
Overview of the Novel

About the Author

F. Scott Fitzgerald
(1896-1940)

Francis Scott Fitzgerald was born on September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. As a student at a Catholic boarding school in Hackensack, New Jersey, he developed an interest in poetry and drama and wrote original plays for amateur productions.

In 1913 Fitzgerald entered Princeton University, where he continued his literary interests, composing lyrics for the college's Triangle Club productions and writing a number of short stories and other pieces for the *Nassau Lit*. This magazine was edited by Edmund Wilson, who later became a distinguished literary critic and editor of two of Fitzgerald's works, *The Last Tycoon* (1941) and *The Crack-Up* (1945). Fitzgerald's literary efforts and a long-distance romance with a Chicago woman led to poor grades and a temporary withdrawal from Princeton. By the time he returned in 1916, Fitzgerald was even more committed to writing.

World War I intervened, however, and Fitzgerald left Princeton, without a degree, for an army commission as a second lieutenant. Posted to Camp Sheridan in Alabama, Fitzgerald met Zelda Sayre, the beautiful and unconventional daughter of a Montgomery judge. After being discharged from the Army in 1919, Fitzgerald worked for eight months at an advertising firm while collecting rejection slips for his moonlighting efforts as a writer.

With the help and encouragement of Max Perkins, his editor at Scribner's, Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, was a resounding success, selling 40,000 copies in 1920 and bringing its young author instant fame. Scott and Zelda were married in the spring of 1920, the same year his first book of stories, *Flappers and Philosophers*, was published. The Fitzgeralds' luxurious lifestyle and travels made it necessary for Fitzgerald to turn out short stories regularly in order to pay the bills. In 1921 their daughter and only child, Scottie, was born. The following spring Scott's second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, was published, followed shortly thereafter by a second book of short stories, *Tales of the Jazz Age*.

Still faced with mounting bills, Scott and Zelda moved to Great Neck, Long Island, in 1922, and Fitzgerald began *The Great Gatsby*. When it appeared in 1925, it sold only half as many copies as his previous novel, which had itself been a sales disappoint-

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ment. Discouraged by the reception of the work which would eventually be regarded as his greatest achievement, Fitzgerald published no other novel until *Tender Is the Night* in 1934.

In the interim, Fitzgerald's personal life became increasingly restless and difficult, marked by scanty work, incessant partying, and alcoholism. In Europe in 1930, Zelda suffered her first breakdown. The following year, her illness was diagnosed as schizophrenia. From that point until her death in 1948, she was in and out of sanatoriums. Fitzgerald's own emotional crack-up is chronicled in *The Crack-Up*.

Despite the critical success of *Tender Is the Night*, Fitzgerald was forced in 1937 to turn to work in Hollywood to pay bills and medical expenses. This, his second sojourn there, was his most successful, both financially and in terms of work produced. His new friendship with Sheila Graham was supportive, and he continued working on his novel *The Last Tycoon*. In late 1940, he suffered two heart attacks and died on December 21.

For many years *The Great Gatsby* was considered a period piece about the twenties. The book vividly evokes the era from 1919 when World War I ended, to the Great Crash of 1929. Fitzgerald called it the Jazz Age for the pulsating, brash, uniquely American music that made its way up from New Orleans and bloomed nationwide as touring big bands and the newly invented radio spread it from coast to coast.

During the twenties, Americans gave themselves over to the task of making and spending money, with little concern for social welfare or global cooperation. Corruption was blandly accepted by most people, just as Fitzgerald's characters accept Gatsby's shady dealings. Conformity and intolerance toward ethnic, religious, and racial differences thrived. Prejudice against Jews, Catholics, blacks, and foreigners rose. The nation's wealth grew spectacularly, but its benefits were unevenly distributed.

Technology helped transform the nation. The automobile decreased physical isolation, created new opportunities for leisure, speeded up life in general, and quickly became a status symbol. The radio and the movies became important, not only for entertainment, but also for the standardization of styles and ideas.

The Characters

Nick Carraway

- is the narrator of the story and an important character in his own right.
- moves from the Midwest to the East when he is twenty-nine to enter the bond business.
- rents a small, run-down house next to Gatsby's giant mansion.
- prides himself on reserving moral judgment of others.
- is simultaneously drawn to and repelled by the selfish, amoral rich people he meets.
- prides himself on his honesty but tacitly endorses the recklessness around him.

Jay Gatsby

- lives in a huge mansion in West Egg next to Nick's house.
- is about thirty years old.
- has limitless wealth from unspecified sources.
- has mysterious long-distance phone calls.
- mixes fact and fiction when he talks about his past.
- has loved Daisy for five years but lost her to Tom.
- is determined to recapture Daisy.