandfather. When Anthony was old enough to leave home, he moved to the city to get away from his grandfather, and waited anxiously every day for news of the old man's death meaning that Anthony had inherited his millions. Though he has the money to do whatever he pleases in the city, Anthony feels there is no color or life in his existence, until he meets Gloria.

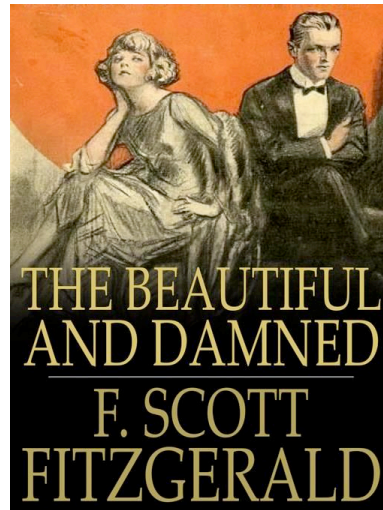


Fig. 4.2, 1st Edition cover of *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922).

Gloria Gilbert is always going. She “dances all afternoon and all night until [her mother] thinks she is going to wear herself to a shadow” (Fitzgerald 33). The Gilberts disapprove of their rambunctious daughter and openly hope she gets married and settles down. The first time Anthony sees her, he thinks she is “dazzling—alight,” full of energy and exactly what he needs to brighten his dismal existence (Fitzgerald 47). Gloria’s personality matches her appearance, she wants to find freedom from the confines of her parents’ apartment and wants to avoid the

kind of husband they are encouraging her to pursue, she “detest[s] reformers, especially the sort who try to reform [her]” (Fitzgerald 49).

Fitzgerald foreshadows the demise of the couple through the story Anthony tells of the Chevalier O’Keefe, whose ultimate demise was brought about by a woman. O’Keefe had enjoyed the company of women and had made himself miserable with their shallow relationships and his broken heart. Chevalier gives up his fortune and seeks solace in a monastery but plummets to his death when he leans too far looking out the window to see a beautiful woman adjusting her garter. Fitzgerald foreshadows that, like O’Keefe, Anthony will meet his doom at the hands of a woman, possibly the exuberant Gloria.

Anthony and Gloria have a rocky courtship, neither of them can agree on whether they want to have children in the future or even if they want to get married. The two are mean to each other, embedding sour and stinging remarks towards the other when they are displeased. Anthony wants to marry Gloria yet the vixen desires to remain free to enjoy the benefits of her youth and beauty. Anthony, handsome and persuasive, convinces Gloria to marry him. Before the engagement is announced Anthony goes to his grandfather to increase his monthly allowance but the old man resists, saying that his current allowance “ought to be plenty. If you have any sense it ought to be plenty” (Fitzgerald 115). But Adam Patch, despite his rough exterior, does care about his grandson and offers to have the wedding on his estate outside of New York City, but Anthony refuses and he marries Gloria quietly in a wedding attended by five hundred people.

After their first few months of marriage, Anthony and Gloria decide that they want a quiet home outside of the city. They buy a quaint but expensive gray home in Marietta and invite all of their friends to stay with them and celebrate their homecoming. They spent a year happily enjoying their home and becoming friends with their neighbors. One night Anthony and Gloria hold a particularly rowdy party, with all of their friends drinking copious amounts of liquor. Just when the party is at its height, Adam Patch walks in and sees the kind of lifestyle his grandson is keeping. With a cold grin Adam walks out the door and sends Anthony a message that he has been cut from his inheritance. Distraught and confused, Anthony goes to see his grandfather and ask his forgiveness but the old moralist refuses to see him.

Seeing no alternative, Anthony and Gloria move back to the city and use the money from selling their house to rent an apartment and buy groceries. Little did they know that their troubles were only beginning. Anthony attempts to find a job, but only half-heartedly, still holding on to the hope that Adam Patch will forgive him. But the old reformer dies and leaves his money in the care of his assistant, Edward Shuttleworth. Anthony hires an attorney to take the matter to court, though he has very little hope that the suit will be successful.

Gloria and Anthony, in denial, continue to hold parties in their apartment, though they realistically could not afford to spend the money on alcohol and party food. Gloria, her vanity hurt by her rejected audition, finds comfort in buying new clothing and complains to Anthony when she cannot afford a squirrel coat, like the ones all of the other wealthy women are wearing. Angry with his materialistic wife and confused as to what to do, Anthony joins the Army and is sent to Camp Hooker,

South Carolina. Though he diligently sends his commission back to Gloria, Anthony spends his time out of his training camp, drinking and flirting with the local women, drowning his sorrows in a bottle. Anthony also carries on an affair with a woman named Dorothy Raycroft, whom he dubs "Dot." Dot reminds him of Gloria, before they were married and before their money troubles. He basks in her youth and is excited by her adventurous personality. But one night when he was supposed to report to camp, Anthony instead snuck out of camp to see Dot. Anthony, discovered missing by his captain, has his rank reduced and spends several days in an Army jail.

Anthony, with his world falling apart around him, begins to suspect that he is going mad. He secures a transfer to Camp Mills, Long Island, hoping to be closer to his wife and to be present when the delayed lawsuit goes to court. He contracts influenza and is forbidden to leave the camp, which is under quarantine. Luckily for Anthony, the war ends and he is allowed to go home. Fitzgerald makes it clear that Anthony was in a situation of serious melancholy, and sought any diversion from his dismal life. When Anthony returns home, he finds what is left of Gloria, now a hollow and lifeless shell of her former self. She looks ten years older and her spirit seems to have been crushed by Anthony's absence and their lack of money.

Even though he has very little money to spare, Anthony drinks at the bars during the day and comes home with his pockets empty to an expecting Gloria who is disappointed at first, and then apathetic as the months drag on. Tired and hallow, Anthony attends a job fair at Gloria's insistence, for she cannot bear their poverty any longer. After receiving a job as a book salesman, Anthony works for two weeks and quits, with his employer bitterly remarking, "every man is born a success, he

makes himself a failure..." (Fitzgerald 308). Gloria, desperate and frightened, contacts an old friend in the motion picture industry and asks if he can get her an audition for a movie, and he agrees. But when Gloria goes in for the audition, she is told that she is too old for the part and she leaves, disappointed.

Both of them broken, Anthony and Gloria "lack the pride to continue on the note of tragedy" and resign themselves to loafing about the apartment, tired of arguing about money (Fitzgerald 328). The climax of the novel comes when Anthony, drunkenly stumbling around in the streets calls to an old friend who is getting into a car with his wife. Anthony's friend ignores the call and tries to make it clear he wants nothing to do with Anthony who is making a scene. Anthony, still angry, stumbles into a club where the producer who rejected Gloria's audition is enjoying dinner. After insulting the producer, Anthony is beaten by the club's guards and is thrown out on the street. To make matters worse, Dot appears at his apartment the next day and Anthony has a mental breakdown.

When Anthony recovers from his breakdown, he discovers that he and Gloria have won their suit in court and are now the beneficiaries of Adam Patch's will. The novel ends with Gloria and Anthony enjoying the comfort their new wealth provides for them.

Likewise with *Amory*, Fitzgerald hopes that his audience will feel sorry for the conflicted Anthony and Gloria, who are undergoing enormous personality changes because of their dire circumstances. The story has the opposite effect on the reader, because the Patches' situation was self-inflicted and could have been

prevented if they had the foresight to see how their actions would effect their circumstances.

The Great Gatsby (1925)

Unlike Fitzgerald's other protagonists, Jay Gatsby is a man of character who was not corrupted by the opulence of his era, mostly because he was not raised in a wealthy home and because his love for the beautiful Daisy Buchanan was his motivation for accruing his wealth. Gatsby earns his money through savvy, though not always legal, business ventures and is elevated to the upper class from near destitution. The ideal man of his era, Gatsby is the only protagonist that does not possess the apathy that cripples the experience of Fitzgerald's other characters and he possesses the resourcefulness that Fitzgerald believes is the only way for wealthy individuals to escape a future like Amory or Anthony. Jay Gatsby also has the motivation to build his own personal wealth because he genuinely, but naively, believes that if he becomes wealthy, his true love will leave her husband and marry him.

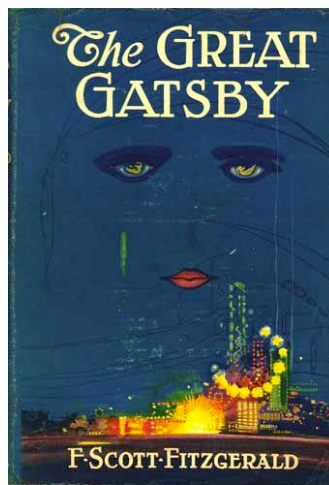


Fig. 4.3, 1st Edition cover of *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

Nick Carraway, the upper middle class narrator of the story, spends the entire book discovering who exactly is this man named Gatsby, the millionaire who owns the mansion next door and throws extravagant parties. Nick frequents the house of his wealthy cousin, Daisy Buchanan and her “hulking” husband Tom. Daisy and Tom live a leisurely life in East Egg Village, a glamorous neighborhood of Long Island Sound, and occupy their time with polo games, social gatherings, and day trips to New York City. Daisy is the stereotypical “trapped” upper class woman who wants to escape from her unhappy marriage but is confined by the necessity of her husband’s money. Daisy is beautiful, materialistic, spoiled, and self-absorbed. She also has a child-like naiveté that keeps her from grasping the seriousness of the social conventions of her class. Her husband Tom is arrogant and also self-absorbed. Tom has a mistress in the city; a silly woman named Myrtle Wilson, the wife of a garage owner, George Wilson. Though they live across the river from Gatsby, neither of the Buchanans have heard of the young millionaire and are intrigued by the mystery surrounding his ascension to their society.

Gatsby, we gradually learn, was raised in a poor rural community in North Dakota. He joins the Army to earn money and is stationed in Louisville, Kentucky, where he falls in love with Daisy. The young Gatsby, not having the money to win Daisy completely, goes to Oxford after the war to earn an education and build his personal reputation, with Daisy promising to wait for him to return. Instead, Daisy marries Tom Buchannan and Gatsby returns to America, where, through his connections and fortunate encounters, rose to wealth as a bootlegger and secretly bought a house across the river from Daisy.

With his new wealth, Gatsby associates himself with other wealthy people and holds lavish parties hoping to draw Daisy to his home where he would win her over again. Gatsby's flaw is fundamentally different than the flaws of Fitzgerald's other characters. Gatsby suffers from an unrealistic sense that if he gains enough wealth, Daisy will return to him. Gatsby is unwilling to let go of the past and does everything within his power to try to rewrite his history with Daisy, only to realize that their future together has come to a close.

Nick Carraway, having spent time with Gatsby, recognizes that the other wealthy people of his class are "a rotten crowd" and Gatsby is "worth the whole damn bunch put together" (Fitzgerald 154). And Gatsby's love for Daisy prompts him to take the blame for the car accident that killed Myrtle Wilson, Tom Buchanan's mistress. Her husband George kills Gatsby for revenge and then commits suicide.

General Observations

While the characters of Fitzgerald's novels are dynamic and unique in their own right, most of them possess similar qualities that identify them as people of means. Excluding Gatsby, the characters of Fitzgerald's novels are spoiled, unmotivated to work, and each possesses a crippling weakness of character that prevents them from being productive individuals. They waste away and feel that nothing they can do will save them from failing.

Amory's and Anthony's apathy towards improving their own situation is symptomatic of their spoiled upbringings and their assumption that someone else will take care of their problems. Both young men grew up without any financial self-

discipline and took for granted that money would always be at their disposal. Without feeling the negative consequences of recklessness in their youth, Amory and Anthony had no concept of what it meant to be poor. Fitzgerald possibly experienced little discipline in this area as well during his development.

It is also apparent in the novels that working-class Americans are less glamorous than the gentry. The only hint of working-class culture in Fitzgerald's novels comes from the brief descriptions of unimportant characters who are present in the lives of the wealthier characters because they are working around them. For instance, George Wilson, a poor mechanic and the man who eventually murders Jay Gatsby, is described by his own wife and those who know him as "so dumb he doesn't know he's alive." In a way, it is not Fitzgerald's fault that he included very little about the working class in his fiction for he never had much experience and exposure to the culture of the lower classes. And if he stuck to the credo that an author must experience his material firsthand, he would have no way of knowing how the other classes lived. The debutantes and the vamps that Fitzgerald wrote about were the daughters of high society, not the workers from the slums of New York City.

Despite the looming threat of poverty in his early life, Fitzgerald and his parents never left the safe confines of the upper class thanks to the McQuillan family fortune. And even when Scott was not producing enough material to keep up his lavish lifestyle with his irresponsible spouse, his family continued to support him though he deplored his dependence on the family money. Even as an expatriate on the French Riviera, Fitzgerald and his wife mingled with other fashionable American

families who were enjoying their leisurely life in Europe. In *The Beautiful and Damned*, Anthony and Gloria Patch experience poverty, still their version of poverty is glossy and unrealistic. The Patches' is an experience colored by greed and an unwillingness to save themselves from their situation. In the end, they are once again elevated to the upper class, but their desire to steer clear of working and getting their hands dirty nearly cost them their marriage, their sanity, and their lives. Gatsby is the shining light in Fitzgerald's collection of heroes, thanks to his unadulterated personality. Yet even Gatsby could not prevent his own demise.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Fitzgerald and the Myth of the “Jazz Age”

After careful evaluation of Fitzgerald’s characters and the author himself, it is easy to see how closely the lives of the characters mirror that of their creator. The author’s heroes, Amory Blaine, Anthony Patch, and Jay Gatsby, all contain similar personality traits that ultimately doom them to failure. More than that, Fitzgerald’s characters have become the accepted archetype of the Jazz Age man. They are handsome, wealthy, and seize the excitement of their generation by partaking in the outrageous parties and reckless behavior that has come to characterize the Roaring Twenties. Even the women in the same novels, Rosalind Connage, Gloria Patch, and Daisy Buchanan, beautiful debutantes who exemplify the ideal of the flapper, are accepted as accurate generalizations of the type of woman that lived through the 1920s—the liberated woman who sought freedom from the confines of their Victorian parents.

Despite being accepted as the norm for the 1920s, Amory, Anthony, and Gatsby, and their female counterparts, are the exceptions to the rule, not the rule. Their class and their personalities set them apart from the majority of the population in America during the Twenties, personalities of mythical proportion. Not only were their lifestyles exaggerated to the point of fantasy, but also Fitzgerald had created an overarching generalization of the most radical trends in the 1920s,

presented them as normal for the population as a whole, and ultimately created what John Callahan describes as “an American mythos” (Callahan 3).



Fig. 5.1, Poster for Baz Luhrmann's film *The Great Gatsby* (2013).

That is not to say that men like Amory Blaine or women like Rosalind Connage did not exist. Most certainly there were plenty of them in the large cities of the East Coast like New York City and Boston, and in the large metropolises of the Midwest like Chicago and Minneapolis. But these dynamic men and women by no means represented the entirety of the American experience during the era, years in which a staunch moralist like Calvin Coolidge was a popular president. America as a whole came to accept these snapshots of life in the 1920s because of the commercial nature of Fitzgerald's writing. By his own admission, Fitzgerald was writing initially to gain notoriety and fame. As his career took off, he published hastily written short stories specifically for the purpose of earning easy money and maintaining his lifestyle. His lifetime friend Edmund Wilson continuously warned him to focus on other subject matter and take his time writing because, with his salacious descriptions of the moral depravity and rebelliousness of the youth, Fitzgerald

would become a “popular, trashy novelist without much difficulty” (Turnbull 103). People would enjoy the scandalous episodes of his novels and short stories, Wilson went on to say, but Fitzgerald would not be taken seriously as a writer, something Fitzgerald himself feared. During his lifetime, Fitzgerald’s fiction was always taken cautiously because he was writing with the intent to sell his fiction and make a fortune doing so, not to provide a critique of the upper classes.

On the whole, Fitzgerald is important in literature mostly because he was “a writer of uncanny gifts and enormous promise whose very defects—brashness, arrogance, immaturity—were part of his charm” (Turnbull 106). Fitzgerald colored his fiction with hyperbole and attempted to engage the reader by “shak[ing] life out of its conventional wrappings and giv[ing] it some color...”(Turnbull 127). Fitzgerald’s dramatic personality also led him to turn simple events in his life into episodes of memorable liberality. Fitzgerald was, after all, a showman who wanted to sell his fiction and found a captive audience willing to believe and emulate the Fitzgerald doctrine. In order to make his stories appealing, Fitzgerald liked to “dramatize the incongruities of his background in a manner more literary than accurate” (Turnbull 127).

In terms of literature, realistic accuracy is not always the most desirable method for the track of the story. But Fitzgerald sold his fiction with the intent of marketing it as realism, and not complete fantasy. Apart from the educated and opulent elite of the large cities, the urban and agrarian populations of the United States did not have the resources or the time to buy Fitzgerald’s frivolous literature or to engage in the type of behavior Fitzgerald attempted to sell to his readers as

realism. Fitzgerald wanted to be the edgy new novelist and is remembered as being quite amused when his novels were banned among Puritan communities.

Fitzgerald, however, cannot be credited as a true social commentator. As the *Minneapolis Journal* described him at the height of his *This Side of Paradise* fame, Fitzgerald has “no genuine powers as a realist” but rather it is his “imaginative power...which create the man whose feet were wrong” (Brucoli & Bryer 413). But the reader takes no notice of the small exaggerations in the prose, mostly because Fitzgerald’s smugness comes across as confidence that the author is an authority on the subject of his works. Instead of the social commentaries that some believe he was producing, Fitzgerald was in fact writing “imaginative fantasy, imaginative studies of American life with realistic touches” (Brucoli and Bryer 414). Critic B.F. Wilson, who initially praised Fitzgerald for his powers as a chronicler of social history, describes the author as “slightly unbalanced” whose “dramatic instinct has been a part of his character,” which translates into the dramatic flair he embeds in his writing. Wilson described Fitzgerald as a pedantic fellow who could not “escape from his thoughts” (Brucoli and Bryer 420).

Fitzgerald cannot be credited as a chronicler of American history because he only preserved his own interpretation of events. What is more, Fitzgerald spent a good deal of time in Europe, away from the American experience altogether. Fitzgerald’s reliance on autobiographical material is also worthy of notice because the experience of one person cannot be representative of a whole population, even of a whole class. Fitzgerald’s life became the basis for his literature. And given the dramatic showmanship of Fitzgerald’s personality, even if his literature is accurate

for his own life, it most certainly cannot be applied to the population at large. Edmund Wilson, who also went to Princeton and who also came from a privileged background, had enough sense and social intelligence to find his place in society as a writer and critic though his life was much less uprooted and chaotic than Fitzgerald's, disproving Fitzgerald's conjecture that a privileged upbringing can completely retard a person's personal growth. Perhaps Fitzgerald was merely searching for a way to justify his irresponsible behavior and his brushes with financial disaster.

For history, Fitzgerald cannot be relied upon to give an accurate account of the actual lifestyles of the population as a whole. Yet Fitzgerald's interpretation is often uncritically accepted as the reality when in actuality his fiction is only representative of the lifestyles of the upper class, and those who had enough financial cushion to take part in the reckless partying and binge drinking that present-day Americans accept as the norm for the Roaring Twenties. Fitzgerald's fiction was unpopular among his contemporaries for several reasons, mostly because of his tendency to describe as "fresh, juicy and spontaneous the American juveniles of the class described by Fitzgerald" when in fact they "exactly are not. Superficially, perhaps" (Brucoli and Bryer 433).

As twenty-first century Americans look back on the 1920s as a whole, their impressions are driven by the literature of the decade, more specifically by the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Baz Luhrmann's highly anticipated cinematic adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* is symptomatic of the hold Fitzgerald's literature still

has on our collective memory of the Jazz Age. The author himself coined the phrase “The Jazz Age” to describe the 1920s.

A linear list of historical events cannot effectively express the complex ideas, trends, and reasoning that were captivating those who lived through a specific time period and so scholars turn to literature and other sources to understand the reasoning behind certain trends. This is a mistaken assumption, for accepting literature as truth can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of those same trends. Fitzgerald’s literature, with its dramatic flair and vivid descriptions, allowed readers to walk through the period with a detailed window into the experiences of the upper crust. But as determined as Fitzgerald was to market his work as literary realism, either wittingly or unwittingly he contributed to an American myth that has been used to generalize the lifestyle of wealthy youth living through the 1920s to all Americans who lived through the period. And as we analyzed in previous chapters, not everyone had the luxury of partaking in the culture of the Jazz Age.

Fitzgerald was writing in order to sell his novels, but the effect his novels had on how we as a nation remember the 1920s is virtually irreversible. Like a modern reality TV-star, Fitzgerald was a rich young man who engaged in irresponsible behavior, drinking copious amounts of liquor, spent money without keeping records, and took for granted that his family’s wealth would save him from any negative repercussions brought about by his actions. His fiction was so popular because he unashamedly detailed instances of irresponsibility and moral depravity in his novels. The material he included in his novels was scandalous to the old

Victorian families, and he was so popular because his fiction was so gritty in comparison to other writers. Fitzgerald confirmed and made permanent *his own* attitudes and actions, which are collectively applied to the era and its populations. Fitzgerald's reality was anything but reality. Fitzgerald was free to engage in irresponsible behavior because he had the financial security to do so and because his romantic personality desired freedom from set social conventions.

The lifestyle of the working poor was much less glamorous than the experience of the upper classes and was neglected by Fitzgerald in his fiction. Therefore, the 1920s was on the whole much less prosperous than our collective consciousness of the era tends to remember. Not only is it unpleasant to read about the filth of the cities, or the hard working conditions of the factories, or the high price of commodities coupled with very low wages, it is easier to assume that all who lived through the 1920s experienced the same prosperity and easy-going spirit propagated by the popular culture of the era. And that is where the influence of Fitzgerald's literature comes in. The lens of his class and his upbringing skews Fitzgerald's version of reality. But to a greater degree than most authors, his literature is accepted as the social history of the 1920s because he depicted, in beautiful detail, the glamorous parties, the leisure, and the materialism of his era so convincingly and with a confidence that made his accounts believable.

America's collective memory of the 1920s possibly would have been quite different if it had not been for Fitzgerald and his writings. As Nathan Miller points out, the 1920s were not so different from today's America, and if anything they were "a precursor of modern excess" (Miller 1). Had Fitzgerald's fiction not been so

popular, or if the author had never written his stories and novels at all, it is hard to imagine the 1920s being remembered in quite the same dramatic way.



Fig. 5.2, Leonardo DiCapprio and Kerry Mulligan as Jay Gatsby and Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* (2013).

Fitzgerald's colorful works have created a veneer over the period that still remains intact today. The young author loved the life he wrote about and had a particular appreciation for it because "he was haunted by the terror of slipping from the comfortable assurances of [the upper class] into poverty" (Miller 4). So while he was young and could afford highballs at the Biltmore Hotel with his Princeton crowd, Fitzgerald embraced the rebelliousness of his generation and used his experiences to write the sensational stories for which he eventually became famous. Who can disentangle Fitzgerald from "the texture and glitter of New York, of youthful forms leaning together in taxis at twilight, and tea dances where the bodies drifted here and there like rose petals blown by the sad horns around the floor" (Miller 7)?

Fitzgerald's literature is undoubtedly praiseworthy—as literature. The realism of his novels is questionable on many accounts and should not be accepted

as an accurate interpretation of history. Fitzgerald's limited experiences during the decade, especially since he spent most of it in Europe, should be taken with a critical eye to what he failed to mention as much as what he detailed in his stories. While moviegoers are enjoying the new adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, the glamor and glitz of the details may be appealing, but they are, in fact, nothing but beautiful fiction.

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