

## F. Scott Fitzgerald: An Introduction

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Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was born in the mid western city of St. Paul, the son of a salesman for Procter and Gamble. An abortive adolescent romance with Ginevra King, daughter of a rich and influential Chicago family, left him with an ambiguous response to wealth and social success, which he simultaneously denounced and pursued for most of his life. His career at Princeton was an odd mixture of success and failure, but it did result in his first novel, "This Side of Paradise (1920). The book was an immediate popular success; published in March it had sold nearly 50,000 copies by the end of the year.

His second book, *The Beautiful and Damned*, which appeared in truncated form in *The Metropolitan Magazine*, was also highly successful and did show improvement on the somewhat callow adolescence of his first novel. It was not until 1925, however, when Fitzgerald's popular reputation was already on the decline and his own self-confidence weakening, that he produced the first of his major works, *The Great Gatsby*. In this story of Jay Gatsby's a moral pursuit of the ideal Fitzgerald at last exercised genuine artistic control and in doing so raised Gatsby's quest to a mythical level.

The period between the publication of *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night* was a difficult one for Fitzgerald. In 1930 his wife, Zelda, suffered major breakdown while he himself was conscious of the continuing eclipse of his popular reputation. There were new stars in the literary firmament now and though he could still command impressive fees for his short stories, the real achievement of *Gatsby* had not been adequately recognised.

*Tender Is the Night* clearly draws on Fitzgerald's own experience and Zelda's fifteen-month stay in Swiss Sanatorium. It is concerned, as Fitzgerald explained, with a

man who is "a natural idealist, a spoiled priest" who is presented as "giving in for various causes to the ideas of the haute Bourgeois" and who "in his rise to the top of the social world" is shown as "losing his idealism, his talent and turning to drink." The novel's protagonist, Dick Diver, sets out as an idealist to reconstruct and redeem. He opposes the terrifying flux of existence with his own constructions. But by degree he is corrupted and these constructions begins to collapse, destroying their creator. Once again the connection between body and the body politic is convincingly established. The wealth and power which shape Diver's life also mould society in general and the entropic force revealed in the individual psyche also dominate the social world. Instead of reclaiming chattered minds and reconstructing society, Diver ends up teaching the rich the "ABCs of human decency".

Fitzgerald's last novel, "The Last Tycoon", was never completed and this story of failure and eventual corruption of the creative mind in the face of the temptations of the material world stands as an appropriate epitaph to a man who was always alive to entropic forces at work in his own life.

Fitzgerald was attracted by romantic notions of revolt. As a writer he wanted to believe that individual could shape not only his fate but even the nature of his environment by nothing more than an act of will and imagination. But he could never finally convince himself that any of this was possible. His romantics are corrupted and destroyed by a deterministic system. Looking desperately for an order which would grant them some kind of function and identity they found only evidence of dissolution. Even the wealthy, who seemed to dictate the terms of their existence, were themselves only victims. The economic crash of 1919, like the dissipation which marked his personal and artistic life and the growing despair which gripped his "marriage, was proof of man's inability to

retain even a tenuous control over events. A concern with money seems to lie at the very heart of Fitzgerald's work - a confused and vague hatred of its privilege, and envy of its power, and assurance of its corrupting influence, and finally, an apocalyptic conviction as to its destructive potential. As he increasingly came to feel, the pursuit of money not merely squandered what he saw as an exhaustible supply of talent, it also shattered the fragile constructions of imagination itself. Part of the tragedy of Fitzgerald's life lay in his compulsive need for those very things which destroyed him.