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"The Best Idea of All": An Examination of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nonfiction

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"THE BEST IDEA OF ALL": AN EXAMINATION OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD'S NONFICTION

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Introduction: The Evolution of Fitzgerald's Nonfiction

In a letter written on May 15, 1934 by F. Scott Fitzgerald to Maxwell E. Perkins, his editor at Charles Scribner's Sons and close confidante for much of his life, Fitzgerald laid out four possible plans for a book to be published that autumn. His fourth novel, *Tender is the Night*, had just been published in April of the same year, and he was eager to produce something just as strong to follow it up. Plans one, two, and three involved either writing new short stories or collecting old ones, but plan four was different. "This is an idea founded on the success of such books as Alexander Woolcott's "While Rome Burns," Fitzgerald wrote to Perkins.

> As you know I have never published any personal stuff between covers because I have needed it all for my fiction; nevertheless, a good many of my articles and random pieces have attracted a really quite wide attention, and might again if we could get a tie-up of title and matter, which should contain wit and a soupçon of wisdom and not look like a collection of what the cat brought in, or be haunted by the bogey of all articles in a changing world, of being hilariously dated. It might be the best idea of all. Let me give you a rough idea as to what I have in that line: (Kuehl 197).

Fitzgerald went on to list and describe the essays he hoped to include in the collection, mentioning pieces published in the *Saturday Evening Post, Scribner's* magazine, *Cosmopolitan,* and the *American,* among others. It is clear that Fitzgerald had thought a great deal about the possibility of publishing a book of his personal essays, and would have preferred to do so to producing a collection of short stories at this moment in his career.

Perkins, however, was not as enthused. In his brief response to Fitzgerald on May 17, 1934, Perkins does not comment at all on Fitzgerald's plan for a collection of essays,

instead telling him, “we are all strongly in favor of Plan #2 … I think we could surely do it with safety and I believe the book would be very much liked and admired. After Plan #2, we favor Plan #3” (Kuehl 198-199). Therefore, Fitzgerald was forced to abandon the idea for a time, until it resurfaced nearly two years later after Simon and Schuster offered to publish such a book. Their offer came in the wake of the positive response to Fitzgerald’s “The Crack-Up” series of essays, which were published in *Esquire* in February, March, and April of 1936. When he consulted Perkins regarding the matter in a letter from March 25, 1936, he wrote,

> do you remember my proposing some years ago to gather up such of my non-fiction as is definitely autobiographical…and making them into a book? At the time you didn’t like the idea and I’m quite aware that there’s not a penny in it unless it was somehow joined together and given the kind of lift that Gertrude Stein’s autobiography had. Some of it will be inevitably dated, but there is so much of it and the interest in this *Esquire* series has been so big that I thought you might reconsider the subject on the chance that there might be money in it. If you don't like the idea what would you think of letting Simon and Schuster try it (Kuehl 227)?

At this point, Perkins was forced to address the idea, and he was still quite uncertain about it, writing on March 26 that he had “been hesitating on the question of asking [Fitzgerald] to do a reminiscent book, – not autobiographical, but reminiscent.” His letter continued,

> I do not think the *Esquire* pieces ought to be published alone. But as for an autobiographical book which would comprehend what is in them, I would be very much for it. Couldn’t you make a really well integrated book? You write nonfiction wonderfully well, your observations are brilliant and acute, and your presentations of real characters like Ring, most admirable. I always wanted you to do such a book as that (Kuehl 228).

Fitzgerald was not overly enthusiastic about the idea of writing an entirely new book, as Perkins suggested, so in his response he attempted to entice his editor with specific details of the collection and ways he could strengthen it as whole and make it more

appealing to the public. He included a preliminary table of contents for the collection, consisting of eighteen essays written between 1920 and 1936. He also offered to "revise it and add certain links, perhaps in some sort of telegraphic flashes between each article," and assured Perkins, "the greater part of these articles are intensely personal, that is to say, while a newspaper man has to find something to write his daily or weekly article about, I have written articles entirely when the impetus came from within, in fact, I have cleaner hands in the case of non-fiction than in fiction" (Kuehl 229). In his reply, Perkins remained unsupportive; he felt that publishing the volume Fitzgerald was proposing would "injure the possibilities of a reminiscent book at some later time" (Kuehl 277).

Neither the collection of personal essays Fitzgerald envisioned nor the reminiscent book Perkins imagined was published during Fitzgerald's lifetime. A collection titled *The Crack-Up* was assembled and published by Edmund Wilson, a literary critic and Fitzgerald's close friend, in 1945, but it contained no essays written before 1933 and depicted the author as a "chronicler of remorse and regret" (West xix). This is not the image that would have come across with the collection of articles Fitzgerald proposed in 1936, nor is it the way he was hoping to portray himself to the public in the mid-1930s.

Since the collection Fitzgerald proposed was only just published in 2005, edited by James L.W. West III, there has not been a great deal of study done on the essays themselves, and they are not usually taken into consideration in collections of Fitzgerald's body of work. In the past decade, however, scholars have begun to look at Fitzgerald's nonfiction essays and their merits in addition to those of his novels and short stories. The most notable studies that have been done have focused on the series of three

"Crack-Up" essays, "The Crack-Up," "Pasting it Together," and "Handle With Care," published in *Esquire* in 1936. These studies include Edward Gillin's 2008 article "Telling Truth Slant in the 'Crack-Up' Essays," Bruce Grenberg's "Fitzgerald's 'Crack-up' Essays Revisited: Fictions of the Self, Mirrors for a Nation," published in 2000, Scott Donaldson's 2009 essay "The Crisis of 'The Crack-Up," and Charles Sweetman's "Sheltering Assets and Reorganizing Debts: Fitzgerald's Declaration of Emotional Bankruptcy in *The Crack-Up*" from 2003. Outside of studies on the "Crack-Up" series, Donaldson's 2002 essay "Fitzgerald's nonfiction," published in the *Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*, provides a more comprehensive study of the body of nonfiction he produced.

Since Fitzgerald's essays have been published in a more complete collection, which includes the essays from the 1936 table of contents and seven additional essays, readers have the opportunity to read them all in succession and in relation to one another. In doing so, similar themes and techniques begin to arise as threads that tie certain essays together, and allow for a new level of insight into Fitzgerald as a person and into his approach to writing. The first of these threads, seen in the essays "My Lost City" and "Early Success," is the way Fitzgerald attempts to articulate the state of his psyche at a given moment by presenting two simultaneous but conflicting perspectives on a situation. These two perspectives can be characterized as an ungrounded hopefulness and a melancholy nostalgia; Fitzgerald is often optimistic about his situation or his surroundings while being consciously aware that whatever he is pleased with is not going to last. This combination creates a sense of loss throughout the essays, and reveals a great deal about how Fitzgerald viewed his successes and how he defined happiness.

The second thread deals with Fitzgerald's creation of a comic persona to narrate his essays "What I Think and Feel at 25" and "Girls Believe in Girls." This narrator often presents himself as intellectually superior to his reader and to those around him, in some cases taking on the role of an expert, though there are times when this outward appearance seems to weaken and the narrator appears a bit unsure of himself. Fitzgerald cleverly crafts the essays so that the reader must be constantly wary of whether the narrator is trying to make a serious point or is making a joke and mocking the reader, the latter of which is often the case. This ambiguity demonstrates Fitzgerald's brilliance as a stylist and his ability to present a certain version of himself to readers. At the same time, it also suggests his insecurity about himself as a person, as it creates distance between Fitzgerald as the writer and his readers. Fitzgerald's stylistic choices are also revelatory of his approach to his work and the way his confidence wavered throughout his life.

The third thread involves Fitzgerald's relationships with his contemporaries and his reading public throughout his career. In "Echoes of the Jazz Age" and "My Generation," Fitzgerald attempts to define what it means to be a member of his generation, which he claims to be that just older than the Jazz Age generation of which he was considered the spokesman, in an effort to present himself as a serious artist as opposed to just a popular, commercial writer. Fitzgerald differentiates his generation from those just older and younger by the fact that he and his contemporaries reached maturity just before World War I, thus having witnessed, as adults, both pre- and post-war America. This distinction is important to Fitzgerald because it helps him to distinguish himself as a serious writer, as opposed to just a popular icon who wrote about the time period he lived in in order to sell novels.

Donaldson believes Fitzgerald's nonfiction "command[s] the lyrical magic and emotional power of his most lasting fiction," and it is for precisely this reason that Fitzgerald's personal essays merit a closer look; they involve the same amount of attention to detail, style, and emotion that Fitzgerald's fiction is known for (Donaldson 164). Throughout Fitzgerald's life, the nonfiction provided a medium through which he could explore and communicate his ideas and feelings about his environment, the people around him, his personal experiences, and America's experiences during his lifetime. Even though Fitzgerald touched on the fact in 1934 that a published collection of his essays would risk being "hilariously dated," they still allow modern readers to delve into Fitzgerald's mind and learn more about him as a man, an author, and an American.

1. Hopefulness, Nostalgia, Loss, and Happiness in “My Lost City” and “Early Success”

In some of his nonfiction essays, Fitzgerald attempts to describe certain moments from his past for his readers. These descriptions are not ones of particular physical experiences, but rather they are attempts to articulate Fitzgerald’s feelings toward these moments in his life, and they reveal a great deal about the complexity of Fitzgerald’s character and the way he emotionally approached his successes and failures. In all of his descriptions, Fitzgerald appears to be conscious of the constant, simultaneous presence of two conflicting perspectives. One is an ungrounded hopefulness in his surroundings, particularly New York City; he expects it will always live up to his preconceived ideas regarding its character and the way it functions. The second perspective is a melancholy nostalgia regarding his actual experiences, as opposed to the environments in which he experiences them. Fitzgerald harbors a consistent belief that he will not be disappointed, even by people, places, and experiences that have already disappointed him in the past. This repeated reaffirmation of his hope is what makes Fitzgerald’s optimism ungrounded; he seems to maintain it even though his environment has given him no reason to do so. This hopefulness is juxtaposed with expressions of melancholy nostalgia, in which his feelings seem pessimistic and sad, but he also expresses a nostalgic resignation to the fact that he cannot change the way he feels about his experiences. Throughout his essays, particularly “My Lost City” and “Early Success,” Fitzgerald alternates between these two perspectives, sometimes expressing both of them at once, making it possible for him to play out the evolution and changing nature of his psyche for his readers, using his

feelings about New York City and about his first experiences with success as backdrops that make the exploration possible. This exploration almost always leads to an attempt by Fitzgerald to articulate the nature of something from his past that he has lost, and his speculations regarding whether he will ever be able to find it again.

In his essay "My Lost City," Fitzgerald states early on that he "thought of New York as essentially cynical and heartless" (Fitzgerald, "My Lost City" 107). However, in the very next paragraph, he explains to the reader that he "felt each time a betrayal of a persistent idealism" when he would return to the city ("Lost" 107). The simultaneous presence of ungrounded hopefulness regarding New York and melancholy nostalgia regarding its existence and the feelings it instigates in him is a thread that arises repeatedly throughout "My Lost City." It seems as though Fitzgerald is painfully aware of yet resigned to the existence of both feelings, particularly in his discussions of his relationship with the city. Before he calls the city cynical and heartless, Fitzgerald admits that he "took the style and glitter of New York even above its own valuation" before he actually got to know the city itself ("Lost" 107). Before moving there after Princeton, Fitzgerald's vision of New York was one in which he would make trips to the theater, drink as much as he wanted, then return to an apartment with some of his contemporaries to sit and discuss philosophy and literature, as this is what he supposed the stylish and sophisticated New Yorker would do.

As much as this view loses weight each time Fitzgerald leaves the city, each time he returns he is unable to leave it behind. This yearning for something that he once had but lost, and hopes to have again, arises repeatedly throughout the essay, yet it is clear from the way Fitzgerald juxtaposes his hopefulness with melancholy that he will never be

able to find what he has lost. A few pages into the essay, he writes, "this is not an account of the city's changes but of the changes in this writer's feeling for the city" ("Lost" 110). However, it seems that as much as Fitzgerald recognizes the city's flaws and develops an increasingly negative view of the place, he is unable to let go of his hopefulness, and his feelings are not incredibly different by the end than they were at the beginning of the essay. However, what does change is the substance behind his feelings, for even though he seems to have maintained his hopefulness that New York will not disappoint him again, he knows that he has lost the glamorous ideas and experiences of his past. "The worst loss of all, in his stories and novels," writes Donaldson, "is the loss of illusion that overcomes Dexter Green at the end of "Winter Dreams" and that Jay Gatsby struggles against on the last day of his life" (Donaldson 184). This theme of loss, according to Donaldson, "take[s] us to the core of a man in the throes of despondency," or a man who is unable to find happiness and contentment in his life as it existed when he was writing "My Lost City" (Donaldson 184).

After living with Zelda in the city for a time, Fitzgerald describes their existence as one in which "we became a small nucleus ourselves and gradually we fitted our disruptive personalities into the contemporary scene of New York. Or rather New York forgot us and let us stay" ("Lost" 110). The contradiction Fitzgerald expresses here is notable, as he says that he and Zelda were disruptive yet easily forgotten. This implies a degree of resignation on his part, and causes the reader to question whether Fitzgerald's interactive relationship with the city was as he explains it to be, or if he merely lived there like any other New Yorkers, and did not spend so much time fussing over the state of the city and how it related to his own everyday life. This rather gloomy nostalgia

continues when he begins a paragraph with, “when bored we took our city with a Huysmans-like perversity” (“Lost” 111). Huysmans was a French novelist writing in the second half of the nineteenth century who was known for his deep pessimism regarding modern life, so this allusion expresses how extreme Fitzgerald’s feelings are. The fact that he says “our city” implies a level of intimacy in the relationship Fitzgerald had with the city, which is not present in his earlier descriptions. This inconsistency suggests that Fitzgerald is not trying to make a specific point in his essay, but rather he is attempting to expose the workings of his psyche through a presentation of his feelings at the various moments in his life that he describes.

Seemingly in direct contrast to his comment about “Huysmans-like perversity,” Fitzgerald ends this same paragraph with “I began to bawl because I had everything I wanted and knew I would never be so happy again” (“Lost” 111). This statement is made in a very simple and matter-of-fact manner and he does not expand on it, though it seems like this would have been a rather significant moment in his life, or at least in his experience in New York. As in the resignation he expressed earlier, Fitzgerald seems to be listing emotions without providing much background or explanation for the dramatic oscillation. This could be because he does not know how to explain it, or because he has consciously chosen only to give the readers the emotion, to interpret as they wish. Nevertheless, in an effort to portray his true emotions about the city, Fitzgerald is clearly torn in two. He wants to love New York, as he always believed he would, but cannot deny his pessimistic approach to his life there. He even says “it seemed inappropriate to bring a baby into all that glamour and loneliness;” here, glamour expresses his optimistic view of the city and loneliness embodies the aspects whose unfortunate existence he has

grudgingly accepted, “that behind much of the entertainment that the city poured forth into the nation there were only a lot of lost and lonely people” (“Lost” 111, 110). Fitzgerald is saying that his life in New York City is filled with contradictions that he has difficulty dealing with on his own, so he is wary of how he would teach a child to do the same. But at the time he is writing this essay his child has already been born, so he is forced to accept this and move forward, just as he has accepted the existence of these contradictions previously. He also refers to the people as “lost and lonely;” similar to the way he expressed his feeling of loss earlier, here he is projecting it onto the other men and women of New York, which suggests that it was an influential aspect of his experiences and his feelings towards them and towards the city itself.

Fitzgerald then begins to discuss his relationship with the city more directly, treating it as if it were a character in his story. “We had no incentive to meet the city halfway,” he writes (“Lost” 111). “We were no longer important,” and later, “the city and I had little to offer each other” (“Lost” 112). These statements provide a contrast to the earlier moment when Fitzgerald says that the city forgot about him, because here he is implying that he does in fact have an active relationship with it, even if it is not a symbiotic one. But at this moment, at a peak of his melancholy thoughts, Fitzgerald leaves the city for three years. When he returns, “a band started to play on deck but the majesty of the city made the march trivial and tinkling. From that moment [he] knew that New York, however often [he] might leave it, was home” (“Lost” 112). It is clear that after spending time away from New York, upon his return Fitzgerald’s hopefulness is more present than ever, despite the pessimistic light in which he had begun to look at his bond with the city. The fact that he knew that New York was home also suggests that he

did not think he could ever lose it, or at least his emotional connection to it, no matter the length of his absence.

At this point, he "settled a few hours from New York," and writes, "there again was my lost city, wrapped cool in its mystery and promise. But that detachment never lasted long – as the toiler must live in the city's belly so I was compelled to live in its disordered mind" ("Lost" 113). This quite poetic moment is striking because Fitzgerald readily admits to the reader that he understands the superficiality behind his ungrounded hope in the city, but he simply cannot help it, and goes so far as to say he is compelled to maintain it. His word choices in this passage are notable as well, as they echo the contradictions that have arisen thus far. The word "my" implies ownership, just as "our" did earlier, yet Fitzgerald describes the city as lost. Further, he mentions its mystery and promise, two characteristics that do not often exist simultaneously. However, by saying that he was compelled to live in the city's mind as opposed to its belly, he is saying that he was forced to confront the reasons the city functioned and presented itself the way it did, yet he refrains from stating these reasons for the reader. Just as he has done before, he simply moves on to his next point, as the essay is not meant to prove a point or to justify why his feelings existed. Instead, it functions as a medium through which Fitzgerald can play out the changes in his psyche and feelings for the reader to interpret in his or her own way.

Fitzgerald closes the essay after he leaves and returns to the city for a second time, this time after being gone from New York for two years. This time is different from the previous one, however, as he does not express the reemergence of his hopefulness upon his return. Rather, he ends the essay with the thought, "for the moment I can only

cry out that I have lost my splendid mirage" ("Lost" 115). This statement appears mournful, as if he has finally come to terms with the true state of his beloved city, in that he has realized that his preconceived notions about its glamour, sophistication, and the natural tendency towards success of its occupants were not grounded in reality. But this is not the case, for the final sentence of the essay reads, "come back, come back, O glittering and white" ("Lost" 115)! This ending brings back the idea of loss, and Fitzgerald is literally calling out for the return of the feelings he once had about New York City. Had Fitzgerald ended the essay on the penultimate sentence, readers would have interpreted it as a solemn resignation to the melancholy nostalgic view that he could never rid himself of. However, he chooses to close it with a romantic plea for the return of the hopefulness of his youth, showing the continuation of the existence of both of these conflicting feelings in his approach to his relationship with the city.

"Early Success," written in 1937, seventeen years after the moment in Fitzgerald's life that it depicts, is an account that uses a poetic, reflective tone but relays ideas that are more sad and pessimistic at times than the tone suggests. In the case of this essay, the juxtaposition of ungrounded hopefulness and melancholy nostalgia reveals Fitzgerald's feelings regarding his incredibly early success as an author as not wholly positive, and shows how he looks back on this period of his life with a mixture of nostalgia and melancholy resignation. The feelings of loss he experienced throughout "My Lost City" are also present in this essay, as Fitzgerald "takes us back into the realm of what has been sadly, irretrievably lost" (Donaldson 188).

The essay begins with the sentence "seventeen years ago this month I quit work or, if you prefer, I retired from business" (Fitzgerald, "Early Success" 185). This opening

appears to tell the reader that Fitzgerald is looking at this moment in his life through rose-colored glasses, but at the same time, two sentences later, he acknowledges the actual situation he was in at the time. “I retired not on my profits but on my liabilities, which included debts, despair and a broken engagement and crept home to St. Paul to “finish a novel”” (“Early” 185). This statement is rather grim, as the words “liabilities,” “despair,” “broken,” and “crept” all have a depressing feel, but the expression seems more realistic in its description of the situation than the first sentence was. This realistic element turns pessimistic, though rather sarcastic, when he writes shortly after, “the implication was that I was on the down-grade at twenty-two” (“Early” 185). Here, as in the previous essay, Fitzgerald seems resigned to this implication that was imposed on him by others, and he does not attempt to refute it. When something is implied it is not explained outright and cannot always be proven, so this sentence seems self-conscious of the fact that Fitzgerald has chosen not to explain his resignation to the notion that his life was evidently going downhill. This is similar to the moments in “My Lost City” when Fitzgerald expressed an idea or the presence of a feeling and left it for the readers to interpret in their own ways, because he is only attempting to portray his feelings rather than explain or justify them.

In this essay, just as in “My Lost City,” Fitzgerald appears to be completely aware of the simultaneous presence of his conflicting views, for he explains to the reader, “this article is about that first wild wind of success and the delicious mist it brings with it. It is a short and precious time – for when the mist rises in a few weeks, or a few months, one finds that the very best is over” (“Early” 186). This recognition brings with it an idea of incomplete nostalgia; Fitzgerald cannot be genuinely nostalgic because he experienced

too many disappointing moments after this first successful one for him to yearn to return to the past. It also shows that these moments at the start of his career have become virtually irretrievable; the "delicious mist" has dissipated, and he has lost contact with the moment. This awareness remains later in the essay, when he writes, "with [*This Side of Paradise*'s] publication I had reached a stage of manic-depressive insanity. Rage and bliss alternated hour by hour" ("Early" 188). It seems that the only way for Fitzgerald to accurately describe this moment in his life is to include both "rage and bliss," even though it is virtually impossible for these feelings to exist simultaneously in a completely sane person. This is yet another instance of Fitzgerald handing the reader emotions to interpret, emotions that he felt but might not have understood, so to present them is all he can do. It is interesting that Fitzgerald characterizes this moment with two conflicting emotions, because at the end of the essay he talks about how his early success was "a single gorgeous moment," and the only moment in which he considered himself truly content with what was occurring in his life and when there was continuity between his past, present, and future ("Early" 191). At the time he is writing "Early Success," Fitzgerald feels that this continuity has disappeared, and he can only remember how things were in the past and how they were different from the present. He calls the moment of success "when the fulfilled future and the wistful past were mingled…when life was literally a dream" ("Early" 191). Donaldson characterized this ending as one in which "Fitzgerald summoned all of his lyrical power in a statement of overpowering regret for what was forever lost to him," for at this point in his life he has accepted that he can never return to the blissful days of his youth (Donaldson 188).

This alternation and simultaneous expression of conflicting perspectives reveal a great deal about Fitzgerald's character and the way he defined success and happiness. It seems that Fitzgerald is unable to genuinely enjoy his moments of success, as they are tinged with feelings of disillusionment regarding his situation and the extent of his success, disillusion he expresses in his personal letters. This disillusion seems, just as in the essays, to stem from a feeling that he has lost something from his past and has no hope of finding it again in his future. However, just as in the essays, the disillusion and melancholic ideas are not always present, for there are times when Fitzgerald allows himself to be hopeful. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, written on January 10, 1917, Fitzgerald wrote of his first novel,

> I can most nearly describe it by calling it a prose, modernistic Childe Harolde and really if Scribner takes it I know I'll wake some morning and find that the debutantes have made me famous overnight. I really believe that no one else could have written so searchingly the story of the youth of our generation… (Bruccoli 17).

Fitzgerald makes some bold and quite hopeful claims in this letter regarding *This Side of Paradise*, which will become his first published novel a few years later. The first is the comparison to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Lord Byron's canonical, semi-autobiographical, narrative poem. By the time Fitzgerald is writing, Byron has become a household name in literary history as one of the prominent figures of the Romantic Movement; therefore, this description of his own work shows the confidence and hope Fitzgerald had that it would succeed.

This hope is reiterated in the next sentence of his letter, when he says that he "really believes" no one else has written about the Jazz Age generation quite like he has in his novel. However, Fitzgerald seems to be trying to convince not only Wilson, but

also himself of the truth in his statement by using the phrase "I really believe," which reveals some of his insecurity. It also shows that Fitzgerald holds himself to very high standards; that in order for him to consider himself a successful writer, his work must be comparable to that of someone like Lord Byron and he must be the first to accomplish something unique: in this case, to bring a voice to the generation of the Jazz Age. This lofty, personally crafted definition of success could stem from the fact that Fitzgerald was never very successful in terms of the social or institutional standards he was held to in adolescence or early adulthood, mainly regarding athletics, academics, and military exploits. Fitzgerald played football in prep school and at Princeton, but his slight frame prevented him from ever being a top athlete. Similarly, his military colleagues considered him weak and immature, and he never invested a great deal of time or energy in his training, as he saw it as an interruption to writing what would become *This Side of Paradise* (Meyers 35). Therefore, when he has the chance to judge his success on his own terms, he determines that he will have achieved it when life is "literally a dream" and covered with a "delicious mist," as he describes in "Early Success." However, since Fitzgerald bombards the reader with his changing perspectives in his essays, it is safe to assume that his feelings will waver regarding his first novel, the success it is capable of achieving, and its effect on his life afterwards.

Even though Fitzgerald seems relatively hopeful and positive about the potential success of *This Side of Paradise* in the years leading up to its publication, shortly after he appears to have again approached the low point he describes at the beginning of "Early Success." In a letter to Perkins on August 25, 1921, nearly a year and a half after the publication of *This Side of Paradise*, he wrote the following:

> Excuse the pencil but I'm feeling rather tired and discouraged with life tonight and I haven't the energy to use ink – ink the ineffable destroyer of thoughts, that fades an emotion into that slatternly thing, a written down mental excretion. What ill-spelled rot!…Hope you're enjoying New Hampshire – you probably are. I'm having a hell of a time because I've loafed for 5 months + I want to get to work. Loafing puts me in this particularly obnoxious and abominable gloom. My 3d novel, if I ever write another, will I am sure be black as death with gloom. I should like to sit down with ½ dozen chosen companions + drink myself to death but I am sick alike of life, liquor, and literature. If it wasn't for Zelda I think I'd disappear out of sight for three years. Ship as a sailor or something + get hard – I'm sick of the flabby semi-intellectual softness in which I flounder with my generation (Bruccoli 48).

In this letter, it seems as though Fitzgerald's feelings toward writing have shifted in the same manner that his feelings toward New York shift in "My Lost City." He has just begun to make a profit from his writing, he was able to married Zelda due to the success of his writing, yet here he appears to look on the practice with contempt, calling ink, the writer's instrument, "the ineffable destroyer of thoughts." It seems Fitzgerald has lost the infatuation or obsession with writing that he had while he was composing *This Side of Paradise*, and that he is yearning to get it back, but that this process is proving quite difficult. This provides a sharp contrast with his thoughts of a few years prior, when he believed he had the ability to be one of the most articulate men of his time. However, later in this brief letter he contradicts himself, when he says that he is in an "abominable gloom" because he has not been writing, and has been loafing instead, but he cannot seem to quit loafing because he is "sick alike of life, liquor, and literature."

At the moment when this letter was written, Fitzgerald appears to be stuck and unable to adequately describe his emotional state, the state he attempts to describe in "Early Success" and "My Lost City." This could be due to the fact that he is unsure of the legitimacy of his definition of happiness, or that he believes he has experienced moments of pure happiness (such as when he says he knows he will "never be so happy again" in

"My Lost City") and will therefore not be content with anything less. It could also be attributed to Fitzgerald's loss of some prized element in his past that has ceased to exist in his present, and that he cannot seem to find again. These essays allow the reader a glimpse of the emotional turmoil that occurred throughout Fitzgerald's life, even at times when he should have been happy and carefree. They provide a medium through which Fitzgerald can play out the workings of his psyche in a way he hopes his readers will understand (using New York City and his first successes as a referent), and they are an attempt by Fitzgerald to discover or articulate what he has lost, even if he knows he will never find it again.

2. The Comic Narrator and his Insecurities in "What I Think and Feel at 25" and "Girls Believe in Girls"

Despite the wild bursts of success Fitzgerald experienced throughout his life, he never seemed to be comfortable or content with himself and his abilities. There were times when he was disillusioned or angry at the world around him, and others when he relished the opportunities it presented. This constant back and forth is likely due to the fact that Fitzgerald was insecure about himself as a person, but he was confident in his abilities as a writer and stylist. This dichotomy is demonstrated in his essays "What I Think and Feel at 25" and "Girls Believe in Girls," where he creates complex relationships between himself, his narrator, and his reader. In these essays, Fitzgerald portrays a comic narrator who is intellectually superior to his reader, and this technique forces the reader to repeatedly question whether the narrator is being serious or making jokes. The comedy inherent in the narration stems from the fact that Fitzgerald is only presenting a part or a version of himself in his narrator, a version that seems unsure of where he stands. The essay's narrator seems intellectually superior to his readers on the surface level, but he also appears to be mocking the readers and daring them to peek through the façade he has created, whose reliability varies throughout the essay. Fitzgerald's creation of this comic persona and the reasons behind it may provide a clue to his approach to his work and his attitude towards the way he lived his life.

Fitzgerald begins his attempt to establish his narrator's comic intellectual superiority immediately, beginning "What I Think and Feel at 25" with, "the man

stopped me on the street. He was ancient, but not a mariner. He had a long beard and a glittering eye" (Fitzgerald, "What I Think and Feel at 25" 16). The latter two sentences are a reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, which he wrote in 1798. To the average eye this opening seems rather odd, and it seems as though the narrator is mocking his readers and their intellectual capacity by essentially dumbing down his prose with the next sentence; "I think he was a friend of the family's, or something" ("Think" 16). The casualness of this sentence, especially in comparison to the ones it follows, creates a rather jarring, yet comical start to the essay. It also provides a hint for the reader to be aware of Fitzgerald's use of grand, sweeping proclamations like this one throughout the essay, as they most likely are not meant to be taken seriously; the man that stopped Fitzgerald on the street likely did not resemble Coleridge's protagonist, and although Fitzgerald may have wished that he did in order for him to lend more importance to the event, the narrator is likely saying this for comic effect.

Only a bit further into the essay, after Fitzgerald realizes that the old man is not going to listen to his insights about the ways men change as they grow older, he calls the man an "old bore" and mutters "you wouldn't understand, anyhow" ("Think" 17). The philosophy Fitzgerald is eager to explain to anyone who will listen is his own regarding the vulnerability of men, how young men are virtually invulnerable because they are callow, but once their callowness dissipates they become incredibly vulnerable. Fitzgerald's narrator reminisces of when he was young and carefree, and then says, "that was three years ago when I was still a young man. I was only twenty-two…Well, now I'm twenty-five I'm not callow any longer – at least not so that I can notice it when I look

in an ordinary mirror" ("Think" 19). If the narrator is taken seriously, his tone appears to attempt to convince the reader that this is actually the case, that at twenty-two he was young and inexperienced but in the three short years that have passed he has completely left young adulthood behind and has garnered enough life and work experience that callowness is no longer a legitimate excuse for a misstep. The fact that the narrator appears confident his own intellectual development might demonstrate that he considers himself on a superior mental level compared to his readers, from which he is able to make these judgments. At the same time, it seems that he is having a joke at the reader's expense by making a statement that sounds like fact but is actually rather preposterous, as the years he refers to in which he became a grown man are the years when young people often experiment with new experiences, as opposed to settling into adulthood. At the time of this essay's publication, Fitzgerald has published *This Side of Paradise* and *The Beautiful and Damned,* so although he has had some success, he has no idea if his life is going to continue in the same upward direction or if he has achieved any stability. Therefore, the reader begins to see that instead of being serious and actually expressing beliefs he has regarding his own life, his words and the ideas they portray are merely those of a comic persona he has created.

Fitzgerald continues with both the idea of inexperience and the joke he is playing later in the essay, saying that if an editor is hoping for something callow, "I have got to refer him to my daughter, if she will give dictation. If anybody thinks that I am callow they ought to see her – she's so callow it makes me laugh. It even makes her laugh, too, to think how callow she is. If any literary critics saw her they'd have a nervous breakdown right on the spot" ("Think" 20). In September of 1922, Fitzgerald's daughter

Scottie was about to turn one, so it is clear that the narrator is mocking both his readers and the editors and critics of whom he speaks. The fact that her callowness makes her laugh, yet supposedly causes the critics to have nervous breakdowns, implies that even Scottie, a baby, is intellectually superior to the reader and the critics, since she can understand her callowness on a more sophisticated level. This obviously is not the case, and again Fitzgerald is supporting his own point with a comic notion, which causes the reader to question his claims and his motives behind the statements he makes. Next he mentions his time at prep school, and how his two years there were "years of utter and profitless unhappiness" because Fitzgerald felt the need to underplay his intellect in order to be accepted ("Think" 20).

> So, for the sake of this negligible cipher, I started out to let as much of my mind as I had under mild cultivation sink back into a state of heavy underbrush. I spent hours in a damp gymnasium fooling around with a muggy basket-ball and working myself into a damp, muggy rage, when I wanted, instead, to go walking in the country ("Think" 21).

His repetition of the adjectives "damp" and "muggy" reinforce his distaste for the activity he was forcing himself to take part in, and since this is an activity in which many of his schoolmates eagerly participated, the statement makes Fitzgerald appear separate from and superior to his classmates. He seems to be challenging readers as well, daring them to believe him when he says that as a teenager he would have preferred a country stroll over playing sports with his classmates. Since this is not the typical decision a high school-age boy would make, this is also an example of Fitzgerald signaling to the reader not to take the things that his narrator says very seriously, as he is saying them for comic effect and not to express a true belief.

Despite the repeated mentions of the narrator's intellectual superiority, he does not always express complete confidence in this quality and in his abilities to form opinions, and there are times when he seems to second-guess himself. Immediately after he says the people around him "had believed all their lives that writing was the only thing for me, and had hardly been able to keep from telling me all the time," Fitzgerald writes, "but I am not really old enough to begin drawing morals out of my own life to elevate the young…I take it all back" ("Think" 22). This proclamation forces the reader to stop and wonder why Fitzgerald is being so seemingly nonchalant in his devaluation of his abilities and the ideas he has presented in the essay up to this point; his insecurity may be rearing its head or he may purposely be presenting himself as one who lacks confidence. The first statement he makes about the opinions of his friends and colleagues is facetious and self-centered in contrast to the second statement, in which he calls himself immature, which is in direct conflict with his claims regarding his entrance to adulthood earlier in the essay. This makes the whole bit rather comical when looked at in the context of the entire essay, for it seems that the narrator is just spouting ideas as they come to him without thinking about the continuity of the piece. The presence of these contradictory points further suggest that the reader is not meant to take the narrator very seriously, even though he seems to be openly discussing his own abilities and trustworthiness.

It is clear that Fitzgerald is presenting a particular version of himself for comic effect later in the essay, when he addresses the reader in a way that assumes he knows exactly what they are thinking and feeling. "And now I will stop pretending to be a pleasant young fellow and disclose my real nature," he says. "I will prove to you, if you have not found it out already, that I have a mean streak and nobody would like to have

me for a son" ("Think" 24). This statement is questionable, for if Fitzgerald or his narrator did have a "mean streak" it would be evident, and would not require any proof to support it. He also says that no one would like him as a son, though he says nothing about other types of relationships, such as a friend or a husband, implying that he is rather selfish and perhaps a hesitant receiver of love. Finally, at the end of the essay, he writes, "having got in wrong with many of the readers of this article, I will now proceed to close" ("Think" 26). In all of these instances it seems that Fitzgerald is projecting what he assumes are the feelings of the audience about him onto himself, thus undermining the statements of superiority he has made throughout the essay and revealing the narrator's insecurity about his skills and abilities that came through earlier. This technique that Fitzgerald uses repeatedly is very similar to the methods Woody Allen uses in his creation of comic characters. In his article "Getting Even: Literary Posterity and the Case for Woody Allen," David Galef says, "Allen's humor appeals to the intellect even as it derides scholasticism," and he describes Allen's image as "straddling knowing and knowledgable, hapless yet hip" (Galef 148). Allen's characters are simultaneously intelligent and insecure, constantly wavering on the barrier between the two, just as Fitzgerald's narrator does in this essay. He does not give readers a chance to form their own opinions about his essay, and instead assures them that he knows exactly how they must have reacted, which is rather humorous considering Fitzgerald has no way of determining how the readers are going to interpret the essay.

These blanket judgments are similar to the sweeping proclamations he makes earlier in the essay as well; they seem to have comic undertones and force the reader to view the narrator as a certain version of Fitzgerald as opposed to the author himself. The

comic narrator does not actually believe that he would be a terrible son, or that he has rubbed all of his readers the wrong way, but he says these things in hopes of engaging the reader and challenging him or her to see the character that narrates the essay as only a part of Fitzgerald, and not as Fitzgerald's own, true voice. If the reader is able to do this, he or she can read "What I Think and Feel at 25" not as Fitzgerald's genuine thoughts and feelings about his life to this point, but as another example of his ability to create comic characters that are versions of himself, as Woody Allen does, who also think on their own and challenge the readers to understand their psyches as separate from Fitzgerald's.

Fitzgerald's comic narrator elicits laughter from his readers because of the presence of incongruity in his narration. According to Arthur Schopenhauer's theory of incongruity in comedy, "The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation" (Lippitt 148). Incongruity can be defined as discrepancy, absurdity, or want of self-consistency, and it occurs when all the elements of a joke, or in this case a narration, do not seem to logically add up. If the incongruity theory is applied to Fitzgerald's essay, the reader finds it humorous because he flaunts his intellectual superiority, yet provides no legitimate basis for it, and his flippant tone hints that he is not being serious. He claims to be mature and wise, yet this is difficult for the reader to believe because he is only 25 years old. These inconsistencies contribute to the appearance of comedy throughout the essay.

The complex use of an insecure and comic narrator is apparent in "Girls Believe in Girls" as well. Throughout the essay, Fitzgerald makes claims regarding the nature of

the flapper generation, why they are the way they are, and what changed for them to be able to embody these new personas, yet it is unclear whether he wants to be taken seriously or if he wants his essay read as the insubstantial ideas of a comic narrator. He makes authoritative statements such as "straightaway individualism was born and with it the modern and somewhat disturbing cult of the heroine," and "all the young girl can be sure of when she comes out into 'the world' is that she will meet plenty of males competent to stimulate her biological urges – for the heterogeneous stag-line can do that if nothing more" (Fitzgerald, "Girls Believe in Girls" 101, 103). The narrator is implying that individualism did not exist prior to the twenties, and when this revolutionary and very American ideal is applied to women it becomes a "somewhat disturbing cult," as opposed to something that should be celebrated. He then takes this idea in the opposite direction, saying that women cannot realistically expect legitimate companionship from the men of their generation, so they should be thankful that they have begun to establish their own identities and can turn to each other instead. Here, it seems that the narrator is simultaneously attacking and applauding the growing individualism in American women, just as he presented contradictory ideas regarding his maturity in "What I Think and Feel at 25," which causes the reader to question the trustworthiness of his narrative. He is also presenting himself as somewhat of an expert on this matter with his authoritative tone and the straightforward structure of his sentences. Indeed, as Scott Donaldson explains in his essay "Fitzgerald's nonfiction," Fitzgerald was once depicted

> as a debonair professor lecturing with the aid of a map of the United States. He was described as the "young St. Paul authority on the flapper," and the subject under discussion was the difference between the girls of the South, the East, and the Midwest. In this competition, the Midwestern flapper – "unattractive, selfish, snobbish, egotistical, utterly graceless" – finished a distant third. Next came the rather sophisticated Eastern girl, with the Southern girl a clear winner for, among

> other things, "retain[ing] and develop[ing] her ability to entertain men" (Donaldson 170-171).

Donaldson also refers to "Girls Believe in Girls" as Fitzgerald's "final venture into the genre of the expert," for he uses this same technique in other essays as well (Donaldson 173). The fact that the public viewed Fitzgerald in the way that Donaldson explains allowed him to use the tone of an expert in his essay, as they believed he was the "authority on the flapper" and could in fact differentiate between the girls from different parts of the United States. Yet the reader must be wary of seriously believing Fitzgerald's judgment in "Girls Believe in Girls," as it also sounds like the voice of the comic narrator of "What I Think and Feel at 25" in the way that the narrator makes blanket statements regarding the flapper and her role in American society.

At the end of the essay, after he has seemingly confidently teased out the origins of the flapper and her place in American life, he writes,

> yet the question remains whether any type so exquisitely achieved, so perennially unworried, will accomplish anything at all. It is not my question – I expect wonders of them, literally. It is the poor young man I worry about – in such time as all but professional worriers spare for such matters ("Girls" 104).

It seems as though the narrator does not want to speculate about the future of the flapper generation, despite posing as an expert on the matter for the majority of the essay. He is willing to say that he expects wonders of them, but this gives the reader the feeling that he has an idea of what he thinks their futures will hold but he does not want to explain it, or he does not know how to since he is just making a comic overstatement of his supposed beliefs. He also only says this after creating distance between the fate of the flapper generation and his own personal involvement in it, when he says, "it is not my question," which hints that the tone of authority he has used throughout the essay was

more for comedic effect than to actually establish himself as an expert. The narrator establishes his superiority over the reader when he makes these claims about the women of the twenties that he expects the reader to believe, but it is difficult for the reader to do so because it seems that the narrator is not meant to be taken seriously. The idea of incongruity is present here as well; the narrator claims to be an expert but is tentative to share his expert point of view. After he has conducted such a seemingly detailed analysis up to this point in the essay, it is difficult for the reader to understand why he does not feel the need to further explain his views. If the essay is read as the voice of a comic narrator and not that of Fitzgerald himself, it becomes plausible that he is not providing explanations because he does not have any, and his ideas are therefore not meant to be read as facts. This situation is similar to the instance in "What I Think and Feel at 25" when Fitzgerald claims he knows what the reader's reaction to him and his writing will be, and he does not feel the need to go into his reasons behind making such assumptions. This supposition is rather self-important, which aligns well with the narrator who mocks his reader in ways that imply the reader's inferiority, and causes the reader to consider that Fitzgerald is not narrating, and he is using this comic persona to only present a particular version of or part of himself, a technique that appears repeatedly in his writing.

In a letter from February 1918 to Shane Leslie, an Irish writer and critic and friend of Fitzgerald's with whom he discussed *This Side of Paradise* while it was being written, Fitzgerald wrote, "Did you ever notice that remarkable coincidence. – Bernard Shaw is 61 years old, H.G. Wells is 51, G.K. Chesterton 41, you're 31 and I'm 21 – All the great authors of the world in arithmetical progression" (Bruccoli 20). Enclosed with this letter were two chapters from *This Side of Paradise*, the first two that Leslie would

read. At this point in his life, two years prior to the publication of his first novel, Fitzgerald has yet to prove that he is an author of any considerable note, much less one of the "great authors of the world." This statement echoes those Fitzgerald makes in "What I Think and Feel at 25" when he talks about his entrance into adulthood between the ages of 22 and 25, and he makes claims about the near future that he has no way of justifying at the time. This is a perfect example and precursor of the technique Fitzgerald uses in that essay and in "Girls Believe in Girls," written four and twelve years after this letter, respectively. Fitzgerald's use of this comedic technique in his personal correspondence suggests that it may be more than a stylistic tool used to entertain his readers, and may in fact reveal or mirror an approach to his life and work. Just as in the essays, Fitzgerald is only presenting one part of himself in the letter; he does not expect Leslie to believe him when he includes himself among the great authors of the world, and is using the stylistic technique to appear more confident and nonchalant about his first novel.

Despite the relative commercial success of *This Side of Paradise*, *The Great Gatsby*, and a variety of short stories, Fitzgerald was never in a financially stable position for an extended period at any point in his life. He was also a self-proclaimed alcoholic, and alcoholism can be a sure marker that one is trying to hide from the reality of the world, just as Fitzgerald hides his thoughts using comedy in these essays. In a letter to Zelda from 1930, he wrote, "We went to Antibes and I was happy but you were sick still and all that fall and that winter and spring at the cure and I was alone all the time and I had to get drunk before I could leave you so sick and not care and I was only happy a little while before I got too drunk" (Bruccoli 187). Here Fitzgerald is attempting to explain that he was trying to be happy, but when he could not be he turned to alcohol,

which only numbed the unhappiness instead of reversing it. By numbing the unhappiness, however, Fitzgerald was able to present a particular version of himself to the world, one insensitive to the unhappiness he experienced when Zelda was sick and he was alone. It seems that the comic persona Fitzgerald creates has a similar role; it allows him to hide certain qualities or aspects of his personality while bringing others to the forefront. In the case of "What I Think and Feel at 25" and "Girls Believe in Girls," Fitzgerald hides his insecurity and presents himself as very confident in his intellectual prowess. Therefore, the version of himself that he presents is self-assured and willing to voice his thoughts or have a joke at the reader's expense, just as the version of himself he creates under the influence of alcohol appears carefree and able to forget or ignore his problems.

In addition to allowing Fitzgerald to portray himself in a particular way, his use of the comic narrator complicates the relationship between Fitzgerald and the reader, making it more ambiguous and slightly more difficult to understand. This is similar to the altered relationship an alcoholic has with the world around him, in that it is not as straightforward as an author speaking to his readers but adds a level of complexity that creates distance between the two. Alcohol can increase the distance between the drinker and the physical world around him because it causes him to perceive things differently than he would without the influence of alcohol, which allows him to hide his true thoughts or ideas about the situations or events he takes part in, similar to the effect the comic narrator has on the essays. This distance between Fitzgerald and the reader is important, as it suggests that Fitzgerald may have been insecure about himself but confident in his abilities as a stylist, which allowed him to craft the complex persona he uses in these two essays.

3. Popular Icon or Serious Writer? Fitzgerald vs. the Jazz Age Generation in "My Generation" and "Echoes of the Jazz Age"

In his essay "My Generation," Fitzgerald defines a generation as

> that reaction against the fathers which seems to occur about three times in a century. It is distinguished by a set of ideas, inherited in moderated form from the madmen and the outlaws of the generation before; if it is a real generation it has its own leaders and spokesmen, and it draws into its orbit those born just before it and just after, whose ideas are less clear-cut and defiant. A strongly individual generation sprouts most readily from a time of stress and emergency – tensity, communicated from parent to child, seems to leave a pattern on the heart (Fitzgerald, "My Generation" 193).

Using this definition Fitzgerald goes about describing the characteristics of what he calls his generation, as well as those of the generations just older and just younger than he. According to Fitzgerald in his essays "My Generation" and "Echoes of the Jazz Age," he was not actually a member of the Jazz Age generation, of which he was considered the spokesman. Instead, he included himself in the generation just older, which he is quick to point out, and which allows him to take a seemingly more objective view of the actions of this younger generation. This distinction is important to Fitzgerald, because it is only through this separation that he believes he can be viewed as a serious author and artist, as opposed to being a popular icon who wrote about the current national experiences only to make a profit, and it helps him to clearly define his generation, which he believes holds a unique place in American history.

Fitzgerald begins his essay "Echoes of the Jazz Age" with "It is too soon to write about the Jazz Age with perspective…yet the present writer already looks back to it with nostalgia" (Fitzgerald, "Echoes of the Jazz Age" 130). This essay was published in 1931,

two years after Fitzgerald considered the Jazz Age to have ended, so it seems that he is correct in assuming it is too soon for one who experienced the daily life of this period, such as he, to be able to discuss it with any meaningful perspective. However, Fitzgerald refers to the "present writer" as someone the Jazz Age "bore up, flattered and gave more money than he had dreamed of, simply for telling people that he felt as they did, that something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War" ("Echoes" 130). Fitzgerald understands that this was his experience writing during the Jazz Age, and that he seemed to be writing what the public wanted to read. However, shortly after, he begins to separate himself from this notion of the commercially successful "present writer" in hopes of establishing an identity as more of a serious artist.

Indeed, he begins to separate himself from this cohort when he writes, "the wildest of all generations, the generation which had been adolescent during the confusion of the War, brusquely shouldered my contemporaries out of the way and danced into the limelight" ("Echoes" 132). By referring to those that the Jazz Age generation replaced as his contemporaries, Fitzgerald is explaining that he does not consider himself to be a member of this iconic generation that he has come to represent. He repeats this image a few times throughout the essay; at one point he refers to his generation as "we greybeards," and he says that towards the end of the Jazz Age "contemporaries of mine had begun to disappear into the dark maw of violence … these things happened not during the depression but during the boom" ("Echoes" 134, 136). The "boom," which Fitzgerald later refers to as "the most expensive orgy in history," was characterized by sex, drinking, and rebellion for members of the Jazz Age generation, but for Fitzgerald and his contemporaries it often led to catastrophe ("Echoes" 137).

In furthering his description of the Jazz Age generation, Fitzgerald refers to them as "the younger generation," and also as "a whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure" ("Echoes" 132). His choices to use "younger" and "a whole race" create distance between Fitzgerald and the generation of which he speaks, reinforcing the fact that he is not a member of it. It also seems that Fitzgerald believes the flapper generation is immature; they are still children in his eyes. This depiction is supported when he says, "it was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all," and "there were very few people left at the sober table" ("Echoes 130,134). A lack of concern with politics immediately following a massive war that resulted in the political restructuring of the most powerful empires in the world implies that people living during the Jazz Age were self-centered and lacked interest in issues that did not directly concern them. The fact that hardly anyone was sober, and the Jazz Age occurred at the same time as Prohibition in the United States, shows the rebellious nature and subversion of authority that existed among young people during this period. "Echoes of the Jazz Age" was published two years after the Jazz Age ended, according to Fitzgerald's point of view, when Fitzgerald was 35. Even though he wrote his most successful novels during the Jazz Age and about the Jazz Age, Fitzgerald is clearly trying to separate himself from it, as it seems he believes it is only through this distinction that he might be viewed as a serious writer as opposed to one who happened to become a representative of the era because of his commercial success.

The distinction between his generation and that of the Jazz Age is explained further in "My Generation," written in 1939 but not published until 1968, when Fitzgerald is talking about the lives of Americans after they returned from World War I.

While the members of the Jazz Age generation were still adolescents, or in their late teens, during the war, this was not the case for Fitzgerald's generation. "We are at once pre-war and post-war," he writes.

> We were well grown in the tense spring of 1917, but for the most part not married or settled. The peace found us almost intact – less than five percent of my college class were killed in the war, and the colleges had a high average compared to the country as a whole. Men of our age in Europe simply do not exist. I have looked for them often, but they are twenty-five years dead ("Generation" 194).

The crucial element separating Fitzgerald's generation from the Jazz Age generation was whether or not they had experienced adult life after college before going off to war. Members of the younger generation, who did not, were able to return from Europe and go back to college as if they had merely left on a vacation; "Hack McGraw, who had been a major in France, came back to Princeton and captained a winning football team…Tommy Hitchcock, who had escaped from Germany by jumping from a train, went up to Harvard" ("Generation" 195). Fitzgerald's generation did not have this luxury, and according to him, "the truth was that we found the youth younger than ourselves, the sheiks and the flappers, rather disturbing. We had settled down to work" ("Generation" 195). While the youths Fitzgerald refers to were able to go to war and return to the same lives they left, his generation was not, and they could only pick up roughly where they had left off and attempt to begin life again. Fitzgerald believed that his generation knew too much about how life was before the war, and therefore how different life was in the years that followed, so that "the capacity of this generation to believe ha[d] run very thin" ("Generation" 198). Fitzgerald claims that because the war occurred at this specific time in the lives of his generation, they were affected by it and by the events that followed in a different way from those in surrounding generations, who were either too young to

understand the war's implications or too old to be so affected by them. This, in turn, made his generation "something else again;" a group clearly distinguishable from the others present in American society at the time ("Generation" 198). Fitzgerald makes this distinction in hopes of setting himself apart from the Jazz Age generation and the writers it produced, writers he believes just wrote to make a profit, as opposed to Fitzgerald who was writing because he was a serious artist and had something important to say.

Fitzgerald ends "My Generation" with a rather solemn remembrance that is not overly emotional but articulates the distinction he has been trying to prove in both this essay and "Echoes of the Jazz Age."

> Well – many are dead, and some I have quarreled with and don't see any more. But I have never cared for any men as much as for these who felt the first springs when I did, and saw death ahead, and were reprieved – and who now walk the long stormy summer. It is a generation staunch by inheritance, sophisticated by fact – and rather deeply wise. More than that, what I feel about them is summed up in a line of Willa Cather's: "We possess together the precious, the incommunicable past" ("Generation" 198).

This final paragraph lends credence to Fitzgerald's argument and his description of his generation. The "first springs" refer to the years before the war when Fitzgerald and his contemporaries were just discovering their identities as men; "death" refers to the time while they were involved with the war, and the "long stormy summer" is the twenty years that have passed since then. Fitzgerald is saying that it is possible to characterize the life of any member of his generation in this manner, that it can be broken down into three phases (before, during, and after the war), and that the qualities of each phase will align with the season that he assigns to it. Spring is full of hope and the possibility of renewal, as the pre-war years were for Fitzgerald and his contemporaries; the heat of summer can be stifling and overbearing even though it may appear bright, which is the way he has

described the post-war lives of his fellows. Fitzgerald says that they "saw death ahead" because they were being sent to fight foreigners on unfamiliar terrain for a cause that seemed far removed from their personal experiences, a situation it appeared nothing good would come of. The inheritance they received is unlike that which previous generations had received; their America was rocked by a worldwide catastrophe after which people struggled to find ways to reinvent their lives, and their generation struggled the most because they had just begun to establish themselves and put down roots when they were torn up and sent off to war. Others, like the flappers and the men they associated with, found ways to distract themselves upon their return because they were still too young to have done anything meaningful or substantial before the war, according to Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's generation is sophisticated and wise because they were able to nearly complete their schooling before many went abroad to complete their education in a more hands-on fashion.

The last line of the essay, taken from the end of Cather's *My Ántonia*, explains that even though their lives most likely grew apart in the years since the war, the members of Fitzgerald's generation have that common experience that shaped who they would become and reinforces the bond that still exists among them twenty years later. Fitzgerald chooses to quote Cather here because the ways in which the past binds people together and influences their futures is a theme she addresses repeatedly in her work. In *My Ántonia*, her most well known novel, which was published in 1918, the narrator, Jim Burden, closes the book with this line in reference to he and Ántonia. Even though Jim and Ántonia's lives took very different paths as they entered adulthood, the two would always share the memories and the experiences of growing up together on the plains of

Nebraska, and this would always be a part of the people they had become. Similarly, in Cather's short story "A Wagner Matinee," the narrator, Clark, notes regarding his Aunt Georgiana, "it never really died, then – the soul that can suffer so excruciatingly and so interminably; it withers to the outward eye only; like that strange moss which can lie on a dusty shelf half a century and yet, if placed in water, grows green again" (Cather 240). Here, Clark realizes that no matter how long a part of someone's past might be buried or dormant, it is still there and can be brought to the surface at any time. At the end of "My Generation," Fitzgerald is attempting to explain this very notion in relation to himself and the other members of his generation; like Jim and Ántonia, they will always have the shared experience of living through the war at a crucial time in their development into adults, and like Aunt Georgiana, this aspect of their characters will always be present, regardless of the amount of time that passes in which it may be forgotten.

These attempts at defining his generation were also an effort on Fitzgerald's part to alter the public's view of him and his work. In the introduction to his biography of Fitzgerald *The Far Side of Paradise*, Arthur Mizener notes,

> Nearly everyone appeared inclined to write about him as if his life had consisted of the years from 1920 to 1928 and the people of that period had not been real people whose lives had consequences but merely the raw materials of a period musical comedy to which, by a grotesque accident, an unhappy but extremely improving ending out of some work like *The London Merchant* has got affixed (Mizener xxiv).

If one were to succumb to this pattern that Mizener describes, he or she would be completely refuting all of the attempts Fitzgerald makes in "My Generation" and "Echoes of the Jazz Age" to differentiate himself from the young, wild generation he believes ruled the twenties. If one were only to look at Fitzgerald's life during this decade, he or she would inevitably consider it to be just like the lives of the characters in the novels

that he wrote during this period and that took place during it as well. This is the way Fitzgerald seemed to want to characterize his own life in the early stages of his career, "as a youth blessed with talent far beyond his years," and "as someone who could turn out fiction with disarming ease and gain expensive rewards therefrom. Writing, for him, seemed a casual occupation that in no way inhibited the pursuit of a pleasurable and carefree life" (Donaldson 165,166). This description is quite similar to those of some of Fitzgerald's fictional characters; Amory Blaine, for example, believed he was talented and intelligent beyond his years and that success would just fall into his lap. Fitzgerald had to work quite hard to get *This Side of Paradise* published; it was rejected twice and required substantial revisions before Scribner's agreed to publish it. Even so, in a letter presented at the American Bookseller's Convention, "Fitzgerald acknowledged none of these difficulties: "to write it…took three months; to conceive it, three minutes; to collect all the data in it, all my life" (Donaldson 164).

Early attempts like this one by Fitzgerald to craft his public image forced people to think of him in the context of and as a member of the Jazz Age generation, as someone who was sexually liberated, an extravagant spender, and a frequent drinker, among other things. These were Fitzgerald's efforts to make himself a household name and a popular icon and voice of the 1920s. In order to gain popularity, Fitzgerald thought that he needed to make himself relatable, to present himself as just like any of the young people who would be reading his book. Mizener explains that with the publication of *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald had become a "hero to his generation," and

> for this role he appeared to be almost ideally equipped. He was strikingly handsome, gracefully casual and informal; he loved popularity and responded to it with great charm; his strong sense of responsibility for the success of a social

> occasion made him exercise his Irish gift of gay nonsense until it seemed as if the fun he could invent was inexhaustible (Mizener 126).

In short, Fitzgerald personified all of the qualities he described in his first novel that characterized the Jazz Age, and he did so with a degree of grandeur and style that it was impossible for the public to miss. In this manner, Fitzgerald was transformed overnight from an aspiring author to the voice of a generation, a role that he embraced wholeheartedly, but did not wish to keep forever, as is clear in "My Generation" and "Echoes of the Jazz Age."

The way Fitzgerald seemed to embody the characters he created as representatives of the Jazz Age made it difficult for him to change the public's perception of him and to make them consider him as a serious artist. A popular, commercial writer and a serious artist differ mainly in their motivations for producing their work. The former writes about popular, contemporary themes and events because he or she knows that the reading public will buy and enjoy reading about things they understand and have experienced. The serious artist may include contemporary themes and ideas in his work, but he does not do so because he knows it will sell copies. He, in this case Fitzgerald, does this because it is the material that he knows and that will allow him to create an interesting story that also functions as a social commentary, and will be just as wholeheartedly accepted and understood in other eras. Donaldson explains, "his image as a representative of the unbridled younger generation was proving difficult to get rid of. Sometimes it seemed that as a legendary figure associated with that generation he was to be held responsible for any and all of its excesses" (Donaldson 168). Therefore, when he writes "Echoes of the Jazz Age" and "My Generation" at ages 35 and 43, respectively, he is trying to portray himself as the serious author the public never seemed to view him as.

His contemporaries criticized him throughout his life for churning out stories and articles for magazines simply to turn a profit instead of spending time on more serious literary endeavors. "Whether it is true that he might have done better work even than his best or much more as good as his best had he not done so much commercial work is another question – and probably an unanswerable one," writes Mizener. "The point here is the extent to which such remarks contributed to the impression that Fitzgerald was not a serious writer at all" (Mizener xxvii). Because Fitzgerald wrote about the time period he lived in, the country he lived in, and the people that surrounded him, it is arguable that he did so because he knew he would make a profit, just like the "present writer" he refers to at the beginning of "Echoes of the Jazz Age." However, despite the fact that his books and his stories did sell very well, this is precisely the image of himself that Fitzgerald is trying to disprove.

By the time he was writing these essays, in 1931 and 1939, it seems that Fitzgerald has begun to realize that the public does not perceive him as a serious writer, so he begins his attempts to convince them otherwise. He tries to establish himself as simultaneously a popular and iconic figure and as a serious novelist, and he struggles to shift the public's perception in favor of the latter characterization. In 1937, Fitzgerald wrote a letter to his daughter Scottie recalling a rejection he received for a movie for Constance Talmadge, a movie star at the time. "At that time," he wrote, "I had been generally acknowledged for several years as the top American writer both seriously and, as far as prices went, popularly. I…was confident to the point of conceit…I honestly believed that *with no effort on my part* I was a sort of magician with words" (Mizener 226). By the time he is writing this letter to Scottie, two years before he published "My

Generation," Fitzgerald has realized that at the height of his career he took his success and the public's view of him for granted, and although this allowed him to accumulate a great deal of cash, it did not allow for the establishment of the public image he came to desire later in life. In "Echoes of the Jazz Age," he criticized writers who wrote what the people wanted to read and devoured the flattery and money that resulted from this, even though he was doing the same thing at the start of his career. Later, as is clear in the change in ideology expressed in his essays, he realized that he did not want to be considered this type of commercial writer and popular representative of the people, and instead strove to be viewed as a serious novelist. This is a debate that has haunted the critiques and analyses of Fitzgerald since his death, and by looking at "Echoes of the Jazz Age" and "My Generation," the side Fitzgerald would have taken in the debate is unmistakable.

Conclusion: Fitzgerald Nonfiction and its Place in Studies of his Work

As Fitzgerald's death has moved farther into the past, his work has become more and more essential to the American literary canon. High schools across the country include *The Great Gatsby* in their English curriculums, and Fitzgerald's novels and short stories are still considered perfect examples of the leading literature produced during the Jazz Age. Needless to say, Fitzgerald has become a household name and a stalwart component of any lesson or discussion on the brilliance of American authors. Up until very recently, these characterizations of Fitzgerald's work were based on studies and analyses of his fiction, which reveals the ways he used symbols, characters, and action to comment on the state of American society, as well as on personal experiences and things that occurred in his own life. However, as scholars are starting to realize, these same skills and unique aspects of Fitzgerald as a writer and a person can be revealed through a study of his nonfiction, and at times they are much clearer. Reading the nonfiction can also provide a deeper understanding of why Fitzgerald uses certain techniques, and of the ideas and experiences that led him to create the characters in his fiction.

In some of his fiction, *The Great Gatsby* for example, Fitzgerald presents the reader with characters who tend to say they feel one way and then act in another. Nick Carraway informs the reader at the beginning of the novel that he has been taught never to judge the people around him, but he proceeds to do just that throughout the entire

novel. Daisy Buchanan tells Gatsby that she loves him and she has always loved him, despite being married to Tom, but when Gatsby dies she does not even send a note. These disconnects create holes in the lives of these characters, keeping them from ever feeling truly content or fulfilled. If one were to read "My Lost City" or "Early Success," they would see that conflicting perspectives and ideas can exist simultaneously, and Fitzgerald often experienced this in his own life. If this is taken into account, the reader can begin to understand the presence of Daisy's love alongside her urges for social stability, and though one may occasionally overpower the other, they both exist. A study of these essays would help the reader see this element that he or she may not have seen before, and perhaps come to a better understanding of why Fitzgerald writes his characters in such a way.

In *This Side of Paradise*, the reader is constantly being bombarded with Amory Blaine's judgments of the people around him, his experiences, and himself. Because he is a first person narrator and no other perspectives are represented, the reader is forced to accept his view of the world and to examine it through his eyes. However, if Amory is thought of as similar to the narrators in "What I Think and Feel at 25" and "Girls Believe in Girls," the reader will approach the text knowing to listen to Amory's narration but to also see the action and the things he says for what they truly are. This can result in a more rounded and full reading of the novel, as Fitzgerald surely did not expect his readers to believe that every judgment Amory made and every drinking binge he went on was wise and justifiable. The essays show that Fitzgerald is capable of creating a comic narrator that presents only one perspective or possible version of a character or a situation, and it encourages readers to be aware of this technique when they are reading his work.

It is impossible to discuss Fitzgerald without a brief discussion, or at the very least a mention, of his lifestyle and the people he associated with. The common perception of Fitzgerald in terms of his social interactions and his life choices is that he attended countless parties, drank copious amounts of alcohol, and managed to produce some best-selling works of fiction. In spite of this, a study of "Echoes of the Jazz Age" and "My Generation" reveals how Fitzgerald hoped the public would see him and remember him, which was not in the way that many people did at the time. Now that the essays are more accessible and are starting to be more widely read, it is possible for the literary community and the average reader to learn and understand what Fitzgerald thought of his own public persona and how he might have tried to change it. This provides future Fitzgerald scholars and enthusiasts the opportunity to see and study Fitzgerald in the ways he would have wanted them to study him.

Despite their structure and mode of publication, Fitzgerald's nonfiction essays are parts of his body of work just as his novels and short stories are, and should be considered as such. The essays allow readers another route into the mind of one of the greatest authors of the twentieth century, and this new opportunity arising seventy years after his death should be utilized to further understand how Fitzgerald became the brilliant writer he is still considered to be today.

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