

## F. Scott Fitzgerald: Writing Under the Influence of Europe

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**As one of the notable figures in 20th Century American literature, F. Scott Fitzgerald has been studied widely by authors, critics, and historians alike. This paper addresses the role of Fitzgerald’s time abroad in creating the inspiration for his work as well as Europe’s part in catalyzing his eventual decline in the public eye. As a member of the so-called “Lost Generation” of American writers who took up residence in Paris during the 1920s, Fitzgerald was profoundly influenced by his peers, notably Ernest Hemingway. Another guiding factor in Fitzgerald’s writing was the presence of Zelda, Fitzgerald’s wife, whose mental illness placed both an emotional and financial strain on Fitzgerald. This paper examines the ups and downs of Fitzgerald’s life while incorporating the analysis of several of his Europe-inspired works, including his last completed novel *Tender is the Night* and his famed short story “Babylon Revisited.” Fitzgerald’s life and work support the claim that Europe was fundamentally a double-edged sword – while Europe provided the thrilling lifestyle that fueled Fitzgerald’s writing and widespread notoriety, it also brought about his ultimate disintegration.**

Over the course of his life, F. Scott Fitzgerald wandered between two divergent conceptions of living. In one scenario, Fitzgerald aspired to penetrate the exclusive class of serious, prominent writers of the twentieth century. In the other, Fitzgerald imagined himself a member of the privileged elite, with all its associated glitz and glamour. Wavering between literary productivity and public notoriety, Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda traveled abroad to Europe in hopes of bringing order to their frenzied lives. In the end, with or against the couple’s will, Europe determined their eventual path. By revealing the seeming worst in the Fitzgeralds, Europe slowly withered away one of the greatest figures in American literature. Simultaneously, Europe provided the setting away from the American spotlight in which the Fitzgerald drama could unfold. In doing so, Europe set the stage for some of Fitzgerald’s most notable works, including his last completed novel, *Tender is the Night*. Bringing together both of Fitzgerald’s visions for living, *Tender is the Night* captures both the tragic reality and the craved fantasies that shaped Fitzgerald’s life and work.

### 1896 – 1921: Early Life in the United States and Conflicting Ambitions

Fitzgerald’s disappointments and aspirations began at an early age. He was born September 24, 1896 to Edward Fitzgerald, a descendant of Francis Scott Key, and Mollie McQuillan, whose wealth made up for her lack of social status. At a

young age, Scott learned to value social standing and financial security, as his father’s frequent business setbacks forced the family to move with his job availability<sup>1</sup>. Despite earning poor grades at St. Paul Academy and at the Newman School in Hackensack, New Jersey, Fitzgerald gained admission to Princeton University in 1913. At Princeton, Fitzgerald’s academic hardships continued, although he was a leading contributor to the university’s humor magazine, the *Princeton Tiger*<sup>2</sup>. In October 1917, however, Fitzgerald dropped out of Princeton and joined the army as a commissioned second lieutenant. But as his division was completing training at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, the war came to an end, much to Fitzgerald’s dismay<sup>3</sup>. Even though Fitzgerald had missed out on the war, his fascination with heroism and war would later resurface in his shifting relationship with Ernest Hemingway.

In July 1918, Fitzgerald met Zelda Sayre, daughter of Judge Anthony D. Sayre of the Alabama Supreme Court. Zelda possessed all the qualities that interested Fitzgerald, including exquisite beauty and social class. The couple became engaged in May 1919, but Zelda refused to marry until Fitzgerald showed “clear [financial] prospects”<sup>4</sup>. In his later writing, Fitzgerald’s financial insecurity would become the plight of many of the male protagonists. Zelda did not have long to wait, however, for the publication of Fitzgerald’s first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, and the couple promptly married and moved to New York City. Almost instantly, the Fitzgeralds became the city’s most celebrated couple, known for their glamorous

lifestyle fueled by Scott's earnings of over \$20,000 in 1920<sup>5</sup>. The press closely followed the couple's unusual public displays, including episodes of undressing at the theater and bathing in the fountain outside the Plaza Hotel<sup>6</sup>.

The subsequent year proved to be perhaps the last time Fitzgerald managed to balance successfully his writing and his bustling, high class lifestyle. Although the couple drank regularly and frequented the most fashionable parties in New York City, Fitzgerald still managed to complete his second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, by early 1921<sup>7</sup>. Describing the disintegration of the marriage between Anthony and Gloria Patch, *The Beautiful and the Damned* surprised critics with its negative view on life<sup>8</sup> and foreshadowed the alcoholism and marital problems that would plague the Fitzgeralds. Fitzgerald's income again exceeded \$20,000 in 1921, but the couple was increasingly in debt. Furthermore, the press' close scrutiny of the celebrity couple, while promoting sales of Fitzgerald's novels, brought attention to the increasingly chaotic lives that they were leading<sup>9</sup>. For the rest of his life, and especially near the end of his career, Fitzgerald would battle the press' criticism and public disapproval of his excessive lifestyle.

## 1921-1932 – Expatriates to France

In an effort to escape the press' intrusion upon their lives, the couple decided to escape to Europe in May 1921<sup>10</sup>. Since Zelda was pregnant with their first child, the couple was also motivated to see Europe while Zelda could still travel<sup>11</sup>. The Fitzgeralds made their transatlantic voyage aboard the *Aquitania*, whose guest list as Scott noted, lacked "glamour"<sup>12</sup>. Fitzgerald was heavily disappointed by the trip, complaining that Europe was merely "of antiquary interest"<sup>13</sup> – at first sight, Europe did not provide the intellectual stimulation that Fitzgerald had craved. The couple returned to St. Paul later that year for the birth of their daughter Frances Scott Fitzgerald, affectionately nicknamed "Scottie." In 1922 and 1923, Fitzgerald made swift progress on his third novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Though *The Beautiful and the Damned* sold over 50,000 copies, earning Fitzgerald over \$25,000 in 1922, the couple continued to remain in debt<sup>14</sup>.

By 1924, a combination of factors would drive the Fitzgeralds to return to Europe. Facing mounting debts, the Fitzgeralds capitalized on the favorable franc-dollar exchange rate and moved to

St. Raphaël, located on the French Riviera<sup>15</sup>. The Fitzgeralds, who left for Europe with only \$7,000, were attracted by the new tourist third class fares offered by North Atlantic steamship companies. Relocating to France also allowed the Fitzgeralds to escape the height of Prohibition in the United States and get closer to the exciting literary and artistic scene emerging in Paris. As social critic Irving Howe once wrote, "literary consciousness collided with the weight of Europe" in the 1920s<sup>16</sup>. Centered on cafés in Montparnasse and finding new creative inspiration in Paris, an American literary community known as the 'Lost Generation' flourished. As the Fitzgeralds found a new home in France, literary giants, including Sylvia Beach, Ezra Pound, and Ernest Hemingway, awaited Fitzgerald's arrival<sup>17</sup>.

Despite the inspiring energy of the American community in Paris, Fitzgerald referred to his stay in 1925, his longest, as the "summer of a thousand parties and no work"<sup>18</sup>. Buoyed by the inexpensive cost of living and fresh off the completion of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald began pursuing a life of drinking and partying<sup>19</sup>. The Fitzgeralds' habits would reinforce an unfavorable reputation in the Odéon neighborhood<sup>20</sup>. In April 1925, Fitzgerald met Hemingway at the Dingo Bar, and the two formed a friendship that would be at times tumultuous. Having read Hemingway's work in an American expatriate journal six months earlier<sup>21</sup>, Fitzgerald recommended Hemingway's "In Our Time" to Maxwell Perkins, editor at Charles Scribner's and Sons<sup>22</sup>. In addition to admiring Hemingway's writing, Fitzgerald was also captivated by Hemingway's athletic and military achievements, areas in which Fitzgerald believed himself inferior<sup>23</sup>.

Over the course of their friendship, Hemingway would contribute to Fitzgerald's literary advancement as well as deepen the rift developing between Fitzgerald and Zelda. Hemingway introduced Fitzgerald to Sylvia Beach and Gertrude Stein, and the two visited Edith Wharton at her *salon* in July 1925<sup>24</sup>. In addition to the Dingo Bar, the two frequented the famous literary cafes, including Le Dôme, La Rotonde, La Closerie des Lilas, and La Coupole<sup>25</sup>. As a close friend, Hemingway also called attention to Fitzgerald's problems with alcohol and the deterioration of his marriage with Zelda. Upon meeting Zelda, Hemingway reportedly described Zelda as "jealous of Scott's work" and "an impediment to his writing"<sup>26</sup>. Zelda, on the other hand, disliked Hemingway for his "macho" attitude,

which was exactly what Fitzgerald found invigorating<sup>27</sup>. While in Paris, Fitzgerald also began work on *Tender is the Night*, a novel that would take him almost a decade to complete<sup>28</sup>. Fitzgerald's progress on his novel would be seriously impaired by his personal life, which began to escalate in frenzy.

At the urging of Gerald and Sarah Murphy, whom the Fitzgeralds had met in Paris, the couple returned to the French Riviera for the summer of 1926<sup>29</sup>. Several bizarre incidents marked the Fitzgeralds' stay and illustrated the couple's continuing dissolution. While the couple was visiting St. Paul de Vence, Fitzgerald began flirting with the celebrated dancer Isadora Duncan<sup>30</sup>. According to Gerald Murphy, "[Duncan] ran her fingers through his hair and called him her centurion," leading Zelda to subsequently throw herself down a set of stone stairs<sup>31</sup>. In another incident, Fitzgerald reportedly punched Gerald and began destroying the Venetian stemware at the Murphys' home<sup>32</sup>. Combined with increasing quarrels between the couple, the Fitzgerald's lives gradually disintegrated as they alienated their closest friends. All the while, Fitzgerald was finding it increasingly difficult to make progress on *Tender is the Night*, and the couple continued to face mounting debts.

In late 1926, the Fitzgeralds moved back to the United States, settling in Hollywood, where Scott had obtained a contract with United Artists to write a flapper screenplay for actress Constance Talmadge. In Hollywood, Fitzgerald had a brief affair with Lois Moran, a seventeen-year-old actress, causing Zelda to burn her own clothing in a hotel bathtub and throw her platinum watch out of a train window. The situation worsened when Fitzgerald's script, entitled "Lipstick," was rejected, and his stint earned him only \$3,500<sup>33</sup>. In the summer of 1927, the Fitzgeralds returned to Paris so that Zelda could continue to fulfill her rekindled interest in ballet. The previous summer, Zelda had renewed her ballet studies with Russian ballerina Lubov Egorova, and ballet quickly became an obsession<sup>34</sup>. Aspiring to perform professionally, Zelda practiced ballet several hours a day and was often exhausted and irritable, and her fascination with dancing contributed to her increasing detachment from reality<sup>35</sup>.

Zelda's peculiar behavior further took a toll on the couple's relationship when she began to accuse Fitzgerald of having a homosexual relationship with Hemingway<sup>36</sup>. Combined with her brief love affairs with other men as early as 1920<sup>37</sup> and most notably in 1924 with French aviator Edouard Jozan,

Zelda's behavior conveyed her increasing doubts of Scott's masculinity<sup>38</sup>. Fitzgerald and Zelda would each seek to characterize Zelda's affair with Jozan in their novels, Scott in *Tender is the Night*, and Zelda in *Save Me the Waltz*. Zelda's attacks on Scott were conceivably a result of her own sexual insecurity, at least in her psyche. Zelda's developing schizophrenia was evident in her fear of becoming a lesbian, and by the time the couple returned to Paris in the summer of 1928, Zelda had befriended several lesbians. With Zelda's gradual detachment from Fitzgerald, Zelda wrote that her ballet instructor had become her "only comfort"<sup>39</sup>.

By 1928, coinciding with his increasing frustration with progress on *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald's closest friendships in Paris were also in decline, most notably his relationship with Hemingway. Hemingway's wife, Pauline, complained of Fitzgerald's excessive drinking<sup>40</sup>, and Ernest subsequently refused to provide Fitzgerald with his new address<sup>41</sup>. The two's relationship hit a low point in the spring of 1929, when Fitzgerald allowed a boxing match between Canadian writer Morley Callaghan and Hemingway to progress for too long, resulting in Hemingway's injury<sup>42</sup>. Hemingway soon became one of Fitzgerald's harshest and most overt critics, contributing to Fitzgerald's declining reputation in Paris. When *Tender is the Night* was finally published in 1934, Hemingway openly denounced its autobiographical basis and "lack of thought"<sup>43</sup>. Almost a decade of work on the novel had yielded no glorious fruit, at least in the eyes of Hemingway.

Fitzgerald never achieved the ideal balance between life as a serious writer and that of upper-class drinking and partying. Although the Fitzgeralds had moved from Long Island to escape the bustle of New York City, Scott ended up visiting more Parisian bars than *salons* and failed to take advantage of the thriving literary community around him. Alcohol, Zelda's emergent schizophrenia, and marital troubles compounded to delay Fitzgerald's completion of *Tender is the Night*. Meanwhile, Fitzgerald was being cast out of the selective literary elite for which he had showed such promise with *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, and *The Great Gatsby*. When James Joyce met Fitzgerald in 1928 at a dinner with Sylvia Beach, Joyce allegedly noted, "That man [Fitzgerald] must be mad. I'm afraid he'll do himself some injury"<sup>44</sup>.

1932-1937 – Return to the United States and *Tender is the Night*

Ironically, Zelda brought about the Fitzgeralds' ultimate return to the United States even though she had previously insisted upon the couple's visits to Paris to pursue her futile ballet efforts. In April 1930, she suffered a severe mental breakdown and was admitted to Malmaison Clinic, located just outside of Paris, for hallucinations. Following several suicide attempts, Zelda was transferred to Prangins Clinic in Nyon, Switzerland. In order to pay for Zelda's expensive treatments, Fitzgerald was forced to write short stories, and his income peaked at over \$37,000 in 1931<sup>45</sup>. The unfortunate consequence was that Fitzgerald's focus turned still more away from *Tender is the Night*.

The first story written after Zelda's mental breakdown was entitled "The Bridal Party" and bore notable connections to Fitzgerald's own life<sup>46</sup>. "The Bridal Party" describes Caroline Dandy's marriage to her fiancé through the perspective of her original love, Michael Curly.

He [Michael] had met Caroline Dandy when she was seventeen, possessed her young heart all through her first season in New York, and then lost her, slowly, tragically, uselessly, because he had no money and could make no money; because, with all the energy and good will in the world, he could not find himself; because, loving him still, Caroline had lost faith and begun to see him as something pathetic, futile and shabby, outside the great, shining stream of life toward which she was inevitably drawn.

While alluding to the barrier of materialism that had delayed his own marriage, Fitzgerald communicates a sense of loss that mirrors his feelings for Zelda. In addition to conveying the painful dissolution of his life in Paris, "The Bridal Story" suggests that Fitzgerald remained troubled by his childhood aspirations.

Similar themes of dissipation and guilt are represented in perhaps Fitzgerald's most celebrated short story, "Babylon Revisited," which appeared February 1931 in the *Saturday Evening Post*. In the opening scene, Fitzgerald evokes the "stillness" and "emptiness" of Paris, which he juxtaposes to the vibrant atmosphere of the Ritz Bar he once frequented. Fitzgerald's regret at having wasted his youth in Paris is symbolized by Charlie's feel-

ings of being lost in the city he had once inhabited. Helen's stinging attacks directed at Charlie reveal that Fitzgerald is haunted by his alcoholism and by the disintegration of his marriage. The distant tone with which the Peters address Charlie echoes that of Fitzgerald's alienated friends, including Hemingway. Charlie's relationship with his daughter also parallels Fitzgerald's own relationship with his daughter, Scottie. While the Fitzgeralds were living in Paris, Scottie remained under the care of a nanny<sup>47</sup>, although Fitzgerald kept in close contact with her through letters<sup>48</sup>. Through the careful layering of the past and the present, "Babylon Revisited" shows Fitzgerald's sorrow that Zelda's mental illness marks the end of their time in Paris.

When Zelda was finally discharged from Prangins in September 1931, the couple returned to the United States, where the Fitzgeralds rented a mansion outside of Baltimore. Fitzgerald continued to make limited progress on the still unfinished *Tender is the Night*. In 1932, Zelda was admitted to Phipps Psychiatric Clinic at Johns Hopkins University, where she wrote *Save Me the Waltz*, a largely autobiographical account of her marriage to Fitzgerald<sup>49</sup>. When Zelda secretly submitted her work for publication, Fitzgerald was enraged, insisting that her manuscript had stolen material from his unfinished draft of *Tender is the Night*. Under Fitzgerald's direction, Zelda revised large parts of her novel, including several damaging accounts of Fitzgerald's alcoholic episodes, and the novel was published in 1932<sup>50</sup>. But perhaps most importantly, Zelda's completion of the novel in less than a year enhanced Fitzgerald's belief that his literary brilliance was slipping away from him.

When *Tender is the Night* was finally published in 1934, Fitzgerald had written and reworked three different versions and seventeen drafts of the novel<sup>51</sup>. The mixed reviews did not reflect the enormous effort that Fitzgerald had poured into completing the novel<sup>52</sup>. J. Donald Adams of the *New York Times* found the book "clever and brilliantly surfaced, but...not the work of a wise and mature novelist"<sup>53</sup>. But whether readers realized or not, *Tender is the Night* was largely Fitzgerald's assessment of his own life. Like many of the short stories that Fitzgerald completed in the 1930s, the novel expresses the misery of wasted promise and fading relationships. In the novel, realistic aspects of Fitzgerald himself are combined with fantasized qualities of Gerald Murphy to accentuate Dick Diver's decline. Through the eyes of Rosemary,

modeled after his lover Lois Moran<sup>54</sup>, Fitzgerald analyzes Nicole Diver as a representation of Zelda.

Nicole is portrayed as a character of both brutality and vulnerability resulting from her mental illness. Even before Nicole's schizophrenia is exposed, Rosemary draws attention to Nicole's "hard" and "stern" appearance (Book 1, VI) and refers to her as an "oppressive force" (Book 1, XIII). One of the central foci of the novel, Nicole's schizophrenia is depicted vividly through her manic episodes.

The children were screaming and Nicole was screaming and cursing and trying to tear at Dick's face...She was laughing hilariously, unashamed, unafraid, unconcerned. No one coming on the scene would have imagined that she had caused it; she laughed as after some mild escape of childhood. (Book 2, XV)

Dick's love affair with Rosemary gradually exposes Nicole's mental illness and communicates Fitzgerald's guilt of perhaps having contributed to Zelda's condition. Interestingly, Fitzgerald also uses Rosemary's compulsive behavior after Dick's refusal to have an affair to evoke Zelda's mental illness.

When the door closed [Rosemary] got up and went to the mirror, where she began brushing her hair, sniffing a little. One hundred and fifty strokes Rosemary gave it, as usual, then a hundred and fifty more. She brushed it until her arm ached, then she changed arms and went on brushing. . . (Book 1, XV)

In *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald also seeks to portray the more delicate side of Nicole. The emotional episode at the restaurant between Nicole and Dick parallels Fitzgerald's nurturing support in the midst of Zelda's schizophrenia. Nicole's emphatic response "Oh, DO I!" to Dick's question "—So you love me?" (Book 1, XII) suggests that Dick's role as husband and psychiatrist have been blended.

In addition to offering insight into Zelda's mental condition, *Tender is the Night* reveals Fitzgerald's failed ambitions. Dick possesses several of the qualities that Fitzgerald could only dream of achieving, including high social standing, academic accomplishment, and athletic glory, which had drawn Fitzgerald to Hemingway in Paris. While introducing the youthful Dick in Book 2, Fitzgerald indicates that Dick had "done the flying rings at New Haven" and "now swam in the winter Danube" (Book 2, I). When Dick attempts to convince Zelda's sister, Baby, of his merit, he cites his status as an

Oxford Rhodes Scholar, his degree from Yale, and his high ancestry, emphasizing that he is a "direct descendant of Mad Anthony Wayne" (Book 2, X). In infusing qualities in Dick that mirror his own dreams, Fitzgerald attempts to suppress the sorrow of his shattered aspirations.

Perhaps most importantly, *Tender is the Night* communicates Fitzgerald's loss of youth and influence over his life. In his affair with Rosemary, Dick realizes that "Rosemary [has] her hand on the lever more authoritatively than he" (Book 1, XIX). Fitzgerald's loss of control is also conveyed by the disintegration of Dick's once promising intellect.

Once he had cut through things, solving the most complicated equations as the simplest problems of his simplest patients. Between the time he found Nicole flowering under a stone on the Zurichsee and the moment of his meeting with Rosemary the spear had been blunted. (Book 3, XVIII)

Fitzgerald overtly cites Zelda's "problems" as the reason for his own dissolution, especially his failure to complete *Tender is the Night* (Book 2, XII). By the end of the novel, Dick's inability to perform the boarding stunt he once completed with ease embodies Dick's vanishing influence, a sorrow Fitzgerald also expresses in "The Bridal Party." Ironically and agonizingly, it had partly been the aviation stunts that had attracted Zelda to her lover Edouard Jozan<sup>55</sup>. *Tender is the Night* ends with Dick's sinking realization that he had lost the love of those around him, mirroring Fitzgerald's own feelings toward the end of his life.

Despite some negative reviews, sales of *Tender is the Night* were strong in the wake of the Great Depression<sup>56</sup>. *New York Times* reviewer J. Donald Adams cited "lapses into melodrama and the introduction of bizarre incidents which heighten the air of artificiality" as the major weakness of the novel<sup>57</sup>, but it is now apparent that the novel's scenes are heavily based on Fitzgerald's aspirations and events in his life. In the end, *Tender is the Night* completely drained Fitzgerald, and he was unable to finish another novel. In 1935, nearing the end of his life, Fitzgerald published a series of three confessional pieces, known as the "Crack-up" essays. In the essays, Fitzgerald acknowledged his personal frustrations as the source of his disappointments, describing himself as "a cracked plate, the kind that one wonders whether it is worth preserving"<sup>58</sup>. In November 1940, Fitzgerald suffered a "coronary episode," and he died shortly after on December 21

at the age of 44, considering himself a failure<sup>59</sup>.

Although Fitzgerald was one of the most talented American authors, in the end, he struggled to find the words to his own story. By weaving together reality and fantasy in *Tender is the Night*, Fitzgerald attempted to reconcile two opposing lifestyles that he never successfully managed. Fitzgerald's difficulty in finishing *Tender is the Night* paralleled his problems in finding the necessary stability in his life as an expatriate to Europe, which was exacerbated by Zelda's deteriorating mental condition. As one of the early examples of the dysfunctional celebrity couple, the story of the Fitzgeralds would foreshadow the lives of other actors and artists who were plunged into the spotlight, only to have their careers slowly erode. As Fitzgerald once wrote, "Mostly, we authors repeat ourselves... We tell our two or three stories – each time in a new disguise – maybe ten times, maybe a hundred, as long as people will listen"<sup>60</sup>. If Fitzgerald is right, his life is worth reading again and again.

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