



F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Great American Dreamer Classroom Guide

The lyrical prose of F. Scott Fitzgerald, perfected in the novels *Tender is the Night*, *This Side of Paradise*, and *The Great Gatsby*, captures the tumultuous mood of the 1920s and 1930s. Fitzgerald is the voice of the “Lost Generation” – those Americans who came of age during World War I. The characters and plots he created mirrored the glamorous lifestyle he led in the madcap excess of the Roaring Twenties. He and his wife, Zelda, enjoyed a lavish expatriate life as they split their time between New York, Paris and the French Riviera. The two of them became symbols of the Jazz Age – a term coined by Fitzgerald himself to convey a lifestyle of fast cars, parties, flappers and music.

But the good times didn't last. By 40, Fitzgerald was suffering from alcoholism and his books were no longer in print. Zelda Fitzgerald struggled with mental illness, never regaining her full capacity. This 1-hour BIO features interviews with family members and friends, as well as leading contemporary authors such as Garrison Keillor, Tobias Wolff, Joseph Heller and Jane Smiley, all of whom thoughtfully examine Fitzgerald's literary legacy.



Curriculum Links:

This biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald would be useful for high school and college classes on American History, Literature, Drama, and American Culture.

Vocabulary:

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an Internet resource such as www.history.com, or an encyclopedia, students should define or explain the significance of the following terms:

armistice	exasperate	maxim
asylum	expatriates	schizophrenic
aura	indulgence	
debutante	inebriated	
destitute	laborious	

Discussion Questions:

1. How did the failures of F. Scott Fitzgerald's father affect F. Scott's life and attitudes?
2. Why are the 1920s known as the Roaring Twenties? What made this decade so different from the decades that led up to it or those that followed?
3. How did the Jazz Age, a moniker Fitzgerald coined, provide a climate favorable to his work?
4. Although he attended the finest schools, Fitzgerald came from a modest background. How did he use his budding literary talents to gain social acceptance during his schooldays?
5. Zelda Fitzgerald was the quintessential "southern belle" during her youth. What is a "southern belle"? How does it reflect cultural differences between the northern and southern regions of the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries?
6. How was Fitzgerald a spokesperson for his generation? Can you compare him with any celebrity today who is a spokesperson for his/her generation?
7. Although Ernest Hemingway and Fitzgerald were friends, why was there a jealous tension between them? Had they collaborated, how could they have used their jealousy to create a great work?
8. The Roaring Twenties gave way to the Great Depression of the 1930s. How did F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald's lives mirror the historical timeline of their era?
9. How did Fitzgerald draw on his own life experiences to create his characters and plot lines?
10. How did alcoholism play a role in the destruction of Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald's lives?

Textual Analysis:

1. The following are the famous concluding lines of Fitzgerald's novel, *The Great Gatsby*: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes

before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And then one fine morning – So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” These lines not only display Fitzgerald’s supreme command of the written word, but they also convey a popular sentiment of the 1920s and 1930s and can be analyzed even by those who haven’t read the book. What do you think this passage means? How does it relate to what you saw in the program?

2. “My generation of radicals and breakers-down never found anything to take the place of the old virtues of work and courage and the old graces of courtesy and politeness.” What do you think this quote means? What were some of the defining characteristics of Fitzgerald’s generation? What major events influenced this generation? Why were they labeled the Lost Generation?

3. Look at the following quote, taken from one of Fitzgerald’s notebooks: “Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.” What do you think this quote means? How can this maxim be applied to Fitzgerald’s own life? In what ways was Fitzgerald’s life successful? In what ways was it tragic?

Extended Activities:

1. The early 20th century was a tumultuous time period in Western history. Create a timeline that compares the events of the 1920s and 1930s to Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s lives. You may want to differentiate between political, economic and social events.

2. Fitzgerald is known for creating some of the most complex and realistic characters in his fiction. Read a work of F. Scott Fitzgerald and write an essay that explores how his characters are a reflection of the people and events in his own life.

3. Research clothing styles of the 1920s and 1930s and then design your own outfits for the two decades. How do the clothing styles reflect the different moods and circumstances of these two decades?

4. Create a poster or advertisement that celebrates the end of Prohibition in the United States.

Additional Resources

Literature:

Brucoli, Matthew Joseph and Scottie Fitzgerald Smith. *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. University of South Carolina, 2002.

Kyvig, David E. *Daily Life in the United States, 1920-1940: How Americans Lived During the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression*. Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2004.

Marguiles, Philip, ed. *The Roaring Twenties (Turning Points in World History)*. Greenhaven Press, 2004.

Tredell, Nicolas. *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Great Gatsby*. Columbia University, 1999.

Websites

Additional information on the life and works of F. Scott Fitzgerald on Bio.com:
<http://www.biography.com/articles/F.-Scott-Fitzgerald-9296261>

Useful quotations, timelines, and bibliography all concerning Fitzgerald:
www.sc.edu/fitzgerald/