LITERARY LEGACY: F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, SINCLAIR LEWIS, AND NORMAN MAILER

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HOW DO F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, SINCLAIR LEWIS, AND NORMAN MAILER FARE in current speculation about literary legacy? Any person making predictions about the future status of prose fiction artists is always and already engaged in risky business. Just ask those literary readers who rejected Herman Melville and Kate Chopin in the 1940s prior to their meteoric rise in status.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1941), having received powerful accolades about writing his generation's *Moby Dick*, leads a group of two novelists (along with Sinclair Lewis) as monumental cultural icons. This assessment is based on cultural matters—the ideas, arts, manners and moods of selected times and places. They will be remembered over time and rightfully so. In his highest point of acclaim, Sinclair Lewis was touted as the author who personified the essence of America's "Main Street." Fitzgerald was even more imposing. *The Great Gatsby* summed up The Roaring Twenties, and Fitzgerald's personal life embodied the flat-out failure of the once exalted American Dream. After all, perhaps, Fitzgerald's most memorable axiom was (and still is): "There are no second acts in American lives."

Fitzgerald accomplished quite a feat, culturally speaking. He clearly earned maximum literary mileage. Many observers have claimed that his fiction encompassed American literary culture between the two world wars, amazingly, with a relatively small canon of nine published books in a lifetime: four novels, four short story volumes, one play, and a few essays and autobiographical pieces. During the cash-poor 1930s, Fitzgerald was ubiquitous in magazine appearances, and much of the work was not very good,

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certainly not up to the standard set by *The Great Gatsby* and many of the short stories.

However, in spite of this limited, mixed collection of prose work, "Great F. Scott" clearly finessed himself into iconic status. Yet, what a paltry canon for a major writer with so much cultural clout and incipient legacy based on a masterpiece novel plus about two or three dozen anthologized stories and not much more. Fitzgerald's picturesque, emblematic 1920s lifestyle overshadowed his occasional literary excellence, except of course for *Gatsby*. Many critics, nonetheless, admitted that none of Fitzgerald's contemporaries, except Hemingway, could have achieved such high cultural heights. Yet how does Fitzgerald's rise in cultural status relate to the potential legacy of Norman Mailer? Mailer's personal behavior and weighty canon certainly might prove to become a Fitzgerald peer and fellow survivor. However, a two-generation gap, at times, makes Fitzgerald and Mailer into somewhat literary strangers. Their literary milieus were far from similar. Fitzgerald's Roaring Twenties, remote from today's digitalized culture, came flush in the beginnings of America's Literary Renaissance, the times ripe for a literary newcomer like the handsome prose troubadour.

Fitzgerald's first book, *This Side of Paradise*, was to be his only highly successful book (1920), the same year as the other fictional best seller, *Main Street*—a novel by Sinclair Lewis, a fellow Minnesotan soon destined to become Fitzgerald's arch rival. Fitzgerald's debut novel's "lost" protagonist, Amory Blaine, was a romantic egotist, an aristocratic Princeton undergraduate on a quest for selfhood. The novel's climatic and celebrated utterance said it all. Amory was stunned to "find all gods dead, all wars fought and all faith in man shaken." America had its first "Lost Generation," and Fitzgerald found himself a celebrity at the tender age of twenty-three. *The Naked and the Dead* did not experience such topical exalted dreamy American fictionalized philosophy. Another Mailer lack of connection to Fitzgerald concerned F. Scott's soft moody essay, *The Crack-Up*, published posthumously in 1945. This compilation was a glossy account of his wife's nervous breakdown and his own depression rooted in flat sales and critical neglect. Fitzgerald was $40,000 in debt, and his few readers could feel his pain.

What induced the next Mailer lack of connection was the time-warped nature of the 1920s Fitzgerald lifestyle. It read like a flapper age dream turned nightmare. Its hero, F. Scott, hailed from Minnesota, then on to elite Prince-

ton. This Age's ideal marriage, which in no time roared into the 1920s as a vortex of day/night parties, boozing, petting and bedding, and public capers that lured the media into crowning this Age's most fascinating twosome—Scott and Zelda. Fitzgerald had to strike it rich —and he did—with a showy book.

However, the American Dream was tender and a Crack-Up seem inevitable. And so it was: Scott in debt, his talent spent, doses of disenchantment, his beloved Zelda institutionalized and diagnosed mad. Where else but Hollywood to end it all? Fortunately, the script was mercifully brief for Fitzgerald: writer's block, debt, alcoholism, rotted liver, TB, and finis. Fitzgerald died in 1940, felled by a heart attack after reading the *Princeton Alumni Review*. He was reminiscent of Amory Blain, recognizing that he was irretrievably lost.

Such an apparent historic life was the stuff of literary legend and cultism, making it all the more difficult to locate and evaluate the essence of Fitzgerald amidst a sea of cultural clutter. Once again, Mailer was spared incipient static icon status. His canon kept roaring throughout his career, and his protean intellectual messages were seemingly scribbled all over the American Experience—for one glamorous decade. Fitzgerald's canon, at the time, seemed like a one-shot sustained cultural end note.

Fitzgerald's short stories (in contrast to Mailer's) rivaled Hemingway's, often considered the twentieth century's most original short fiction author. And Fitzgerald, at times, equaled or surpassed "Papa" with his top-rated "Mad Day" and "The Diamond as Big as The Ritz" in his *Tales of the Jazz Age*, a title that revealed their essence. Furthermore, his stories remained his primary money machine. Yes, "machine" because he, like Jack London, turned out an overload, at times mushy junk. They were brotherly "pulp work beasts." Fitzgerald's novels, however, were not money-friendly. His first was a moderate best seller. Later, there ensued a slow monetary and popular decline and that included his *Gatsby* masterpiece. His short fiction remained Scott's money lode. The 1920s readers had a love affair "roaring" with those glossy magazines full of cultural chatter and pert timely stories. Fitzgerald smartly pitched his flapper tales to those magazines—*Smart Set*, *Red Book*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*—that paid the most princely sums. His stories close ties with *Colliers* was a preview of O'Hara's, Salinger's and Cheever's alliance with *The New Yorker*. The earlier generous magazines kept F. Scott and Zelda financially alive during their final days—his lost in alco-

holism and hers in madness. Yet his stories still earned a lucrative $30,000 a year.

But by raw legacy standards, there was downside to Fitzgerald's success, somewhat ironic because the more famous Fitzgerald became, the more he was paid for both good and bad stories, and the latter, embarrassingly, accumulated at the end. Yet, these numerous uneven stories, more than his less popular four novels, resulted in his being identified as "the Poet Laureate of the Jazz Age." The importance of *Gatsby* for Fitzgerald's long term legacy cannot be overestimated. Literary wise people have compared Fitzgerald's novel with *Moby-Dick*. Hemingway's and Lewis' best novels were important but not to the extent of Fitzgerald's magnum opus. Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* was (and is) *Gatsby's* closest rival. Both were published in 1925, literary America's top banner year for serious mainstream fiction.

Gatsby should not be viewed as a phenomenal novel for literary reasons, but rather as a phenomenal cultural artifact. This novel was written exactly at the right time and place by an ideal writer. *Gatsby*'s voluminous, positive critiques climaxed with the novel's cultural message that Gatz, alias Gatsby, was the archetypal American Dreamer of Daisy and the Green Light that symbolized the American will and determination to achieve the national ideal—but, alas, no longer so because the indomitable environmental imperfections would prevail and, alas, America's psychic Frontier was being closed and the American Dream, indeed, was on unstable ground. Fitzgerald ended his masterpiece with bittersweet poetic rhetoric, still, often quoted.

Gatsby's conclusion was also a tender farewell to the once more hardcore reality of Literary Naturalism, and the shifting allegiance to the Jane Austen dynasty of social and realistic novel of manners. The 1925 Fitzgerald novel lived on high and because of the 1920's miscarriage with the American Dream. Yet despite all the later literary and cultural acclaim that made Jay and Daisy immortal, the novel itself initially received lukewarm reviews and sales, and no popularity spree, In the first six months, the book sold about 25,000 copies, good but not great. Then, a slow fade and, finally, a possible media salvation when stage and screen beckoned, but a play adaptation and Hollywood screenplay produced scant profit. Fitzgerald's depression and alcoholism deepened, and thus, those barren years, a nine-year go-round with no published novels—what Fitzgerald called "1,000 parties and no work."

The magical literary year, 1925, had room for another major cultural icon, Sinclair Lewis, whose *Arrowsmith* won the Pulitzer and, unlike *Gatsby*,

spawned giddy popularity. Competition as to the 1920's "Who's Who" (Lewis over Fitzgerald) emanated, not from literary critical theory, but from overall cultural logic. Lewis had opted for "Main Street, USA," mundane, folksy, a virtual national mirror of massive readers and spenders, the makers of wealthy writers. Fitzgerald, a fellow north Midwestener, instead looked toward a fictionalized Dream Street paved with current idyllic musings of what might be. In the collective American mind, "dreams" outlasted "streets," and so in legacy reality it was Fitzgerald and not Lewis who would prevail.

Such was the literary staging for Fitzgerald's final literary phase. Its headliner was *Tender is the Night* (1934), a novel that ended a nine-year drought. This narrative was a biographical transplant of Scott and Zelda's emotionally nadir life on the French Riviera and Paris. The novel's downbeat mood emanated, presumably, from F. Scott book-browsing the Age's newest mostly pessimistic thinkers: Henry Adams, Marx, Freud, and especially Oswald Spengler and his *The Decline of the West* (1918).

Such was the prevailing mood and tone and storyline of this novel. Its protagonist, Dick Diver, the epitome of the "savior" psychiatrist, is married to a wealthy woman with a burnt-out mind that he strived to reignite while she bankrupted him emotionally. He winds up wandering aimlessly in obscure upstate New York. Such a denouement had Spenglerian overtones but of course, much more tenderly told, marking this narrative as Fitzgerald's most ambitious novel, although flawed in his own mind, which fostered some postmortem literary surgery.

So Fitzgerald was fated to be resurrected. But not Lewis, whose literary career during the dismal 1930s quickly spiraled downward as did a poverty-paved Main Street, with pauper readers, now leery about any past skyward dreamscape, their collective practical eye now on basic daily survival. Lewis' fame and fortune never returned. Even today, compared with the still highly visible Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Lewis remains largely forgotten.

Unlike Lewis' sensational decade-long Act One, Fitzgerald's career experienced a Second Act. This drama occurred too late to lessen F. Scott's money blues, but the somewhat ignored *Gatsby* still harbored a "green light" for both Fitzgerald's literary career and for America. A beacon was the literary establishment, once favoring Lewis, but now becoming Fitzgerald's redeemer. So the stage was set for the post Gatsby era of F. Scott and Zelda "live" in America . . . all those 1,000-odd parties, decadence among the International Set, and Zelda's certified Schizophrenia, and F. Scott's mammoth

drinking and his flawed *Tender is the Night* . . . all of these bacchanalian episodes would be culturally immortalized, and thereby, poignancy akin to tragedy . . . and all these devolutions made more palpable in *The Crack-Up*.

Near Fitzgerald's end, Hollywood offered a possible survival, a dozen film scripts for MGM for $1,000 per week, his last sizeable cash transfusion. But alcohol listlessness won out, and there was only a brief respite from the pain of life—a brief romance with the glamorous Sheila Graham. Near the end, with the genesis of *The Last Tycoon* still being composed, Scott suffered a heart attack and he was finis. As for Zelda a sanatorium fire claimed her and the most notable Jazz Age couple were now part of the ages. However, Scott and Zelda did not simply pass on. Contrary to Fitzgerald's famous maxim about no American "Second Acts," his canon did have a revival, starring the Roaring '20s with Scott and Zelda as Living Legends.

Such was the nature of the post-1920s Fitzgerald Revival, which in a way was like Mailer's *Ancient Evenings*. The 1983 weighty novel about Egypt BCE and how its magicians and physicians and ancient engineers perfected their Pharaoh's afterlife, locked inside pyramids still standing today. And so similarly, three modern American distinguished Men of Letters of the 1940s (Malcolm Cowley, Maxwell Perkins and Edmunds Wilson) decided to operate on the flawed Fitzgerald canon. Such was a significant component of the genesis of Fitzgerald as the 1920s cultural icon.

America needed no less. There was Pearl Harbor and a challenging post-war era, and the nation needed cultural tonics, and that included literary restorations. These literary high priests—Wilson, Cowley and Perkins, not BCE Egyptians, but rather AD American academics who did their patriotic duty and engineered the Fitzgerald Resurrection. The intellectual Wilson collected and edited *The Crack-Up* (1945). Such poignant farewell essays, posthumously published, both deepened and sweetened the mood of the Fitzgerald Revival. Cowley also came to Scott's rescue. He downplayed many of the legacy eyesores, particularly the pulp junk, by redirecting attention to Scott's prose at its best (lucid, graceful and poetic), which fostered "true life" characterization, the Fitzgerald narrative gift of "the performing self," and his uncanny ability to enliven an whole generation. Cowley also did major surgery on the deeply flawed *Tender is the Night*, Scott's supposedly simulated Modern Symbolist Movement novel, á la Joyce and Faulkner. For example, instead of centering on protagonist Dick Diver, Fitzgerald substituted a complicated perspective with multiple viewpoints, reminiscent of a Pirandello

philosophical play. Doctor Crowley, a skilled researcher, discovered among Fitzgerald's notes and papers, the author's original intentions and he acted accordingly. He reconstructed the original 1934 novel and put Dick Diver, psychiatrist extraordinaire, center-stage. Consequently, the 1951 Revised Edition became the standard version, quite a literary feat.

Overseeing all the Fitzgerald green light literary traffic was the redoubtable Maxwell Perkins, reputed super editor who pruned and nursed the wordy Thomas Wolfe into print. Now Perkins both joined and guided the "Welcome Back Scott" moment and movement. Perkins was the generation's literary Godfather. No fewer than sixty contemporary serious writers dedicated their books to their mentor, the indispensible "Max."

Such literary comradeship. Scholars, critics, writers gave their blessings to a concerted Fitzgerald face-lift. However all this dated literary mush would seem alien to the Mailer literary generation, void of any Max Perkins to shape the flow of legacy. So, in some foreseeable future staging, outside posterity's gate, will there be more (or less) literary mush starring F. Scott Fitzgerald? It is safe to say that Fitzgerald, now and probably then, will remain visible and remembered, epitomized as personifying those glamorous ancient Roaring American 1920s, and will receive posterity's green light, apropos for the creator of the ever-watching Jay Gatsby.

As for Mailer, minus his *Gatsby*, yet another literary mystery? Would the creator of *Ancient Evenings* be remembered or would Mailer face a legacy red light and be upstaged by F. Scott Fitzgerald's Third Act? Only time will tell.