The Man of Letters as Professional

Civilians hold these notions about writers and writing to be self-evident: that it is easy; that there is a trick to it; that writers earn fortunes but that they don't write for money. These assumptions have impeded the proper assessment of F. Scott Fitzgerald as a professional author and distorted his reputation as a man of letters. The professors and the Fitzgerald groupies have collaborated to create an irresponsible writer who sold out to the *Saturday Evening Post*.

Fitzgerald provides a laboratory case for the profession-of-authorship approach to American literary history as formulated by William Charvat in studying the careers of Hawthorne, Melville, and Emerson:

The terms of professional writing are these: that it provides a living for the author, like any other job; that it is a main and prolonged, rather than intermittent or sporadic, resource for the writer; that it is produced with the hope of extended sale in the open market, like any article of commerce; and that it is written with reference to buyers' tastes and reading habits. The problem of the professional writer is not identical with that of the literary artist; but when a literary artist is also a professional writer, he cannot solve the problems of the one function without reference to the other.¹

Freud stated that writers write for fame, money, and the love of beautiful women. Dr. Johnson—who combined Grub Street assignments with high scholarship—declared “No man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money.” The compulsion to write is concomitant with the compulsion to eat and drink.

Much has been written about Fitzgerald and money—as a subject in his fiction and as a determining factor in his career. The popular notion that he squandered his genius on lavishly paid hackwork persists with the legends of his orgiastic irresponsibility. In actuality Fitzgerald functioned for twenty years as a

professional writer and as a literary artist—but he did not have two separate careers. He had one career to which everything he wrote connected.

Willa Cather—who should have known better—expressed this lofty position: “Writing ought either to be the manufacture of stories for which there is a market demand—a business as safe and commendable as making soap or breakfast foods—or it should be an art, which is always a search for something for which there is no market demand, something new and untried, when the values are intrinsic and have nothing to do with standardized values.” The key word in her pronouncement is ought. Geniuses ought not to be concerned with money. Serious writers ought to be able to write what they want to write. But professional writers write for publication. Otherwise they are hobbyists.

During their college days Fitzgerald dumbfounded Edmund Wilson by announcing, “I want to be one of the greatest writers who ever lived, don’t you?” He meant it. Moreover, Fitzgerald believed that writers should receive financial rewards commensurate with the quality of their work. He never expected to starve for his art.

One of the enduring myths attached to Fitzgerald is that he made and squandered fortunes. He was extravagant, but he did not earn vast sums from his magazine work or from his books. His total income from 1919 through 1936, before he went to Hollywood, was $374,922.58 (after his agent’s commissions) according to his Ledger: an average of $20,829.03 over eighteen years.

Many writers think of themselves as good businessmen, and most of them are bad at it. Fitzgerald employed an agent, Harold Ober, for his magazine work but dealt directly with Maxwell Perkins at Scribners for his books. Ober had a good business relationship with the Post and was able to negotiate steady raises in Fitzgerald’s story payments. Over the years Ober’s role altered from that of literary representative to banker as he advanced Fitzgerald the price of written but not-yet-sold stories—and then the price of the stories in progress. From 1927 to mid-1937 Fitzgerald lived from story to story.

The Fitzgerald/Ober correspondence establishes that Ober’s function was to sell the stories; he provided no editorial advice until the late Thirties, when Fitzgerald’s stories became hard to place. The Post editorial archives are lamentably lost, but the skimpy surviving evidence indicates that Fitzgerald had almost no direct contact with the magazine’s editors. A few editorial recommendations about material were relayed to Fitzgerald by Ober. It was not until after Tender Is the Night, when Fitzgerald’s money problems became acute, that he unwisely attempted to interpose in transactions with the Post. Fitzgerald dealt directly with editor Arnold Gingrich at Esquire during the Thirties, receiving $200 to $300—the magazine’s going rate—for the “Crack-Up” essays and the “short-shorts.” Ober did not take a commission on these sales.
More is known about the professional life of Fitzgerald than about that of any other major American author because so much of the evidence has been preserved. The year-by-year autobiographical, financial, and bibliographical records he kept in his business ledger include his every sale in the literary market place. The Ledger supplements the evidence provided by Fitzgerald’s correspondence with Ober and with Perkins at Scribners. Fitzgerald became a full-time professional before his twenty-fourth birthday when Perkins accepted This Side of Paradise on 18 September 1919. Six weeks later Fitzgerald wrote his first letter to his agent asking him to place “Head and Shoulders”—which the Post took for $400.

When it became clear to Fitzgerald after The Beautiful and Damned that his novels would not support his family’s habits of living and spending, he tried to strike it rich by writing a play. The Vegetable died during its out-of-town try-out in 1923. Thereafter Fitzgerald wrote short stories to buy time for novels in the expectation that his novels would both free him from the need to write stories and establish his permanent literary stature. Fitzgerald’s novels were commercial work of a higher order than his magazine stories. He expected them to be critical successes and best-sellers.

The Great Gatsby was written on the $14,700 proceeds from nine stories; but after Gatsby the magazine money was often spent before Fitzgerald received it. The composition of Tender Is the Night stretched over eight years as he interrupted work on the novel to write stories to pay bills—many of which were for his wife’s psychiatric treatment. Fitzgerald’s 160 stories during twenty-two years may have required as much writing time as his five novels. Moreover, during his lifetime Fitzgerald was more widely read as a magazine story writer than as a novelist. Although the prominent treatment of his stories in the Post and other magazines promoted the recognition of Fitzgerald’s name, it does not appear that this exposure significantly increased the sales of his novels. The two novels that sold best predated his peak activity as a Post contributor. Fitzgerald never wrote what is now called a blockbuster. This Side of Paradise (1920) made the Publishers Weekly monthly best-seller list twice, reaching number four; The Beautiful and Damned (1922) appeared three times, reaching number six. The Great Gatsby never made the best-seller list and did not break 24,000 copies in 1925. Tender Is the Night was number ten for April 1934, but did not sell 15,000 copies in that year. In 1929 his royalties on seven books totaled $31.77; and eight Post stories brought him $31,000.

The magazines provided most of Fitzgerald’s income before he went to work for the movies in 1937: $241,453 for 116 stories. Four short-story collections with royalties of $12,400 increased his cumulative income from short stories to more than $253,800, as against about $41,000 in royalties from four novels. Between 1919 and 1929 Fitzgerald’s Saturday Evening Post story price rose from
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$400 to $4,000. It is impossible to convert 1929 dollars into 1996 dollars, but if the inflation multipliers of eight or ten are used, then a $4,000 Fitzgerald story would be worth between $32,000 and $40,000 in diluted dollars.8

The Post and other “slick” magazines (so called because they were printed on glossy paper to accommodate advertising art) paid well because pre-television Americans had a large appetite for magazine fiction. In addition to the penny-a-word pulp-paper magazines or dime novels (for which Fitzgerald did not write) there was an array of slicks that competed with the Post for fiction. Fitzgerald appeared in Collier’s, Red Book, Ladies Home Journal, McCall’s, Metropolitan, and Hearst’s International. The Saturday Evening Post, with a circulation of 2,750,000, was the most prosperous slick and the most generous to its writers. During the Twenties the Post’s circulation and advertising revenues enabled it to provide between 200 and 300 pages each week for a nickel.9 The hebdomadal mixture of fiction and nonfiction included from six to nine short stories and two or three serialized novels. The 13 July 1929 issue, led by Fitzgerald’s “Majesty”—a story about an American girl who makes a king out of a European weakling—had Brooke Hanlon, Almet Jenks, E. Phillips Oppenheim, Octavus Roy Cohen, and Clarence Budington Kelland. The serials were by Gilbert Seldes, Harry Leon Wilson, and Henry C. Rowland. These by-lines are no longer recognized, but in their time Oppenheim (The Magnificent Impersonation), Kelland (Scattergood Baines), and Wilson (Ruggles of Red Gap) were prodigiously popular. The issue’s five articles included three by Sir Cecil Spring-Rice and one each by Christopher Morley and Struthers Burt.

Fitzgerald’s magazine stories were highly competitive hackwork. His fellow-hacks—as defined by Post publication—included William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, John P. Marquand,10 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Joseph Hergesheimer, Donn Byrne, Sinclair Lewis, P. G. Wodehouse, Stewart Edward White, Edgar Wallace, Thomas Beer, Earl Derr Biggers, and Don Marquis. Before he won the Nobel Prize in 1951, Faulkner was forced to supplement his novel royalties. He sold fifty-six magazine stories, sixteen of which appeared in the Post. He worked for the movies, and there were years when he spent more time in Hollywood than in Yoknapatawpha County. He probably outdrank Fitzgerald. Yet Faulkner was respected as a genius who made necessary accommodations for the sake of his art, whereas Fitzgerald was typed as a casualty of materialism and dissipation.

The circumstance that two of Fitzgerald’s masterpieces—“May Day” (1920) and “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” (1922)—appeared in the low-paying Smart Set (circulation 22,000) raises futile speculation about the stories he might have written if literary magazines had paid as well as the mass-circulation slicks. Fitzgerald wrote stories to meet market requirements—a matter of material and
plot. But he had one style: style, Lionel Trilling observed, is “where eventually all
a writer’s qualities have their truest existence.” The writing in some stories is
rushed and flashy, but it unmistakably purveys Fitzgerald’s tone and sensibility.
The superb “Diamond as Big as the Ritz” was written for the commercial market,
and the rejection of this story by half a dozen slicks elicited Fitzgerald’s 1922 dec-
laration to his agent: “I am rather discouraged that a cheap story like The Popu-
lar Girl [Saturday Evening Post, 11 and 18 February 1922] written in one week
while the baby was being born brings $1500.00 + a genuinely imaginative thing
into which I put three weeks real enthusiasm like The Diamond in the Sky
brings not a thing. But, by God + Lorimer, I’m going to make a fortune yet.”

At the beginning of his career Fitzgerald was exuberant about the money and
exposure generated by his stories. In 1925, following the publication of Gatsby, he
wrote to H. L. Mencken with a characteristic compound of confession and self-
judgment: “My trash for the Post grows worse and worse as there is less and less
heart in it. . . . I never really ‘wrote down’ until after the failing of the Vegetable
and that was to make this book possible.” The tailoring required for Post publi-
cation is touched on in a letter wherein Fitzgerald argues that he was in effect a
Post employee. Having tax problems in 1932, he hoped for a ruling that his earn-
ings from the Post be treated as earned income. He asked Ober to provide a docu-
ment for the Collector of Internal Revenue attesting:

(3.) That you had never considered me a free lance author but that on the
contrary my sales were arranged long in advance and that it has been under-
stood for years among editors that my stories were written specifically for the
Post by definite arrangement and that I was what is known as a “Post Author.”
(4.) Moreover that they conform to Post specifications as to length and
avoidance of certain themes so that for instance they could not have been pub-
lished in Liberty which insisted on stories not over 5000 words, + would have
been unacceptable to womens magazines since they were told from the male
angle. That when I contracted with another magazine such as College Humor
the stories were different in tone + theme, half as long, signed in conjunction
with my wife. That the Post made it plain that they wanted to be offered all
my work of the kind agreed apon; that they always specified that no work of
mine should appear in several competing magazines. That during the years
1929 and 1930 no story of mine was rejected by the Post. . . .

The College Humor connection requires clarification. During 1929–1930 this
magazine published five “Girl” stories by Zelda Fitzgerald with the proviso that
Fitzgerald be by-lined as coauthor. The stories were written by her with some pol-
ishing by him. The magazine was buying his name for $500 per story. Ober sold
one of the stories in the series, “The Millionaire’s Girl,” to the Post for $4,000 as Fitzgerald’s solo work.

The greatest change in literary finances between the Twenties and the Nineties involves subsidiary rights. Civilians read current newspaper reports about five-million-dollar book deals and assume that publishing has always been a jackpot business for authors. The newspapers usually fail to make clear that most of the millions derive from subrights (everything except hard-cover publication) in what has become known as “literary property.” In the Twenties the standard Scribners contract for Fitzgerald’s books disposed of subrights in one gentlemanly sentence because these rights were not lucrative. “It is further agreed that the profits arising from any publication of said work, during the period covered by this agreement, in other than book form shall be divided equally between said Publishers and said Author.” Now a book contract devotes a page or pages to reprint, book-club, movie, television, audio, dramatic, and electronic rights. Publishers refer disparagingly to a book as making only a “publishing profit”—that is, from the sale of copies of a publisher’s own edition, without ancillary income.

Fitzgerald received no income from paperback rights because there were no paperbacks. There were no book clubs before 1925, and they paid chicken feed during their early years. Fitzgerald’s foreign rights were negligible, and he did not have a British readership during his lifetime. Serial rights for The Beautiful and Damned brought $7,000 from Metropolitan Magazine, and Scribner’s Magazine paid $10,000 for serializing Tender Is the Night. Movie rights to stories brought relatively modest amounts: $2,500 for “Head and Shoulders,” $2,500 for The Beautiful and Damned, $10,000 for This Side of Paradise. The most subsidiary income for a Fitzgerald property derived from The Great Gatsby: about $15,000 from the play by Owen Davis; $18,000 for the silent-movie rights; and $1,000 for second serial rights. Apart from occasional windfalls Fitzgerald lived on the sales of his stories and the dwindling royalties from his books until he went on the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer payroll in 1937. From 1926 to 1933 the royalties on his three novels averaged $2,860 per year.

Like many American writers of varying talents, Fitzgerald regarded Hollywood as an emergency financial resource. When The Great Gatsby failed to sell, he wrote to Perkins:

In all events I have a book of good stories for the fall. Now I shall write some cheap ones until I’ve accumulated enough for my next novel. When that is finished and published I’ll wait and see. If it will support me with no more intervals of trash I’ll go on as a novelist. If not I’m going to quit, come home, go to Hollywood and learn the movie business. I can’t reduce our scale of living
and I can’t stand this financial insecurity. Anyhow there’s no point in trying to be an artist if you can’t do your best.\textsuperscript{16}

His first two Hollywood trips were failures. In 1927 he was paid \$3,500 to write an original screen story titled “Lipstick,” which was rejected. In 1931 he was paid \$6,000 to write a screenplay for \textit{Red-Headed Woman}, which was also rejected. His final California sojourn during 1937–1940 brought him \$91,000 for eighteen months at M-G-M and one screen credit for \textit{Three Comrades}. Fitzgerald was unsuccessful as a screenwriter because he resisted collaboration and because the movies could not film the style and voice of his prose.

Satisfying the requirements of the slicks was hard work; it took a lot of fuel to boil the pot. Scholars frequently cite Fitzgerald’s denigration of himself as an “old whore” in a 1929 letter to Hemingway:

Your analysis of my inability to get my serious work done is too kind in that it leaves out dissipation, but among acts of God it is possible that the 5 yrs between my leaving the army + finishing \textit{Gatsby} 1919–1924 which included 3 novels, about 50 popular stories + a play + numerous articles + movies may have taken all I had to say too early, adding that all the time we were living at top speed in the gayest worlds we could find. This \textit{au fond} is what really worries me—tho the trouble may be my inability to leave anything once started— I have worked for 2 months over a popular short story that was foredoomed to being torn up when completed. . . . Here’s a last flicker of the old cheap pride:—the \textit{Post} now pays the old whore \$4000. a screw.

These commentators often omit the next sentence in the passage: “But now its because she’s mastered the 40 positions—in her youth one was enough.”\textsuperscript{17} This complaint makes the point that Fitzgerald’s magazine stories required technique and craftsmanship, that early ebullience had given way to mature technique. Hemingway’s response clearly identifies the function of Fitzgerald’s stories in his working life:

I wish there was some way that your economic existence would depend on this novel [\textit{Tender Is the Night}] or on novels rather than on the damned stories. Because that is one thing that drives you and gives you an outlet too—the damned stories— . . .

(They never raise an old whore’s price—she may know the 850 positions—they cut her price all the same—so either you aren’t old or not a whore or both). The stories aren’t whoring They’re just bad judgement—You could have and can make enough to live on writing novels.\textsuperscript{18}
Fitzgerald could not live on his novels. Neither could Hemingway in 1929; his second wife had a wealthy and generous family.

Fitzgerald’s denunciations of his stories become more vociferous during the years when he stalled on the novel that became *Tender Is the Night* and he began to function as a supplier of Post stories: the eight Basil Duke Lee stories (1928–1929) and the five Josephine Perry stories (1930–1931). When Ober advised him to make a book out of the Basil stories in 1930, Fitzgerald’s response made a firm distinction between reader response to his stories and his novels:

> I could have published four lowsy, half baked books in the last five years + and people would have thought I was at least a worthy young man not drinking myself to pieces in the south seas—but I’d be dead as Michael Arlen, Bromfield, Tom Boyd, Callaghan + the others who think they can trick the world with the hurried and the second rate. These Post stories in the Post are at least not any spot on me—they’re honest and if their form is stereotyped people know what to expect when they pick up the Post. The novel is another thing—if, after four years I publish the Basil Lee stories as a book I might as well get tickets for Hollywood immediately.19

There was a close—even symbiotic—relationship between Fitzgerald’s magazine fiction and his novels because the stories often functioned as tryouts for subjects and themes that were more complexly developed in novels. Thus the cluster of *Gatsby*-related stories: “Winter Dreams,” “‘The Sensible Thing,’” “Absolution” (cut from an early draft of *Gatsby*), “Dice, Brassknuckles & Guitar,” and “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz.” Fitzgerald did not have a different style for magazine work. A good writer writes the only way he can write. The writing in the stories is sometimes self-indulgent, the story plots are often too gimmicky, and there is a reliance on the intrusive philosophizing; but the style, tone, voice, and rhythm of the prose are authentic Fitzgerald. He was unable to improve on certain passages that were later required for a novel. It therefore became obligatory for Fitzgerald to maintain a system to prevent himself from using the same passage in a collected story and in a novel—which he considered dishonest. When he classified a story as not worth reprinting in one of his four story collections, he “stripped” passages and phrases for possible use in novels. If material in the story chosen for a collection had been recycled in a novel, he revised the story to remove repetition. During the eight-year evolution of *Tender* he borrowed material from the novel drafts for use in stories.20 When Perkins advised him not to be overconcerned about duplication of passages in *Taps at Reveille* and *Tender*, citing Hemingway’s repetitions, Fitzgerald responded firmly:
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The fact that Ernest has let himself repeat here and there a phrase would be no possible justification for my doing the same. Each of us has his own virtues and one of mine happens to be a great sense of exactitude about my work. He might be able to afford a lapse in that line where I wouldn't be and after all I have got to be the final judge of what is appropriate in these cases.

Besides, it is not only the question of the repetitions but there are certain other stories in the collection that I couldn't possibly think of letting go out in their current form. I fully realize that this may be a very serious inconvenience to you but for me to undertake anything like that at this moment would just mean sudden death and nothing less than that.

Writing about Fitzgerald after his death, James Gould Cozzens observed that “writing short stories is living on your capital if you are naturally a novelist—you can get through in a few years all the subjects, even if you have a lot, that you could have written books on.” One of the reasons Fitzgerald resented his stories is that they depleted his literary and emotional capital. In 1935 when he was having difficulty writing marketable stories, Fitzgerald explained to his agent that “all my stories are conceived like novels, require a special emotion, a special experience—so that my readers, if such there be, know that each time it’ll be something new, not in form but in substance (it’d be far better for me if I could do pattern stories but the pencil just goes dead on me.)”

Largely as a consequence of his reputation as a bad speller, compounded by the factual errors in his published work, Fitzgerald had been classified as a literary ignoramus—as someone who wrote brilliantly without knowing what he was doing. A natural. This condescending view is corrected by his letters, notebooks, book reviews and articles—which establish that Fitzgerald reached usable conclusions about the craft of writing, the discipline of authorship, and the obligations of literature. Fitzgerald wrote perceptively and eloquently when he was analyzing his own work. “Our April Letter,” a prose poem in his Notebooks, expresses Fitzgerald’s sense of his exhausted creative capital: “I have asked a lot of my emotions—one hundred and twenty stories. The price was high, right up with Kipling, because there was one little drop of something not blood, not a tear, not my seed, but me more intimately than these, in every story, it was the extra I had.”

There was a time when the appellation “man of letters” would have seemed inappropriate for Fitzgerald; but the evidence of his career establishes that he functioned as a literary personage—not just a literary personality. In 1945 Lionel Trilling provided one of the earliest and best assessments of Fitzgerald as a man of letters.
It is hard to overestimate the benefit which came to Fitzgerald from his having consciously placed himself in the line of the great. . . . To read Fitzgerald’s letters to his daughter . . . and to catch the tone in which he speaks about the literature of the past, or to read the notebooks he faithfully kept . . . and to perceive how continuously he thought about literature, is to have some clue to the secret of the continuing power of Fitzgerald’s work.25

Fitzgerald’s conduct as a literary figure was exemplary. He encouraged younger writers and recruited writers—including Hemingway—for Scribners. He did not regard writing as competitive and did not resent the success of other writers. He had firm critical standards and, for example, regarded John Steinbeck’s work as bogus. Other writers respected Fitzgerald’s literary intelligence—sometimes involuntarily. John Dos Passos recalled, “When he talked about writing his mind, which seemed to me full of preposterous notions about most things, became clear and hard as a diamond. . . . about writing he was a born professional. Everything he said was worth listening to.”26

From 1920, when he wisecracked that “An author ought to write for the youth of his own generation, the critics of the next, and the schoolmasters of ever afterward,”27 Fitzgerald was concerned about his permanent stature as a literary figure. Yet it often seemed that he was almost deliberately damaging his literary stature by trading permanent fame for notoriety. Fitzgerald lacked the ruthlessness that normally fosters great literary reputations. He was incapable of sacrificing everything and everybody to his writing—as did Hemingway, Faulkner, and Wolfe. The posthumous Fitzgerald revival was a triumph of genius over misfortune—testimony to the enduring force of words on paper. Although the reviewers of his time—except Gilbert Seldes—did not recognize him as a great writer, other writers understood how important Fitzgerald’s writing was. T. S. Eliot orphically pronounced that *The Great Gatsby* was “the first step that American fiction had taken since Henry James.”28 Dos Passos stated of *The Last Tycoon*: “Even in their unfinished state these fragments, I believe, are of sufficient dimensions to raise the level of American fiction to follow in some such way as Marlowe’s blank verse line raised the whole level of Elizabethan verse.”29

Fitzgerald did not play the game of careerism, except by writing. Although he sought the friendship of writers, he belonged to no self-promoting literary-critical groups. During the Thirties he eschewed the mandatory mea culpas and fashionable Marxist conversions by which writers protected themselves. The condescending obituaries in 1940 indicate that Fitzgerald was generally classified as a failure, a writer who had sold out to the slicks and the movies. Inevitably, F. Scott Fitzgerald provided the best epitaph on the mechanism of his professional work
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and his literary achievements. Writing to his daughter, Scottie, he declared: “I am not a great man, but sometimes I think the impersonal and objective quality of my talent, and the sacrifices of it, in pieces, to preserve its essential value has some sort of epic grandeur.”

A professional’s life is lived most fully in terms of his vocation.

Notes

4. The buying power of Fitzgerald’s dollars is discussed elsewhere in this introduction: but a rough indication of his affluence is provided by the fact that the members of the House of Representatives and the Senate were paid $10,000 per year during the Twenties.
7. This figure is approximate because it is impossible to untangle the advances and loans for *Tender Is the Night*.
8. Magazine-fiction rates have not increased since Fitzgerald’s time. The *Post*’s $4,000 fee represented about eighty cents per word. The top short-story rate in 1996 is one dollar per word, paid by the *New Yorker* and *Esquire*; *Playboy* pays between $3,000 and $3,500 for a story.
9. In 1996 it is a ninety-six-page monthly selling for $2.95 and bears no resemblance to Fitzgerald’s *Post*.
10. Marquand out-published Fitzgerald in the *Post*; between 1921 and 1939, eighty-three Marquand stories appeared there, plus fourteen serials—including *The Late George Apley*.
12. George Horace Lorimer, the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post*.
14. 4 May 1925. Ibid., p. 211.
15. Received 23 April 1932. Ibid., p. 215.
17. 19 September 1929. Ibid., p. 169.


29. Ibid., p. 343.