

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* at 100

James McDonald
22 November 2020

In a time of pandemic, when untold millions of Americans face unemployment, eviction and poverty, when America's democratic institutions have all but succumbed to the depredations of an increasingly dictatorial ruling class, and when working class anger over all these issues is beginning to boil over—in such a time the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the publication of F. Scott Fitzgerald's first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, might seem to warrant little more than perfunctory acknowledgment. After all, it is a flawed work, set primarily on the tranquil lawns and walks of Princeton University, and following the moral education of a privileged and narcissistic protagonist.

Nevertheless, as the initiation of Fitzgerald's novel-writing career alone, *This Side of Paradise* warrants consideration, and the novel does reward the contemporary reader with its psychological complexity, with Fitzgerald's characteristically glittering lyrical sentences and with his equally characteristic trenchant insight into American class society.

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in 1896 in St. Paul, Minnesota, but spent the first 11 years of his life in Syracuse and Buffalo, New York. The Fitzgeralds returned to Minnesota in 1908, and in 1911 F. Scott was sent to the Newman School, a Catholic prep school in New Jersey, where he demonstrated exceptional intelligence and an aptitude for literature. In 1913, Fitzgerald entered Princeton and wrote for a number of campus publications, but he left the university in 1917, without graduating, to join the Army upon the United States' entry into World War I. He never served overseas, a fortune he regretted.

Best known for *The Great Gatsby* (1925), taught in virtually every American high school and college and generally acclaimed to be one of the finest novels in American literature, Fitzgerald completed only four novels: *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), *Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night* (1934). A fifth novel, *The Last Tycoon*, was completed by Fitzgerald's longtime friend, the critic Edmund Wilson after Fitzgerald's death in 1940. F. Scott was a prolific short story writer, however, and a number of his stories are still widely anthologized, most notably "Bernice Bobs Her Hair" (1920) and "Winter Dreams" (1922).

Taken as a whole, Fitzgerald's literary output is at once brilliant and uneven, a fact that is to be attributed not primarily to any failing on the author's part, not even to his notorious alcoholism, so much as to the hand-to-mouth existence capitalism imposes on the serious artist. While he enjoyed some fleeting prosperity after the publication and great success of *This Side of Paradise*, during which he and his wife Zelda Sayre became the iconic figures of "the Jazz Age," a term Fitzgerald coined, his career mirrored that of many other artistic writers of his time. He was often in debt and had to buy the time to write an ounce of gold by producing a pound of relative dross.

Fitzgerald's main source of income became the *Saturday Evening Post*. It was to the *Post* that he sold his short stories, many of which are quite fine—Fitzgerald was a gifted and skilled practitioner of the story form—but some of which were banged out for the money. By the mid-1930s, the *Post* was paying Fitzgerald \$4,000 per story, top dollar at the time, but

still too infrequent a paycheck to allow him the freedom necessary to develop more serious work. After *Gatsby*, it would be nine years before Fitzgerald would produce his next novel, the magnificent *Tender Is the Night*.

In 1930, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald suffered her first mental breakdown. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, she would spend the majority of her remaining years in a series of mental hospitals and clinics, dying sadly in a fire in a North Carolina hospital in 1948. Among Fitzgerald's papers are lengthy, impassioned letters to Zelda's psychiatrists in which the writer attempts to assist in his wife's diagnosis and care.

In 1937, Fitzgerald moved to Hollywood, as many other writers did, to write for the movies and get out of debt, but the movies and Fitzgerald never quite understood each other, it seemed. "My great dreams about this place are shattered and I have written half a novel [*The Last Tycoon*] and a score of satiric pieces. .. about it," he would write to friends in 1940. Later that year, having suffered years of heart disease as a result of alcoholism, Fitzgerald died of a heart attack in his Hollywood apartment.

This Side of Paradise

As noted above, *This Side of Paradise* has its genuine merits.

Begun as *The Romantic Egotist* while Fitzgerald was awaiting deployment and published when he was just twenty-three years old, *This Side of Paradise* is a semi-autobiographical treatment of the author's youth. The protagonist of the novel is Amory Blaine who, like Fitzgerald, is born into an upper-middle-class Minnesota family. As a young boy, Amory travels the US and Mexico with his eccentric mother, Beatrice, visiting one resort after another. From his mother, whom the young Amory calls by her first name and about whom he has "no illusions," he learns classical art and class snobbery, e.g., "at eleven he could talk glibly, if rather reminiscently, of Brahms and Mozart and Beethoven."

Like Fitzgerald, Amory is born into comfortable circumstances during America's Progressive Era, before the crisis of world capitalism culminates in the eruption of the Great War in 1914. Observant but not politically conscious, young Amory witnesses a world of upper-middle-class pretensions and rigid class stratification, where servants are ordered about by moody children and one sinks into the leather sofas at the Minnehaha Club.

We follow Amory to an eastern prep school where "he went all wrong at the start, was generally considered both conceited and arrogant, and universally detested." Conceited and arrogant Amory certainly is, and at times early in the novel the reader has difficulty finding him a sympathetic character, looking on his emotional adventures as on a curiosity. Of Amory's time at Princeton, Fitzgerald stresses that "the best of Amory's intellect was concentrated on matters of popularity, the intricacies of a

university social system and American Society as represented by Biltmore Teas and Hot Springs golf links.”

Among the young Amory’s other faults are an infatuation with the Nietzschean concept of the superman, a wistful affection for the “homogeneity” of the Confederacy and a certain elitist disdain for, in fact a revulsion from, non-Anglo immigrants—all symptoms of American ruling-class ideology of the time. Fitzgerald’s own feelings on matters of race and ethnicity have been a topic of critical debate (most notably involving Nick Carraway’s allegedly anti-Semitic portrait of the Jewish gangster Meyer Wolfsheim in *Gatsby*), but as a character, Amory would hardly be believable if he did not share the prejudices of his class. It can also be argued that, by the end of *This Side of Paradise*, Amory has matured beyond such ideas.

In the first half of the novel, Amory’s saving grace for the reader, apart from his undeniably quick intelligence, is his capacity for suffering. The occasion for his emotional pain is usually his romantic and ill-fated attachment to a girl or woman. The primary object of his attraction in this half of the novel is the coquettish and conceited Isabelle Borgé (apparently based on Chicago debutante Ginevra King, Fitzgerald’s first love), about whose personality Fitzgerald is incisive and understanding: “She had begun as [Amory] had, with good looks and an excitable temperament, and the rest was the result of accessible popular novels and dressing room conversation culled from the older set.” Yet Isabelle, like Amory, is conscious of her social role and plays it “with an infinite guile that would have horrified her parents.” In fact, one is struck again and again by the high degree of self-awareness on the part of the characters, a tendency that may have contributed to most critics’ finding *This Side of Paradise* to be not a fully mature work of art.

In the second half of the novel, after a brief “Interlude” that stands in for Amory’s experience of the Great War, three other female characters excite Amory’s ardor and contribute to his growth. Clara Page, Amory’s beautiful, semi-impoorished cousin, presents him with a kind of human ideal. “Her goodness,” Amory thinks, “was above the prosy morals of the husband-seeker, apart from the dull literature of female virtue.”

Rosalind Connage, said to be based on Fitzgerald’s soon-to-be wife Zelda, is an intelligent and passionate young socialite and Amory’s most enduring love interest. Rosalind’s decision not to marry Amory provides the emotional nova from which the remainder of the novel travels.

Eleanor Savage, Amory’s last romantic partner in the novel, is a fascinating character. Like Clara, she is every bit Amory’s intellectual equal, but Eleanor shares as well his restlessness and desire for a fulfilling social role, though she believes such a role is denied to women. As a result, Eleanor becomes unbalanced and seems ultimately a tragic character, an insight on Fitzgerald’s part that proves painfully ironic given Zelda’s later mental breakdown.

Amory shows himself capable of forming male friendships at Princeton, usually based on some form of intellectual admiration, as with the poet Tom D’Invilliers and the radical Burne Holiday. The conversations between Amory and these classmates provide some of the novel’s finest intellectual satisfactions, as the young men argue poetry, character and war propaganda. Amory also maintains a close friendship with Monsignor Darcy, a kind of confessor and cultural mentor to the young man and based upon Father Sigourney Fay, Fitzgerald’s own mentor at the Newman School.

It is in his last year at Princeton that Amory’s consciousness emerges somewhat from its narcissistic thicket, and he begins to credit the significance of the larger world. Still, like Fitzgerald himself, Amory leaves Princeton without graduating to join the army. This decision goes largely unexplained, in the novel and in Fitzgerald’s letters, but it appears that both Amory and F. Scott felt some degree of patriotic duty to fight in the war.

Following the “Interlude” of the war and throughout the second half of

the novel, Amory develops, at material cost, an intellectual independence and maturity. In the novel’s final scene, an unemployed Amory accepts a lift from two businessmen. When the men make conversation with him, Amory surprises even himself by telling them he is a socialist. Here Fitzgerald primarily uses Amory as a mouthpiece, putting forth an argument for a socialist society as an answer to a bourgeois class that has begrudged the working class even the reforms of trade unionism: “You’ve brought it on yourselves,” insisted Amory. “You people never make concessions until they’re wrung out of you.”

Fitzgerald/Amory meets head-on in this conversation the common arguments against socialism that one still encounters. To the objection that state ownership of industry has been proven a failure (in Russia), he replies, “No—it merely failed.” Amory’s assessment of the Russian Revolution’s prospects from the vantage point of 1919 notwithstanding, he states that such a system of nationalized industry would benefit from the oversight of “the best analytical business minds in the government working for something besides themselves.”

Confronted with the violence of revolution and asked, “Don’t you believe in moderation?” Amory responds, “You won’t listen to the moderates, and it’s almost too late. The truth is that the public has done one of those startling and amazing things that they do about once in a hundred years. They’ve seized an idea.”

Neither Amory nor Fitzgerald, unsurprisingly, has a solid grasp of Marxism, unclear as they are on the incapacity of reform—“moderation”—to contain the inner contradictions of capitalism. Nevertheless, in addition to being alive and open to the 1917 October Revolution and Bolshevism, Fitzgerald was aware of the economic downturn and international labor uprisings that followed World War I. Anti-worker and anti-socialist sentiments invariably find expression in the mouths of the book’s least savory characters, and Amory’s emphatic defense of socialism in this scene provides an invigorating note on which to close the novel.

With these points in mind, one finds in *This Side of Paradise* a flawed work of art that nonetheless speaks to our own political moment and that reads as an intimate portrait, and ultimately an incisive critique, of American ruling class culture by one of that culture’s most sophisticated critics.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact