

Reading Round Gatsby

Professor Nicolas Tredell's suggestions for wider reading not only give you a literary context for Fitzgerald's novel but also throw light on the direct influences of his favourite writers and how they make their way into his work.

In studying F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), it can enhance our enjoyment and understanding of the novel to read a range of other, shorter pieces by Fitzgerald himself and by poets whose work he liked and whose themes overlap with his. A good place to start is the 'Gatsby group' of short stories.

The Gatsby Group

The Gatsby group consists of three stories that Fitzgerald wrote during the genesis of *The Great Gatsby*: 'Winter Dreams' (1922); 'Absolution' (1924); and "The Sensible Thing" (1924). 'Absolution' focuses on Rudolph Miller, an eleven-year-old boy living in the Middle West. Like the young James Gatz, whose 'imagination had never really accepted' his parents as his own, Rudolph inwardly rejects his parents, believing he is not their son, and has fantasies of himself as an exceptional person, an imaginary figure called 'Blatchford Sarnemington'.

When he became Blatchford Sarnemington a suave nobility flowed from him. Blatchford Sarnemington lived in great sweeping triumphs.

The story traces Rudolph's movement, inadvertently encouraged by Father Schwartz, the repressed priest in whom he confides, to an inner declaration of independence from the faith in which he has been schooled and to the conclusion that there

was something ineffably gorgeous somewhere that had nothing to do with God.

The phrase 'ineffably gorgeous' would not be out of place in *The Great Gatsby*; in Chapter 1, Nick Carraway tells us Gatsby has 'something gorgeous about him' and in Chapter 6 he speaks of the 'ineffable gaudiness' of James Gatz's boyhood dreams.

In 'Winter Dreams', Dexter Green, a grocer's son in Minnesota who earns pocket money as a golf caddy, falls, at the age of 14, for Judy Jones, who comes from a privileged background like Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. By his early twenties, Dexter has transformed himself into a wealthy New York businessman eligible to pursue Judy, and he eventually gets engaged to her. She quickly ends the

engagement, but he accepts this stoically and retains his devotion to her as, like Gatsby, he goes off to the First World War:

He loved her, and he would love her until the day he was too old for loving – but he could not have her.

Seven years later, a business acquaintance tells him that Judy is now Mrs Simms, an unhappily married woman whose husband maltreats her and whose beauty has already faded. This news devastates him:

The dream was gone

and

he could never go back any more. The gates were closed, the sun was gone down, and there was no beauty but the grey beauty of steel that withstands all time.

This loss of romantic illusion is also the theme of the third Gatsby group story, “The Sensible Thing”. George O’Kelly is a qualified engineer but with poor prospects; the woman he adores, Jonquil Cary, declares her undying love for him but rejects his proposal of marriage

‘because it doesn’t seem to be the sensible thing.’

George then quickly finds success as an engineer, first in Peru and subsequently in New York, rising in a year

from poverty into a position of unlimited opportunity.

But when he returns to try to win Jonquil, he knows, as he kisses her again, that although he might

search through eternity he could never recapture those lost April hours. He might press her close now till the muscles knotted on his arms – she was something desirable and rare that he had fought for and made his own – but never again an intangible whisper in the dusk, or on the breeze of night...

Doing ‘the sensible thing’ has destroyed the delicate original delight.

As well as these Gatsby group stories, a fascinating longer Fitzgerald tale called 'The Rich Boy' is also worth reading.

'The Rich Boy'

'The Rich Boy' (1926) contains a claim in its third paragraph that has become famous:

'Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me.'

Fitzgerald's younger fellow-writer, friend and rival Ernest Hemingway later mocked this claim in his tale 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' (1936), suggesting that the only way in which the rich were different was that 'they have more money'. But the idea that 'the rich are different', in other ways than the merely financial, has circulated widely, becoming almost proverbial, which suggests that it strikes a chord in cultural experience, and, irrespective of its sociological truth, it does apply to Fitzgerald's fiction and especially to *The Great Gatsby*, which explores the ways the rich are, and are not, different.

Like 'Winter Dreams' and "The Sensible Thing", however, *The Great Gatsby* focuses on protagonists who are born poor but get rich; by contrast Anson Hunter, the 'rich boy' of the tale's title, is born rich, but becomes emotionally poor, failing in his relationships with women and falling prey to drink and depression. As the tale ends, Anson, whose friends are all now married, turns thirty and faces a future of diminishing expectations, like Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*. For this boy who starts rich, as for the boys who start poor and get rich like Jay Gatsby, Dexter Green and George O'Kelly, the dream is gone. We can also find this contrast between exalted dream and mundane disillusion in the early and late romantic poetry of which Fitzgerald was particularly fond.

Poetry of John Keats

Fitzgerald himself was only an occasional writer of verse but we can rightly call his fictional and nonfictional prose 'poetic', given its rhythm, cadence and evocative vocabulary and imagery. His favourite poet was the nineteenth-century English Romantic John Keats, and he especially admired Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'; indeed, a phrase from its fourth stanza supplied the title of his last completed novel, *Tender is the Night* (1934). You can hear online a recording of Fitzgerald's haunting recitation of the first three stanzas of the poem (see link below). Fitzgerald wove into *The Great Gatsby* some phrasing from the last three lines of stanza four of 'Ode to a Nightingale', which run:

*But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.*

Fitzgerald later, in a letter, challenged his daughter, Scottie, to find the Keats reference in *Gatsby*. We can locate it in Chapter 5 when Jay and Daisy are in the music room of Gatsby's mansion after their reunion and we have the sentence:

He lit Daisy's cigarette from a trembling match and sat down with her on a couch far across the room where there was no light save what the gleaming floor bounced in from the hall.

The difference between the two passages is instructive; Keats's poem is set outdoors and the 'breezes' blow in the natural light 'from heaven'; the scene in *Gatsby* is set indoors and, a little earlier, *Gatsby* has 'flipped a switch' to summon the artificial electric light reflected from the hall floor. This moment exemplifies Fitzgerald's general achievement in *Gatsby*: to adapt a romantic temperament like that of Keats to a modern world of electricity, telephones and motorcars.

The presence of Keats in *Gatsby* is not confined, however, to the echo of specific phrases and motifs; it is a pervasive mood of ardent aspiration and poignant loss translated from early nineteenth-century England to early twentieth-century America. We also find a late Romantic version of this in an early twentieth-century poet Fitzgerald admired.

Poetry of Rupert Brooke

This poet was Fitzgerald's near-contemporary, Rupert Brooke. Born in 1887, eight years before Fitzgerald, Brooke enlisted in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and died in 1915 of sepsis while sailing to the Gallipoli landing. His best-known poem is 'The Soldier' and the timeliness of this idealising sonnet, combined with his poetic skills, good looks and early death (even if not in combat) helped to make him a legend. Fitzgerald used a phrase from Brooke's poem 'Tiare Tahiti' as the title of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920).

Some of Brooke's most striking poetry creates a mood of ecstasy punctured by a sharp, sudden sense that it cannot last. 'Beauty and Beauty', for example, starts by evoking an ecstatic encounter in which the earth is 'crying-sweet' and the air 'scattering-bright', but ends by foreshadowing

the tears that fill the years
After – after –

The sonnet 'The Hill' begins

Breathless, we flung us on the windy hill,
Laughed in the sun, and kissed the lovely grass

and eloquently sustains its euphoria until the abrupt turn in the last line:

– And then you suddenly cried, and turned away

One of Fitzgerald's achievements in *The Great Gatsby* was to give the kind of heady romanticism to be found in such poems a specific location in twentieth-century America through vividly realised characters, settings and situations: to create a kind of Romantic Modernism. Reading the poetry of Brooke and Keats in conjunction with *Gatsby* helps us to appreciate this achievement.

Further Reading

- Link to Fitzgerald's 'Ode to a Nightingale' recording: <https://granta.com/john-keats-ode-nightingale-read-f-scott-fitzgerald/>
- For those interested in the critical response to *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald: *The Great Gatsby: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, edited by Nicolas Tredell and published by Red Globe Press, provides extracts from and summaries of key reviews and essays from the novel's first publication in 1925 to the 1990s.

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