

Scott Fitzgerald: A pillar of American literature

BY RAVINDRA WIJEWARDHANE

When talking about American literature, there are three authors who are considered three pillars of it. The first is William Faulkner, the second is Ernest Hemingway and the third is Scott Fitzgerald.

We are more familiar with the fiction of the first two authors, but we are relatively lesser known about the fiction of Scott Fitzgerald, apart from his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925. And we are also, more or less, unaware of the extraordinary life of Fitzgerald, a literary icon of Jazz age. Hence, this is an ideal opportunity to discuss his literary career as his 125th birth anniversary fell on September 24.

Early life

F. Scott Fitzgerald or Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born on September 24, 1896 in St. Paul, Minnesota, US. He was named after a famous ancestor. The namesake is the lawyer and writer who penned the lyrics of American national anthem ("The Star Spangled Banner") during the War of 1812, and the two were only distantly related - a second cousin three times removed on his father's side.

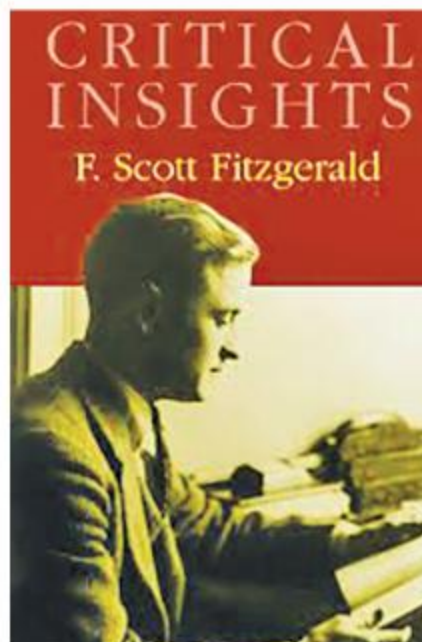
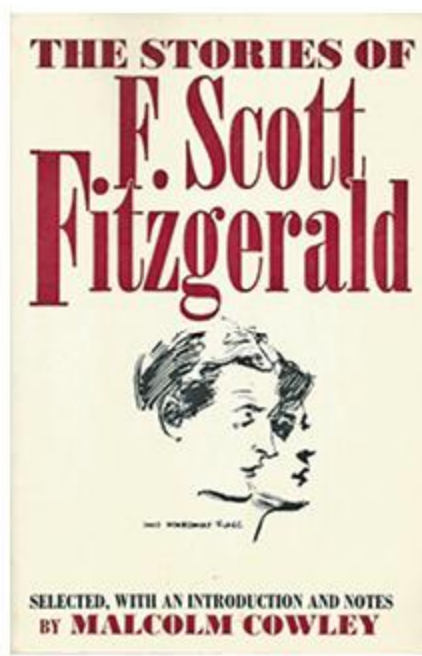
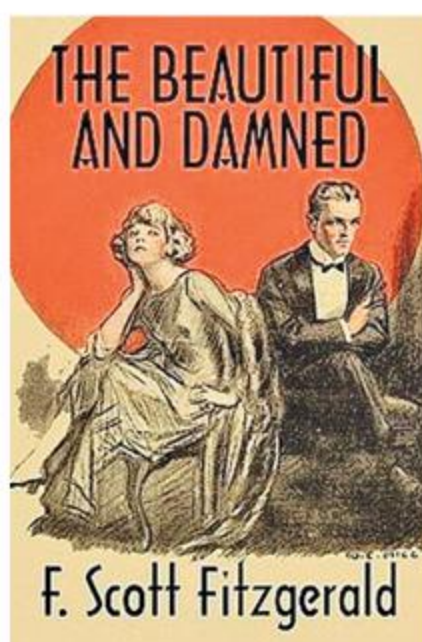
Fitzgerald's father, Edward Fitzgerald, was a salesman for a company named Procter and Gamble. Before this occupation, he had opened a wicker furniture business in St. Paul, but it was failed. During the first decade of Fitzgerald's life, his father's job took the family back and forth between Buffalo and Syracuse in upstate New York. When Fitzgerald was 12, father lost his job with Procter and Gamble, and the family moved back to St. Paul in 1908 to live off his mother's inheritance. His mother, Mary ('Mollie') McQuillan, was from an Irish-Catholic family that made a small fortune in Minnesota as wholesale grocers. Fitzgerald grew up in a solidly Catholic and upper middle-class environment.

Education and literary development

Fitzgerald, first, attended the St. Paul Academy which was a private school. But he was not a brilliant student, instead he attracted to literature - he was an avid reader and started to write literary items. When he was 13, his first literary work appeared in the school newspaper - it's a detective story. In 1911, when Fitzgerald was 15 years old, he moved to the Newman School, a prestigious Catholic preparatory school in New Jersey. That school was also not impressed for Fitzgerald, but, there, he met Father Sigourney Fay, who noticed his incipient talent with the written word and encouraged him to pursue his literary ambitions.

In 1913, after passing out from the Newman School, Fitzgerald entered the Princeton University, in New Jersey. He wanted to continue his artistic development from it, but the academic system in it didn't impress him.

As always, he started to dedicate honing his craft as a writer, neglecting all his college studies. So, while he was



a failed student in the University, on the other, he was able to write scripts and lyrics for the Princeton's famous Triangle Club musicals as well as frequent articles for the Princeton Tiger humour magazine and stories for the Nassau Literary Magazine. However, he was placed on academic probation in the Princeton because of his failing in the academic studies. Thus, in 1917, he dropped out of the Princeton University without graduating and joined the US Army.

Army life

During this time, World War I started to wage, and more American youth began to join the Army. Fitzgerald hadn't any special desire for the Army, but he joined it. First, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry, and then assigned to Camp Sheridan outside of Montgomery, Alabama until he was chosen for the battle front. When the time passed, he worried that he might die in the battlefield one day.

So, he frantically set out to write his off-hours in the hopes of leaving behind a literary legacy. However, the November 1918 armistice was signed shortly before he was to be shipped overseas. He never made it to the battlegrounds of World War I. Ultimately, he had a chance to complete a draft of his unpublished novel called *The Romantic Egotist*, which he later reworked into his smash hit debut *This Side of Paradise*.

Meeting Zelda

When Fitzgerald was at the Army, he was able to meet an 18-year-old celebrated belle in Southern, Zelda Sayre. She was a daughter of Alabama Supreme Court judge. At the first sight, he fell in love with her, and they even engaged. Meanwhile, as the War ended, Fitzgerald had a chance to quit the Army. When he said it to Zelda, his girlfriend, she suggested that if he left the Army, he should find a job lucrative enough to convince her to marry him. He decided to embark on advertising field in New York.

Upon his discharge in July, 1919, he moved to New York City hoping to

launch a career in advertising. Yet, only a few months later, he realised that he wouldn't be able to earn enough money from advertising. Zelda, in the meantime, unwilling to wait until Fitzgerald succeeded in the advertisement business and unwilling to live on his small salary, broke their engagement. Fitzgerald quickly returned to St. Paul and began to rewrite his novel.

This Side of Paradise

He started to write his debut novel (then titled *The Romantic Egotist*), while he was working at the Army. After completing it, he submitted it to a publishing house named Charles Scribner's Sons, but they rejected it only mentioning its originality and the talent of the writer. These words encouraged Fitzgerald to work on the manuscript further. This was the time he fell in love with Zelda. The romantic affair gave him more energy to work on the manuscript. So he resubmitted it after reworking on it, but the Scribners once again rejected it.

After quitting the advertising business, Fitzgerald started to touch the manuscript once again. He submitted it to the Scribner for the third time. Only then it was accepted by the editor Maxwell Perkins of Scribners (in September). By then, he recast the title as *This Side of Paradise* as well. This beginning of constant revising pattern of his fiction later characterised his writing style for the rest of his career.

This Side of Paradise was published in 1920, and it got instant success, turning Fitzgerald overnight one of the country's most promising young writers. A week later the book was launched, he and Zelda were married. Afterword, the two eagerly embraced the newly minted celebrity status and embarked on an extravagant lifestyle that earned him a reputation as a playboy and hindered his reputation as a serious literary writer too.

This Side of Paradise is a largely autobiographical story about love and greed. The story, set mainly at Princeton, was centered on Amory Blaine, an ambitious Midwesterner who falls in love with, but is ultimately rejected by,

two girls from high-class families. According to Fitzgerald the book is "a quest novel." While the book traces the career aspirations and love disappointments of Amory Blaine, it also depicts the post-World War I era's newfound prosperity and consumerism in the United States.

The Beautiful and Damned

Fitzgerald's second novel is *The Beautiful and Damned* which was published in 1922. It tells the story of troubled marriage of Anthony and Gloria Patch. The book helped cement Fitzgerald's status as one of the great chroniclers and satirists of the culture of wealth, extravagance and ambition that emerged during the affluent 1920s - what became known as the Jazz Age. "It was an age of miracles," Fitzgerald wrote, "it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."

Great Gatsby

The third novel, *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, is considered Fitzgerald's finest work, with its beautiful lyricism, pitch-perfect portrayal of the Jazz Age, and searching critiques of materialism, love and the American Dream. Fitzgerald wrote this novel when he was at Valescure, France. He moved to France in 1924 in seeking a change of scenery to spark his creativity. *The Great Gatsby* is narrated by Nick Carraway, a Midwesterner who moves into the town of West Egg on Long Island, next door to a mansion owned by the wealthy and mysterious Jay Gatsby. The novel follows Nick and Gatsby's strange friendship and Gatsby's pursuit of a married woman named Daisy, ultimately leading to his exposure as a bootlegger and his death.

Despite winning rave reviews from the likes of T.S. Eliot and Edith Wharton, the book was never a bestseller in Fitzgerald's lifetime. It performed poorly compared to his first two novels, selling just over 20,000 copies and only turning a meager profit for its publisher. According to critics, popular interest in the book didn't spike until World War II, when some 150,000 copies were shipped to US servicemen overseas. Now it has become one of the most popular, widely read, and critically acclaimed works of fiction in the American literature. The book now sells some 500,000 copies each year.

Death of the writer

In the 1920s, Fitzgerald fell into severe alcoholism and suffered from writer's block. His alcoholism, depression and financial problems worsened. After *Zelda* was placed in a North Carolina hospital in 1937, he left his wife behind and moved to Hollywood to try his hand as a screenwriter.

In 1939, he began work on his final novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, but died of a heart attack the following year without completing the work. He was 44 and considered himself a failure at the time of his death.

Scott Fitzgerald remains among readers not just as a great writer, but also as an extraordinary human being, just like Franz Kafka.

King Swarnamali the Great

BY UDAYASIRI WICKRAMARATNE

Making a genuine effort to bring an unimagined and unexplored treasure trove of modern Sinhala literature to the English reading community, Montage is bringing Udayasiri Wickramaratne's debut novel 'Swarnamali Maha Raja' translated by Malinda Seneviratne, veteran journalist, writer and poet.

'Swarnamali Maha Raja' (King Swarnamali the Great) is an imaginative journey with the disgraced Prince Gemunu during his self-imposed exile.

Chapter 8, Part 2

Wasn't it true that even as all these thoughts crossed his mind, he had not taken his eyes off the figure that had emerged at the far end of the field? Had he realised, the moment the figure had materialised upon the mahaniyara faraway, that it was none other than Nandimitra? As the man approached and this was indeed confirmed, why didn't the realisation rise to the surface of his mind? In other words, had he reflected thus knowing well that it was Nandimitra? Had he secured access to such thoughts on account of being wrapped in some kind of energy that Nandimitra had released into the landscape around him? In fact, hadn't Nandimitra turned the entire field into a home simply by walking across it towards him?

When in solitary reverie, he had to bear the burden of himself and the world all by himself. This is the very essence of solitude. Ranmenika was prepared to share a part of his solitude. She was ready to share a part of his burden.

Since he bore the entire burden of Lanka, he himself would be a burden unto her. Never alone in her home, Ranmenika would have to suffer solitude on his account. Living with her family whose livelihood was farming, she would never suffer solitude, but with him and because of him she would. She, who was never alone, would learn the meaning of solitude if she were to live with him.

Lightness of being

This is why life was different in a home. Within its confines one is not forced to carry one's burden nor those of the world. Life never felt like a deadweight. Life was light and lighthearted. How many years had passed since he had renounced this lightness of being? So was it not the very same lightness and ease that was now approaching him in the form of Nandimitra?

Gemunu gazed upon Nandimitra's face as though he was looking at his own father, the King. Nandimitra came up to him. He stopped. Gemunu was transformed into a newborn infant.

He was now one who knew not what to do. Nandimitra looked at Prince Gemunu for a moment, then fell on his knees and saluted him.

It was then that Gemunu recovered his senses. He immediately stepped forward, put his hands on Nandimitra's shoulders and made him stand up. Nandimitra, however, was so consumed by confusion that he desired more than anything else to just sit down and be lost in thought for days

without once blinking his eyes, just as Gemunu had.

Nandimitra did not do anything of the kind though, but Gemunu read it all in Nandimitra's eyes. Gemunu invited Nandimitra to sit down beside him under a tree upon the mahaniyara. Nandimitra looked at him.

'Mother and father - are they well?' Gemunu asked.

'Yes.'

It was a one word answer that Nandimitra offered, but that single word told Gemunu all he needed to know. The colours emanating from the single syllable of the word enabled Nandimitra to paint the entire picture of the story expected of him. Gemunu found himself standing up. The sight of Nandimitra dispelled his solitude and yet there was a deeper loneliness that pervaded everything now. There was nothing to be seen anywhere. Neither was he able to sit down and look for some blank space in the sky or to curl up, close his eyes and drive his mind to be convinced that the world did not exist.

Weight of discontent

As Gemunu took one step forward, he felt as though the entire weight of his discontent, his being, the world, the earth and the universe had descended upon his foot. In short, without murmur, with utmost calmness and grace, in conduct quite unlike that unleashed by his insanities, endowed with compassion for one and all including himself, without an iota of ill will even in some obscure corner of his mind towards the hapless creatures who had conferred upon him this weight but instead that very burden turning the corner of his lips into a smile that arrived a moment after being amused and thereby indicating to the world the true weight he bore, the weight his father, the King carried, now.

Suddenly, as though having concealed itself in some corner of the field, a storm broke through. Sweeping through the vast expanse of the paddy field, announcing a determination to bring down branches of the trees beyond, rolling up the paddy field as though it was a mat, a great wind arose as though intent on breaking through the clouds into the skies above or destroy the sky itself and scatter it all over the earth.

The landscape which had not many moments previously appeared like a mirror was now enveloped in a gigantic, dark cloud. This, then, was darkness. Once the entire sky was covered by grey clouds, raindrops began to fall as though they were black blobs unleashed from above to seek and put out any pockets of light that may still remain. The wail of the rain and the growl of thunder encompassed everything.

Walking through the pouring rain, Gemunu nevertheless heard Nandimitra's voice very clearly. Perhaps Nandimitra's voice had risen above the cacophony of rain and thunder. Perhaps it was just that Gemunu had blocked everything from his mind and had channelled all his senses to focus on Nandimitra's voice alone and therefore he could discern with utmost clarity even what was spoken in the softest murmur. As the entire sky wept and wailed, all Gemunu could hear was Nandimitra's voice.