

Fourth Grade / Novel

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The great Gatsby (F. Scott Fitzgerald)

Lecture 1

Life and background of the author:

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's origins are a peculiarly American distillation. From his father came the historic names, Scott and Key, and a family who had been in America since the 1600s. His mother, Mary McQuillan, was of Irish immigrant descent, but her family had made much money in the new land. And, although Princeton prestige and New York parties come to mind at the mention of his name, Fitzgerald was actually a Midwesterner, born September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. His father was not prosperous, and the family moved to Buffalo, New York, when Scott was 2 years old, to Syracuse, New York, when he was 5, back to Buffalo when he was 7-1/2, and finally, in 1908, when he was 12, back to St. Paul, where the family remained.

Young Fitzgerald early knew the terror of a lack of money. Before the final move back to St. Paul, the firm of Procter & Gamble had fired his father. The elder Fitzgerald's failure no doubt haunted the young man, but, at the same time, in his father he sensed quiet good taste and natural courtesy and decorum, values that he transferred to Dick Diver's father in *Tender Is the Night*. From his sire he also learned a great deal about the Civil War, a passion that supplies many references in that novel as well.

While still a student at St. Paul Academy, Fitzgerald began to write both stories and drama, though he did not seem to be interested in his regular courses. In an attempt to encourage him in more traditional scholarly endeavors, his aunt sent him in 1911 to Newman Academy, a Catholic boarding school in New Jersey.

He was writing plays of his own, and the amateur productions of them, in addition to the editorship of the college paper and other honors, restored his popularity. He prepared to enter Princeton in the fall.

In September 1914, he settled into the university, which had been his goal ever since he had heard of the Princeton drama club, the Triangle. He immediately became involved in writing a musical for the club. That work and his writing for the campus humor magazine, *The Tiger*, took up most of his time, but these activities took their toll, for he managed to fail several courses. Nonetheless, by his junior year his hopes were high: he expected to be the Triangle Club president his senior year, he had been placed on the editorial board of *The Tiger*, he had been admitted to a distinguished social club on campus, and he was in love with Ginevra King, a beautiful heiress from Chicago. But in November 1916, he was forced to withdraw from Princeton because of his grades; he himself preferred to think that his removal was for health reasons.

By the time he returned to Princeton the following fall, his romance was breaking up and his ambitions were coming to naught. During his senior year, the war beckoned, and he left Princeton without a degree, but with rich, imaginative materials for his future novels and with at least one lasting

friendship, that of Edmund Wilson, the now famous author and critic.

The army did not send Fitzgerald to the front; he got only as far as Alabama, where two crucial things happened. He began working seriously on a novel, which he had started at Princeton (later to be published as *This Side of Paradise*) .

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Success came almost too quickly. Though Edmund Wilson, for one, thought that *This Side of Paradise* was immature, the novel catapulted Fitzgerald to fame. The couple lived in luxury in New York and became the center of a sophisticated and exhausting social life where money — and alcohol — was in abundant supply. The publication of two volumes of short stories, *Flappers and Philosophers* (1921) and *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922) and a novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned* first serialized, then published as a book (1922), added materially to Fitzgerald's income.

Though his books were selling well, the Fitzgerald seemed to spend more money than they earned. He left for a visit to Europe in May 1921, for a brief rest, and his daughter, "Scottie," was born in St. Paul in October, after their return. By fall of the next year they had decided to move back East. They settled in Great Neck, Long Island, where a close neighbor and friend was Ring Lardner, the famous short story writer, whose profligate brilliance was later used in the characterization of Abe North in *Tender Is the Night*. Their social life remained riotous, and Scott was often drunk. Nonetheless, he kept working; he was hoping for financial success from a play, *The Vegetable*, which opened in November 1923, in Atlantic City. It

was a dismal failure, and Fitzgerald was forced to write short stories, which were quick-selling and remunerative, in order to get out of debt.

While at Great Neck he worked on what was to become an American masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, and in the spring of 1924, when they were financially able to do so, the Fitzgeralds moved to Europe, where he hoped to finish his novel. In Paris they met Gerald and Sara Murphy, to whom *Tender Is the Night* is dedicated, and after whose life style, in some measure, the *Divers'* was patterned. The Murphys took them to their hideaway on the Riviera, and there, Fitzgerald labored to finish *The Great Gatsby*, which was finally published in April 1925.

The critics recognized the novel's brilliance immediately, but it did not sell as well as Fitzgerald had hoped. It should be said that Fitzgerald made large amounts of money by writing, even during the lean years of the Depression; the fact remained, however, that the two usually spent more than they could earn. And in order to keep his income high enough to meet ever-mounting expenses, Fitzgerald wrote short stories and even went to Hollywood to write film scenarios.

Ironically, *The Great Gatsby* marked the end of Fitzgerald's fame as a writer. Dissipation had taken its toll, and he seemed unable to discipline himself for an extended artistic effort. In the meantime the Fitzgerald marriage, marked by recklessness and extravagance from the beginning, had yet a new strain — Zelda's dissatisfaction, (his wife)

which finally manifested itself as serious mental illness. Zelda was not without talent, but she was without an identity of her

own in her marriage to a famous writer. To counter her feeling of uselessness, she tried a number of things, including painting, writing, and practicing ballet avidly. While she continued painting for the rest of her life, it was a limited pursuit because of her failing vision. Her deepest commitment was to dancing, but she finally became aware that she had simply started too late for a serious career. Disappointed and exhausted from her ballet practice, she collapsed in the spring of 1930. Finally diagnosed as a schizophrenic, she was hospitalized off and on for the rest of her life until she died in 1948 in a hospital fire. After her institutionalization, however, she continued to write, and in 1930 she published her only novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, a highly autobiographical work that treats the trip to Europe and the stay on the Riviera, among other things.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's version of the story, a novel that had been in production for years, was at last published in 1934. *Tender Is the Night* did not sell well, possibly because the American public, reeling under the weight of the Great Depression, was not in a mood for a tale of wealthy and privileged people. Fitzgerald was under severe financial pressure again, and he went to Hollywood once more to write his way to solvency. There he met Sheilah Graham; their love had become by the end of his life a quiet domesticity. She tried to give him some sense of order and attempted to aid him with his nearly hopeless alcoholism. He suffered a heart attack in late November 1940, and the afternoon of December 21 he experienced the second and fatal one. He was buried in Rockville, Maryland, December 27, but because he did not die within the Catholic Church he was denied the last rites of the

Church, which he had desired. His grave is not in the small cemetery with the generations of Scotts and Keys, but rather in the Rockville Union Cemetery nearby.

Before his death, Fitzgerald had been working on *The Last Tycoon*, a novel about his life in Hollywood; his old friend Edmund Wilson edited it and also a collection of personal writings, *The Crack-Up*; both volumes were published in 1945. Little attention was paid to this fine American artist until the publication in 1949 of Arthur Mizener's landmark biography, *The Far Side of Paradise*, triggered a Fitzgerald revival. The last two decades have seen F. Scott Fitzgerald placed in the pantheon of great American novelists.