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TRAGIC COURAGE

The World of F. Scott Fitzgerald:
Jazz, Prohibition, Flappers
and American Literature

by Elisa Jordan

“
Show me
a hero,
and I will
write you
a tragedy.”

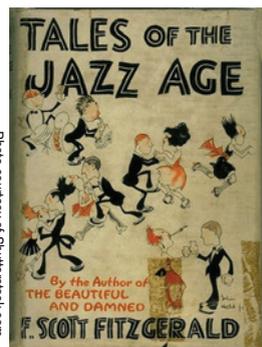
Not long before the millennium turned, the Modern Library published a list of the twentieth century’s 100 Best Novels. Number 2 on that was *The Great Gatsby* by American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald. Only *Ulysses* by Irish novelist James Joyce beat *Gatsby* for the top position.

When Fitzgerald died in Los Angeles in 1940, thousands of copies of *Gatsby* sat unsold in his publisher’s warehouse. Just a decade or so earlier he had been the toast of America’s literary community, traveling abroad and making enormous sums of money. Toward the end of his life his wheel of fortune had turned. He was struggling for work as a screenwriter in Hollywood, his books’ popularity was waning and his wife Zelda was institutionalized.

He disliked life in Hollywood but it provided one of the few viable options for income. In addition to living expenses, he was also paying for Zelda’s care at a private facility and for his daughter’s education. But alcoholism disrupted his once-prolific writing schedule and years of hard living took its toll on his health. Before he died of a heart attack at the age of 44, F. Scott Fitzgerald believed his work would be forgotten. Little did he know that his entire body of work would later revolutionize twentieth century fiction. *The Great Gatsby*, the novel in which Fitzgerald examines America against a backdrop of the 1920s “Jazz Age,” is now considered a masterpiece. Fitzgerald himself coined the term “Jazz Age,” and he didn’t just write about it. He lived it.

THE JAZZ AGE

The era of excess that F. Scott Fitzgerald would call the Jazz Age starts where World War I ends. The United States was on the winning side and the entire country was jubilant in the 1918 victory. Soldiers returned home and soon the country was on an economic upswing. The stock market boomed, which gave many a feeling of wealth even if it was only on paper. It was also a time of change.

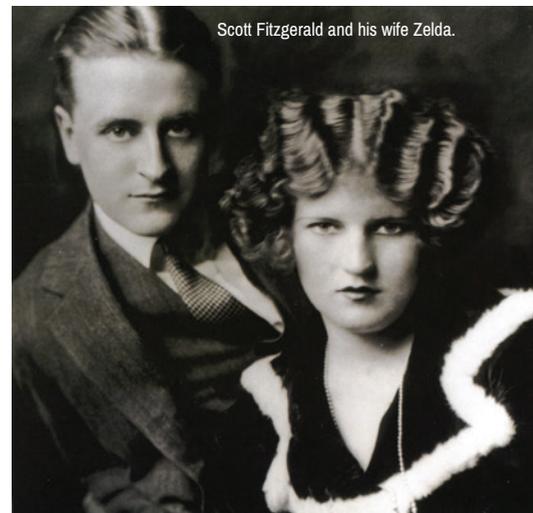


For the first time in America's history, more people lived in cities than in rural areas. It was an age of machinery. Cars were more affordable thanks to the Model-T, skyscrapers were jutting into the sky and airplanes were becoming more commercial. The machine theme heavily influenced a style called Art Deco, which emphasized geometric design and industrial materials like chrome and metal. The symbolism behind it all: progress.

And that's exactly what was happening in the 1920s. In addition to the mechanical revolution, a cultural revolution was also breaking open. The Jazz Age, of course, takes its name from the style of music for which it is named. Its roots grew in New Orleans and combined multiple types of music, including marching band, blues and ragtime, to form a new, unique sound. In retrospect, jazz is considered the first truly American style of music.

Jazz was created by African Americans during a time when whites and blacks were often segregated. But jazz had the unique ability of bringing people together. Music lovers gathered to hear bands play. And thanks to the new era of mass production, phonographs and radios provided other avenues to reach listeners who might otherwise have missed out because of their geographical location or race issues. The culture of mass consumption had another side effect: It narrowed gaps between social classes. Mass produced goods lowered prices and made them more readily available to middle and lower income families.

During this time, F. Scott Fitzgerald—Scott to his friends—was honing his craft as a writer and intently watching all that was going on around him. Although born into a modest but upper-middleclass Irish-American family, Scott was determined to achieve two things: a writing career and infiltrate the upper levels of society. He enrolled in Princeton, which provided material for his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. In 1917, he dropped out to enlist in the Army and serve in the war. Before he could be deployed, however, the war ended in 1918 and he never even left the United States.



“ Here was a new generation, a new generation dedicated more than the last to the fear of poverty and the worship of success, grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths to man shaken.

”

PROHIBITION: A TIME OF REBELLION

In the latter days of the war, President Woodrow Wilson temporarily suspended the manufacturing of alcohol to save grain for food production. After the war ended, Congress submitted the 18th Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture, transportation and sale of liquor. It was ratified on January 29, 1919, and went into effect in 1920.

Although the 18th Amendment had noble intentions, it soon backfired. Instead of curbing the public's desire to drink, people just found illegal ways to acquire liquor. Illegal alcohol manufacturers, or bootleggers, sold their products to eager buyers. Because liquor no longer originated from legal channels, a criminal element crept into distribution. Nightclubs ("speakeasies") catering to thirsty crowds thrived despite the looming and very real possibility of police raids.

Despite connections to the underworld, many speakeasy attendees were hardly the criminal type. Everyday people had been forced underground to find fun and music. The jazz scene exploded in speakeasies, which were less likely to have the rigid cultural rules imposed by prior generations. Now, both black and white musicians played together on stage and whites were introduced to a new style of music.



Jazz Fan parties with flappers

Photo courtesy of Getty Images

It was an exuberant time, for women especially. The 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote, was ratified on August 18, 1920. Women began entering the workforce, expanding their role in society and their personal freedoms. Fashion and behavior followed accordingly. Skirts were shortened and so was hair—as Scott documented in the short story “Bernice Bobs Her Hair.” It was also the first time in America when women who were not prostitutes could be seen in public smoking and drinking—even though it was the Prohibition era. This generation was called the New Woman, although most people are probably more familiar with the term “flapper.” After Scott married socialite Zelda Sayre in 1920, he called her the “first American flapper.”

That same year, he released his first collection of short stories called *Flappers and Philosophers*, which contains “Bernice Bobs Her Hair.”



Photo courtesy of Getty Images

Flapper and revelers make the bar scene

“ You don’t write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say. ”



Photo courtesy of Getty Images

Prohibition Agents at work

GATSBY'S PARTIES

Scott closely watched the world changing around him and wrote his observations into fiction. He examined this in the short stories but began working on a longer, more epic story that evolved into *The Great Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby, a man of questionable background who longs for Daisy, an old flame who went on to marry a millionaire. Gatsby earns a fortune in bootlegging and displays his new wealth with elaborate parties on his vast lawn with intention of winning Daisy's love. As the book unfolds, a dark side to the glamour emerges.



Gatsby's guests are nameless, faceless against a backdrop of excess and drunkenness. There are allusions to the criminal underworld. Reckless youth spirals and the working class hopelessly dreams of upward mobility that will never happen. Gatsby's tragic demise suggests the death of the American Dream. Although the novel is set against the backdrop of the hedonistic Jazz Age, Scott was a keen student of history and his cautionary story can apply to almost any era.

“
The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.
”

THE PARTY'S OVER

F. Scott Fitzgerald's work was fictional, but a great deal of it was based in reality. Charming alcoholics, some of whom fall from grace, dot much of Scott's fiction. Scott and Zelda, charming alcoholics in their own right, started slowly losing control of their lives. Drunken revelry devolved into embarrassing episodes in public and self-destruction in private. For as much as they drank, the Fitzgeralds did not always hold their liquor well. They went from life of the party to friends resenting their behavior. Scott began struggling with bouts of depression and to keep a writing schedule, which he had once been fastidious about.

For her part, Zelda struggled with life in Scott's shadow. She wrote her own novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, and started intensive ballerina training. She showed some talent, but as a woman in her late twenties she was far too old to embark on a professional dance career. Her training strained their marriage and her health.

Zelda, once the ideal flapper, was showing signs of mental illness. Her grueling dance schedule likely exacerbated her breakdown, which resulted in a diagnosis of schizophrenia. She spent the rest of her life in and out of sanitariums during a time when there was little help for her illness. Scott strove to provide his wife with the best care he could afford, but the financial burden was heavy. There was also their daughter, Scottie, to care for. But his work started to bring in less money.

His last two completed novels, *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, did not meet sales expectations. Cultural times were about to change. The Roaring 20s—the Jazz Age—that had inspired a nation's spirit of rebellion and social change came to a calamitous end when the stock market crashed in October 1929. So much of the nation's presumed wealth had been in stocks and it evaporated in an instant.

Now thrust into the Great Depression, people no longer wanted to read about wealthy drinkers who lived glamorous lives. When Scott moved to Los Angeles in 1937 to write for movies, it was for the money. He held little regard for the rising art form. "I saw that the novel, which at my maturity was the strongest and supplest medium for conveying thought and emotion from one human being to another, was becoming subordinated to a mechanical and commercial art. As long past as 1930, I had a hunch that the talkies would make even the best-selling novelist as archaic as silent pictures," he wrote in *The Crack-Up*.

His screenwriting career sputtered, but Hollywood did provide material for the Pat Hobby series of short stories and for a novel he was working on, *The Last Tycoon*. It was incomplete at the time of his death, but like its predecessors explores heavy topics like wealth, power distribution and excess.

It was published posthumously, so he never got to see the response to his final, if incomplete, work. Scott similarly did not get to witness the increasing popularity of his literature. In the 1950s, after the country had recovered from economic disaster and another world war, fresh eyes were able to see F. Scott Fitzgerald's work for what it was. These were hardly shallow stories of excess and wealth. Readers were finally able to understand the cautionary tales of corruption, crumbling morality, materialism, power distribution and the idealism of the American dream.

He embodied the Jazz Age but at times he overshadowed his own work. "I do not know that a personality can be divorced from the times which evoke it," Zelda wrote after Scott's death. "I feel that Scott's greatest contribution was the dramatization of a heart-broken & despairing era, giving it a new *raison-d'être* in the sense of tragic courage with which he endowed it."

F. Scott Fitzgerald may have been consumed by the era he epitomized, but through his experiences and genius for language he accomplished the rarest of literary prizes: the great American novel.

Closing line from *The Great Gatsby*:

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

“
The loneliest
moment in
someone's life
is when they are
watching their
whole world fall
apart, and all they
can do is stare
blankly.
”

Elisa Jordan is a freelance writer in Southern California. She has a Masters Degree in English with an emphasis in American Literature. Her favorite book is The Great Gatsby.