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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Fitzgerald's Minnesota childhood and New York adventures underlie events in Nick's and Gatsby's lives. As a child, Fitzgerald liked to imagine he was from British royalty and had been abandoned on his parents' doorstep. A weak student, Fitzgerald was sent to boarding school. His parents hoped that this education would improve his prospects. Like the characters in the novel, Fitzgerald took a train from his Midwest home in St. Paul, Minnesota, to New York City. Many of his short stories explore the effects that a physical departure from the Midwest may have on a person. And while we more fully understand this novel as we learn about the author, the artistry of the novel does not succeed or fail based on the author's life. The novel—a work of art—has an internal structure independent of the author's personality.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD, Track One. Students should take notes as they listen. What do we learn about F. Scott Fitzgerald from the CD? What are the three most important points the students learn from the CD?

Copy Reader's Guide essays, "F. Scott Fitzgerald" (pp.6-7), "Fitzgerald and the Jazz Age" (pp.8-9), and "Fitzgerald and His Other Works" (pp.10-11). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned from the essay. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentations memorable.

Writing Exercise

The novel begins with a quote from Thomas Parke D'Invilliers, a character from Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*: "Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her; / If you can bounce high, bounce for her too, / Till she cry "Lover, gold-hatted, high-bouncing lover, / I must have you!" What does this poem mean? Based on what you've learned from the CD, why do you think Fitzgerald chose this quote as an epigraph?

Homework

Read Chapter 1 (pp. 1-21).^{*} Prepare your students to read roughly 20 pages per night in order to complete this book in ten lessons. Why is Nick telling this story? Why is Nick "confused and a little disgusted" at the end of the chapter?

^{*} Page numbers refer to the Scribner 2004 edition of *The Great Gatsby*.