

# **Sports, Narrative, and Nation in the Fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald**

**Jarom Lyle McDonald**

# STUDIES IN MAJOR LITERARY AUTHORS

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A ROUTLEDGE SERIES

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Routledge  
New York & London

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
270 Madison Avenue  
New York, NY 10016

Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group  
2 Park Square  
Milton Park, Abingdon  
Oxon OX14 4RN

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Routledge is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group, an Informa business

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

International Standard Book Number-10: 0-415-98133-6 (Hardcover)  
International Standard Book Number-13: 978-0-415-98133-0 (Hardcover)

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

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McDonald, Jarom Lyle, 1976-

Sports, narrative, and nation in the fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald / by Jarom Lyle McDonald.

p. cm. -- (Studies in major literary authors)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-98133-6

1. Fitzgerald, F. Scott (Francis Scott), 1896-1940--Criticism and interpretation. 2. Fitzgerald, F. Scott (Francis Scott), 1896-1940--Political and social views. 3. Sports in literature. 4. Sports spectators. 5. Social status in literature. 6. Social classes in literature. 7. National characteristics, American, in literature. I. Title.

PS3511.I9Z6855 2007  
813'.52--dc22

2006101160

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# Fitzgerald, Sport, and Social Interaction

Sport has, quite often, been a common motif in literature, functioning as theme, as setting, as allusion, and as metaphor. This is especially true in American Literature; as spectator sports moved to the forefront of American consciousness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, major and minor literary figures turned to sport as a way of comprehending some of the radical changes occurring in American life.

And while a variety of authors reacted to sport in a variety of ways, F. Scott Fitzgerald is unique among American authors in the approaches his literature took toward the significance of American sport. Fitzgerald is among the first of American authors to see sport as a *social* institution, one that went beyond functioning as an activity of leisure. In his perception, sport fit into larger concepts of social relationships, both relationships of immediate community as well as those of national identification. In doing so, sport had a noteworthy interaction with Fitzgerald's literary methodologies. As Fitzgerald used his literature to engage with history, nationhood, and the relationship between citizens of different class and/or status, his emphasis on social institutions provided a distinctive position from which to analyze the cultural context of spectator sports.

With this thesis in mind, let me emphasize that one cannot talk about the significance of F. Scott Fitzgerald's fiction without understanding the role that notions of social class and social status played in Fitzgerald's personal and literary life. Among other things, Fitzgerald treated his literary endeavors as a way to comprehend and understand better the class distinctions, class consciousness, and social mobility (or lack thereof) he saw in the modern American lifestyle. To interrogate issues of class and status, Fitzgerald would often focus on character types or conventions of setting and plot that served as microcosms of, or homologues for, much broader social systems. Much of his early literature consistently reworked motifs such as the poor young



boy (or girl) losing the game of love to a wealthier counterpart or the talented artist hampered by economic and social constraints or boundaries. As he matured as a writer, Fitzgerald moved beyond simple character reworkings, recognizing deeper complexities and questions in such social situations and struggling to figure out how his questions about the ideologies of class related to ideologies of nationhood, race, religion, and gender. Everything became, for Fitzgerald, types of the social world: college and education, personal and family relationships, political happenings, the expatriate lifestyle, emerging media.

Yet while sport, in some ways, functioned similarly to some of these other institutions in terms of its relationship to social systems or its ability to be a target of Fitzgerald's social inspection, it also provided Fitzgerald a particular insight that these other social microcosms do not. Fitzgerald may not have found any actual answers to all his questions about social mobility that he seemed so earnestly in search of through his literature, but he returned to sports often in search of them. And as he sought to comprehend the system of social stratification in which he lived, spectator sports were an essential influence on his representation (or representations) of the American way of life. Moreover, his insights into the narratives associated with the institution of sport provide a center of examination that is invaluable for understanding the way other cultural institutions function in Fitzgerald's mind.

In this book, then, as I examine how Fitzgerald probed the roles of sport in American social formations, I will also read fictional narratives as responses to or conversations with some of the other narratives of sport. By doing so, I seek to investigate both the degrees of similarity and the differences between Fitzgerald's understanding of how sport works and that of other personalities of sport-related cultural rhetoric. I ultimately argue that Fitzgerald, through *This Side of Paradise*, *The Great Gatsby*, and his short stories, demonstrates how both sport (the rules, the history, the physical action) and stories told by and about sport worked together to structure concepts of social stratification. Fitzgerald's literary treatment of and influence by class-inflected sport culture reveal an often paradoxical phenomenon in both his own attitude to status-based power structures and in his analysis of the burgeoning American nationalism. He saw within spectator sport a consistent structure of stratification and hierarchy, even in the face of sport's own attempts to put forth the story that sport erases lines of difference and allows for egalitarian social relationships as a model of success—one built on individual talent rather than social ideologies.

As I put Fitzgerald's understanding of sport within the framework of social criticism, I make a distinction between the term "social class" and "social

status.” In my distinction, I find Max Weber’s definitions of the two terms particularly helpful in understanding how class and status are separate but interrelated concepts. In “Class, Status, Power,” Weber defines the term social “class” as a delineation of groups of power along purely economic lines. The term “status” becomes vital for Weber as he attempts to show that power structures are not inherently grounded in economic condition. For example, “Honor,” such as that which comes through adulation of war or sport heroes, is a condition that can help create status. In fact, Weber theorizes that the power which comes from status is actually more important because it can lead to economic power, whereas the converse isn’t necessarily true; economic accumulation does not always lead to status. For Weber, occupying a position of honor interacts with having command of economic resources, in that both states contribute to a more encompassing desire for power. “Man does not strive for power only in order to enrich himself economically,” Weber writes, “[but] power, including economic power, may be valued for its own sake” (250). In Weberian terms, then, Fitzgerald, identifying relationships between sport and social formations, often focuses his attention more on concepts of status, especially in terms of the ways that sport leads to honor and the formation of status-groups. However, the word class itself does become important at different moments as well, especially in the ways that Fitzgerald sees sport connecting to national systems of class distinction. Throughout such investigations, Fitzgerald, too, sees “power” of privilege and elitism as the key concept to center on in the relationship between sport and status or sport and class.

The first chapter of the book, “‘We Are a Very Special Country’: The Narrativization of Sport and the Fiction of a Classless Nation,” will establish my argument in the framework of modern and contemporary American spectator-sport culture, a culture which finds its roots in concepts of emulation and vicarious participation. The major goal of chapter one is to situate the subsequent literary readings within an examination of the ways in which the institution of sport historically (and currently) perpetuates narratives of classlessness and equal opportunity while ironically reinforcing division along lines of social status—status that, while sometimes based in economic condition, is more often centered in celebrity adulation and emulation by spectators. Through analyzing common structures of contextual material, from autobiographies of star athletes of both early and late twentieth century to political anecdotes concerning the relationship between sport and status, I consider the pervasiveness of the following lines of reasoning: 1) As sport culture has become more of a fixture of celebrity in American culture, its focus on spectatorship has led to the narrativizing of sport—the idea that sport is perceived in terms of the stories that it tells and the myths that it disseminates; 2) Because

of the physical nature of athletic competition, one of the most commonly disseminated narratives of sport centers around concepts of merit-based success; 3) This description of sport's inherent structures belies the actual reality that American culture has formulated (and continues to do so) its perception of sport through an emphasis on a spectatorship based not in meritocracy but in emulation and hero-worship, and thus the stories and myths that are most often disseminated actually reinforce the structures of social status rather than eliminate them; and 4) This conflict between the stories sport tells and the way sport functions is a significant homology for concepts of American nationalism, a nationalism taking pride in stories of egalitarian opportunity yet very often centered on the same hierarchical attitudes of meritocracy and exceptionalism seen in sport.

Once I lay out the theoretical groundwork of my argument, I begin to examine the ways in which Fitzgerald, himself so concerned with stories of hierarchy, status, and national attitudes, explores the paradoxes of sport society as a way to explore the paradoxes of American social life. Chapter Two, "Gridiron Paradise: Princetonian Football, American Class," will begin to read Fitzgerald by way of his first novel, emphasizing the historical convergence of American sport, American status, and American stories in his own narrative undertakings. Published in 1920, *This Side of Paradise* chronicles Fitzgerald's conception of the social relationships of the Ivy League community at Princeton. Fitzgerald considered Princeton in some ways a cultural microcosm for the nation, and often framed discussions of American culture as discussions of Princetonian culture. This is most striking in his investigation of college football at Princeton, a system which Fitzgerald once called "the most intense and dramatic spectacle since the Olympic games" ("Princeton" 94). I will investigate football at Princeton, both the historical Princeton which Fitzgerald attended as well as the fictional Princeton of *This Side of Paradise*, and deeply interrogate the rhetoric of the socially-inflected language through which Fitzgerald represents it. In doing so, I will show how Fitzgerald's first novel both passively allows as well as actively challenges dominant ideologies of social status formation. The novel, in which college football plays a quantitatively minor yet contextually crucial role, uses the settings, stories, and language of football specifically as a way to talk about spectatorship, emulation, and ideology, expressing both the possibilities and complications of trying to connect the stratified class system at Princeton with the act of living in a much larger and rapidly changing America.

Chapter Three, "'Idol of the Whole Body of Young Men': Football, Heroes, and the Performance of Social Status," will continue looking at college football but change genres, examining the role that football plays in the

diverse corpus of short stories. Fitzgerald's stories dealing with football are extremely intriguing in their use of descriptive words such as "spectacle," "drama," and "play," words all with connections to performance. They also often contain strong correlative juxtapositions between the action of the game and theatrical settings, Hollywood personae, and a sense of audience-oriented, constructed rehearsing. As Fitzgerald narratively explores the connection between the game of football and some of these settings, such stories describe the physical action of football and its consequences not as an athletic competition but as a staged show, a play in which actors take on roles that bring them romantic and monetary accolades out of reach of the "spectators."

This observation is important for Fitzgerald as he more closely probes the ways that spectators "worship" football idols for their successful, skillful performances. Football for Fitzgerald is based in a social interaction of performance behavior that exists in the relationship between fan and spectator. Reading his football stories with this lens demonstrates the way in which he critiques the social status-groups that attempted to ground themselves in athletic success. Fitzgerald's football stories, in many ways, challenge their own literary heritage; rather than reincarnate well-known pulp sports figures such as cultural hero and American Dream icon Frank Merriwell, Fitzgerald's stories attempt to argue that the hero/idol figure's social tactics are, as strong as they might be, fantasy. Given such an assumption, Fitzgerald's short football stories argue that while football as a cultural narrative may have the power to allow for movement along a social hierarchy, such a phenomenon is not due to individual accomplishments or abilities but instead relies inherently upon the reactions of the crowd to a given performance. The performance of a football game thus sets the stage for a larger, social performance that creates the formation of status-groups around the idols and simultaneously recreates rituals of social relationship.

Chapter Four, "Perfunctory Patriotism': Tom Buchanan, Meyer Wolfshiem, and America's Game," will move away from college football and look instead at baseball in the first part of the twentieth century. From the first significant use of the phrase "America's game," baseball has been continually labeled as the "national pastime" and the "game of the people," a sport structured to represent the best of American ideologies of egalitarianism and social equality. Yet while baseball did, in fact, gain rapid popularity in America because of certain structural characteristics that appealed to the emerging American middle-class, the application of ideals of an American character to baseball is largely based in a romanticism that ends up ignoring the real class tensions involved in such a spectator sport. Fitzgerald uses his masterpiece, *The Great Gatsby*, to see in this game a tension between mass

America, a group often labeled as the emerging middle class because of its increasing economic and social power, and the smaller groups of leisurely, upper-class sportsmen.

Though *The Great Gatsby* contains only a few scattered allusions to baseball amidst the complex collection of cultural objects, examining these episodes will demonstrate how Fitzgerald understands baseball as a key player in figuring out what people meant when they speak such words as “status” and “class.” To restate, though the baseball allusions are few in number, they are crucial; the novel contains a textual history that is often overlooked yet which brings baseball to the forefront of discussion about Fitzgerald, sport, and class. A history of the revision process of the novel reveals a deleted passage from early galleys of *The Great Gatsby*, where the climactic moment in which Daisy, Gatsby, and Tom “have it out” occurs not in a private hotel room but instead following a long description of the group’s outing to a Giants-Cubs baseball game. This textual history, both the initial inclusion of this anecdote as well as its eventual excision, will be read in terms of tensions of class and status.

In addition to the deleted passages, three specific textual passages existing in the final publication—James Gatz’s childhood baseball schedule, Gatsby’s Oxford-days cricket posing, and Meyer Wolfshiem’s involvement in baseball—will demonstrate the degree to which baseball ultimately fails in its attempts to function as a rhetoric for the egalitarian “values” of the middle class. The use of baseball in the novel works together with the cultural context of baseball’s early history (from the late nineteenth century through the first part of the 1920s) to make an argument for seeing baseball not as the national pastime, but as an ideological force which set the groundwork for the type of rhetorical recapitulations of the sports-based success myth that is at the heart of the contextual material which chapter one explores. Fitzgerald understands how the stories told about baseball, both individual narratives as well as cultural and historical ones, evolved into tools of American nationalism, specifically a middle-class nationalism with its own ideologies concerning the real and symbolic social significance of the game of baseball.

Ultimately, Fitzgerald’s fiction helps us better see how spectator sports function as an ideological voice and are used by individuals to disseminate certain attitudes and beliefs about community, status, and nationhood. The union of a cultural analysis of sport culture and a literary analysis of Fitzgerald’s fiction is also fruitful considering the way that society has permeated its participation of sport with a substantial emphasis on narrative structures. In other words, Fitzgerald understood the ways that culture “reads” sports, and his fiction often offers alternative or more complex “readings” that better

comprehend the way that the stories of sport function in terms of influencing American class anxieties and debates over defining national identity. As I provide close, detailed readings of Fitzgerald's fiction in conjunction with associated historical records and cultural voices, I aim to investigate fully the understanding that the "peculiarly American" fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald offers of the relationship between sport, spectator culture, and ideologies of social systems.

As a caveat, I must close this introduction by recognizing that paradoxes also inherently exist within Fitzgerald, an author seeking to investigate class structures in order to both criticize as well as embrace the hierarchical systems he so often encountered in American society. In his own attitude toward status-based power structures as well as toward burgeoning American nationalism at the turn of the century, Fitzgerald often found himself desiring simultaneously to be the privileged successor to the status bestowed through the "American Dream" narrative as well as to end the perpetuation of the myths which ultimately exclude all those who exist on the outside. As I investigate the ways in which Fitzgerald paradoxically responds to particular narratives of sport and ideologies of status, I demonstrate how Fitzgerald's conversations with American sport culture uncover the complicated ironies in American social stratification and reveal how the institution of sport culture historically and contemporarily perpetuates these same narratives, ideologies, and ironies.



## Chapter One

# “We Are a Very Special Country”: The Narrativization of Sport and the Fiction of a Classless Nation

During the 1988 presidential campaign, George H.W. Bush stated, “I am not going to let that liberal Governor [Michael Dukakis] divide this nation. . . . I think that’s for European democracies or something else. It isn’t for the United States of America. We are not going to be divided by class” (qtd. in Kalra 1). Bush, of course, had a particular political agenda (relating to the upcoming election) in claiming that America desires to, or has the ability to, exist as a “classless” nation. But behind Bush’s comments is an unacknowledged facet of his ideologies as well, one that speaks about the ways in which he sees the American nation in relationship to other nations around the world. Bush’s statement exemplifies an idea that rests on a notion of American exceptionalism—the belief that America is, inherently, set apart from other nations.

Several months later, as Bush began his presidential term, he made his claims of how class should (or shouldn’t) function in America the focal point of his inaugural remarks. In talking about America as a model for other countries, he stated,

For the first time in this century, for the first time in perhaps all history, man does not have to invent a system by which to live. We don’t have to talk late into the night about which form of government is better. . . . America today is a proud, free nation, decent and civil, a place we cannot help but love. We know in our hearts, not loudly and proudly, but as a simple fact, that this country has meaning beyond what we see . . . (“Inaugural Address”)



The ideas expressed behind phrases of this nation's "better" government and "simple fact[s]" of America serving as an standard are, of course, not unique to Bush by any means. On the contrary, Bush's speech taps into one of the most common sentiments of the motif of American exceptionalism, that America, as a nation, is "better" because its form of government is based in supposed democratic ideals, ideals that somehow create the type of classless social system that Bush called for during the election debate.

Apparently when it came to speeches, George Bush saw much value in espousing notions of American exceptionalism, as he only three weeks later elaborated upon such ideas in yet another public address. In this particular oration, Bush stated,

The main ingredient in each person's success is individual initiative. It always has been, and it always will be. So I would say, if you're willing to work hard and make sacrifices, you can accomplish just about anything you set your mind to. And that's what the American dream is all about. ("Congratulations to 49ers")

Bush's goal here appears to be making a connection between the collective "successes" of the American nation and the manner in which that success could be attributed to the work of its individual citizens. The phrase "American Dream," a phrase which many consider trite and worn out in both sociological and literary studies, has nevertheless persisted in being one of the most pervasive ideas espoused by American citizens, emerging in all forms of discourse and across all institutions. Politically speaking, rarely is an individual elected without overtly espousing a belief in American exceptionalism and in the ability of the "American Dream" to raise citizens to the top of the social and economic ladder. It is no wonder that George Bush made such concepts an integral part of his campaign and of his subsequent presidency.

The story of a nation giving all individuals equal access to the accumulation of wealth, status, and success is a powerful narrative, one which, by relying on words such as "opportunity" and "mobility," encourages convictions of the primacy of internal qualities over external; the American dream sees hard work and dedication as factors for both social and monetary success and dismisses theories that suggest environment, genealogy, and history could shape one's social status or class position. American society has ideologically embedded the American Dream motif into culture to such a degree that a large portion of citizens wholeheartedly believe Bush when he states that classes don't exist in this nation. In fact, as Paul Fussell notes in *Class: A Guide Through the American Class System*, the concept of class has consistently been "remained