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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's Minnesota childhood and New York adventures inspire 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 could have on a person.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide, Track One. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask students to discuss what they learned about F. Scott Fitzgerald from the Audio Guide.

Copy Reader's Guide essays, "F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1896–1940" (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 it 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? Ask students to examine the intention behind this epigraph. Based on what they learned from the Audio Guide, why do they think Fitzgerald chose this quote?

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. As they read, students should consider these questions: Why is Nick telling this story? Why is Nick "confused and a little disgusted" (p. 20) at the end of the chapter?