

F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald



F. Scott Fitzgerald, photographed by Carl van Vechten in 1937

Born: September 24, 1896
St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

Died: December 21, 1940 (aged 44)
Hollywood, California, USA

Occupation: Novelist, screenwriter

Nationality: American
Writing period: 1920-1940
Genres: Literary fiction
Literary movement: Modernism
Debut works: *This Side of Paradise* (1920)
Influenced: Michael Chabon, John Cheever, J. D. Salinger

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (September 24, 1896 – December 21, 1940) was an American Jazz Age author of novels and short stories. He is regarded as one of the greatest twentieth century writers. Fitzgerald was of the self-styled "Lost Generation," Americans born in the 1890s who came of age during World War I. He finished four novels, left a fifth unfinished, and wrote dozens of short stories that treat themes of youth, despair, and age.

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Early Years

Born on Cathedral Hill in St. Paul, Minnesota, to an upper-middle class Irish Catholic family, Fitzgerald was named for his famous relative Francis Scott Key, but was commonly known as 'Scott'. He spent 1898–1901 and 1903–1908 in Buffalo, New York, where his father worked for Procter & Gamble. When Fitzgerald, Sr. was fired, the family moved back to Minnesota, where Fitzgerald attended St. Paul Academy in St. Paul from 1908–1911. His first piece of literature was published in his school newspaper when he was 13. He attended Newman School, a prep school in Hackensack, New Jersey, in 1911–1912, and then entered Princeton University in 1913 as a member of the Class of 1917. There he became friends with future critics and writers Edmund Wilson (Class of

1916) and John Peale Bishop (Class of 1917), and wrote for the Princeton Triangle Club.

A mediocre student throughout his three-years at Princeton, Fitzgerald dropped out in 1917 to enlist in the United States Army when the US entered World War I. Fitzgerald wrote a novel titled *The Romantic Egotist*, portions of which later largely were reincarnated as the first half of *This Side of Paradise*, while at Princeton, and edited the work at Camp Zachary Taylor and Camp Sheridan. When he submitted the novel to Charles Scribner's Sons, the editor praised the writing but ultimately rejected the book. The war ended shortly after Fitzgerald's enlistment.

Marriage to Zelda Sayre

While at Camp Sheridan, Fitzgerald met Zelda Sayre (1900–1948), the "top girl," in Fitzgerald's words, of Montgomery, Alabama youth society. She was the daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court Judge. The two were engaged in 1919, and Fitzgerald moved into an apartment at 1395 Lexington Avenue in New York City to try to lay a foundation for his life with Zelda. Working at an advertising firm and writing short stories, he was

unable to convince Zelda that he would be able to support her, leading her to break off the engagement.

Fitzgerald returned to his parents' house on Cathedral Hill in St. Paul to revise *The Romantic Egotist*. Recast as *This Side of Paradise*, about the flapper generation of the Roaring 20s, it was accepted by Scribner's in the fall of 1919, and Zelda and Scott resumed their engagement. The novel was published on March 26, 1920, and became one of the most popular books of the year. Scott and Zelda were married in New York's St. Patrick's Cathedral. Their daughter and only child, Frances Scott "Scottie" Fitzgerald, was born on October 26, 1921.

"The Jazz Age"

The 1920s proved the most influential decade of Fitzgerald's development. His second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, published in 1922, demonstrates an evolution beyond the comparatively immature *This Side of Paradise*. *The Great Gatsby*, Scott's masterpiece, was published in 1925. Fitzgerald made several excursions to Europe, notably Paris and the French

Riviera, and became friends with many members of the American expatriate community in Paris, notably Ernest Hemingway.

Hemingway looked up to Fitzgerald as an experienced professional writer. Hemingway greatly admired *The Great Gatsby* and wrote in his *A Moveable Feast* "If he could write a book as fine as *The Great Gatsby* I was sure that he could write an even better one" (153). Hemingway expressed his deep admiration for Fitzgerald, and Fitzgerald's flawed, doomed character, when he prefaced his chapters concerning Fitzgerald in *A Moveable Feast* with:

His talent was as natural as the pattern that was made by the dust on a butterfly's wings. At one time he understood it no more than the butterfly did and he did not know when it was brushed or marred. Later he became conscious of his damaged wings and their construction and he learned to think and could not fly any more because the love of flight was gone and he could only remember when it had been effortless. (129)

Much of what Hemingway wrote in *A Moveable Feast* helped to create the myth of Fitzgerald's

eventual demise and Zelda's hand in that demise. Though much of Hemingway's text is factually correct, it is always tinged with his disappointment with Fitzgerald. That disappointment was most evident when in "The Green Hills of Africa" he specifically mentions Fitzgerald as a ruined writer.

Fitzgerald's friendship with Hemingway was a tumultuous one, as it seems most of Fitzgerald's relationships were. Hemingway did not get along well with Zelda, either. He claimed that she "encouraged her husband to drink so as to distract Scott from his 'real' work on his novel,"¹ the other work being his short stories he sold to magazines. The "whoring" as Fitzgerald, and subsequently Hemingway, called these sales, were a sore point in the authors' friendship. Fitzgerald claimed that he would first write his stories in an authentic manner but then put in "twists that made them into saleable magazine stories."²

Fitzgerald drew largely upon his wife's intense and flamboyant personality in his writings, at times quoting direct segments of her personal diaries in his work. Zelda made mention of this in a 1922 mock review in the *New York Tribune*, saying that "[i]t seems to me that on one page I recognized a

portion of an old diary of mine which mysteriously disappeared shortly after my marriage, and also scraps of letters which, though considerably edited, sound to me vaguely familiar. In fact, Mr. Fitzgerald—I believe that is how he spells his name—seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home" (*Zelda Fitzgerald: The Collected Writings*, 388). But the impact Zelda's personality might have had on his life may be overstated, as much of his earliest writings reflect the personality of his first love, Ginevra King. In fact, the character of Daisy as much represents his inability to cultivate his relationship with King as it does Zelda's personality.

Although Fitzgerald's passion lay in writing novels, only his first novel sold well enough to support the opulent lifestyle that he and Zelda adopted as New York celebrities. As did most professional authors at the time, Fitzgerald supplemented his income by writing short stories for such magazines as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's Weekly*, and *Esquire magazine*, and sold movie rights of his stories and novels to Hollywood studios. Many of these stories act as testing grounds for his novels. For example, "Absolution" was intended to become an earlier chapter in *The Great Gatsby*. Because of his

opulent lifestyle as well as the bills from Zelda's medical care, he was constantly in financial trouble and often required loans from his literary agent, Harold Ober, and his editor at Scribner's, Maxwell Perkins. When Ober decided not to continue advancing Fitzgerald, the author severed ties with his longtime friend and agent.

Fitzgerald began working on his fourth novel during the late 1920s but was sidetracked by financial difficulties that necessitated his writing commercial short stories, and by the schizophrenia that struck Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald in 1930. Her emotional health remained fragile for the rest of her life. In 1932, she was hospitalized in Baltimore, Maryland. Scott rented the "La Paix" estate in the suburb of Towson, Maryland to work on his latest book, the story of the rise and fall of Dick Diver, a promising young psychiatrist who falls in love with and marries Nicole Warren, one of his patients. The book went through many versions, the first of which was to be a story of matricide. Some critics have seen the book as a thinly-veiled autobiographical novel recounting Fitzgerald's problems with his wife, the corrosive effects of wealth and a decadent lifestyle, his own egoism and self-confidence, and his continuing alcoholism. Indeed, Fitzgerald was extremely

protective of the his material (their life together). When Zelda published her own version of their lives in Europe, *Save Me the Waltz*, Fitzgerald was angry and succeeded in getting her doctors to keep her from writing any more. His book was finally published in 1934 as *Tender Is the Night*. Critics who had waited nine years for the followup to *The Great Gatsby* had mixed opinions about the novel. Most were thrown off by its three part structure and many felt that Fitzgerald had not lived up to their expectations. The novel did not sell well upon publication, but the book's reputation has since risen significantly.

Hollywood years

Although he reportedly found movie work degrading, Fitzgerald was once again in dire financial straits, and spent the second half of the 1930s in Hollywood, working on commercial short stories, scripts for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (including some unfilmed work on *Gone with the Wind*), and his fifth and final novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*. Published posthumously as *The Last Tycoon*, it was based on the life of film executive Irving Thalberg. Scott and Zelda became estranged; she continued living in mental

institutions on the east coast, while he lived with his lover Sheilah Graham, a movie columnist, in Hollywood. From 1939 until his death, Fitzgerald mocked himself as a Hollywood hack through the character of Pat Hobby in a sequence of 17 short stories, later collected as "The Pat Hobby Stories"

Illness and death

Fitzgerald had clearly been an alcoholic since his college days, and he became notorious during the 1920s for his extraordinarily heavy drinking. This left him in poor health by the late 1930s.

According to Zelda's biographer, Nancy Milford, Scott claimed that he had contracted tuberculosis, but she states that this was usually a pretext to cover his drinking problems. However, Fitzgerald scholar Matthew J. Bruccoli contends that Fitzgerald did in fact have recurring tuberculosis, and Nancy Milford reports that Fitzgerald biographer Arthur Mizener said that Scott suffered a mild attack of tuberculosis in 1919, and in 1929 he had "what proved to be a tubercular hemorrhage". It may be pure coincidence but two of Fitzgerald's least likeable characters have the initials "TB" (an acronym for tuberculosis) - Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* and Tommy

Barban in *Tender is The Night*. Given the extent of Scott's alcoholism, however, it is possible that the hemorrhage was caused by bleeding from esophageal varices—enlarged veins in the esophagus that result from advanced liver disease. Fitzgerald's lifelong smoking habit undoubtedly also damaged his health and brought on the heart problems that eventually killed him.

Fitzgerald suffered two heart attacks in late 1940. After the first, in Schwab's Drug Store, he was ordered by his doctor to avoid strenuous exertion and to obtain a first floor apartment, which he did by moving in with Sheilah Graham. On the night of December 20, 1940, he had his second heart attack, and the next day, December 21, while awaiting a visit from his doctor, Fitzgerald collapsed in Graham's apartment and died. He was 44.

Among the attendants at a visitation held at a funeral home in Hollywood was Dorothy Parker, who reportedly cried and murmured "the poor son of a bitch," a line from Jay Gatsby's funeral in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. In another strange coincidence, the author Nathanael West, who was a friend and admirer of Fitzgerald, was killed along with his wife on the way to Fitzgerald's services.

Fitzgerald's remains were then shipped to Maryland, where his funeral was attended by very few people. The Catholic church would not allow him to be buried in his family's plot in Rockville and he was originally buried in Rockville Union Cemetery. Zelda died tragically in a fire at the Highland Mental Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1948. With the permission and assistance of their only child, Frances "Scottie" Fitzgerald Lanahan Smith, the Women's Club of Rockville had their bodies moved to the family plot in Saint Mary's Cemetery, in Rockville, Maryland.

Fitzgerald never completed *The Love of the Last Tycoon*. His notes for the novel were edited by his friend Edmund Wilson and published in 1941 as *The Last Tycoon*. However, there is now critical agreement that Fitzgerald intended the title of the book to be *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, as is reflected in a new 1994 edition of the book, edited by Fitzgerald scholar Matthew Bruccoli of the University of South Carolina.

Works

Novels

- *This Side of Paradise* (New York: Chas. Scribner & Son: 1920)
- *The Beautiful and Damned* (New York: Chas. Scribner & Son: 1922)
- *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Chas. Scribner & Son: 1925)
- *Tender Is the Night* (New York: Chas. Scribner & Son: 1934)
- *The Last Tycoon* – originally *The Love of the Last Tycoon* – (New York: Chas. Scribner & Sons, published posthumously: 1941)

Other works

- *The Princeton Tiger* (Humor Magazine, 1917)
- *The Vegetable, or From President to Postman* (play, 1923)
- *The Crack-Up* (essays and stories, 1945)
- *Winter Dreams* (Short Story, 1922)
- *Babylon Revisited* (Short Story)
- *All the Sad Young Men* (Short Story Collection, 1926)
- *Babylon Revisited* (Short Story Collection)
- *Taps at Reveille* (Short Story Collection, 1935)
- *Tales of the Jazz Age* (Short Story Collection, 1922)
- *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz* (Short

Story)

- *Bernice Bobs Her Hair* (Short Story)
- *The Ice Palace* (Short Story)
- *The Bridal Party* (Short Story)
- *The Baby Party* (Short Story)
- *Head and Shoulders* (Short Story)
- *Flappers and Philosophers* (Short Story Collection, 1920)
- *The Basil and Josephine Stories* (Short Story Collection)

Published as

- *Novels & Stories 1920-1922: This Side of Paradise, Flappers and Philosophers, The Beautiful and Damned, Tales of the Jazz Age* (Jackson R. Bryer, ed.) (Library of America, 2000) ISBN 978-1-88301184-0.

The Rich Boy (short story)

Biography and criticism

- The standard biographies of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald are Arthur Mizener's *The Far Side of Paradise* (1951, 1965), and Matthew Bruccoli's *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur* (1981). Fitzgerald's letters have also been

published in various editions such as *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda: The Love Letters of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer and Cathy W. Banks (2002); *Correspondence of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, ed. Matthew Bruccoli and Margaret Duggan (1980), and *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, ed. Matthew Bruccoli (1994).

- Zelda Fitzgerald published an autobiographically-charged novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, in 1934.
- The film *Beloved Infidel* (1959) depicts Fitzgerald (played by Gregory Peck) during his final years as a Hollywood scenarist. Another film, *Last Call* (2002) (Jeremy Irons plays Fitzgerald) describes the relationship with Frances Kroll during his last two years of life. The film was based on the memoir of Frances Kroll Ring, entitled *Against the Current: As I Remember F. Scott Fitzgerald* (1985), that records her experience as secretary to Fitzgerald for the last 20 months of his life.

Sources

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Moveable Feast*. London: Arrow Books, 1996. ¹Canterbury, E. Ray; Birch, Thomas. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: Under the Influence*.

(St. Paul: Paragon House, 2006), 189 ²Canterbury, 189

External links

- F. Scott Fitzgerald Centenary pages at the University of South Carolina
- F. Scott Fitzgerald Papers at Princeton University
- Annotated Bibliography
- Texts and translations
- National Historic Landmarks Program: F. Scott Fitzgerald House
- Works by F. Scott Fitzgerald at Project Gutenberg
- Profile of F. Scott Fitzgerald at Find A Grave

F. Scott Fitzgerald Books

Novels: *This Side of Paradise* | *The Beautiful and Damned* | *The Great Gatsby* | *Tender Is the Night* | *The Love of the Last Tycoon*

Short story books: *Flappers and Philosophers* | *Tales of the Jazz Age* | *All the Sad Young Men* | *Taps at Reveille* | *The Pat Hobby Stories* | *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald*

Other works: *The Princeton Tiger* | *The*

Vegetable | *The Crack-Up* | "Winter Dreams" |
"Babylon Revisited" | "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" |
"The Cut-Glass Bowl" | "Benediction" | "Head
and Shoulders" | "The Diamond as Big as the
Ritz" | "The Ice Palace"

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