

F. Scott Fitzgerald is now safely and securely in the pantheon of American writers. *The Great Gatsby* may be the most taught undergraduate text in the country; there is what seems to be an endless stream of articles, books, and popular magazine references to Scott and Zelda; and new biographies continue to appear, as one author after another is inspired to examine Fitzgerald's life and works.

Now, more than fifty years after his last, unfinished novel was published, the question that presents itself is, Why is all this happening? Why Fitzgerald? What is so beguiling about this man who married only once, who neither hunted lions like his friend Ernest Hemingway nor told gothic tales of the Old South like his contemporary William Faulkner? This volume will be the newest collection of essays explaining and examining Fitzgerald's work, but not the last. What is it about him and his work that generates this amount of attention?

The answer, I think, comes in parts. First, Fitzgerald lasts because he is a beautiful writer, a beautiful stylist. He was well read in the traditional literature of England and the United States. The Newman School in New Jersey and Princeton University may not have made a scholar out of young Scott, but he did leave with a thorough grounding in and appreciation for the masterworks of English literature and especially the strengths of the English Romantic poets, especially his favorite, John Keats. Fitzgerald had a distinctive style right from the start, and it was a poetic style. Without even knowing why, readers are taken and held by memorable passages in his novels and stories. I think of the scene in *Gatsby* in which Jay spends his first moments reunited with Daisy: it all ought to have been perfect, and yet Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway, remarks, "There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. . . . No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in

his ghostly heart.” Or one remembers the end of “Babylon Revisited,” perhaps his best story, when Charlie Wales realizes he has failed to convince his sister-in-law to give him custody of his daughter, Honoria: “He would come back some day; they couldn’t make him pay forever. . . . He wasn’t young any more, with a lot of nice thoughts and dreams to have by himself. He was absolutely sure Helen wouldn’t have wanted him to be so alone.”

Fitzgerald not only wrote beautifully but also wrote about concerns central to the American consciousness. It seems a little tired to say so again, but we Americans are in fact consumed by what we, in shorthand, call the American Dream. We do wish to prosper, to rise in the world economically and socially. We want each generation to do better, to live more comfortably than the ones before it. And we worry about the cost. What will this chasing after material goods, this getting and spending, cost in human terms? For *Gatsby*, it costs everything.

And like everyone, everywhere in the West, since the concept was invented in Old Provence, we care intensely about romantic love. No one in serious, literary fiction does a better job with boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl, and boy-gets-girl-back—and, sometimes, boy-loses-girl-again-for-good—than F. Scott Fitzgerald. His stories of romance in all its ecstatic and frustrating forms are as fresh today as they ever were. We may have texting and cell phones now, but the young human heart is not much different from that of a hundred years ago. Fitzgerald’s distinctive, poetic style, let us remind ourselves, is as appropriate for talking about love as Hemingway’s terse declarative sentences are for describing an existential universe in which, after duty is done, we must all die, or Faulkner’s filigreed style is for conveying the Deep South’s complex tangles of race and blood.

Whether we are eager to admit it or not, Fitzgerald wrote about a subject of major concern to all of us: youth. He wrote of the joy, freshness, and exuberance of youth and the intrinsic fear that settles on almost all Americans as we contemplate losing our youth. Who can say what percentage of the gross national product is spent in attempting to