Background Lecture

FRANCIS SCOTT KEY FITZGERALD (1896–1940)

- Born in St. Paul, Minnesota on September 24, 1896.

- His father, Edward Fitzgerald, had charm and elegance but little money. His mother, Mollie McQuillen Fitzgerald, was an Irish immigrant. Her family was financially secure, but she did not prefer society life. The Fitzgeralds lived on the outskirts of a wealthy neighborhood, and although Scott played with the rich children, he was never totally accepted by them.

- The family moved to New York in search of work. When Scott was about 12 years old, they moved back to St. Paul.

- In 1908, Scott entered St. Paul Academy where he excelled in debate and athletics. During this time, he published some articles and three stories. Over the next ten years, Fitzgerald experienced several literary achievements, but also experienced academic decline.

- He joined the Navy and was stationed at Camp Sheridan.

- In 1918, Fitzgerald met and fell in love with eighteen-year-old Zelda Sayre. Zelda refused to marry Scott because he did not have the means to finance the kind of lifestyle she was used to. She waited for a short time, but eventually broke off their engagement.

- In 1919, Fitzgerald returned home to Minnesota. He wrote and published *This Side of Paradise,* in 1920.

- One week after the novel's release, Fitzgerald and Zelda were married in New York. One year later, Zelda gave birth to their only daughter. The family lived an extravagant life-style that included much drinking and many parties. Their domestic life was turbulent, largely due to the couple's heavy alcohol consumption, bordering on alcoholism. They their time in America and Europe.

- The monies from the sale of *This Side of Paradise* began to run out so Scott wrote and sold short stories. In 1925, Fitzgerald published *The Great Gatsby,* his most famous work.

- *The Great Gatsby,* a story that takes on the intensity of a poem, is the American equivalent of *The Waste Land,* a postwar vision of England by T. S. Eliot.

- Major works of Fitzgerald include:

  - *This Side of Paradise,* published in1920, was based largely on Fitzgerald's experiences and observations at Princeton.

- *The Beautiful and the Damned,* published in 1922, was first serialized in Metropolitan Magazine.

- *Tender is the Night* was published in 1932.

- *The Last Tycoon*, published posthumously in 1941, is a novel based on his experiences in Hollywood.

- In 1930, Zelda experienced the first of three mental breakdowns. After her breakdown in 1934, She remained institutionalized for the remainder of her life, draining what funds the Fitzgeralds did have.

- Fitzgerald remained married to Zelda until his death, but he met and fell in love with Sheilah Graham, a movie columnist. She helped revive Fitzgerald's writing career and spent the last few years of his life with him.

- In 1940, F. Scott Fitzgerald died. He had virtually slipped into literary oblivion. In many ways, his death was like Gatsby's. The obituaries written about him were condescending and focused on many of his hardships. Friends were nowhere to be found.

THE ROARING TWENTIES

The 1920s went by such names as:

- **the Roaring Twenties:** The United States' overall success in World War I, the survival of the worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918, and an apparently strong economy led to a period of strong optimism and a new fun-seeking attitude.

- **the Jazz Age:** The popularity of the new Jazz music of New Orleans and Chicago, dances like the Charleston, combined with the relaxing moral code and the general feeling of optimism created the feeling of a neverending social party.

- **the Age of Intolerance:** The losses—both financial and human—associated with World War I left the United States unwilling to entangle itself again into the affairs of foreign nations. The U.S. refusal to join the League of Nations was evidence of this new isolationist policy. Immigration rules and quotas were tightened. There was also a concerted effort to pursue and unmask spies, usually Communists or "Reds." The "us and them" mentality resulted in the revitalizing of such supremacist organizations as the KKK.

- **the Age of Wonderful Nonsense:** It was the age of flappers and bathtub gin, an age of prosperity, and a time of moral and sexual revolution.

Much of what was considered "roaring" about "The Roaring Twenties," however, contained the seeds of the 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression of the 1930s.

CONSUMERISM

- Mass-production and chain stores drove down prices and encouraged consumers to spend.
- The concept of credit was being used to help more Americans buy durable goods such as cars and stoves. The lenders, of course, charged interest so that the total cost of the item was far more in the end than if it had been purchased for cash.
- Runaway consumer credit was part of the overload that resulted in the Great Depression of the 1930s.
- Americans were also spending more money on entertainment, especially the movies. The technology that made the "talkies" possible (Phonofilm) became commercially available in 1922. President Calvin Coolidge and several famous vaudeville performers appeared in these early sound-films. In 1927, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*, the first commercially-released "talkie," changed the motion picture industry forever.

ECONOMIC POLICIES

- In 1920, for the first time in United States history, more people were living in cities than on farms. Presidents Warren G. Harding (1921–1923), Calvin Coolidge (1923–1929), and Herbert Hoover (1929–1933) supported big business and passed legislation that benefited large corporations, often at the expense of small businesses and farmers.
- Harding's "return to normalcy" after World War I did little to address social and economic problems facing thousands of Americans.
- The Harding Administration's Teapot Dome Scandal illustrated the extent to which greed and the desire to accumulate wealth quickly were the governing principals of post-World-War-I America.
- Calvin Coolidge especially favored a *laissez faire* attitude toward big business, thus allowing for credit and investment abuses that would lead to the 1929 crash.

PROHIBITION, ORGANIZED CRIME, AND GATSBY'S FORTUNE

The Eighteenth Amendment, prohibiting the manufacture, sale, or transportation of "*intoxicating liquors*" in the United States was ratified on January 16, 1919, and the Volstead Act, which defined the phrase "intoxicating liquors," thus making the amendment enforceable, was passed on October 28, 1919. Prohibition began on January 16, 1920, when the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect.

Never a popular law (even President Calvin Coolidge, who, as a senator, had voted *for* both the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act, kept his White House well-stocked with illegal liquor), there were enough loopholes in the legislation to allow most people to acquire and consume as least as much alcohol as they had before:

- Prohibition banned only the manufacture, sale, and transport, not the possession or consumption of alcohol. This left many opportunities for abuse open.

- Alcoholic drinks were widely available at "speakeasies" and other underground drinking establishments. Speakeasies were named for the fact that a patron had to "speak easy" and convince the doorman to let him or her in.

- Federal Prohibition Agents had no forced-entry rights, and so could not break into a drinking establishment if the doorman refused them entry.

- Large amounts of alcohol were smuggled in from Canada.

- Home brewing of beer and wine was popular during Prohibition.

- Commercial wine was still produced in the U.S., but was only available through government warehouses, supposedly for use in religious ceremonies.

- Whiskey was available by prescription. Although the labels clearly warned that it was for "medicinal purposes" only and that other uses were illegal, doctors freely wrote prescriptions and druggists filled them without question.

- Over a million gallons of whiskey were prescribed and consumed per year.

- This discrepancy between law and actual practice contributed to the widespread disdain for authority that had accompanied the return of World War I servicemen.

- Because the Prohibition laws did little to change the behavior of the citizenry, but eliminated all government regulation of an entire industry, Prohibition presented an enormous opportunity for organized crime to take over the importation, manufacture, and distribution of alcoholic beverages. The infamous gangster Al Capone built his criminal empire largely on profits from trafficking in illegal alcohol.

- Some Prohibition agents took bribes to overlook the illegal brewing activities of gangsters.

- It had originally been estimated that it would cost six million dollars to enforce prohibition laws. Over time, however, as more people drank illegally and the profits from the manufacture, transportation, and sale of liquor went to organized crime, gangsters would bribe officials to ignore their illegal activities, and the cost of enforcing prohibition laws increased.

- Fitzgerald never specifies how Gatsby manages to amass such an enormous fortune in the short span of five years. Certainly, the economy of the day would have allowed for overnight riches on the stock market, but there are also suggestions in the novel that Gatsby is and has been involved in illegal activities, quite possibly bootlegging—illegal trafficking in the manufacture, transport, and sale of alcohol.

NOTES ON FITZGERALD'S STYLE, SETTING, AND THEMES

- Fitzgerald is known for his imagistic and poetic prose. His topics were largely influenced by his surroundings and experiences.

- Fitzgerald uses motifs and symbols throughout the novel that are significant to the development of his themes. The motif of geography plays an important role in defining social stratification. Weather is used to reflect human conditions. The green light and the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg are mentioned several times; the meaning changes or signifies different things to different characters and to the reader.

- Three things to note are names, dates, and ages. Names are one of the important tools that Fitzgerald uses to enhance character development. Dates and ages help to define the beginning and ending of the dreams, and tie Fitzgerald's life's happenings into Gatsby's life and the 1920s.

- The setting of the story is in the summer of 1922, near New York City, in the towns of West Egg and East Egg.

- *The Great Gatsby*, in order to be fully appreciated, must be examined in its full historical context, as the 1920s was an era of great change.

Politically, the 1920s were a time of growth, prosperity, and corruption. Growth for the 1920s included financial and population growth. Financially, there was rampant materialism. Post-World-War-I manufacturing flourished, producing cars, radios, telephones. Consumer goods flooded the market, and people bought and bought. Professional sports grew in popularity as people spent more and more money on entertainment. Immigration, which had subsided during the war, increased drastically. The threat of differing political ideas and the loss of American jobs to foreigners created an intense dislike of outsiders.

In 1919, the scandal with the World Series involving the White Sox rocked the sports world. Warren G. Harding's administration was plagued by scandal and corruption. During Prohibition, when the illegal liquor business became lucrative, organized crime stepped in to fill the need.

The nineteenth amendment, which granted women the right to vote, changed the nature of American politics and society. Women, who had held factory jobs during the war, had no intention of returning home. They "bobbed" their hair and threw out their corsets. They took up smoking and drinking. The face of motherhood changed. Women everywhere were challenging traditional notions of femininity.

- Fitzgerald exposes but leaves undeveloped three social issues: racism, domestic violence, and the loosening moral standards of the "Roaring Twenties."

- Fitzgerald makes several allusions that should be researched and understood as they add depth to a reading of the novel.

- An allusion to Theodore Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy*

- An allusion to Kaiser Wilhelm

- An allusion to Rosy Rosenthal, a small time gambler involved with the underworld

- An allusion to the "Black Sox" team of 1919 and the fixing of the World Series

- An allusion to Trimalchio

Themes addressed are:

- The Death of the American Dream: The basic tenets of the American Dream have much in common with values espoused in the Declaration of Independence. According to the American Dream, all Americans are born with equal opportunity to use their talents to improve their economic standing and thus secure their happiness. The Great Gatsby can be read as a critique of this ideal. In Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald creates a character who uses his unique talents to accumulate wealth, but is unable to secure the happiness and social standing his wealth should confer. Discussions of materialistic wealth and the exploration of the societal separation between the communities of West Egg and East Egg help to develop this theme.

- The Stratification of the Social Classes: Throughout the novel, Fitzgerald makes comparisons between *old money*, *new money*, and *no money*. Each of these groups has a specific place in society. No money, represented by Myrtle, tries to climb the ladder into the next class but is constantly thwarted by the new-money class. New money—Gatsby—is also trying to climb the social ladder, but meets the resistance of the old money, represented by Daisy and Tom. The motif of geography is used here to help develop this theme as each location represents a particular class of people.

- The Upper Class's Lack of Integrity: Throughout The Great Gatsby, Fitzgerald explores characters, situations, and settings designed to explore the lack of integrity among the members of the upper class. Tom and Daisy Buchanan engage in extramarital affairs, and Jordan Baker is depicted as dishonest. Gatsby's entire character is an elaborate fiction designed to regain Daisy's love and resurrect his past. Throughout The Great Gatsby, the wealthy are depicted as cruel and careless.

Understanding the setting of *The Great Gatsby* is important to understanding the overall meaning. Political, social, and economic changes marked the 1920s, forever changing the face of America. Fitzgerald's story, although fiction, is informed by reality, making it one of the most treasured literary works of the early twentieth century.

NOTES ON THE BYRONIC HERO

Romantic poet Lord Byron (George Gordon) is credited with the development of the prototypical antihero, referred to as the Byronic hero. Like Childe Harold in Byron's popular *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage,* the Byronic hero is a larger-than-life but flawed character who could be considered, by traditional standards, to be a rebel. Typically the Byronic hero:

- exhibits conflicting emotions and excessive moodiness;
- is passionate about a particular issue;
- can be introspective and critical of himself;
- struggles with his own sense of integrity;
- operates largely within his own set of rules and principles;
- rejects accepted codes and norms of society;
- is fiercely independent and strongly individual;
- is a loner (whether imposed by society or self-imposed);
- displays a lack of respect for rank and privilege;
- has a troubled or mysterious past;
- can be cynical, demanding, and arrogant;
- exhibits self-destructive tendencies and behavior.

This hyper-sensitive loner, obsessively following a quest—which, being a Romantic Quest, is doomed to failure—usually ends up dead at the end of his story, either as the unintended consequence of the hero's own choices and actions, or as a conscious choice.

Gatsby's quest for Daisy, the uncertainty surrounding how he amassed so vast a fortune so quickly, his aloofness around everyone except the Object of his Quest, the fact that it is not enough that Daisy love him but that she must also declare that she never loved Tom, and his disdain for the traditional moral and social class standards of his time all suggest Gatsby's status as a Byronic hero.

NOTES ON THE TRAGIC HERO

The **tragic hero**, according to Aristotle, was a man (god, demi-god, hero, high-ranking official) who rises to a high position and then falls from that high position—usually to utter desolation and/or death. Two forces seem equally powerful in classical tragedy: the tragic hero's tragic flaw (or *hamartia)* and fate.

Some tragic heroes clearly bring about their own downfall, as in the case of Creon in *Antigone,* whose downfall is due to his hubris (excessive pride)—he believes his Law holds precedence over the gods' sense of Right.

Other tragic heroes seem to be more a pawn of Fate, like Oedipus who has done everything in his power (as had his parents before him) to prevent the fatal prophecy from coming to pass that Oedipus would murder his father and marry his mother. It is in the very act of trying to avoid destiny that the prophecy is fulfilled.

By the Renaissance, however, people generally felt themselves to be less pawns of fate and more in control of their own destinies. The Elizabethan tragic hero, therefore, is much more often responsible for his own downfall. This "waste of human potential" as it were seems to be much more tragic to the Elizabethans than the vagaries of fate.

Thus, in Shakespeare's tragedies, we have a Macbeth who is, by nature, a man of action and *chooses* a course of action that results in his being plagued by guilt, his wife's insanity and suicide, and eventually, his own death. We have a Hamlet, a man of ideas, who is called to action and, finding himself unable to act, watches while his entire society collapses around him, and he himself is killed.

By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the concept of what was at the root of the tragic situation was again being examined. In his article, "Tragedy and the Common Man," playwright Arthur Miller asserts that his character, Willie Lowman, is a tragic hero. According to Miller, the hero's tragic flaw is really nothing more than his attempt to gain, or regain, what he considers to be his rightful status in society.

Looked at this way, Macbeth (following the prediction of the witches and Duncan's promise in I, iv: "I have begun to plant thee and will labor to make thee full of growing...") *believes it is his rightful place to be king of Scotland.* When he is not named heir to Duncan's throne, he acts as he believes he must in order to *become* king, and then he continues to act as he believes he must in order to *remain* king. His tragedy, then, lies in his desire to gain and maintain what *he believes to be his rightful status.*

So, too, with Hamlet. He has been alienated from his mother's love. From his very first line in the play, Hamlet bemoans his mother's marriage to Claudius far more than he grieves for his father or for the loss of his throne. The madness, rebellion, and carnage that surround him are all the result of his desire—and inability—to find a way to reinstate himself in the affections of his mother.

Jay Gatsby, then, in that he sacrifices everything (including his life) to secure his "rightful" place as Daisy's true lover, is a tragic hero. Everything he has done in the five years before the novel's beginning, and everything he does throughout the course of the novel, is for the sole purpose of having Daisy declare that she *does* love Gatsby and that she *never* loved Tom. When Gatsby fails to achieve his goal—when he fails to attain the status of sole love that he believes is his—his world falls apart, and he is killed as a result of his own decisions.

Thus, in the sense that Miller would codify little more than a decade after *The Great Gatsby's* publication, Jay Gatsby can be examined as a tragic hero. According to Miller, the tragic hero exemplifies our "underlying fear of being displaced...torn away from our chosen image of what or who we are in this world."