LUBLIN STUDIES IN MODERN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE Vol 48, No 4 (2024)
Maria Curie-Sklodowska University Press

E-ISSN 2450-4580

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DOI:10.17951/lsmll.2024.48.4.47-56

The Theme of Marriage in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Prose

ABSTRACT
Fitzgerald is the author of many short stories and five novels, heavily infused with autobiographical elements. The characters created by the writer often resemble himself or his wife Zelda, and not unfrequently the events depicted mirror documented episodes from their lives. In this article, I present the recurring theme of marriage in the writer's works, appearing in various forms in both his short and long prose. I also highlight the vagueness of literary terms such as theme, motif, plot, and character, which often intersect and do not always allow for clear differentiation.

KEYWORDS
American literature; Fitzgerald's prose; autobiography; theme; motif

1. Themes, motifs, plots, and characters in literature

Słownik terminów literackich [*Dictionary of Literary Terms]* (1998, p. 325, translations mine) defines a motif as "an elementary – analytically distinguishable – structural unit of the presented world in a work, its elemental component: event, object, situation, experience, etc." These elements connect to form "higher-order complexes such as character, plot, theme". According to the same source, a theme (p. 577) is "the subject of the discourse, a set of motifs constituting the core of the presented world of the work, its main component, the highest distinguishable component of its structural units". The examples provided include "a sequence of events (in epic or dramatic works), object, human character, landscape, etc."; It is added that "in narrative works, the theme is often identical with the main plot".

A plot, on the other hand, comprises "narrative events centered around one character or a pair of characters distinguished from the entire group of presented individuals based on the type of relationships binding them (e.g., a love plot)" (p. 608). A literary character is "a fictional figure" constructed according to a pattern that is "the resultant of three components: 1. A literary stereotype established in the tradition of a given genre; 2. An extraliterary personal model shaped in the social conditions observed by the writer; 3. An ideal of life stance propagated by the creator" (p. 412). As Daemmrich (1985, p. 566) notes, researchers often use

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The journal is financed by the Institute of Modern Languages and Literatures of Maria Curie-Sklodowska University.

the terms motif and theme interchangeably, referring to such elements of a text as detail, metaphor, image, symbol, idea, issue. Adams (1983, p. 213) also points out the frequent conflation of theme and motif.

It might seem that at least a literary character should not raise any doubts, since it usually has a first or last name (or both) and can be easily distinguished from other constructs. However, the fate of this character, in conjunction with the abstract type it represents (e.g., a poor boy, a beautiful girl from a wealthy home, a war veteran in peacetime), is, at the same time, the theme of a given work.

As can be seen, these four concepts cannot always be distinguished, and their dictionary definitions do not necessarily prove helpful.

In this paper, I present marriage as a significant theme present in Fitzgerald's prose, which for individual works could also be termed a motif or plot and discussed under the label of the characters that represent it. It is worth noting that in his book on Fitzgerald's work, in the section titled *Main Themes* (which does not include marriage), Kirk Curnutt (2007, pp. 53–69) devotes much space to selected characters and their fates, and in the section titled *Main Characters* (pp. 68–84), he returns to the issue of themes. In my approach, the characterization of the characters constitutes a fundamental element of the presentation of the theme.

2. The marriage of the Fitzgeralds

The marriage of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, concluded shortly after the success of the writer's debut novel (1920), aroused widespread interest, which intensified as the author's popularity grew. From the beginning, the young couple led a lavish, expensive, sometimes scandalous social life, mingling with artistic bohemians and providing tabloid press with rich material for front pages. Much has been written about their colorful but ultimately unhappy life in numerous biographical books (e.g. Milford, 1970; Spargo, 2014; Stromberg, 1997; Taylor, 2001). Interestingly, several novels loosely based on facts have also been devoted to them, (e.g. Leroy, 2007 and Fowler, 2013) which on one hand, maintains their legend, and on the other, distorts it with the declared fictional contents.

The circumstances preceding the wedding of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Sayre and the ceremony on 3.04.1920 at St. Patrick's Church in New York could serve as material for a thriller movie. The romance of a handsome lieutenant with a local beauty in Montgomery, strong competition among young men courting her, parental disapproval of their relationship due to his poverty, sending and secretly receiving an engagement ring, intense correspondence between the two, the demobilized officer's strenuous work on a novel in which he used his beloved girl's letters, breaking of the secret engagement, the great success of his first novel, official engagement with reluctant parental acceptance, a rushed wedding held in a Catholic church, to which Zelda did not belong – these are some elements in their story, eagerly repeated by their biographers and echoed in the writer's works.

4. Autobiographical Aspect in Fitzgerald's Prose

One of the most frequently mentioned features of Fitzgerald's work is its autobiographical nature, which some critics (e.g. Callahan, 2006, p. 102; Diemert, 1998, p. 135; Eagleton, 1971, p. 438) note with reproach, while others consider it an added value, allowing Fitzgerald's works to be seen as "semi-autobiographical chronicles of the so-called 'Jazz Age', the lives of a generation of young people who came of age in the 1920s" (Stachura, 2010, 2013).

A reader who is just moderately familiar with the facts of Fitzgerald's biography will easily recognize him in the characters of all his completed novels. Like Amory Blaine (the main character in *This Side of Paradise*), Fitzgerald studied at Princeton, where he formed significant friendships, was influenced by a Catholic priest, and experienced a painful romantic disappointment. With Anthony Patch (the protagonist of *The Beautiful and Damned*), his creator shares a reckless, irresponsible lifestyle, alcohol abuse, and a destructive marriage. Like the title hero of *The Great Gatsby*, he painfully experienced the effects of social barriers that stood between him and the woman he loved. Like Dick Diver (the protagonist of *Tender Is the Night*), he struggles with his wife's mental illness, lacking the strength to stay and the courage to leave. These are, of course, only the obvious similarities, noticeable without in-depth analysis.

The characters in many of Fitzgerald's short stories also bear visible traces of the author's personal experiences or his well-known personality traits. Basil Lee (*The Freshest Boy*) is strongly disliked by his schoolmates. In another story (*The Perfect Life*), the same character stands out on the football team, earning the admiration of his peers. Andy (*The Last of the Belles*) is an officer who never made it to the European front. Adrian Smith (*The Rough Crossing)* travels by ship to Europe with his wife, flirting with a young admirer. The brilliant Bill McChesnay (*Two Wrongs*) achieves great success at a young age, only to succumb to alcoholism shortly after that. John Unger (*The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*) comes from an impoverished family but inherited from his creator a taste for wealth and luxury that is mismatched with his modest social status. Jim Mather (*Hot and Cold Blood*) falls victim to swindlers due to his good heart. An unnamed writer (*Afternoon of an Author*) suffers from creative block, killing time in a futile search for inspiration.

5. Engagements and Marriages in Fitzgerald's Fiction

Corresponding to these extraordinary experiences of the writer, his characters enter into their marriages (or make plans or suddenly withdraw from matrimonial projects) in strangest circumstances. Anthony Patch, the protagonist of *The Beautiful and Damned*, first declares with conviction that he will never marry. Then, during the wedding ceremony with the beautiful Gloria (whom he can keep only as his wife), the idea of escaping from the altar comes to his mind. When the

unremarkable bookstore employee Merlin Grainger (O Russet Witch) arranges the details of his wedding with his coworker Olivia, he stares fascinated at the eccentric, unattainable Caroline. The successful Perry Parkhurst (*The Camel's Back*) "marries" his former fiancée as a joke, dressed as a camel at a fancy-dress party, only to find out to his satisfaction that the marriage might be valid. On the eve of her wedding to Tom (*The Great Gatsby*), Daisy gets drunk and declares she has changed her mind, only to complete the ceremony soon, as planned. The heir to a great family fortune, Toby Moreland (*The Offshore Pirate*), kidnaps the capricious Ardita pretending to be a pirate, so that she agrees to marry him out of excitement. The wealthy George Van Tyne (*The Unspeakable Egg*) plays the role of a tramp to win the heart of his beloved Fifi. When Dick Diver (*Tender Is the Night*) marries his schizophrenic patient Nicole, he is unsure whether he is motivated solely by love or by the fortune offered by her family to the doctor willing to combine the roles of therapist and husband to Nicole. The theater producer Bill McChesney (*Two Wrongs*) breaks up with his famous fiancée without a reason to marry Emmy, whom he initially only tried to seduce. Due to a head injury, the veteran Charley Abbot (*Diamond Dick*) does not remember that he got married during the war; his wife patiently waits and fights for his lost memory to return. Obligated to marry an English aristocrat, Knowleton Whitney (*Myra Meets His Family*) weaves an expensive, elaborate intrigue to provoke Myra to break off their ill-considered engagement, lacking the courage to withdraw himself. The fifty-year-old millionaire Tom Squires (*The Rich Boy*) abandons his intention to marry the young Annie when he sees her with a young admirer and suddenly realizes the significance of their age difference, which he had desperately tried to overcome. On the way to her wedding Carol (*Fate in Her Hands)* decides to marry the groom's best man, even though nothing previously indicated such a possibility. A young widow Mary (*Day Off from Love*) forces her fiancé to agree to spend one day separately, each according to their own imagination, to minimize the risk of boredom in their relationship. Kiki (*Offside Play*) returns the engagement ring to her fiancé due to a misunderstanding related to his trip to Greece. Kathleen (*The Last Tycoon)* surprises Stahr with a telegram about her hastily concluded marriage, thus putting an end to their ongoing romance.

In each of these cases, the marriage-related circumstances deviate from accepted social norms in a surprising, outrageous, or shocking way.

6. Married Couples in Fitzgerald's Novels

The lifestyle of the young Fitzgeralds is reflected in the novel *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922), whose title aptly summarizes the fate of its characters as well as the later life of its author and his wife. As Jan Rybicki (1996, p. 390) observes in his translator's note in the Polish edition, from today's perspective, the story

of Gloria and Anthony may appear as a prophetic vision of the own future of the young author, who was already grappling with severe alcohol issues at the time. Gloria and Anthony only want to have fun and take for granted that the money of Anthony's grandfather will make it possible for the rest of their lives. Although Anthony, a Harvard graduate, has certain literary ambitions, he is not inclined to dedicate intense work to them. Unlike his creator, who earned his living with his writing and worked hard, Anthony lacks motivation for effort. Gloria and Anthony represent the type of heirs to great fortunes doomed to luxury, free from the need to work or make any efforts for their future – though, as will soon become clear, only temporarily. When the strict, demanding grandfather surprises them with an unannounced visit, stumbling upon one of the endless drunken parties at their home, he disinherits Anthony, triggering a cascade of the couple's financial troubles, marital crises, and leads to Anthony's moral decline and mental illness.

In the novel's world, Gloria manages to overturn the grandfather's will after many years, but for Anthony it is already too late. Importantly, despite mutual infidelities, accusations, illnesses, and other adversities, the couple ultimately does not separate, thus affirming the indissolubility of marriage. In real life, the Fitzgeralds remained married until Scott's death (1940), although he became involved with another woman towards the end, and Zelda spent most of the 1930s in mental institutions.

Compared to Gloria and Anthony, Daisy and Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* represent a different type of married couple. Their immense wealth does not depend on their families' will, they own a luxurious home with servants and are parents to a little daughter. They neither attend parties very often nor abuse alcohol. Although Tom has a mistress and has had episodes of infidelity in the past, it is noteworthy that he shows a degree of tolerance for his wife's affair with Gatsby, not exhibiting the hypocrisy in this respect. The disillusioned lover, Gatsby, temporarily alleviates Daisy's boredom, revives memories, and creates tension. However, his dazzling new money fortune and genuine devotion are insufficient to break the bond that unites the Buchanans. The lover must leave, and the wife remains with her husband, aware of his rights and her obligations. In his lifetime, Fitzgerald was somewhat like both Gatsby and Tom. Like Gatsby, he quickly made money for the woman he loved, and later, like Tom, he never abandoned her or let her leave him.

Myrtle and George Wilson, Tom Buchanan's mistress and her husband, are overshadowed in the novel *The Great Gatsby* by the Buchanans' glamour. George Wilson, who – as reported by his wife – had to borrow a suit for his wedding ceremony, owns a garage with a gas pump. Certainly, he has not achieved spectacular success and cannot offer his wife the luxury that Tom occasionally provides, but he has also accomplished something in life. He loves Myrtle and does not hesitate to decide to relocate when their marriage is threatened. Like

Tom, he defends his marriage in his way, ultimately giving his life for it. By locking his wife in a room, Wilson attempts not only to keep her by his side but also to protect her from the brutality of the outside world, which she encounters when she escapes his control. Myrtle, who refuses to admit that she married her husband out of love (though her sister remembers) and rejects him because he does not measure up to the wealthy Tom, is punished for her lack of faith in her marriage. Scholars pay little attention to Wilson; for instance, Philip Northman does not mention him in his list of main characters, and others (e.g., Lance, 2000) see him solely as an antithesis to the masculinity, wealth, and vitality of Tom Buchanan, which he undoubtedly is due to his low social status and resulting limited opportunities. However, no one highlights that he is (perhaps in the first place) a husband who believes in indissolubility of marriage, unable to continue living after losing his wife.

Dick and Nicole Diver lead a life of luxury thanks to Nicole's family's fortune, Dick continues to work "half-heartedly", including as his wife's physician. Unjealous and loyal to each other – until a breaking point – the Divers enjoy socializing and having fun, much like the young Fitzgeralds. Dick's fascination with the teenage actress Rosemary does not threaten their marriage (just as Fitzgerald's infatuation with the young actress Lois Moran does not destroy his marriage). Dick is responsible and aware of the dangers a potential affair could bring, not just to his marriage but also to the young girl's psyche. Albeit the role of a doctor to his mentally ill wife overwhelms him, and the opulent life at her expense humiliates him, he lacks both the courage to leave her and the strength to fight for her when she finally decides to leave him for another man. Dick sacrificed his professional career for Nicole, but he cannot withstand the pressure in the long run, succumbing to alcoholism that leads to scandals and excesses reminiscent of some documented episodes from Fitzgerald's own life.

In the novel *Tender Is the Night*, two other married couples appear, with a history partly borrowed from the Fitzgeralds' biography, namely Abe and Mary North and Albert and Violet McKisco.

Abe North is a talented composer, who has been suffering from a lack of creative inspiration for several years, seeking escape in alcohol, and sinking deeper into addiction – this clearly mirrors the experiences of his creator. Abe North accusing the wrong black man of stealing his wallet is a replica of a similar incident involving a quarrelsome Fitzgerald in a Parisian bar (Taylor, 2003, p. 232). Abe's death during a brawl in a New York bar gives his wife Mary a chance for a new, this time aristocratic, marriage. Perhaps by killing off his fictional alter ego, the writer wished to rid himself of that part of himself which he could not discard in reality and free his wife from the burden of his personality.

Albert McKisco is an underappreciated writer whose greatness is proclaimed to the world by his wife Violet, who dreams of being the wife of a famous author.

Violet expects her husband's success to be primarily for her benefit, while he desires to rise to the occasion. McKisco undergoes the nightmare of an absurd duel with the experienced soldier Tommy Barban, a confrontation that he himself provoked. McKisco, who disappears from the reader's view for a long time, eventually achieves the coveted success, and then watches from the sidelines as his wife Violet parades triumphantly in her dream role as the wife of a famous husband. With a bit of malice, one could ask whether this is how Fitzgerald viewed his relationship with his wife after the spectacular success of his first novel.

7. Marriages in Fitzgerald's Short Stories

Two opposite types of marriage are conveyed through some characters in Fitzgerald's short stories. One of them is the "artistic" marriage, where at least one partner is an artist. It is based on love and tolerance, but nonetheless marked by the temptation and eruption of jealousy. This is evident in stories like *Magnetism* (1928), *The Rough Crossing* (1929), *Two Wrongs* (1930) or *One Trip Abroad* (1930).

In *Magnetism*, the protagonist is a handsome actor struggling with the temptation posed by a young screen star, facing an unexpected surge of jealousy from his wife and a blackmail attempt by a female colleague, which ultimately helps to ease their marital conflict. Instead of leaving her husband as she had previously threatened, his wife Kay unexpectedly confesses her love to him: "George!" Kay called from the next room. "I love you!" "I love you too," he replied (Short Stories, p. 313).

This clearly echoes the turbulent relationship of the Fitzgeralds – Scott's fascination with the young actress Lois Moran, Zelda's jealousy, her acts of revenge, and the multiple reconciliations of the quarrelsome couple.

The difficult journey from America to Europe was undertaken by the Fitzgeralds in 1927. The theme of a married man's infatuation with a very young woman resurfaces in this story. The protagonist, a popular writer named Adrian Smith, is fascinated by his young female admirer, but despite his wife's suspicions, he does not commit adultery (as the author himself always claimed he did not with Lois Moran). Meanwhile, his suspicious wife flirts with another passenger drinking to excess, which results in a ban on further alcohol consumption on board (a scenario that could likely have befallen the party-loving and flirtatious Mrs. Fitzgerald). The story concludes on land with a happy act of mutual admiration by the spouses, reminiscent of the many times the Fitzgeralds reconciled, and a renunciation of their "traveling" versions of themselves: "What do you suppose those Smiths on the ship were like?" he asked. "That certainly wasn't me." "Nor me," she replied (Short Stories, p. 550).

In *Two Wrongs*, the characters Bill, a theatrical producer, and his wife, Emmy, whom he has groomed into an ambitious dancer, are depicted. Similar to his creator,

Bill achieves great success as a young man, only to experience a slow moral and professional decline, succumbing to alcoholism and engaging in affairs, eventually suffering serious health issues. Like Zelda Fitzgerald, Emmy dreams of a ballet career but, unlike Zelda (who turned down an offer to perform in Italy), she takes up a lucrative offer, even though she feels she should accompany her sick husband to a sanatorium. Unlike Scott Fitzgerald, Bill supports his wife's decision, albeit insincerely, hoping for her voluntary act of self-sacrifice: "He was sure Emmy would eventually come back, no matter what she did or what favorable contract she signed" (Short Stories, p. 639). Bill's hope has its foundation in the fact that in the end, Mrs. Fitzgerald always returned, even after packing her suitcases and moving out.

In *One Trip Abroad*, the young married couple Nelson and Nicole can indulge in their artistic passions and lead a rich, entertaining social life thanks to an inheritance that Nelson received. Not coincidentally, the reader meets them during a trip to Africa (similar to a trip that the Fitzgeralds took in 1930), where they are intrigued by another couple, with whom they ultimately do not establish a connection despite the temptation. Nelson and Nicole settle in Switzerland (a place the Fitzgeralds briefly visited), where, as a punishment for their snobbish tendencies, they fall victim to an aristocratic con artist. They remain in their relationship despite Nicole's flirtations with other men, but Nicole flies into a jealous rage when she catches her husband kissing another woman. The couple encounters the pair from the African trip twice more, eventually recognizing themselves in them. Though they feel aversion to their own replicas, harmony is restored between them, sealed by the romantic glow of the moon. As Marc Baldwin (2005, p. 69) writes, in 1930, the author experienced a nervous breakdown, and his wife was placed in a mental institution diagnosed with schizophrenia. According to Baldwin, the imagined second couple in *One Trip Abroad* symbolizes the disintegration of the self, and the positive ending contrasts with the author's real experiences (p. 78).

In sum, in this type of marriage, the spouses lead an intense life full of interactions with others, constantly questioning themselves and each other, yet never freeing themselves from a sense of duty and mutual solidarity, typical of the traditional model of marriage.

Another type is the boring marriage, where the husband or wife longs for change – such as in the stories *Oh Russet Witch!* (1922), *The Four Fists* (1920), *Offshore Pirate* (1941) or *Crazy Sunday* (1931). Boredom appears regardless of the couple's financial status and is often accompanied by marital infidelity or the temptation thereof, sometimes leading to the dissolution of the relationship.

In *O Russet Witch*!, the modest bookstore employee Merlin Grainger is fascinated by his eccentric neighbor but, driven by realistic pragmatism, proposes to his colleague from work, with whom he leads a lackluster middle-class life. His infatuation with Caroline, who, as it turns out after many years, is actually named Alice, never leaves him, and a chance meeting is enough for him to momentarily

forget his wife and child. However, this has no impact on the couple's relationship, especially since Olivia does not attach much importance to her husband's questionable behavior, seemingly content with her status as a wife and mother.

The protagonist of *The Four Fists*, Samuel Meredith, forms a close relationship with a married woman who agrees to meet him despite considering her marriage happy. Her behavior reflects the syndrome of a non-working wife free from any obligations, whose life starts to lack variety and excitement. The flirtation ends abruptly when her husband returns home earlier than expected and lands a punch to his rival, which the rival accepts with humility. Both men thus acknowledge the principle of marital indissolubility, which a minor episode cannot undermine.

In *Offshore Pirate*, the millionaire Gaston Scheer travels by ship with both his lover and his wife, from whom he has no intention of separating. When he accidentally notices his wife flirting with another passenger, he unhesitatingly orders his rival to be thrown overboard, making no reproach to his wife. His assessment of his marital rights is absolute, leaving no room for negotiation.

In *Crazy Sunday*, the protagonist, a barber by trade, amasses a great fortune thanks to a tip from a wealthy client, only to lose it all during the stock market crash. Disappointed by this turn of events, his wife Violet runs off with a neighbor, taking the last of their money from their joint account. Interestingly, the lover is also bankrupt, indicating that the woman is driven purely by a desire for adventure, not the prospect of security with another man.

In sum, Fitzgerald's short stories present a vivid tapestry of marital dynamics, reflecting both the allure and the challenges of romantic relationships. Whether it is the intense life of artist couples or the ennui of more traditional marriages, Fitzgerald's characters navigate the complexities of love, loyalty, and personal aspirations in a manner that often mirrors the author's own tumultuous experiences.

8. Conclusions

Fitzgerald's prose reflects, to some extent, the marital experiences of the author and his wife, but it would be wrong to view it solely as a literary chronicle of their tumultuous relationship. The writer seems to experiment with different models of marriage that often significantly differ from young people's dreams of a happy, untroubled relationship with their loved one. Nevertheless, many of Fitzgerald's characters pursue marriage with the beloved person as a priority in their lives, suffer if this intention is unsuccessful and recall it after years with nostalgia.

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