

Scott Fitzgerald 120 years on Looking back at an Icon of the Jazz Age

This year we celebrate the 120th anniversary of the birth of Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, born in St. Paul, Minnesota on 24th September 1896.

Fitzgerald's short life reads like a novel. He discovered his passion for writing when he was a child, abandoned his studies at the university and joined the US army, seeing active service in the First World War.

The success of his first published novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) earned him fame and enough money to enjoy a playboy life in the "Roaring Twenties". These were the golden years of economic wealth, parties, dancing and fashion in America, also known as the Jazz Age, before the terrible crisis of the Wall Street Crash of 1929 brought poverty and hardship to the nation. His greatest novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), was written while he was living in France. His heavy drinking led to alcoholism and Fitzgerald fell into depression. After completing a fourth novel he worked briefly as a screen writer in Hollywood, where he died of a heart attack in 1940 when he was just 44 years old.

Scott Fitzgerald truly was a "child of his times" as we will see in the texts, images and song below. As the United States moved from the happy, carefree days of the 1920s into the years of dark depression that followed in the Thirties, Fitzgerald's fame, fortune and success collapsed around him. Today, a century on, we can look back and see one of America's great writers in a new perspective.

1. REDISCOVERING FITZGERALD – EIGHTY YEARS LATER

Reading and Use of English – Part 1

For questions 1-8, read the text below and decide which answer (A, B, C or D) best fits each gap. There is an example at the beginning (0).

Eighty years ⁰ ...*after* ... they were written, the last unpublished short stories by Francis Scott Fitzgerald are to be published under the title “I’d Die For You” in April 2017.

The collection of stories, written in the 1930s, contains work that Fitzgerald ¹ to sell at the time because its subject matter and style were not what his editors expected.

The American publisher Scribner, which will publish the stories, says that the collection brings “Fitzgerald writing about ² topics, depicting young men and women who actually spoke and thought more as young men and women did, without censorship.”

³ Fitzgerald desperately needed money at the time, he preferred not to have his work published rather than be obliged to ⁴ it be changed and “sanitized” by his contemporary editors.

The title story of the collection, *I’d Die For You*, is ⁵ on the time Fitzgerald spent in the Smoky Mountains of North Carolina, suffering from alcoholism and with his wife Zelda in a nearby clinic.

The American novelist Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938) commented on Fitzgerald’s situation in 1936 in a letter to his brother: “There is a poor, desperate, unhappy man staying at the Grove Park Inn. He is a man of great talent but he is throwing it ⁶ on drink and worry over his misfortunes ... His name, I forgot to say, is Scott Fitzgerald, and a New York paper has just published a miserable interview with him – it was a [...] rotten piece of journalism, going to see a man in that condition, gaining his confidence, and then betraying him.”

Fitzgerald’s story adds a Hollywood star and film crew to the Smoky Mountains, introducing the cinematic world in which Fitzgerald ⁷ live. In 1937 Fitzgerald moved to Hollywood as an MGM screenwriter and died there just three years later.

Fitzgerald is ⁸ as the author of great tragic novels, but the short stories promise to offer a new insight into his skills in the short-story genre, his beautiful language and satirical abilities to mock everyone around him and the behavioural norms of the society of the 1930s.

0	A	before	B	after	C	later	D	subsequently
1	A	was unable	B	could not	C	did not succeed	D	never hoped
2	A	unfortunate	B	traditional	C	actual	D	controversial
3	A	Even though	B	Despite	C	Paradoxically	D	Because
4	A	accept	B	allow	C	let	D	make
5	A	inspired	B	set	C	based	D	interested
6	A	in	B	over	C	out	D	away
7	A	might soon	B	was about	C	would soon	D	was going
8	A	considered	B	remembered	C	reminded	D	memorized

2. SCOTT AND ZELDA - THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE DAMNED – CHILDREN OF THE JAZZ AGE

Reading and Use of English – Part 1

For questions 1-8, read the text below and decide which answer (A, B, C or D) best fits each gap. There is an example at the beginning (0).

Francis Scott Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda were the ⁰ ...*first* .. American celebrity couple, pre-dating the great names we have come to know like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. They created their ¹ mythology of the Jazz Age, described by Fitzgerald as “an age of miracles. An age of art, an age of success ... and age of satire.”

The 1920s saw economic prosperity, a flourishing of new art forms and a lifestyle of wild partying, and especially of the popularity of jazz music. Young people rebelled ² the restrictive social norms of their time. Women made bold fashion statements, smoked cigarettes and drank. Afro-American dances like the Charleston became popular. Jazz music became popular ³ the hostility of many middle-class Americans who saw it as “the devil’s music”, believing that its rhythms and sounds promoted promiscuity.

All of this ⁴ a price. Money was spent lavishly until the Wall Street Crash of 1929 brought the “Roaring Twenties” to a sudden, tragic end.

Scott and Zelda paid a heavy price too. Their reckless lives of drinking and partying lasted a ⁵ years but then left Scott as a hopeless drunk, trying to survive working for Hollywood. Zelda had a breakdown when she was 30 years old, was diagnosed as schizophrenic and ⁶ the last years of her short life (1900-1948) in mental institutions.

The fascinating, tragic story of this woman of spirit, energy and intellect, who dreamt of success as an artist, writer and ballet dancer in an age when women were expected to be ⁷ the role of wife and mother, has led many to suggest that her devotion to Scott led to her downfall. If Scott and Zelda had loved each other less, they ⁸ have lived happier and longer lives.

0	A	early	B	first	C	prime	D	greatest
1	A	own	B	real	C	true	D	unknown
2	A	for	B	about	C	against	D	towards
3	A	despite	B	in spite	C	although	D	except
4	A	demanded	B	set	C	had	D	made
5	A	short	B	number	C	little	D	few
6	A	stayed	B	spent	C	passed	D	enjoyed
7	A	accepting	B	happy about	C	contented for	D	satisfied with
8	A	should	B	might	C	will	D	probably

3. THE BRIGHT SIDE OF THE JAZZ AGE: GATSBY'S CAR

The passage below is taken from Chapter 4 of Fitzgerald's masterpiece *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and contains the description of Gatsby's car, a symbol of his wealth and of the irreverence of the so-called Jazz Years.



BEFORE READING:

Look at this 1936 painting called *Street Scene* and made by Archibald Motley, an American artist who represented American life in the 1920s and 1930s.

STEP 1:

1. What different kinds of people can you see portrayed?
2. What are the people in the foreground doing?
3. When does the scene take place?

STEP 2:

1. Are these people having fun?
2. Is there any sign of loneliness?
3. Do these people look real?

STEP 3:

1. What idea of the 1920s and 1930s does this painting suggest?
2. Why are there people at the window in the background?
3. Would you like to be part of this scene? Why (not)?

At nine o'clock, one morning late in July, Gatsby's gorgeous car lurched up¹ the rocky drive to my door and gave out a burst of melody from its three-noted horn². It was the

¹ sbucò

first time he had called on me, though I had gone to two of his parties, mounted in his hydroplane, and, at his urgent invitation, made frequent use of his beach.

“Good morning, old sport. You’re having lunch with me to-day and I thought we’d ride up together.”

He was balancing himself on the dashboard³ of his car with that resourcefulness⁴ of movement that is so peculiarly American — that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work or rigid sitting in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous, sporadic games. This quality was continually breaking through his punctilious⁵ manner in the shape of restlessness⁶. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand.

He saw me looking with admiration at his car.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it, old sport?” He jumped off to give me a better view. “Haven’t you ever seen it before?”

I’d seen it. Everybody had seen it. It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes⁷ and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields⁸ that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town.

I had talked with him perhaps half a dozen times in the past month and found, to my disappointment, that he had little to say: So my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door.

AFTER READING

1. Focus on the narrative style of the passage.
 - a. What kind of narrator is adopted here?
 - b. Is the narrator telling a story in which he plays an active part?
2. Find in the text elements that make you say that:
 - a. Gatsby and the narrator are not close friends.
 - b. Gatsby love parties.
 - c. Gatsby is very rich.
3. The description of Gatsby’s car is full of sensory details which have a symbolical meaning.
 - a. Complete the chart below.
 - b. Which sense is prevailing?

² sirena a tre note

³ cruscotto

⁴ ingegnosità

⁵ pignolo

⁶ irrequietezza

⁷ cappelliere

⁸ parabrezza

SIGHT	HEARING	OTHER SENSES
	three-noted horn	
rich cream color		
bright with nickel		
monstrous length		
a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns		
green leather conservatory		

4. What aspects of Gatsby's personality does his car reveal? Tick as appropriate:
 - a. He is rich.
 - b. He love shiny big cars.
 - c. He wants to impress people.
 - d. He is a lonely person.
 - e. He is a superficial man.
 - f. He is a sad person.
5. What aspect of Gatsby's behaviour reveal his impatience?
6. How has the narrator's opinion about Gatsby changed after meeting and speaking to him?

YOUR VOICE

In the passage Gatsby's car becomes the symbol of his materialism and superficiality, which were typical traits of the so-called "Jazz Years" in America. If the passage were set in today's world and in your country, what other "objects" would have the same connotation? Organise a class debate around this topic.

4. THE DARK SIDE OF THE JAZZ AGE

NOBODY KNOWS YOU WHEN YOU ARE DOWN AND OUT

The following song was originally sung by Bessie Smith in 1923 and describes the “dark” side of the Jazz Age: in this age of wealth, parties and material consumption everybody is a friend, but when the money finishes how many friends are left?



BEFORE READING

**What is true friendship?
How do you recognise a true friend?
Brainstorm your ideas with your classmates.**

Once I lived the life of a millionaire,
Spending my money, I did not care.
I carried my friends out for a good time,
Buying bootleg⁹ whiskey, champagne and wine.

When I began to fall so low,
I didn't have a friend and no place to go.
So if I ever get my hands on a dollar again,
I'm going to hold on to it till them eagles grin¹⁰.

Nobody knows you
When you're down and out¹¹.

⁹ illegale

¹⁰ per sempre - fino a quando non sorridono le aquile (sul retro del dollaro è raffigurata l'aquila calva con espressione severa - non sorriderà mai!)

In my pocket, not one penny,
And my friends, I haven't any.

But if I ever get on my feet again
Then I'll meet my long-lost friends
It's mighty strange, without a doubt,
Nobody knows you when you're down and out.

When you're down and out
Not one penny
And my friends, I haven't any
Well I fell so low

Nobody wants me round their door
Without a doubt
No man can use when you're down and out
I mean, when you're down and out

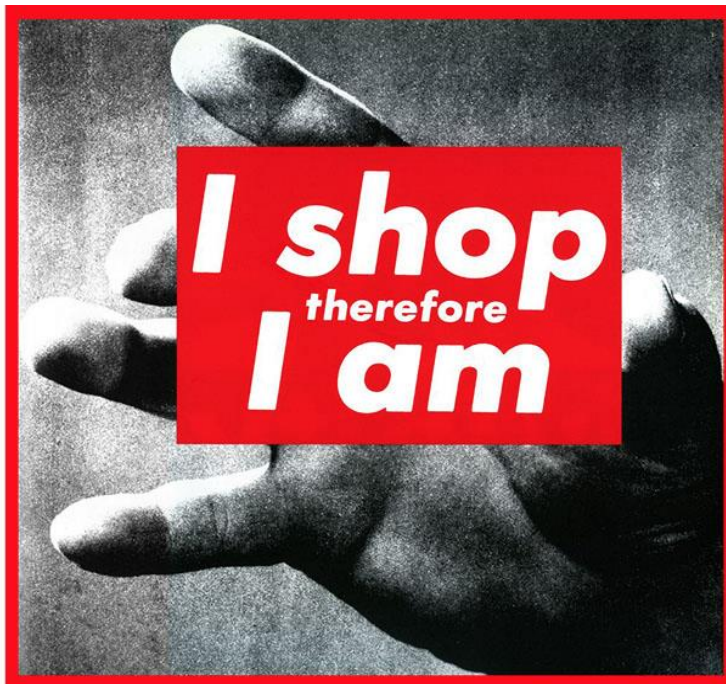
AFTER READING

1. Is the speaking voice talking about his/her own life? How do you know?
2. Does the song have a regular rhyme scheme? Point it out.
3. Do the stanzas of the song have the same length?
4. The song is based on the contrast between the past, the present and the future.
 - a. What characterised the speaker's past life? Underline at least two meaningful expressions.
 - b. What is the speaker's life like now? Underline one expression that makes it clear.
 - c. What is the speaker's hope for the future? Circle the stanza in which he expresses it.
5. The speaker draws a parallelism between money and friends. What unites them? Tick as appropriate:
 - a. They depend on each other
 - b. They are both positive aspects of human life
 - c. They can disappear easily
 - d. You can use money to buy friends
6. Use the elements contained in this and in the previous text to explain the role of money in the Jazz Age.
7. What important historical event that affected the United States at the end of the 1920s does this song anticipate?

YOUR VOICE

¹¹ squattrinato

The song and the passage you have read both tackle a very modern theme: the role of money in human life. Look at the picture below, made in 1987 by the American conceptual artist Barbara Kruger, and answer the questions:



STEP 1:

1. What can you see in this picture?
2. How many colours are used?
3. What does the slogan mean? What does it remind you of?

STEP 2:

1. What do you think the artist want to underline in this work?
2. Do you think the artist is right or not?
3. Do you think the message of this work is still valid today? Why (not)?

STEP 3:

1. Is this picture linked to the passage about Gatsby? Why (not)?
2. How is this picture related to the song by Bessie Smith?
3. What is the role of shopping in your life? Does it define what you are? Does it make you feel more popular? Does it help you make friends?