

The Women Characters in Scott F. Fitzgerald's Fictions: His Autobiographical Commentary

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Abstract: 1920 saw the emergence of American social novel with galaxies of writers who brought forth the flowering of second American renaissance. Among the new breed of writers who defined the modern America was F. Scott Fitzgerald. That year 'This side of Paradise', the first novel of Scott broke into the American literary terra firma and was an instant rage for its commentary on the youth of that period. With this the unforgettable Flapper heroine was also born who became the symbol of changing female consciousness of his time. Fitzgerald as a social historian depicted the revolution of the female characters drawn mostly from his experience of the women who he knew and lived with, especially his wife Zelda Sayre or Ginevra King, the love of his young life. The experience with them became the inspiration for basing most of the female characters of his short stories and novels. Scott's interest for their beauty and personality led him to model many of his female characters.

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F. Scott Fitzgerald lived and wrote in an age of great social change. The issues and conflicts that dominated the minds of the author also dominated the minds of his fictional characters. As a sharp-eyed observer, he recorded the changes, the new manners and morals which were revealed to him through living characters. What he learned from his exposure to real women influenced his development of female characters in his fiction. So much has been written about Fitzgerald's penchant for basing his literary characters on the people, especially the lively and ambitious women he knew and lived with. In short, he had 'a sense of living history'. His interest in women was complemented by his interest in women.

Fitzgerald regarded with care the changing values, life-styles, and aspirations of the women of his generation, the slowly shifting status of women during the First and Second World War. Not only has he chronicled his observations in his fiction, but also dealt with many themes that are based on the experiences of his life. Many of the experiences he talks about were with women in his life. People like his mother, Ginevra King, the most serious crush of his adolescent years, Zelda Sayre, his beautiful and unconventional wife, Sheila Graham, his mistress towards the end of his life had major impact on Fitzgerald's life.

The first woman to make an impression on his life was his mother. The fact that Fitzgerald's mother rather than his father was the financial foundation for their family influenced Scott greatly. The theme that arose from this about a wife's or mother's inherited property or money appears frequently in Fitzgerald's writing. Fitzgerald's attitude towards his mother influenced him as a person. But Fitzgerald's perception regarding the changing status of women may actually be rooted in his childhood, well before the onset of the decade of the 1920s. His notes reflect a poignant memory of his mother 'always waiting in waiting-rooms an hour early pulled forward by an 'irresistible urge of boredom and vitality' (*The Crack Up* 73). In much the same way, his female characters – Rosalind in *This Side of Paradise*, Gloria in *The Beautiful and Damned*, and Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* are often affected by an 'irresistible urge of boredom and vitality'. Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* and Kathleen in *The Last Tycoon* also exhibit the same pattern of behavior borne out of their energy and boredom and show 'dignity under suffering' as important aspect of the lives of women in his era.

Another major impact on Fitzgerald's young mind was his first love, Ginevra King and the experience with her influenced his mind in shaping his fictional flappers. He met the sixteen years old during his sophomore years at Princeton and immediately fell in love. She matched his dreams of the perfect girl; beautiful, rich socially secure and more over the most sought after. The last qualification was important for the ideal girl. There has to be an element of competition. His pursuit of Ginevra and the ultimate rejection from her family changed his attitude and personality. Ginevra King was the first serious love of his young life, the ultimate quest for his romantic wonder. The pain of losing her never left him. It is not clear who made the remark; 'poor boys shouldn't think of marrying rich girls' but perhaps as critic Richard Lehan has suspected, the speaker could be the stockbroker and horseman Charles King, Ginevra's authoritative father and the likely model for Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*. Further more, his rejection by Ginevra for social and economic status motivated much of his fiction time after time.

He attempted to free himself and paradoxically wanted to keep alive that pain in the stories and novels he produced later on. In *This Side of Paradise*, Ginevra became Rosalind Connage and earlier, Isabelle Borge. Fitzgerald had to face the painful truth that this relationship was for all purposes ended. He now used his stories as means of coming to grips with and attempts to understand his past experience. '*The Debutant*' published in January, 1917 issue in '*Nassau lit*' is an episode in play-form which depicts a bored, fickle, pseudo- sophisticated young society girl in the process of driving one of her ardent- beaux to despair. It is a brief little sketch, but Fitzgerald fully understood the impression he wanted to convey and conveyed it effectively. Having reconsidered his experience with Ginevra King, Fitzgerald published '*Babes in the Woods*', a story

about two young people feeling each other out in the early stages of their romance. It is a very effective story as it probes deeper into the author's feelings for its emotional tensions. Fitzgerald now understood two of his young people; Isabelle and Kenneth quite well. Isabelle incidentally remains as the name of his first novel's early heroine; Kenneth becomes Amory, the hero in *This Side of Paradise*.

As Fitzgerald much later, that he was writing about a love affair that was still bleeding. He cast Ginevra as Judy Jones in '*Winter Dreams*'. Ginevra is mostly Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*; much of Nicole Diver in *Tender is the Night*. She was modeled for Josephine Perry in his Josephine stories. But the wound would not heal. Characters based on her showed up in his other writings as well. Scott writes to his sister Annabel with a feeling of cynicism that in their society nine out of ten girls marry for money and 'nine out of ten are fools' (Brucoli 559). Years later, after he became successful, Scott wrote in his confessional essays, *The Crack Up*.

It was one of those tragic loves, doomed for lack of money, and one day the girl closed it out on the basis of common sense, the man with the jingle of money in his pocket who married the girl a year later would always cherish an abiding distrust, an animosity toward the leisure class (Crack up 73).

His first novel *This Side of Paradise* is primarily Amory's book but the author has self consciously confessed page after page its real subject: the use of women in making of an artist. In *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald fused and combined many elements of experiences especially with Ginevra and Zelda. Fitzgerald moved from a description of Isabelle who was modeled after Ginevra to Rosalind modeled after Ginevra and Zelda both to Eleanor who was based on Zelda again. He has depicted Zelda's Sayre's tendency towards self destruction in Rosalind and Eleanor. In Rosalind it takes the form of daredevil recklessness when she drives from the top of rickety, thirty-foot summer house. Rosalind uses a word 'ready' a code word used by Zelda to mean Scott must establish himself financially before any prospect of marriage. With Eleanor, it takes the form of self-destruction when she confesses to Amory how her mother went mad stark raving crazy, she rode her horse towards a cliff, falling off ten feet before the horse plunged over. Eleanor too declines to marry Amory for the same reason i.e. lack of sufficient money. Moreover, with Eleanor, Fitzgerald sums up the frustration of many of the young women of his acquaintance including Zelda. In Eleanor's words, "Oh, why am I a girl? Why am I not Stupid...here I am with the brains to do everything, yet tied to the sinking ship of future matrimony" (*This Side*, 470)

It has been assumed that Gloria in *The Beautiful and Damned* is modeled mostly on Zelda, but a closer look at the novel shows that Gloria, like Rosalind in *This Side of Paradise*, really has two personalities, and again Fitzgerald seems to be describing both Ginevra King and Zelda Sayre. Ginevra King surrounded herself constantly with three friends, her classmates at Westover. Gloria Gilbert surrounds herself with two

friends, her classmates at Framover. In *The Beautiful and Damned*, Fitzgerald seems to be describing his own experience with Ginevra King and her family, who were from Lake Forest. He depicts Gloria's father as unfavourably as he thought of Ginevra's father, Mr. King. Fitzgeralds also made Anthony's fiercest competitor Joseph Blockman vulgar and socially unacceptable and this is again the way Fitzgerald would have liked it to be in his own life.

In the story the heroine is described as a girl without mercy who appears to be indifferent to Anthony because she is supposed to marry a wealthier man – resembles Fitzgerald's experience with Ginevra King. Gloria Gilbert is divided; the one who is a femme fatale like Rosalind and other is a little schizophrenic girl who oscillates between two extreme states of excitement and melancholy. They are like the two sides of Zelda Sayre. Although Fitzgerald once wrote that he and Zelda had a better time than Anthony and Gloria, the woman Anthony gets married to is very much like Zelda. Like the Fitzgeralds, the Patches honeymoon in Santa Barbara. Also like the Fitzgeralds the marriage seems on the rocks from the beginning. It was almost as destructive, reckless and careless, taxed by heavy drinking and incessant parties as that of Anthony Patch and Gloria Gilbert in the novel. The amorousness and exuberance of mood of the youth that Fitzgerald lived and tried to depict in his first novel helped create a new type of American girl, based to a great extent on his idiosyncratic image of Zelda whom he had married just then. Fitzgerald, in one of the interviews, drew a direct contrast between 'the sexless animals writers have been giving us' and his own wife who was the heroine of his stories and whose 'destructive highhandedness' attracted him. In January, 1922, he wrote to Edmund Wilson, "The most enormous influence on me in the four and half years since I met her has been the complete, fine and full hearted selfishness, and chill mindedness of Zelda". (Letters 421) Gloria's awareness of self, her overwhelming instinct for conquest and extraordinary energy matches Zelda's; he tried to immortalized Zelda in his works.

As before, Fitzgerald used Zelda's diary and letters, although since almost all the originals are lost, it is difficult to determine how extensively he had used materials. It is clear from the first reading that a lot of Zelda has gone into the making of Gloria. Zelda, herself, invited to review the novel, made joking reference to a portion of an old diary of hers which mysteriously disappeared shortly after her marriage as well as some of her letters which she recognized, concluding that the author 'seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home'. Marriage does not involve domestic responsibilities for either of them; Gloria is Anthony's permanent mistress. Interestingly enough, Fitzgerald, too, always introduced his wife Zelda as his mistress; 'Don't say wife, I'm your mistress' (587), Gloria says in the early days of her marriage. The material for *The Great Gatsby* is largely the material Fitzgerald had used before, at the centre once again the love affairs of Scott Fitzgerald with

Ginevra King and Zelda Sayre. Daisy was the source of Gatsby's perfect beauty, Ginevra King was Fitzgerald's perfect beauty. Richard D. Lehan, in his book, *F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Craft Of Fiction* observes:

Fitzgerald saw the need for a perfect illusion as part of the creative impulse... not only Ginevra King go into *The Great Gatsby*; she was in many ways part of Fitzgerald's motive for writing the novel in the first place. Is it any wonder that at one point it in *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy Fay is described as the Kings' daughter? (Lehan 102)

Fitzgerald made the relationship between Gatsby and Daisy impossible from the start. Gatsby wants to relive the past which time cannot permit. In *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald was trying to push his own experience with Ginevra King and Zelda Sayre to the extremes. In other words, he made Gatsby's relationship with Daisy Fay more impossible than his with Ginevra King or with Zelda Sayre. The situation was drawn from the author's own emotional life the unsuccessful pursuit of the golden girl and search for the perfect love. Much later in 1935, Fitzgerald told Laura Guthrie, his type-writer for the last novel *The Last Tycoon* that he was always in search for the perfect love and never had it. For the young men, sometimes, the illusion is preferable than the capture because once they get the golden girl, they regret losing their dream. For this reason, Fitzgerald avoided meeting Ginevra King because he wanted his dream to remain intact. Fitzgerald had come away from Ginevra with a sense of deep hurt, social inferiority and a longing beyond attainment. As Fitzgerald told a friend, 'the whole idea of Gatsby is the unfairness of a poor young man not being able to marry a girl with money.... This theme comes up again and again because I lived it' (Letter 141).

After marriage Fitzgerald found his life with his extremely proud, independent, romantic and free-spirited Alabama bride to be difficult and he projected into his major fiction much of his real life experiences. After Zelda's mental breakdown, he began to write the stories of self-appraisal and self-accusations that gave shape to *Tender Is the Night*. Early in 1934 when Fitzgerald was reading proof of the novel, Zelda had her most severe breakdown and for the next six years, she lived her life in sanatoriums. Their marital life was over. It is no doubt, Fitzgerald produced a matured and to somewhat objective novel under heavy emotional stress. Zelda's breakdown and his anxiety over it, gave him sufficient knowledge for a case history that he wanted to explore in *Tender is the Night*. He studied womanhood in its different shapes and phases through Zelda that was projected in stories like *'A Woman with a Past'*, *'Babylon Revisited'*, *'Crazy Sunday'*.

Around that time, Fitzgerald felt that his marriage to Zelda had taken a big toll on his energy. Fitzgerald expressed this emotion in *Tender Is the Night* making Nicole Warren into the spirit of Zelda who drains Dick Diver of strength and energy. Fitzgerald makes Dick Diver the victim of the rich. Here we are again back with the Gatsby theme. The Warrens like the Buchanans are a wealthy Chicago family. Fitzgerald again and again

was venting his anger on Charles, Ginevra's father and his family. It is commonly interpreted that Charles Warren is a distorted version of Charles King. Fitzgerald's attitude toward the rich embodies his bitterness. 'I have never able to forgive the rich for being rich', Fitzgerald once wrote, 'and it has coloured my entire life and works' (Turnbull 150). The particular incident of losing Ginevra in his early youth seems most responsible for his attitude towards the very rich, most responsible for the cruel Chicago families of wealth that appear in his best fictions. To imagine Nicole, Fitzgerald could start from Zelda in her illness and partial recovery and ultimately put her in the corrupt and wealthy world of Ginevra. It is beyond suspicion that Fitzgerald drew heavily from his personal experience with Zelda, herself a Schizophrenic and Scott's on going power struggle with Zelda. Nancy Wellford wrote how Scott 'mercilessly exposed Zelda in his characterization of Nicole Driver' (Milford 280).

Fitzgerald now wants to portray another kind of woman in his new novel who works and has control over her life. Sheilah Graham, his lady-love towards the end of his life who had, as Edmund Wilson said, 'roused in him the sense of romance without which he could not flourish' (Mayfield 253). His observations of Hollywood as a society during his eighteen months stay under contract as a screen writer, coupled with his Hollywood love affair with Miss Graham who inspired him write a new novel, despite the poor reception of *Tender Is the Night*, encouraged him and rekindled a sense of hope in him. His understanding of his daughter Scottie and Sheilah Graham contributed to his characterization of Kathleen Moore, the heroine and Cecilia Brady, the narrator of the story. Sheilah Graham as she herself described in '*Beloved Infidel*' is the model for Kathleen Moore, the object of Stahr's affection. With Zelda in the North Carolina institution, Sheilah took her place in Fitzgerald's life, as Kathleen Moore takes the place of Minna, Stahr's deceased wife. Stahr who loved his wife Minna dearly is attracted to Kathleen because he found a lot of resemblance between Miss Graham and Zelda. At the time Fitzgerald first saw Miss Graham- who, like Kathleen, was wearing a silver belt. Miss Graham's education in Fitzgerald's "college of one" also parallels Kathleen's experience. Finally, Stahr's hesitation about marrying Kathleen is a reflection of Fitzgerald's inability to marry Sheilah Graham. Fitzgerald, as she says was attracted to her because he found a lot of resemblance between her and Zelda. Miss Graham writes:

"... If I was Kathleen, Minna was Zelda. How much I must have reminded him of Zelda! Was this how I had appeared that night, when he stood at my door saying good-by, and I had not wanted to let him go and I had asked him in and he had come in? Had he – has he – been reliving with me his life with Zelda?" (Graham 123)

The similarities between Kathleen and Sheilah Graham make us believe that Sheilah Graham was the model for Kathleen. Kathleen is Irish but she lived as did Miss Graham, in London. Like Miss Graham, she was

divorced from an older man. At the time Stahr met Kathleen, she was to be married to another man and so was Miss Graham when Fitzgerald first met her. Like his other earlier stories, Fitzgerald was drawing upon his personal experiences. Fitzgerald had a very strong yet confusing feeling for Zelda but at the same time worked on her experiences and her ideas. He once again used the experiences of Ms. Graham and used her as a source of inspiration. '*The Crack Up*', his most autobiographical piece which was published posthumously, reads like a rationalization of his breakdown. Towards the end, Fitzgerald was clearly suffering from nervous exhaustion, or from – in his phrase – 'emotional bankruptcy' and in that state he cited three reasons for his defeat and Zelda's refusal to marry him because of lack of money was one of them. In fact, he could not also come to terms with Ginevra's rejection till his death and these two incidents coloured his treatment of female characters in most of his stories. Except Kathleen in *The Last Tycoon*, they were either Ginerva or Zelda or a blend of both.

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