**F. Scott Fitzgerald** (1896– 1940)

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Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was an American novelist, short-story writer, and cultural critic. Best-known for his 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, he coined the term ‘The Jazz Age’ to refer to the riotous lifestyle of alcohol and excess that characterized the *zeitgeist* of the United States during the Roaring Twenties.

Born in Saint Paul, Minnesota, Fitzgerald was named after a well-known distant relative, Francis Scott Key, author of ‘The Star Spangled Banner.’ He attended but did not graduate from Princeton University, where he was a member of the Princeton Triangle club—a theatre group dedicated to musical-comedy—and where he wrote for the literary magazine as well as the campus paper. During his time at Princeton Fitzgerald began work on what would eventually become his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (then titled *The Romantic Egoist*). The energy devoted to such extracurricular activities took its toll on Fitzgerald’s coursework, and he dropped out of the university in 1917 to enlist in the United States Army. Fitzgerald was stationed in Alabama at Camp Sheridan but did not see combat in the First World War. He was in New York awaiting deployment when the armistice was signed in 1918.

Though he did not make it to the battlefields of the Great War, Fitzgerald did meet the woman he would marry while stationed in Alabama for training exercises. Zelda Sayre was the daughter of a prominent Montgomery family: her father was an Alabama Supreme Court judge. She was also a well-known Southern debutante with many admirers. Fitzgerald stayed in New York after his discharge from the army and took a job in advertising, determined to earn enough money that he and Zelda could get married. After a tempestuous long-distance courtship, Zelda broke off their engagement.

Broken-hearted and miserable in the advertising business, Fitzgerald quit his job, left New York, and sought refuge in Minnesota with his parents. There he set about revising *The Romantic Egoist* with the encouragement of Maxwell Perkins, a young editor at Charles Scribner’s Sons publishing house. The book was published in the spring of 1920, and the initial run of 3000 copies sold out in days. The loosely autobiographical novel details the life of a young Midwestern man of exceptional promise who eventually attends Princeton University. The book made its author an overnight celebrity and within a week of its publication, F. Scott Fitzgerald married Zelda Sayre at St Patrick’s cathedral in New York City.

The Fitzgeralds’ escapades in New York City in the early 1920s were legendary. The couple led an extravagant lifestyle of parties and excess that Fitzgerald paid for with the money he made, typically after it had already been spent, by selling his short stories to popular magazines such as *The Smart Set* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The Fitzgeralds’ only child, a daughter named Frances Scott after her father, was born in 1921. Fitzgerald published his second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, in 1922. Set in New York City, *The Beautiful and Damned* chronicles the unhappy marriage of Anthony and Gloria Patch and solidified Fitzgerald’s reputation as the spokesman of ‘The Jazz Age.’ Fitzgerald also penned a play, *The Vegetable,* that he hoped would lead to financial security. It opened in Atlantic City in April of 1923 and in Zelda’s words, ‘flopped as flat as one of Aunt Jemima's famous pancakes’ (Bruccoli, 219). The run was cancelled after a single week and Fitzgerald’s Broadway hopes were dashed.

In 1924, the Fitzgeralds traveled to Paris, where they were notable members of the American expatriate circle of the Left Bank. In Paris, Fitzgerald met a then unknown Ernest Hemingway, who had just published *in our time* [sic]. From then on, Fitzgerald and Hemingway shared a lasting if difficult friendship, which has been famously chronicled in their correspondence. The Fitzgeralds did not remain in Paris but instead traveled south to the Riviera where Scott completed work on his third novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Much to Fitzgerald’s great disappointment, the book, which would eventually become widely regarded as one of the finest novels of the twentieth century, received mixed-reviews from critics and sold poorly when it was published in 1925. It famously details an ill-fated love triangle between a Southern belle, her philandering husband, and the mysterious Jay Gatsby.

After *Gatsby*, the Fitzgeralds’ fairy tale life together began to fall apart. Fitzgerald’s ability to write longer fiction was compromised by his struggles with alcohol and an increasingly strained relationship with Zelda. She had begun an intensive ballet study in Paris, which culminated in hospitalization for nervous exhaustion in the spring of 1930. She was diagnosed with schizophrenia soon after and sought treatment in Switzerland. Through these struggles, which were both emotional and financial, Fitzgerald continued to write stories and also grappled with a fourth novel, *Tender is the Night*. He started the book in 1925, but it stalled and went through several major revisions before it was finally published in 1934. *Tender* tells the story of a wealthy American expatriate couple in post-war France and chronicles the deterioration of their marriage. The narrative is marked by more formal experimentation than his earlier efforts, and later in his life, Fitzgerald was convinced that the book’s non-sequential narrative was responsible for its poor reception. At the time of his death, he was revising the novel so that the narrative would unfold in chronological order. The chronological edition of the book was finished and posthumously published by Malcolm Cowley in 1948.

To support his family and pay for his wife’s extensive medical treatments, Fitzgerald depended on his short stories. At the height of his career, he was paid handsomely for them; in a letter to Hemingway, he mentioned that *The Saturday Evening Post* paid $4000 per story, which was among the highest rates of the day. Ultimately, he would write 178 and publish 148 during his lifetime. Though the stories were lucrative, Fitzgerald resented them as a distraction from what he considered the serious work of writing novels, even though after the initial success of *This Side of Paradise*, the novels did not bring him the recognition or financial stability that he craved. Several of Fitzgerald’s stories have been widely anthologized, most notably ‘Babylon Revisited,’ ‘Winter Dreams,’ and ‘The Rich Boy,’ but they have received relatively little critical attention.

In 1937, Fitzgerald moved to Los Angeles and took a job at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) as a screenwriter. The majority of his work for the studio was uncredited, but the experience inspired him to begin work on a fifth novel based on the life of Irving Thalberg, an MGM studio executive. Fitzgerald’s health had been in decline for several years, and in 1940, he suffered his third heart attack, this one fatal, leaving the Hollywood book unfinished but with extensive notes. The book was edited and published posthumously as *The Last Tycoon* (1941) and later made into a film, which starred a young Robert DeNiro and featured Jack Nicholson in a supporting role.

Fitzgerald’s prose style is characterized by a deceptively simple lyricism, which masks an insightful complexity. The majority of his work might be characterized as variations on the genre of romance, but it also explores such themes as the relationship between material success and romantic love as well as the emotional and economic cost of individual ambition. Many of his stories contain elements of the Fitzgeralds’ autobiography, most famously Daisy Buchanan’s utterance upon the birth of her daughter in *The Great Gatsby*, ‘I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool’ (17), which Zelda herself had said upon the birth of the couple’s daughter. But even these autobiographical similarities are more complicated than the *Gatsby* example might initially suggest. In them, Fitzgerald explores the extent to which the modern subject, whether James Gatz, Jay Gatsby, or Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald himself, is a construct or a performance rather than a stable and fixed personage.

At the time of his death, Fitzgerald was regarded as a cautionary tale and a failure rather than a respected writer. In fact, in the last year of Fitzgerald’s life, he sold only 7 copies of *Gatsby* and 9 of *Tender is the Night*; according to Sarah Churchwell, all of his books combinedearned him a dismal $13.13 in royalties that year (361). Fitzgerald himself contributed to this image with some of his last publications, *The Pat Hobby Stories*, which focus on the misadventures of a washed-up, alcoholic screenwriter. Self-satire and biographical parallels make for uncomfortable moments as Fitzgerald unflinchingly details Hobby’s many humiliations.In the years and decades after his death, however, Fitzgerald’s literary reputation rose significantly, largely thanks to a revaluation of *The Great Gatsby*. Edmund Wilson included *Gatsby* in his edition of *The Last Tycoon*, which was published in 1941. By the 1960s, his transformation from failure to respected author was complete.

**List of Major Works:**

**Novels**

*This Side of Paradise* (1920)

*The Beautiful and Damned* (1922)

*The Great Gatsby* (1925)

*Tender is the Night* (1934)

*The Love of the Last Tycoon* originally *The Last Tycoon* (1941, posthumous)

**Short Story Collections**

*Flappers and Philosophers* (1921)

*Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922)

*All the Sad Young Men* (1926)

*Babylon Revisited and Other Stories* (1960)

*The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1989)

*The Crack-Up* (1945 essays, notebook excerpts, letters)

Cambridge University Press has published a fourteen volume authoritative annotated edition of Fitzgerald’s complete body of work. These are the definitive editions for anyone interested in doing research on Fitzgerald.

**References and for Further Reading:**

Bruccoli, Matthew. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur* (1983) New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich. Widely regarded as the standard source for those interested in the life and work of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Churchwell, Sarah. *Careless People: Murder, Mayhem and the Invention of* The Great Gatsby (2013) Great retain: Virago. Sets *Gatsby* in its cultural context and explores how the New York of the 1920s was transformed into Fitzgerald’s vision of not only East and West Egg but also New York City and its many inhabitants, both the glamorous and the seedy.

Meyers, Jeffrey*. Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography* (1994)New York: HarperCollins. Focusing on Fitzgerald’s alcoholism and Zelda’s illness, Meyers’s biography draws upon new material and contains detailed literary criticism. It is one of the more balanced of the many Fitzgerald biographies.

Mizener, Arthur. *The Far Side of Paradise* (1951, rev 1965)*.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Mizener’s was the first book-length biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald that was published and helped legitimize Fitzgerald’s place in the American literary canon.

Prigozy, Ruth, Ed. *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald* (2001) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. This collection of academic essays from noted Fitzgerald scholars provides a good introduction to critical issues in Fitzgerald’s fiction.

Smith, Scottie Fitzgerald, Bruccoli, and Joan P. Kerr, eds. *The Romantic Egoists: A Pictorial Autobiography from the Scrapbooks and Albums of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald* (1974) New York: Scribners. Drawing upon Fitzgerald’s scrapbooks, journals, and personal effects, *Romantic Egoists* provides a unique and compelling glimpse into the lives of one of American literature’s most glamorous and tragic couple.