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F. Scott Fitzgerald, “A Dud” to an Enduring Author:  
Major Author Study

Today it is reported that over 25 million copies of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* have been sold since its original publication in 1925, and the figure will continue to rise as the novel sells an average of 500,000 copies each year (Reach). But this great popularity and high regard for the novel is not what Fitzgerald owed his success to during his own lifetime. In fact, his first two novels gained his fame as an author, and *The Great Gatsby* seemed to be a disappointing addition to his collection at the time. This great shift from the disappointing to the enduring classic raises many great questions about Fitzgerald’s prevalence and literary criticism during both his time and today.

The work that F. Scott Fitzgerald is most well known for today is his novel *The Great Gatsby*. The novel written in 1925 prevails in the American literary canon and has gained great popularity in the American high school and college curriculum. In the last study done by the National Center on Literature Teaching and Learning in 1992, an analysis of text requirements in U.S high school classrooms found that fifty-four percent of public schools, sixty-four percent of private schools, and forty-nine of independent high schools required *The Great Gatsby* to be taught in their curriculum (Applebee 28). This alone shows the great popularity of Fitzgerald’s third book, but it also must be taken into consideration that this figure doesn’t include the number of teachers who choose, but were not required, to teach the book in their classroom. The

book's universal presence in classrooms implies a push for its teaching greater than its place in the literary canon.

Due to the novel's well-earned place in the American curriculum, my first and only previous encounter of Fitzgerald's work was in my eleventh grade English class in our unit on *The Great Gatsby*. Before actually reading the novel, we first did projects on the time period and on Fitzgerald himself. In that class, I gained a working understanding of Fitzgerald's life and the occasion for his work. The book soon became one of my favorites because of Fitzgerald's almost poetic writing style and his use of metaphors. Regardless of Fitzgerald's critique of the period in his work, I had always fantasized about the time of the Roaring Twenties, so the book brought the period to life for me. I enjoyed reading of the frivolity and illusion of endless prosperity before the crash; I am still drawn to the story's ties to the American dream, especially Gatsby's version of the dream. As for Fitzgerald's other novels and his short stories, I have not had the experience of reading them, but I have heard of some of the titles like *The Beautiful and the Damned*. Because of my interest in American culture during the period, the criticism of that culture found in Fitzgerald's novels, and his unique writing style, I chose to do further research on F. Scott Fitzgerald to gain a greater understanding of his authorship.

Fitting the endurance of Fitzgerald's novels throughout the past century in both the literary canon and my experience in the American classroom, his books are relatively well accessible to students at institutions like Illinois College. Within our library, we have access to all four of his published novels and the majority of his short stories, letters, essays, and play either directly or through collections of his work. In addition to this, through both print and database availability, there are a number of secondary texts available to students regarding F. Scott Fitzgerald's life and his works in the form of biographies, reader's guides, and works of literary criticism like *Scott Fitzgerald: Crisis in an American Identity*, *Scott Fitzgerald and His*

*World, American Dreams, American Nightmares, and The Golden Moment: The Novels of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, among many others.

Although Fitzgerald's work, especially *The Great Gatsby*, is widely accessible and holds great popularity in the literary canon of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, this was not the case at the time of the book's publication. In 1925, when Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby*, he had already gained his fame as an acclaimed author with his first two novels, *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and the Damned*, and a number of his short stories. Due to this previous success, reviewers had high expectations for Fitzgerald's next work of fiction. While the book did have some positive reviews, the majority of popular reviewers gave the book very mediocre reviews and had no suspicion of the future lasting effect of the book on the literary canon. The novel earned reviews in newspapers from journalists like H.L. Mencken in *The Chicago Tribune*, where he proclaimed the novel "no more than a glorified anecdote, and not too probable at that... Certainly not to be put on the same shelf with, say *This Side of Paradise*" (Mencken). In newspapers like *The New York World*, the headline classified *The Great Gatsby* as simply "a dud" (Reach). With this bombardment of critical reviews, the endurance of the novel throughout the ages was doubted among many including Isabel Patterson at the *New York Herald*, who claimed, "this is a book for the season only" (Reach).

The numbers behind Fitzgerald's book sales only further this assumption about the reception of *The Great Gatsby*. In the first year after publication, the novel sold an underwhelming 21,000 copies, which was less than half sold in the first years of publication of his previous novels (Reach). Fitzgerald's handwritten ledger confirms the lack of success of *The Great Gatsby* in 1925; the book earned only two thousand dollars in the year of its publication. In comparison, *This Side of Paradise* earned six thousand dollars, *The Beautiful and Damned* earned just over twelve thousand dollars, and *Tales of the Jazz Age*, one of his many collections

of short stories, earned three thousand dollars in their first year of publication (Fitzgerald). From the combination of these harsh reviews and Fitzgerald's sales data, it is clear *The Great Gatsby's* reception in 1925 did not align with its enduring quality in the literary canon.

Although the popular reception of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* was less than satisfactory, the true literary readership of the time was able to foresee the enduring nature of *The Great Gatsby*. Authors of the time like Edmund Wilson, Gertrude Stein, and Gilbert Seldes, saw potential in the story. Gilbert Seldes called the novel, "a brilliant work", and Edmund Wilson especially showed this praise of *The Great Gatsby* in a letter to Fitzgerald in April 1925 in which he claimed the novel was "undoubtedly in some ways the best thing you have done—the best planned, the best sustained, the best written." Then, later in a 1929 letter to Hamilton Basso, Wilson coined the novel as, "one of the best novels that any American of his age has done" (Wilson). The praise of the few true literary readers of the time ads complexity and opposition to the contemporary reception of the novel, but these authors were in a minority.

After the mild failure that was *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald went on to publish his final novel *Tender is The Night* in 1934, which again earned him a fair share of mixed reviews. The book was not entirely a failure, but not a success either (Reach). Fitzgerald went on to write his novel *The Last Tycoon* but died before finishing; however, Edmund Wilson edited and published Fitzgerald's novel in 1941. Interestingly, some reviewers at the time believed that the novel, albeit unfinished, would have been Fitzgerald's greatest work, and according to a writer at *Chicago Tribune* in 1941, it would have been "one of the major novels of the day" (Reach).

Regardless of the mixed contemporary reviews of the entirety of Fitzgerald's work, the most common theme among works of literary criticism over the past century of his work is the analysis of the motif of the American dream throughout his novels. These authors shared a

variety of opinions on what Fitzgerald's intentions with the dream of Gatsby, especially. In the research essay, "Scott Fitzgerald's Evolving American Dream: The 'Pursuit of Happiness' in *Gatsby*, *Tender Is the Night*, and *The Last Tycoon*", John Callahan expresses his opinion that Fitzgerald's idea of the American dream develops further with each of his works, and it serves as a critique of American ideology. Callahan claims that "Fitzgerald embodied in his tissues and nervous system the fluid polarities of American experience: success and failure, illusion and disillusion, dream and nightmare" (374). Put simply, Callahan argues that what sets Fitzgerald's writing apart from others of both his time and today, is the opposition he gives to the American identity through his own unique life experiences that fuel his narratives. In his work, Callahan compares the evolving idea of the American dream in each of Fitzgerald's novels to Fitzgerald's own mental state at his time of writing. This comparison is enabled as Callahan follows Fitzgerald's changes in mentality in his collection of self-reflection pieces in *The Crack-Up*, which was published after his death in 1940.

Also mentioned in this essay is the debate among scholars on what message Fitzgerald is trying to convey to readers about this American ideal, but along with other literary critics like Marius Bewey, Callahan argues that Fitzgerald purposely presents the idea of the romantic and beautiful American dream as unrealistic and problematic in order to critique the idea of the inalienable right to the "pursuit of happiness" outlined in Declaration of Independence. This ideal worked into American history made the American dream a binding promise to all rather than an opportunity, and Fitzgerald used his work to help clear the American misconception of this promise (Callahan 379). Callahan is among many others in his interest in how Fitzgerald has developed the idea of the American dream through his work and what that says about the time period.

Enabling Fitzgerald's critique of the American dream is his unique writing style. This has since become a trend in literary criticism of Fitzgerald's work, and the greatest focus is on how Fitzgerald chose to tell the story of *The Great Gatsby*. In the essay, "Scott Fitzgerald as Social Novelist", Michael Millgate discusses how Fitzgerald uses his narrative style as a lens to manipulate his critique of the American dream by corrupting the dream of Gatsby through Daisy's character (Millgate 22). Millgate argues that Fitzgerald's great use of symbolism is a tool for this. For example, his use of colors like white to capture the life of Daisy by tying her character to purity and innocence paints the façade of the overly romanticized dream of Gatsby (23). Later, Fitzgerald's final characterization of Tom and Daisy disregards this previous identity of Daisy as he writes, "careless people... [who] smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness" (Fitzgerald 143). This description taints Gatsby's draw to Daisy that was romanticized with Fitzgerald's previous symbolism (Millgate 23). While this is only one example of how Fitzgerald uses his specific writing style to enable his critique of the American ideal, there are many others discussed in the vast literary criticism of his novels.

Through looking at the contemporary reception of Fitzgerald's work and the literary criticism of the past century, it is clear that works like *The Great Gatsby* were greatly underappreciated in their time; nevertheless, his writing has endured the century. Fitzgerald's great success in the American literary canon cannot simply be a coincidence. This success is owed to his unique writing style of not only the story of Gatsby but also his other works which fueled his critique of the American dream. Now, his least popular novel that appeared to be "a dud" in his time has since become what some might call the great American novel. In the words of Fitzgerald himself in *Tender Is The Night*, "In any case, you mustn't confuse a single failure with a final defeat" (272).



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