

LITERARY CRITICISM

Notes 2021-22



Texas UIL

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald
Poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning
The Tragedy of Macbeth by William Shakespeare



LIT CRIT NOTES 2021-2022

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Lit Crit Notes are written by **Jennifer Bussey** and her team of writers. Bussey is a freelance educational writer specializing in literature with almost 25 years' experience and has authored Hexco's Lit Crit products since 1999. She has a B.A. in English Literature and an M.A. in Interdisciplinary Studies. Her team consists of **Luke Hardt, Lisa Holmes, and Joshua Prybylski**. Hardt is a retired Professor of Theater with over 30 years' experience teaching at the college level, including every aspect of drama from understanding plays to performing them. He has directed more than 85 plays in his career. Holmes is an educational writer with over 20 years' experience as a high school English teacher, exploring texts across genres and literary periods with numerous students. In addition, she is an experienced writer of book abstracts, lessons, and tests. Przybylski has over 10 years' experience as a teacher--both in person and online--and as a writer and researcher. His experience with high school students spans an impressive range of abilities, interests, and cultural backgrounds, and his expert grasp of literature make him uniquely skilled in opening up literary texts to students.

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SAMPLE



Zelda Fitzgerald, circa 1919
Public Domain

Midwestern man attending Princeton University who is rejected by two different women from upper-class families. The novel is clearly based on Fitzgerald's own experiences – one of the two women is a thinly disguised portrait of Ginevra King, and the other is modeled after Zelda Sayre. In the process of revising the novel, he even included material directly from Sayre's diaries. The novel was an instant sensation, and Scott and Zelda were married shortly afterward.

In February of 1921, while Fitzgerald was working on his second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, Zelda became pregnant. When Zelda gave birth to their daughter, Frances Scott ("Scottie") Fitzgerald, Fitzgerald scribbled down her ramblings as she emerged from the anesthesia. One of the remarks she made about their newborn daughter was, "I hope it's beautiful and a fool — a beautiful little fool." This would later become one of the most famous lines in his third novel, *The Great Gatsby*.

In 1922, both *The Beautiful and the Damned* and Fitzgerald's book of short stories, *Tales of the Jazz Age*, were published. This latter book's title contributed to American culture a widely-used nickname for the 1920s and 1930s. And together, the Fitzgeralds became the embodiment of their era. The successful and glamorous young couple's lives were in many ways an illustration of the same excess and careless ambition that his writings critiqued. Their partying and alcohol-fueled antics were as legendary as their charm and intelligence, and their companionship was highly sought-after. During this period, the Fitzgeralds moved to Long Island while Scott oversaw the Broadway production of a play he had written. The play was an expensive disaster. Fitzgerald had to pay off the debts from its production by writing short stories, which he intensely disliked and felt were "trash."

Fitzgerald began the planning of the novel that would become *The Great Gatsby* in 1923. Its working title was *Trimalchio*, and Fitzgerald's initial plan was for it to be the story of a freedman's acquisition of power and wealth. In 1924, the Fitzgeralds moved to Europe, alternating the majority of their time between Paris and the French Riviera. During an extended trip to Rome, Fitzgerald revised the novel to something closer to its present form, replacing the main character with Jay Gatsby. It is interesting to note that during one of their stays on the French Riviera, Fitzgerald believed Zelda to be having an affair. At one point, when she asked him for a divorce, he locked her in their house and refused to let her leave until she agreed to stay with him. The man with whom she was supposed to be having an affair later refuted the idea, saying that this kind of drama was typical of the Fitzgeralds' relationship and had little to do with him.

The Great Gatsby was finally published in 1925. Although many prominent writers praised the novel, it was not a financial success. While the Fitzgeralds lived among the expatriate Americans in Paris that would eventually be known as the Lost Generation, Fitzgerald worked on a fourth novel. He paid the family's bills by writing short stories. Both he and his new friend Ernest Hemingway felt that these stories were beneath Fitzgerald's talent, and Fitzgerald's drinking became an even more serious problem. Fitzgerald's substance abuse contributed to a breakdown in his marriage that was accelerated by Zelda's declining mental health.

In 1926, Fitzgerald moved his family to Hollywood so that he could write for the film industry. He needed the money, but again felt that the work was beneath him. He began an affair with a seventeen-year-old girl, Lois Moran, and rewrote his fourth novel – *Tender is the Night* – to feature a character based on her. Zelda became aware that her husband was being unfaithful with Moran, and the Fitzgeralds' relationship deteriorated further. They left Hollywood after only two months.

The years that followed saw Zelda hospitalized in a succession of mental health facilities and Fitzgerald moving from place to place to live near his wife. The couple fought bitterly over Zelda's desire to write autobiographical works. Fitzgerald's work was so closely based on their lives that he felt that

allowing Zelda to publish would lessen the market for his own work. When the Great Depression hit the United States, sales of Fitzgerald's work plummeted, as he had come to represent to the public the worst excesses of the 1920s. Impoverished and in poor physical and mental health from his drinking, Fitzgerald struggled to write.

From 1937 to 1939, Fitzgerald was briefly able to reassemble some of the pieces of his life. Now completely estranged from his wife, he moved back to Hollywood alone. He cut back on his drinking and made an excellent income from working on film scripts for Metro Goldwyn Mayer. His disdain for the conventions of film writing, however, eventually caused the studio to fire him, and he once again spiraled out of control. In 1940, he died of a heart attack, at age forty-four.

HISTORICAL CONTENT

NATURALISTIC AND SYMBOLISTIC PERIOD IN AMERICAN LITERATURE (1900-1930)

The America of the early 20th century bore little resemblance to the America of the late 19th century. In the time between the Civil War and World War I, America had become increasingly urban and industrialized. The successes of 19th century science gave rise to dramatic technological changes by the early 20th century. These changes restructured the American economy and changed people's daily way of life. Families moved away from rural areas where they had lived surrounded by their extended families for generations. Instead of families working together on their farms, adults began working in factories and other spaces away from the home. Women and people of color began to agitate for more equal treatment, and large waves of immigration brought new people, new ideas, and new competition into the United States. And then came World War I. The horrors of this war made many question the direction that Western culture was headed in.

American authors of the early 20th century struggled to reflect the new realities of American life using the techniques and content of bygone days. The sentimentalism, optimism, and adherence to convention that characterized late 19th century literature did not reflect young authors' experience of the world. Ezra Pound summed up the ethos of the movement in this way: "Make it new." The belief was that an entirely new kind of America required an entirely new kind of literature.

The writings of authors during the period reflected their deep suspicion of the beliefs and institutions of the past. They incorporated modern philosophy, psychology, and political views into their works. They questioned the foundations and merits of Western civilization and explored the alienation and despair felt by people in a rapidly changing world.

Novelists made heavy use of the already established techniques of irony and satire, but they also invented new techniques in an attempt to convey their ideas about what the Western world had become. Typical techniques include fragmentation, superimposition, non-linear narrative, stream-of-consciousness, and experimentation with narrative point of view. These techniques are meant to mimic the fragmented and confusing nature of early 20th life. They express skepticism about the authority of words and narratives. They also involve the reader more deeply in a text, exposing characters' thoughts and experiences more directly and asking the reader to participate in making meaning from the text.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR (1914-1918)

World War I was devastating. It was one of the largest wars in history, involving more than 70 million military personnel – about 8.5 million of whom died. In addition, about 13 million civilians were killed. At the same time, a devastating flu pandemic was spreading throughout the world. It in part moved across international borders by troop movements during the war, and the Spanish Flu would eventually kill tens of millions of people. Political turmoil erupted in many places during and immediately after the war, and many more millions of people were affected by the resulting instability