

CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **THE GREAT GATSBY**

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Early Years

September 24, 1896 marks the birth date of F. Scott Fitzgerald, one of the foremost twentieth century American writers. Born in St. Paul, Minnesota, young Scott was christened Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, in honor of his second cousin three times removed, Francis Scott Key, the author of the National Anthem. His father, Edward, brought breeding, charm, and a sense of elegance to the family, although as a businessman, he experienced only marginal financial success. Fitzgerald's mother, Mollie McQuillan, was the daughter of an Irish immigrant who made a fortune in the wholesale grocery business. Although she came from a family of means, she had little interest in society life, except as it regarded her son's future. The family lived comfortably on the outskirts of the city's most fashionable residential neighborhood, Summit Avenue, thanks largely to the generosity of the McQuillan family. Although the Fitzgeralds lived just blocks from the city's most elegant and wealthy families, they were not considered rich and therefore were perched precariously on the community's social hierarchy. They possessed what some critics have come to call "a certain genteel shabbiness." It seems likely much of Fitzgerald's interest in society life began in his youth in Minnesota when he would play and associate with the rich children of the neighborhood — dancing, sailing, swimming, sledding — all the time knowing he was never entirely a part of their society.

The Fitzgeralds lived in Minnesota on and off during Scott's youth. When his father's business folded in 1897, the elder Fitzgerald took a job the following year as a salesman for Procter and Gamble, consequently moving his family to New York, first to Buffalo, then Syracuse, and then back to Buffalo. He was fired from his job in 1908, and just months before Scott's twelfth birthday, the family returned to St. Paul where the McQuillan family still lived. From that point, the Fitzgeralds essentially lived off the McQuillan family fortune. Although Scott would call St. Paul home from 1908 to 1922, he was often not there. Rather, he spent much of that time at boarding school, at Princeton University, in the army, and in New York City.

Prep School and College

Although Edward and Mollie Fitzgerald did not mingle much in the society life of their community, they saw to it that Scott met the right people. He attended the prep school and dancing classes where the elite sent their children. In 1908, Fitzgerald entered the St. Paul Academy where he was received with mixed welcome (many of the students apparently thought he was too arrogant). He excelled in debate and athletics, pushing himself continually. In 1909, "The Mystery of the Raymond Mortgage" was published in the school magazine *Now & Then*, marking the first time Fitzgerald was in print. He would publish three more stories in the next two years. He would also begin writing plays while still a student at St. Paul.

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In 1911, however, due largely to Scott's less than stellar scholastic record, his parents sent him to the Newman School, a Catholic prep school in Hackensack, New Jersey. Here he met Fr. Sigourney Fay who would serve as a mentor, encouraging him to develop his talents and pursue his dreams of personal achievement and distinction. During the years at Newman, Fitzgerald published three stories in the school literary magazine, helping him to realize that despite his interest in athletics, he was more successful in literary endeavors.

In 1913, Fitzgerald entered Princeton University. Again, he would not prove himself a top scholar, although his literary achievements began to grow. He wrote scripts and lyrics for the Triangle Club musicals and contributed to Princeton publications. By 1917, Fitzgerald was on academic probation and, given that graduation looked unlikely, he joined the army, commissioned as a second lieutenant in the infantry. He continued to write, however, and in 1918, *The Romantic Egotist* was rejected by Charles Scribner's Sons, with a request for resubmission upon revision.

Marriage and Work

In 1918, while assigned to Camp Sheridan, near Montgomery, Alabama, the course of his life changed forever. The 22-year-old Scott met and fell in love with then 18-year-old debutante Zelda Sayre. Zelda, youngest daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge, refused marriage, however, until Scott could support her in the manner to which she was accustomed. After being discharged from the army in February 1919, Fitzgerald moved to New York and took up work with an advertising agency, hoping to earn enough money so he and Zelda could be married. By June of 1919, Zelda had tired of waiting for Scott to earn his fortune and broke their engagement.

During the summer of 1919, Fitzgerald quit the ad business to return to St. Paul to rewrite *The Romantic Egotist*. In September of the same year noted Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins accepted *This Side of Paradise*, as the novel was now called, for publication. One week after its publication, Scott and Zelda were married in New York. The novel meant instant success for the young author and pushed the newlyweds into the limelight. Together, Scott and Zelda became synonymous with life in the 1920s. In many regards, the Fitzgeralds' lifestyle read like something out of one of Scott's novels. Stories of their drinking, dancing, and extravagant lifestyle surround the couple. Over the years, they traveled between the United States and Europe (especially France) extensively, becoming (at least for a while) part of "The Lost Generation" of American expatriates in Paris. In 1921, Zelda gave birth to the couple's only child, a daughter named Frances Scott Fitzgerald (known as Scottie).

Despite their celebrated status, the Fitzgeralds' domestic life was plagued with hardships. Throughout their marriage, the two went through periods of heavy alcohol consumption.

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Although Fitzgerald wrote sober, he drank more and more frequently and excessively. Drinking was also a factor in the Fitzgeralds' frequent fights. In some scholars' opinions, stories of Scott's drinking earned him the reputation for an "irresponsible writer," which kept him from being taken seriously by the literary community. The Fitzgerald's marriage was also plagued by financial difficulties. Although *This Side of Paradise* did well, the follow-up novel did not meet the same success. In order to maintain their extravagant lifestyle, Scott spent much time working on short stories that ran in widely distributed magazines.

Another major obstacle to the Fitzgeralds' domestic happiness came to light in 1930, when Zelda experienced her first of three mental breakdowns. Although she had been troubled during much of their marriage, by 1930, Zelda's condition had worsened such that she was institutionalized. This breakdown left her in various care facilities in France and Switzerland from April 1930 to September 1931. She suffered a second breakdown less than six months later in February 1932, resulting in four months' hospitalization in the United States. Zelda's third breakdown, which occurred in January 1934, left her institutionalized until her death in a fire at her last hospital in 1948.

Although he remained married to Zelda until the end, her mental illness redefined their marriage. Zelda required more care than Scott could give, and so he worked hard to keep her comfortably hospitalized (in fact, many of the couple's later debts resulted from Zelda's institutionalization). Scott eventually met and fell in love with Sheilah Graham, a movie columnist, with whom he spent the last few years of his life. Graham's support and encouragement helped put Scott's stalling career back onto the path of creative productivity.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Major Works

Although Scott is known for his novels, his literary talents ran much deeper. Over the course of his career, Fitzgerald wrote four complete novels, while a fifth, partially completed at the time of his death, was published posthumously. *This Side of Paradise* (1920) marked the beginning of Fitzgerald's career as a novelist and was built largely around experiences and observations made while at Princeton. While also writing short stories, Fitzgerald completed *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), a book first serialized in *Metropolitan Magazine*. *The Great Gatsby* (1925), the novel for which Fitzgerald has become most well known, met only limited success upon its publication. In the years since, it has gone on to become nearly synonymous with Fitzgerald and life in the Roaring 20s. Fitzgerald worked on his fourth novel, *Tender is the Night* (1934), sporadically for almost ten years after publication of *The Great Gatsby*. Despite favorable reviews, the novel sold even more poorly than *The Great Gatsby*. At the time of his death in 1940, Fitzgerald was working on *The Last Tycoon* (1941), a novel based upon his experiences in Hollywood.

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About half the novel was completed at the time of his death and, according to some literary critics, *The Last Tycoon* quite likely could have been his greatest critical success, had it been completed.

Aside from his novels, Fitzgerald amassed a considerable collection of short stories, composing over 150. The Fitzgeralds' lifestyle was expensive and frequently, short stories brought in much needed money. Beginning in 1919, Fitzgerald's works were frequently published in national publications such as *The Smart Set*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Metropolitan Magazine*, *The American Mercury*, *Liberty*, *Scribner's Magazine*, and *Esquire*. He would also publish three collections of short stories during his lifetime: *Flappers and Philosophers* (1920), *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922), *All the Sad Young Men* (1926).

In addition to his novels and short stories, at three distinct points in his career Fitzgerald earned his living as a screenwriter in Hollywood. His first job was in 1927, when he worked for United Artists for only a few months. He returned to Hollywood again in the fall of 1931 to work for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer until the following spring. Fitzgerald made his third and final trip to Hollywood in 1937, drawn there out of dire financial necessity created by Zelda's institutionalization. Fitzgerald signed a six-month contract with MGM Studios at the rate of \$1,000 per week. His contract was renewed for another year at the rate of \$1,250 per week. In December of 1938, however, in keeping with the sort of luck that seemed to plague Fitzgerald, the contract was not renewed. Fitzgerald stayed in Hollywood, however, and between 1939 and 1940 he freelanced with most of the major studios (Paramount, Universal, Twentieth Century-Fox, Goldwyn, and Columbia) while writing his final novel.

At the time of his death in 1940, Fitzgerald had slipped into relative obscurity. His personal life was chaotic and his literary reputation fragile. Fitzgerald's death, sadly, was not unlike Gatsby's. Despite having once been the golden boy of the Jazz Age, upon his death, many of his obituaries were condescending, capitalizing on his personal hardships. Not one of his books remained in print and every indication suggested he was on his way into obscurity. However, after World War II, interest in his work began to grow. By the 1960s, he had risen from the dustbin to secure a place among the great twentieth century American authors. In the time since, interest in Fitzgerald has remained consistently strong. Together with Zelda, his personal life has become a part of the American landscape, linked forever with the youthful exuberance of the 1920s. Professionally, his works provide a valuable voice for exploring themes of ambition, justice, equity, and the American dream — themes that are still current — affording him with a well-deserved place in the American literary canon.