

American Literature & Culture
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F Scott Fitzgerald A Brief Overview (Lecture 20)

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Good morning, we will talk about F. Scott Fitzgerald, again one of the seminal authors, who has written one of the most important, most influential works of all time, *The Great Gatsby*. So F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the key members of The Lost Generation and the author of *The Great Gatsby* along with several other important American novels as well. A famous exchange between F. Scott Fitzgerald and his friend the great Ernest Hemingway was, it went like this

So Fitzgerald says the rich are different than you and me. And Hemingway said, yes, they have more money. So, this sort of encapsulates the relation between the two and the attitudes of the two great writers. Fitzgerald was always preoccupied with money and Hemingway was seemingly dismissive of it and it reflects in the kinds of work they wrote and the kinds of lives they led and also the kinds of men they were. Now, this was actually an encounter and Hemingway and the great literary critic Mary Colum, where it was said that Hemingway says I am getting to know the rich, and Colum says I think you will find the only difference between the rich and other people is that the rich have more money. So this was the retelling of the exchange between the two great writers and also the two, the great writer and the

famous critic. In *Rich Boy*, Fitzgerald and that's a Fitzgerald story, it is short story *The Rich Boy*, published in 1926. The full quotation is

Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them, makes them soft, where we are hard, cynical where we are trustful, in a way that, unless you were born rich, it is very difficult to understand.

So this is a quotation from Fitzgerald's short story *The Rich Boy* published in 1926. Fitzgerald, full name was Francis Scott Fitzgerald. He lived between 1896 and 1940. He was named after Francis Scott Key, the author of the United States national anthem, the *Star-Sprangled Banner*. *Star-Sprangled Banner* is the anthem, national anthem of the USA.

Fitzgerald was born in Minnesota; however he lived in New York for the major part of his life. He also studied at the prestigious Princeton University between 1913 and 17 and joined the Army in 1917. After his discharge from the Army in 1919, that is after the First World War he moved to the New York City. Some of his literary successes included *This Side of Paradise*, *Tales of the Jazz Age* which was his second collection of short stories and which also contains one of his most famous short stories *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*, *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz* is contained in the *Tales of the Jazz Age*.

He also wrote *The Beautiful and Damned* in 1922 which was also adapted to the screen and was published in the same year. And many of the novels by Fitzgerald were adapted for cinema. He also had a stint at Hollywood for a period although it was not very successful, but something came out of it which is a novel, *The Last Tycoon* which deals with Hollywood and was published posthumously. The novel was also adapted into a famous film, *The Last Tycoon* directed by the great Elia Kazan starring Robert De Niro.

Scott and his wife Zelda are the immortal literary couples. He married Zelda in 1920, honeymooned at Biltmore Hotel but were asked to leave because of their notoriously wild parties. Now we are talking about the 1920s, the Roaring 20s and Zelda and Scott, they sort of embodied the spirit of the Roaring 20s of the Jazz age. Finally they settled at a home in Westport Connecticut but they continued the lifestyle of rich and famous. They constantly

entertained and attended parties, threw famous parties and all this can be, you know, the distillation of their lifestyle can be seen in *The Great Gatsby*, of course.

Their troubled marriage is portrayed well in Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* which is a 1934 novel. They had a turbulent life together. Zelda was upset to discover *Tender Is the Night*'s heroine Nicole Diver is modeled after her. In 1927, Fitzgeralds rented a huge mansion. It had 27 bedrooms which was near Wilmington, Delaware. Fitzgeralds or Fitzgerald rather was increasingly turning to alcohol, sometimes becoming abusive and Zelda was tempestuous. She often embarrassed herself and Fitzgerald also in front of friends as well as strangers.

She became fixated on her old passion for ballet and often participate, practiced to the point of physical and emotional collapse. For the next 3 years, the couple travelled back and forth between New York and Baltimore. They also travelled to and stayed in Europe for months at a time, sometimes with fellow Americans in Paris, the Riviera, Cannes, Sao Rafael, Capri and Rome. In 1930, they were in North Africa. The same year, Zelda had a nervous breakdown. For the next few years, she was in and out of clinics in Switzerland. She died in 1948. This was a turbulent period, a very tragic period in Fitzgerald's life.

To understand Fitzgerald we have to understand his, his personal life although I am not encouraging you to do a biographical reading of writers but you will find so many elements from his novels were actually lived by the author. We have also got to understand the Roaring 20s, a period that I constantly keep referring to, which symbolizes social, artistic and cultural dynamism. apparently normally quote unquote returned to politics in the wake of The First World War. This was also the period which redefined modern womanhood. This was a period of Art Deco, Jazz Music, Surrealism and Expressionism in Europe; so several experiments being conducted in Europe and America in literary, cultural, artistic domains.

Economically or financially the Wall Street crash of 1929 served to punctuate the end of the era and that was the setting in one of the Great Depression, both G and D in capital letters. The era of industrial growth in the beginning of the 20s, the roaring 20s, it sort of, you know, gave an impetus to consumer demands and aspirations and significant changes in lifestyle and culture, all these are embodied in Fitzgerald's works. You have to also understand the period in terms of so-called Harlem Renaissance, post-First, post The First World War, the

population in Harlem or upper Manhattan was exclusive black. Harlem became the center of African-American culture and it gave birth to prominent writers such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, W. E. B. Du Bois and James Baldwin, writers all of them.

The period is also called the Jazz Age, and as a social historian Fitzgerald became identified with the Jazz Age. It was the age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess and it was an age of satire. That's what he writes in his book, *Echoes of the Jazz Age*. So all these terms, the Roaring 20s, the Jazz Age, they have come to be associated with Fitzgerald. We have already referred to The Lost Generation. It refers to the writers post First World War. These were the expatriates.

When we were talking about Hemingway, we have already referred to all this, we are talking about the host of, or The Lost Generation comprises host of young men who survived and were adrift morally and spiritually following the First World War. The mood was that of cynicism, weariness and disenchantment. some of the greats as we have already seen, apart from Fitzgerald, we had Hemingway, we had Erich Maria Remarque and we also had Ezra Pound, Dos Passos, Hart Crane so these are the writers of The Lost Generation

Hemingway period or the peak of the Hemingway's literary period also coincides with the Radical Thirties. See the Roaring Twenties, the Radical Thirties in America and this is the age of President F. D. Roosevelt and his famous, The New Deal. This was floated in the aftermath of The Great Depression and this was also the time or also a time when writers became radically political and concerned with social issues. So some of them included as I have been mentioning, Clifford Odets, O'Neill, Thomas Wolfe, Dos Passos of course, and also Faulkner. So these are the names you should know in, from the Radical Thirties.

Now coming back to Fitzgerald, some of the recurring themes in his works include love and success, social climbing, alcoholism and loss. All these themes can be found in the great, *The Great Gatsby*, a 1925 novel. The novel is critique for its, or it rather critiques the Great American Dream, the idea that anyone can be a success with hard work and determination and honestly were in America, so that is American Dream The hero Jay Gatsby is a self-made man who flaunts his wealth and tries to construct a new past, a new identity for himself.

If you have read the novel and I urge you read the novel, his idea, the hero's idea of The American Dream is doomed from the very beginning because he tries to buy his way into a society that will never accept him. He gets his idea how to achieve his American Dream from Benjamin Franklin's autobiography Poor Richard where Benjamin Franklin stresses on the virtue of industriousness, frugality and experience with life, life experiences. if you read the novel in Chapter 9, Mr. Wolfshiem, he shows Nick, Nick is the narrator, Nick Carraway and he shows him an old book of Gatsby's which has a daily schedule in the back.

At the back of the book you have a daily schedule and Gatsby thought he could improve himself if he would practice elocution, poise and how to attain it, Read one improving book or magazine per week and Be better to parents; that is a mantra that all good Americans should follow in order to attain riches. But how mythical it could be, that is the tragedy of The Great Gatsby.

Gatsby believes that by planning out every minute of his day, he could attain the wealth that would win the love of his life, Daisy Buchanan who is married to someone else, but the idea is to win her back through his newly acquired immense wealth. The novel is set in the West Egg, Ok that is the area in New York, Great Neck which is thinly disguised as West Egg. So Great Neck is the area in New York which is, for novel purpose we have, for the purpose of the novel, it is disguised as West Egg. It is a counterpoint to Manor haven and Sands Point which was the inspiration to more posh East Egg, the next peninsula over on Long Island. So Great Neck symbolizes the decadence of the Roaring Twenties as it extended out from New York City to the then remote suburbs.

So talking about East versus West Egg, the areas of East Egg and West Egg in Long Island find isolation not just geographically separated only by Courtesy Bay but more significantly in spirit. Now see, separated only by Courtesy Bay, this is an ironic line from The Great Gatsby given on page 9 for the version that I have, but you will find it in one of the earlier parts. This is how it's described, that the two islands are separated only by a Courtesy Bay. East Egg consists of the already established wealthy class born into money and this is a class that has been part of the aristocracy, the American aristocracy for generations.

The West Egg in contrast attract the nouveau riche, the newly rich people those that had more than likely been born under less comfortable circumstances and who suddenly became rich, acquired money. The new money tries desperately to situate themselves on the level of wealth that the people of East Egg enjoy but ultimately they realize the difficulty of becoming a part of that society. The problem in, or the conflict in *The Great Gatsby* is that those inhabit the East Egg will never accept those from the West Egg as equals.

They will consider, consider the West Egg inhabitants severely lacking in class, style and sophistication. But they are regarded as freaks. So that is particularly marked when Gatsby throws his wild, extravagant parties, weekly parties. People come there but it is more like a freak show. The nouveau riche all gather there but the old money, those who are born into money, they prefer to stay away and regard him with, you know with a rather amused outlook.

During one of the Gatsby parties, a small cluster of the East Egg elite situate themselves away from the larger crowd in order to demonstrate that they represent the staid nobility of the countryside. East Egg condescending to West Egg and carefully on guard against its spectroscopic gaiety. This is the line I am quoting from the novel. They come to the parties only to ridicule the festivities around them.

A similar situation occurs when Gatsby invites the Sloane of the East Egg to one of his parties only to have the invitation accepted without gratitude. That is again a term from the novel. No one of the East Egg wants to associate with the new money now rampant on Long Island due to the fact that they believe the West Egg inhabitants unfit for such a lifestyle that they lead. They adhere to the notion, their true classiness stems from upbringing alone and cannot be mastered if one starts too late in life.

The Great Gatsby's themes and characters reflected the real world transformation that Great Neck was experiencing at that time. As show business personalities like Sid Caesar and the Marx Brothers bought homes in the Hamlet. Talking about symbolism in *The Great Gatsby*, one of the most important themes, in the novel is class and social standing, again a recurring motif in all works of Hemingway. Class and social standing act as a barrier for almost every character, East and West Egg act as a symbol of this in their physical makeup.

You have to remember that Tom and Daisy Buchanan, they live on the East which is far more refined and well-bred seemingly. Nick and Gatsby are on the West which is for people who don't have any real standing or financial standing or class standing, even if they have all the money. The green light that shines frequently, if you have seen the movie; you will understand that green light that shines from the East Egg, it entices Gatsby towards what he has always wanted but he will never get. And Daisy the woman that Gatsby has always wanted but will never get, she lives on, very symbolically, on East Egg. So again we are talking about the barrier that the water creates between these two worlds is symbolic of the barrier that keeps these people apart from one another and from much of what they want.

Fitzgerald portrays 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed and empty pursuit of pleasure. The reckless jubilation that led to Decadent parties and wild Jazz music epitomized in *The Great Gatsby* by the opulent parties that Gatsby throws every Saturday night resulted ultimately in the corruption of The American Dream as the unrestrained desire for money and pleasure surpasses more noble goals.

When The First World War ended in 1918, the generation of young Americans who had fought the war became intensely disillusioned as the brutal carnage that they had just faced made the Victorian social morality of early twentieth century America seem like stuffy, empty hypocrisy. The dizzying rise of the stock market in the aftermath of the War led to a sudden sustained increase in the national wealth and a newfound materialism as people began to spend and consume at unprecedented levels. A person from any social background could potentially make a fortune but the American aristocracy families with old wealth scorned the newly rich industrialists and speculators, all these people are a part of *The Great Gatsby*.

So although his affections are misplaced, Gatsby is a passionate man who cannot live without love. Love is his undoing. When Daisy leaves with Tom and Gatsby loses her, it is the death of his dream, the Great American Dream and many critics have read that Daisy, herself symbolizes the American Dream, the unattainable American dream. Although Gatsby's dream is never met, he can be considered great. Why is he great after all?

So, he is considered great because he is compared to the shallow characters of East Egg and that's what is the most important aspect of *The Great Gatsby*. The title, depiction of a particular age in American History and then also look at the multiple perspectives, the narrative, so you have Nick's perspective, you have Jordan Baker's perspective, you have Daisy and Gatsby's father's perspective. So this is; you know a novel or a movie like *Citizen Kane*.

Many people look at the central character but they are never able to understand who he really was. *Citizen Kane*, a movie made by Orson Welles, it employs the same device and this was found in several other novels also, several other films also. *Great Gatsby* is one of the novels that successfully employed the idea of multiple perspectives. We have to understand the idea, the notion of The American Dream in the novel. We have to understand that money and pleasure and pursuit of happiness and unbridled freedom is what the characters want.

Daisy, the heroine represents all that is idealized, that is perfect at least from the eyes, or through the eyes of the hero. And the novel is an allegory for the deception and false promises of the American Dream. We have to understand the legacy of the novel. It has given us a word like *Gatsbyesque*, which stands for conspicuous consumption and flaunting of wealth, and also of course I talked about a point of view, the structure and the multiple perspectives in the novel. So read the novel. We may not be doing it actually in the class but I wanted you to get introduced to one of the greatest novels of American Literature, *The Great Gatsby*. Thank you very much.