

“So we beat on, boats against the current,
borne ceaselessly back into the past.”





On the surface, *The Great Gatsby* is a story of the thwarted love between a man and a woman. The main theme of the novel, however, encompasses a much larger, less romantic scope.

Though all of its action takes place over a mere few months during the summer of 1922 and is set in the vicinity of Long Island, New York, *The Great Gatsby* is a highly symbolic meditation on 1920s America as a whole, in particular the disintegration of the American dream

in an era of unprecedented prosperity and material excess.

Fitzgerald portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed, and empty pursuit of pleasure. But how empty was their pursuit?

The Context of 'The Great Gatsby'

In pairs, you will be given one of the following research tasks to complete. You will be expected to work on this during this half term – we will be checking on your progress! - and continue with it over the Summer holidays ready to present to your group at the beginning of term in September.

You need to prepare:

- A powerpoint presentation on your research area. REMEMBER, however, that your presentation should NOT just involve reading your slides out loud. Your slides should merely act as prompts and contain key points
- A copy of the slides (a reduced version) for class mates to annotate while you are speaking with questions/ gaps to be filled in ...and/ or...
- ...create a handout that everyone will complete as they listen to your presentation. It should not detract from your presentation – they should be able to listen and complete it at the same time. (Think: Fill-in-the-Blank style but it also should contain additional information from your presentation, together with relevant images).

Key contextual areas for research task

- 1) F. Scott Fitzgerald
- 2) New York, consumerism and mass culture
- 3) Women in the 1920s
- 4) The Jazz Age
- 5) Prohibition and Organised Crime
- 6) Class and the American Dream

Task 1: F. Scott Fitzgerald's life

Read the biography and highlight the major influences on Fitzgerald's life and writing. Read 'The Crack Up', a series of articles that Fitzgerald wrote for *Esquire* magazine in 1933, about his life, writing, and the breakdown that he suffered. You can find it on Central Resources (English/KS5/A2course/The Crack Up) and pick out key sections which show his attitude towards his life and work.



The dominant influences on F. Scott Fitzgerald were aspiration, literature, Princeton, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, and alcohol.

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 24, 1896, the namesake and second cousin three times removed of the author of the National Anthem. Fitzgerald's given names indicate his parents' pride in his father's ancestry. His father, Edward, was from Maryland, with an allegiance to the Old South and its values. Fitzgerald's mother, Mary (Mollie) McQuillan, was the daughter of an Irish immigrant who became wealthy as a wholesale grocer in St. Paul. Both were Catholics.

Edward Fitzgerald failed as a manufacturer of wicker furniture in St. Paul, and he became a salesman for Procter & Gamble in upstate New York. After he was dismissed in 1908, when his son was twelve, the family returned to St. Paul and lived comfortably on Mollie Fitzgerald's inheritance. Fitzgerald attended the St. Paul Academy; his first writing to appear in print was a detective story in the school newspaper when he was thirteen.

During 1911-1913 he attended the Newman School, a Catholic prep school in New Jersey, where he met Father Sigourney Fay, who encouraged his ambitions for personal distinction and achievement. As a member of the Princeton Class of 1917, Fitzgerald neglected his studies for his literary apprenticeship. He wrote the scripts and lyrics for the Princeton Triangle Club musicals and was a contributor to the *Princeton Tiger* humor magazine and the *Nassau Literary Magazine*. His college friends included Edmund Wilson and John Peale Bishop. On academic probation and unlikely to graduate, Fitzgerald joined the army in 1917 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry. Convinced that he would die in the war, he rapidly wrote a novel, "The Romantic Egotist"; the letter of rejection from Charles Scribner's Sons praised the novel's originality and asked that it be resubmitted when revised.

In June 1918 Fitzgerald was assigned to Camp Sheridan, near Montgomery, Alabama. There he fell in love with a celebrated belle, eighteen-year-old Zelda Sayre, the youngest daughter of an Alabama Supreme Court judge. The romance intensified Fitzgerald's hopes for the success of his novel, but after revision it was rejected by Scribners for a second time. The war ended just before he was to be sent overseas; after his discharge in 1919 he went to New York City to seek his fortune in order to marry. Unwilling to wait while Fitzgerald succeeded in the advertisement business and unwilling to live on his small salary, Zelda Sayre broke their engagement.

Fitzgerald quit his job in July 1919 and returned to St. Paul to rewrite his novel as *This Side of Paradise*. It was accepted by editor Maxwell Perkins of Scribners in September. Set mainly at Princeton and described by its author as “a quest novel,” *This Side of Paradise* traces the career aspirations and love disappointments of Amory Blaine.

In the fall-winter of 1919 Fitzgerald commenced his career as a writer of stories for the mass-circulation magazines. Working through agent Harold Ober, Fitzgerald interrupted work on his novels to write moneymaking popular fiction for the rest of his life. *The Saturday Evening Post* became Fitzgerald’s best story market, and he was regarded as a “*Post* writer.” His early commercial stories about young love introduced a fresh character: the independent, determined young American woman who appeared in “The Offshore Pirate” and “Bernice Bobs Her Hair.” Fitzgerald’s more ambitious stories, such as “May Day” and “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” were published in *The Smart Set*, which had a small circulation.

The publication of *This Side of Paradise* on March 26, 1920, made the twenty-four-year-old Fitzgerald famous almost overnight, and a week later he married Zelda Sayre in New York. They embarked on an extravagant life as young celebrities. Fitzgerald endeavored to earn a solid literary reputation, but his playboy image impeded the proper assessment of his work.

After a riotous summer in Westport, Connecticut, the Fitzgeralds took an apartment in New York City; there he wrote his second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*, a naturalistic chronicle of the dissipation of Anthony and Gloria Patch. When Zelda Fitzgerald became pregnant they took their first trip to Europe in 1921 and then settled in St. Paul for the birth of their only child, Frances Scott (Scottie) Fitzgerald, who was born in October 1921.

The Fitzgeralds expected to become affluent from his play, *The Vegetable*. In the fall of 1922 they moved to Great Neck, Long Island, in order to be near Broadway. The political satire subtitled “From President to Postman” failed at its tryout in November 1923, and Fitzgerald wrote his way out of debt with short stories. The distractions of Great Neck and New York prevented Fitzgerald from making progress on his third novel. During this time his drinking increased. He was an alcoholic, but he wrote sober. Zelda Fitzgerald regularly got “tight,” but she was not an alcoholic. There were frequent domestic rows, usually triggered by drinking bouts.

Literary opinion makers were reluctant to accord Fitzgerald full marks as a serious craftsman. His reputation as a drinker inspired the myth that he was an irresponsible writer; yet he was a painstaking reviser whose fiction went through layers of drafts. Fitzgerald’s clear, lyrical, colorful, witty style evoked the emotions associated with time and place. When critics objected to Fitzgerald’s concern with love and success, his response was: “But, my God! it was my material, and it was all I had to deal with.” The chief theme of Fitzgerald’s work is aspiration: the idealism he regarded as defining American character. Another major theme was mutability or loss. As a social historian Fitzgerald became identified with the Jazz Age: “It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire,” he wrote in “*Echoes of the Jazz Age*.”

Seeking tranquility for his work the Fitzgeralds went to France in the spring of 1924. He wrote *The Great Gatsby* during the summer and fall in Valescure near St. Raphael, but the marriage was damaged by Zelda’s involvement with a French naval aviator. The extent of the affair if it was in fact consummated is not known. On the Riviera the Fitzgeralds formed a close friendship with affluent and cultured American expatriates Gerald and Sara Murphy.

The Fitzgeralds spent the winter of 1924-1925 in Rome, where he revised *The Great Gatsby*; they were en route to Paris when the novel was published in April. *The Great Gatsby* marked a

striking advance in Fitzgerald's technique, utilizing a complex structure and a controlled narrative point of view. Fitzgerald's achievement received critical praise, but sales of *Gatsby* were disappointing, though the stage and movie rights brought additional income.

In Paris Fitzgerald met Ernest Hemingway then unknown outside the expatriate literary circle with whom he formed a friendship based largely on his admiration for Hemingway's personality and genius. The Fitzgeralds remained in France until the end of 1926, alternating between Paris and the Riviera. Fitzgerald made little progress on his fourth novel, a study of American expatriates in France provisionally titled "The Boy Who Killed His Mother," "Our Type," and "The World's Fair." During these years Zelda Fitzgerald's unconventional behavior became increasingly eccentric.

The Fitzgeralds returned to America to escape the distractions of France. After a short, unsuccessful stint of screen writing in Hollywood, Fitzgerald rented "Ellerslie," a mansion near Wilmington, Delaware, in the spring of 1927. The family remained at "Ellerslie" for two years interrupted by a visit to Paris in the summer of 1928, but Fitzgerald was still unable to make significant progress on his novel. At this time Zelda Fitzgerald commenced ballet training, intending to become a professional dancer. The Fitzgeralds returned to France in the spring of 1929, where Zelda's intense ballet work damaged her health and contributed to the couple's estrangement. In April 1930 she suffered her first breakdown. She was treated at Prangins clinic in Switzerland until September 1931, while Fitzgerald lived in Swiss hotels. Work on the novel was again suspended as he wrote short stories to pay for psychiatric treatment.

Fitzgerald's peak story fee of \$4,000 from *The Saturday Evening Post* may have had in 1929 the purchasing power of \$40,000 in present-day dollars. Nonetheless, the general view of his affluence is distorted. Fitzgerald was not among the highest-paid writers of his time; his novels earned comparatively little, and most of his income came from 160 magazine stories. During the 1920s his income from all sources averaged under \$25,000 a year: good money at a time when a schoolteacher's average annual salary was \$1,299, but not a fortune. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald did spend money faster than he earned it; the author who wrote so eloquently about the effects of money on character was unable to manage his own finances.

The Fitzgeralds returned to America in the fall of 1931 and rented a house in Montgomery. Fitzgerald made a second unsuccessful trip to Hollywood in 1931. Zelda Fitzgerald suffered a relapse in February 1932 and entered Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. She spent the rest of her life as a resident or outpatient of sanitariums.

In 1932, while a patient at Johns Hopkins, Zelda Fitzgerald rapidly wrote *Save Me the Waltz*. Her autobiographical novel generated considerable bitterness between the Fitzgeralds, for he regarded it as pre-empting the material that he was using in his novel-in-progress. Fitzgerald rented "La Paix," a house outside Baltimore, where he completed his fourth novel, *Tender Is the Night*. Published in 1934, his most ambitious novel was a commercial failure, and its merits were matters of critical dispute. Set in France during the 1920s, *Tender Is the Night* examines the deterioration of Dick Diver, a brilliant American psychiatrist, during the course of his marriage to a wealthy mental patient.

The 1936-1937 period is known as "the crack-up" from the title of an essay Fitzgerald wrote in 1936. Ill, drunk, in debt, and unable to write commercial stories, he lived in hotels in the region near Asheville, North Carolina, where in 1936 Zelda Fitzgerald entered Highland Hospital. After Baltimore Fitzgerald did not maintain a home for Scottie. When she was fourteen she went to boarding school, and the Obers became her surrogate family. Nonetheless, Fitzgerald functioned as a concerned father by mail, attempting to supervise Scottie's education and to shape her social values.

Fitzgerald went to Hollywood alone in the summer of 1937 with a six-month Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer screenwriting contract at \$1,000 a week. He received his only screen credit for adapting *Three Comrades* (1938), and his contract was renewed for a year at \$1,250 a week. The \$91,000 he earned from MGM was a great deal of money during the late Depression years when a new Chevrolet coupe cost \$619; but although Fitzgerald paid off most of his debts, he was unable to save. His trips East to visit his wife were disastrous. In California Fitzgerald fell in love with movie columnist Sheilah Graham. Their relationship endured despite his benders. After MGM dropped his option at the end of 1938, Fitzgerald worked as a freelance script writer and wrote short-short stories for *Esquire*. He began his Hollywood novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, in 1939 and had written more than half of a working draft when he died of a heart attack in Graham's apartment on December 21, 1940. Zelda Fitzgerald perished at a fire in Highland Hospital in 1948.

F. Scott Fitzgerald died believing himself a failure. The obituaries were condescending, and he seemed destined for literary obscurity. The first phase of the Fitzgerald resurrection or "revival" does not properly describe the process which occurred between 1945 and 1950. By 1960 he had achieved a secure place among America's enduring writers. *The Great Gatsby*, a work that seriously examines the theme of aspiration in an American setting, defines the classic American novel.

Matthew J. Bruccoli's "A Brief Life of Fitzgerald" originally appeared in *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters*, ed. Bruccoli with the assistance of Judith S. Baughman (New York: Scribners, 1994.); essay reprinted courtesy of Simon & Schuster.

Task 2: New York, Consumerism and Mass Culture

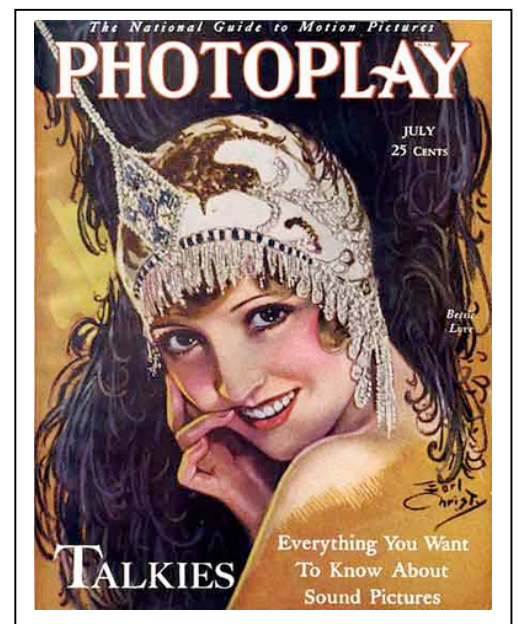
List the dominant post-war American attitudes and major movements of the 1920s. Pay close attention to the attitudes of 'The Lost Generation' and the rise of prosperity and consumerism.

Why were cars considered "the most important catalyst for social change in the 1920's"?



Advertising and the mass market

Find out about advertising, cinema, newspapers and magazines during the 1920s



Task 3: Women in the 1920s

Read the article on 'Flapper Jane' and the poem by Dorothy Parker. What impression do you get of women of the 1920s? What was the 19th Amendment? What effect do you think this had on their position in society?



FLAPPER JANE BY BRUCE BLIVEN



THE SOPHISTICATED FLAPPER

shocked at the things they do and say. That is a fact which would interest her minister, if he knew it--poor man, he knows so little! For he regards Jane as a perfectly horrible example of wild youth--paint, cigarettes, cocktails, petting parties--oooh! Yet if the younger generation shocks her as she says, query: how wild is Jane?

Before we come to this exciting question, let us take a look at the young person as she strolls across the lawn of her parents' suburban home, having just put the car away after driving sixty miles in two hours. She is, for one thing, a very pretty girl. Beauty is the fashion in 1925. She is frankly, heavily made up, not to imitate nature, but for an altogether artificial effect--pallor mortis, poisonously scarlet lips, richly ringed eyes--the latter looking not so much debauched (which is the intention) as diabetic. Her walk duplicates the swagger supposed by innocent America to go with the female half of a Paris Apache dance. And there are, finally, her clothes.

These were estimated the other day by some statistician to weigh two pounds. Probably a libel; I doubt they come within half a pound of such bulk. Jane isn't wearing much, this summer. If you'd like to know exactly, it is: one dress, one step-in, two stockings, two shoes.

The following article by Bruce Bliven appeared in *The New Republic* on September 9, 1925. The illustrations which accompany this piece did not accompany the original magazine article, but are added here for your amusement.

Jane's a flapper. That is a quaint, old-fashioned term, but I hope you remember its meaning. As you can tell by her appellation, Jane is 19. If she were 29, she would be Dorothy; 39, Doris; 49, Elaine; 59, Jane again--and so on around. This Jane, being 19, is a flapper, though she urgently denies that she is a member of the younger generation. The younger generation, she will tell you, is aged 15 to 17; and she professes to be decidedly

A step-in, if you are 99 and 44/100ths percent ignorant, is underwear--one piece, light, exceedingly brief but roomy. Her dress, as you can't possibly help knowing if you have even one good eye, and get around at all outside the Old People's Home, is also brief. It is cut low where it might be high, and vice versa. The skirt comes just an inch below her knees, overlapping by a faint fraction her rolled and twisted stockings. The idea is that when she walks in a bit of a breeze, you shall now and then observe the knee (which is not rouged--that's just newspaper talk) but always in an accidental, Venus-surprised-at-the-bath sort of way. This is a bit of coyness which hardly fits in with Jane's general character.

Jane's haircut is also abbreviated. She wears of course the very newest thing in bobs, even closer than last year's shingle. It leaves her just about no hair at all in the back, and 20 percent more than that in the front--about as much as is being worn this season by a cellist (male); less than a pianist; and much, much less than a violinist. Because of this new style, one can confirm a rumor heard last year: Jane has ears.



A FLAPPER POWDERS
HER KNEES

THE FLAPPER BY DOROTHY PARKER

The Playful flapper here we see,
The fairest of the fair.
She's not what Grandma used to be, --
You might say, *au contraire*.
Her girlish ways may make a stir,
Her manners cause a scene,
But there is no more harm in her
Than in a submarine.

She nightly knocks for many a goal
The usual dancing men.
Her speed is great, but her control
Is something else again.
All spotlights focus on her pranks.
All tongues her prowess herald.
For which she well may render thanks
To God and Scott Fitzgerald.

Her golden rule is plain enough --
Just get them young and treat them rough.

Task 4: The Jazz Age

The Great Gatsby takes place during the summer of 1922. Fitzgerald coined the phrase, "the Jazz Age" that same year to describe the flamboyant—"anything goes"—era that emerged in America after World War I. Listen to songs by the following and make notes on your reactions:

Van and Schenck: Ain't we got fun?

Scott Joplin: Cakewalk

Halfway House Orchestra: Let me call you

George Olson: The varsity drag

Eddie Cantor: Making Whoopee



What was the importance of Jazz?

Task 5: Prohibition and...

What was Prohibition? Why was it introduced and what effect did it have on the people of the 1920s? Why was it abolished in 1933?



Please turn over...!

...Organised Crime in the 1920s

What was the impact of organised crime? What was the scandal surrounding the World Series 1919?

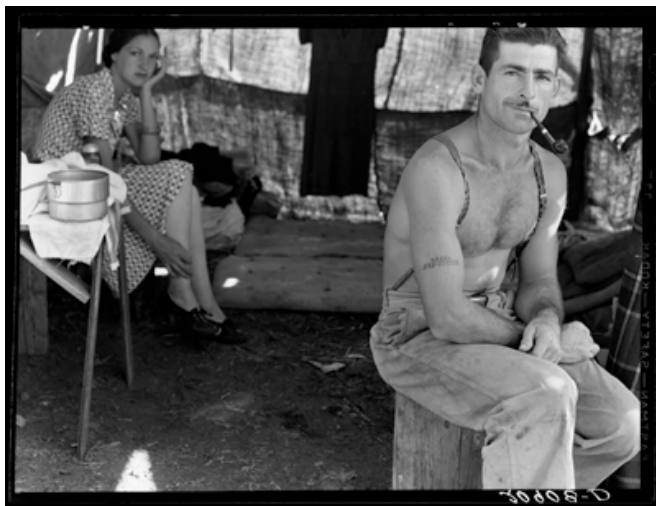


INSIDE STORY OF PLOT TO BUY WORLD'S SERIES

Attel, Chase, Named
in \$100,000 Ring.

Task 6: Social class and the American Dream in the 1920s

What was the American dream? How did it manifest itself in the 1920s? What was the social situation in terms of different classes in America at the time? Try to find a real-life case study of someone from the working and upper classes.



Useful websites

"The Great Experiment" *Thirteen Years of Prohibition: 1920 - 1933*

Fantastic: lots of information and pictures on prohibition, speakeasies and organised crime, including a great section on life for the average American at the time, with videos of interviews from two women who share their memories of Prohibition:

http://www.albany.edu/~wm731882/life_for_the_average_american_final.html

The Jazz Age

http://reading.cornell.edu/reading_project_06/gatsby/jazz_age.htm

American Jazz Culture in the 1920s

<http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/tbacig/studproj/is3099/jazzcult/20sjazz/jazzculture.html>

The 20's Online

<http://staff.tamhigh.org/chamberlin/20%27s%20Online/Index.html>

Covers a huge range of topics, so probably useful whichever one you are researching, but each article is written by a different author, and they do vary in quality: there is some appalling grammar and spelling in places, so don't just copy it! Very good on consumer culture.

Gatsby Treasure Hunt

<http://www.huffenglish.com/gatsby/>

Really useful website with lots of 1920s and Gatsby-related information, which has links to lots of other sites as well.

A brief survey of the short story part 15: F Scott Fitzgerald

from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog+classics?gusrc=rss&feed=books>

TWENTIES SLANG

- Bee's Knees - An extraordinary person, thing, idea
- Berries - is attractive or pleasing; similar to bee's knees, As in "It's the berries."
- Big Cheese - The most important or influential person. Same as big shot
- Bluenose - An excessively puritanical person, a prude
- Bump Off - To murder
- Carry a Torch - To have a crush on someone
- Cat's Meow - Something splendid or stylish; similar to bee's knees; The best or greatest
- Cat's Pajamas - Same as cat's meow
- Cheaters - Eyeglasses
- Crush - An infatuation
- Dogs - feet
- Drugstore Cowboy - a guy that hangs around on a street corner trying to pick up girls
- Dumb Dora - a stupid female
- Fall Guy - victim of a frame
- Flat Tire - A dull insipid, disappointing date. Same as pill, pickle, drag, rag, oilcan
- Frame - To give false evidence, to set up someone
- Gams - A woman's legs
- Giggle Water - An intoxicating beverage; alcohol
- Gin Mill - An establishment where hard liquor is sold; bar
- Hard Boiled - a tough, strong guy
- Heebie-Jeebies - The jitters
- Hooch - Bootleg liquor
- Hooper - Dancer
- Hotsy-Totsy - Pleasing
- Jalopy - Old car
- Joint - A club, usually selling alcohol
- Keen - Attractive or appealing
- Kisser - Mouth
- Lounge Lizard - a guy that is sexually active
- Moll - A gangster's girl
- Neck - Kissing with passion
- Pinch - To arrest
- Pushover - A person easily convinced or seduced
- Ritzy - Elegant (from the hotel)
- Scram - Ask someone to leave immediately
- Sheba - A woman with sex appeal (from the movie *Queen of Sheba*)
- Sheik - A man with sex appeal (from the Valentino movies)
- Speakeasy - An illicit bar selling bootleg liquor
- Spiffy - An elegant appearance
- Struggle Buggy - the backseat of a car. A parent's worst nightmare
- Stuck On - Having a crush on
- Swanky - Ritzy
- Swell - Wonderful. Also: a rich man
- Take for a Ride -To drive off with someone in order to bump them off
- Torpedo - A hired gun
- Upchuck - To vomit when one has drunk too much
- Whoopee - To have a good time

Quotes by F. Scott Fitzgerald

On drinking: I've been drunk for about a week now, and I thought it might sober me up to sit in a library.

Often people display a curious respect for a man drunk, rather like the respect of simple races for the insane... There is something awe-inspiring in one who has lost all inhibitions.

On youth: Everybody's youth is a dream, a form of chemical madness.

On the past: It is sadder to find the past again and find it inadequate to the present than it is to have it elude you and remain forever a harmonious conception of memory.

On life: Life is essentially a cheat and its conditions are those of defeat; the redeeming things are not happiness and pleasure but the deeper satisfactions that come out of struggle.

On honesty: No such thing as a man willing to be honest - that would be like a blind man willing to see.

On advertising: Advertising is a racket, like the movies and the brokerage business. You cannot be honest without admitting that its constructive contribution to humanity is exactly minus zero.

On women: A great social success is a pretty girl who plays her cards as carefully as if she were plain.

On wealth: Riches have never fascinated me, unless combined with the greatest charm or distinction.

Nothing is as obnoxious as other people's luck.

On the Twenties: Though the Jazz Age continued it became less and less an affair of youth. The sequel was like a children's party taken over by the elders.



On writing: You don't write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say.

You can stroke people with words.

My idea is always to reach my generation. The wise writer writes for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward.

All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath.

Show me a hero and I will write you a tragedy.