Background to The Great Gatsby

T.S. Eliot labeled *The Great Gatsby* "the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James." Such praise was exactly what Fitzgerald hoped for, as his letters to Maxwell Perkins make clear. It would not be the case. Many critics failed to understand what Fitzgerald had attempted with *The Great Gatsby*, focusing more on what they felt was lurid content rather than engaging the themes of the book. The book sold respectably, but not well. At the time of Fitzgerald's death, most of the second printing remained in the Scribner's warehouse.

The roots of the story go back deep in Fitzgerald's early life. In 1914, home in St. Paul from Princeton for the Christmas holiday, Fitzgerald met Ginevra King, a daughter of a socially prominent St. Paul family and the object of many suitors. The early encounter of Gatsby and Daisy is a stylized and romanticized version of Fitzgerald and King's early encounters. Like Gatsby, Fitzgerald meets King at a time when his prospects are far better than his actual standing. Ginevra also has many suitors. Just as Gatsby had to leave and soon went to war, so, too, did Fitzgerald return to Princeton and, in 1917, take his commission as a 2nd lieutenant in the U.S. Army.

The moment stayed with him. Fitzgerald had always been susceptible to romantic notions. Like Gatsby, Scott Fitzgerald kept lists in his own journals, lists of steps to take for self-improvement. He put daydreams on paper about being a famous novelist and influential man. And, like Gatsby, he went far from home and, to some degree, borrowed a personality in order to realize his dreams.

Daisy Buchanan is seen by many as a conflation of Ginevra King and Zelda Sayre. Daisy's zeal for the gesture and antics of being drunk owes much to Zelda's behavior, as well as the behavior of many around the Fitzgeralds. As well, Gatsby's parties were only slightly hyperbolic representations of the chaos that abounded in Great Neck, the inspiration for West Egg.

But while he had the material all around him, Fitzgerald was not driven as much by his experiences as by his ideas for the novel. With two novels and two short story collections under his belt, he wanted to try something new—an intricate and layered novel whose prose technique would separate it from other writing popular at the time.

In June 1922, he already knew his next novel would be different. He wrote to Perkins that "It will concern less superlative beauties than I run to usually." By April of 1924, he had a very good idea of what he would do, writing to Perkins, "in approaching it from a new angle I've had to discard a lot of it—in one case 18,000 words." The discarded piece formed the short story, "Absolution," a story critics agree is an early study of the character of Jay Gatsby. Fitzgerald himself indicated it was to have been the "prologue." Perkins' response mentions the title, "The Great Gatsby," which he says is "a suggestive and effective title,—with only the vaguest knowledge of the book, of course." In other words, Fitzgerald exhibited the classic signs of a writer who knew he was on to something: he said little.

When Perkins received the first draft, titled on the manuscript "Trimalchio at West Egg," he wrote to Fitzgerald, "you have every kind of right to be proud of this book." He pointed out some strengths—particularly the narrative mode and the use of symbol in the book. At the same time, he felt Gatsby was too vague. Fitzgerald appreciated the insight as well as the support. He noted that Perkins "picked out all [his] favorite spots in the book to praise as high spots. Except you didn't mention my favorite of all—the chapter where Daisy and Gatsby meet."

In the letters the two exchanged in the last months of 1924 and into 1925, too lengthy to quote from here, Fitzgerald's purpose and acumen are clear. They show how much thought he had given to every move in the novel, to every bit of language, to the layers and complications he had stated, early on, that he wanted.

Many scholars—but chiefly Matthew Bruccoli and Scott Donaldson—have outlined the numerous parallels between Fitzgerald's life and many elements of the novel. The most obvious parallels come in the character of Daisy Buchanan and her interactions with Jay Gatsby. But the letters between Perkins and Fitzgerald make clear many more—from the real-life source for Jordan Baker to the likely source for Tom Buchanan, from the inclusion of Robert Keable's *Simon Called Peter* to the source for Gatsby's
obscure medal.

Though the novel produced mediocre reviews and sales in its time, there were a few who knew its importance. As Perkins wrote to Fitzgerald after reading and thinking about that first draft: "You once told me you were a natural writer—my God! You have plainly mastered the craft, of course; but you needed far more than craftsmanship for this."

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