"An Instance of Apparent Plagiarism":

F. Scott Fitzgerald, Willa Cather, and the First *Gatsby* Manuscript

**BY MATTHEW J. BRUCCOLI**

The Princeton University Library has recently acquired a letter from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Willa Cather enclosing two pages from a working manuscript of *The Great Gatsby*. Concerned that he had inadvertently echoed Cather’s short novel, *A Lost Lady*, Fitzgerald explained in late March or early April 1925 that his evocation of Daisy’s voice, which resembles Cather’s description of Marian Forrester, had been written before he read *A Lost Lady*.

Hotel Tiberio, Capri, Italy

My Dear Miss Cather:

As one of your greatest admirers—an admirer particularly of *My Antonia*, *A Lost Lady*, *Paul's Case* and *Scandal* I want to write to explain an instance of apparent plagiarism which some suspicious person may presently bring to your attention.

To begin with, my new book *The Great Gatsby* will appear about the time you receive this letter (I am sending you the book besides). When I was in the middle of the first draft *A Lost Lady* was published and I read it with the greatest delight. One of the finest passages is the often quoted one toward the end which includes the phrases “she seemed to promise a wild delight that he has not found in life... "I could show you”... etc (all misquoted here as I have no copy by me).

Well, a month or two before I had written into my own book a parallel and almost similar idea in the description of a woman’s charm—an idea that I’d had for several years. Now my expression of this was neither so clear, nor so beautiful, nor so moving as yours but the essential similarity was undoubt-

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1 This article was suggested to me by Charles Scribner III who generously gave me his notes. Mr. Scribner discovered the letter and manuscript pages in the Seven Gables Bookshop, New York City, shortly after they were purchased from Dr. William H. Button whose family knew Miss Edith Lewis, one of Willa Cather’s literary trustees. They are printed with the permission of Scottie Fitzgerald Smith.
edly there. I was worried because I hated the devil to cut mine out so I went to Ring Lardner and several other people and showed them mine and yours and finally decided to retain it. Also I've kept the pages from my first draft to show you and am enclosing them here. The passage as finally worked out is in my Chapter One. Hoping you will understand my motive in communicating this to you I am

With Best Wishes and Most Sincere Admiration

F. Scott Fitzgerald

The passage Fitzgerald quoted from memory appears on pp. 171-72 of *A Lost Lady* (New York: Knopf, 1923):

Her eyes, when they laughed for a moment into one's own, seemed to promise a wild delight that he has not found in life. "I know where it is," they seemed to say, "I could show you!" He would like to call up the shade of the young Mrs. Forrester, as the witch of Endor called up Samuel’s, and challenge it, demand the secret of that ardour; ask her whether she had really found some ever-blooming, ever-burning, every-piercing joy, or whether it was all fine play-acting. Probably she had found no more than another; but she had always the power of suggesting things much lovelier than herself, as the perfume of a single flower may call up the whole sweetness of spring.

As published, the description of Daisy's voice on p. 11 of *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribners, 1925) reads:

Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered "Listen," a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour.

On 28 April 1925, Willa Cather replied, saying that she had enjoyed reading *Gatsby* before she received Fitzgerald's letter and that she had not detected any duplication of *A Lost Lady*. She acknowledges that many authors have tried to say that same thing,
Mr. Willa Cather,

As one of your greatest admirers — an admirer particularly of your work, The Great Gatsby, and now I know that Steinbeck and I ought to write to explain an instance of apparent plagiarism where some invisible person may possibly spring to your attention.

To begin with, my new book, The Great Gatsby, will appear around the time you receive this letter (I am writing you the last October). When I was in the middle of the first draft of The Great Gatsby, one of the first passages that often quoted was something like: "Your thing was so beautiful, so incalculable, so incalculable."

Well, two months before I had written into my own book a parallel and almost similar idea as "the description of a woman's change: an idea that I had for several years, now a very clear idea of this woman's change."

Dear Mr. Cather,

F. Scott Fitzgerald

Letter from F. Scott Fitzgerald to Willa Cather

Fitzgerald Additional Papers

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They stood up when dinner was announced, Jordan Vince stood up very straight, with her slim shoulders back and she leaned the upper part of her body leaning a little back wards. She pushed hands on her hips and threw back her bonnet with lovely part and non too and said:

"Are we tired of eating, aren't you? Nobody ever does anything worth anything. Your voice is dark and musical, like her great eyes and the fleshy lips and mouth and voice up and down their scale. It was not a gale voice — it was somewhat

honorable — it held a promise of infinite dignity, that all the books of world knew gay things for which the soul beloved to brood of all the whole.

As they went into the dining room, on a screwed tanned porch.
but none has succeeded. The only way to describe beauty is to de-
scribe its effect, and not the person. Fitzgerald pasted this letter in
his scrapbook.²

Apart from demonstrating Fitzgerald’s scrupulous literary hon-
esty as well as the care with which he had read Willa Cather, these
documents provide a significant supplement to our knowledge
about the composition of *Gatsby*: they are the only known pages
from the working draft that preceded the complete 1924 manu-
script now in the Princeton University Library.

*A Lost Lady* was published 14 September 1923. Since Fitzgerald
notes that he “was in the middle of the first draft” of his novel
when he read Cather’s novel, it now seems highly probable that
Fitzgerald was writing on the final plot of *Gatsby* earlier than has
been thought. Until the discovery of the pages he sent Cather, it
had appeared that Fitzgerald did not conceive the Gatsby-Daisy-
Nick plot until spring 1924. These manuscript pages attest to the
existence of at least a partial working draft in 1923 which Fitz-
gerald then completely rewrote—not revised—in 1924. Apart from
the name changes (Jordan Vance became Jordan Baker and Ada
became Daisy), the crucial difference between the drafts is that the
1923 draft was written from the point of view of the omniscient
author. Nick Carraway did not become the narrator until Fitz-
gerald rewrote the novel in 1924. Moreover, the evidence of the
paper reinforces the separation of these drafts. The pages Fitzgerald
sent to Cather are on 8½ × 11 paper watermarked SHAMROCK
TYPEWRITER LINER, whereas the complete 1924 draft is on 8½ ×
12½ paper watermarked CASCADE BOND / U.S.A.

On the basis of two pages it is impossible to tell how close to
the published novel the plot of the 1923 draft really was. Fitzger-
al was living in Great Neck, Long Island in 1922-24 and seeing
Maxwell Perkins regularly, so there is little editorial correspond-
ence about *Gatsby* during this period. The original conception
of the novel, which Fitzgerald reported to Perkins in June 1922, was
for a novel set in the Midwest and New York in 1885 with “a cath-
olic element.” No manuscript survives for the *Ur-Gatsby*, and
there is no outside evidence that Fitzgerald ever began writing it.

² Since Fitzgerald was in Europe when *Gatsby* was published on 10 April 1925, he
could not inscribe copies of the book. He provided Scribners with inscription slips
to be pasted in presentation copies. Willa Cather’s copy has not been located. Be-
cause of restrictions in Cather’s will, the text of her letter to Fitzgerald cannot be
reproduced.
"How's Chicago?" asked Daisy in her low voice as we sat in the train of cars, but her eyes followed up and down as if each spoke were an arrangement of notes that would never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright-passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered "follow me," a promise that she had done gay exciting things just a while since and that they were still gay, exciting things: "...honing in the next hour.

"Only stopped off for a day when I came through. Isn't it long enough to know they mean you and Daisy?"

"This wasn't the sort of girl to expect."

"I must confess I had spent a month of eight about..."
Fitzgerald's *Ledger* mentions the novel only four times before the Fitzgeralds went to France in May 1924:

June 1923: Begin my novel  
July 1923: Intermittent work on novel  
September 1923: A new schedule + more work on novel  
April 1924: Out of the woods at last + starting novel

In April 1924, Fitzgerald informed Perkins that he had decided to rewrite the novel from a "new angle": "Much of what I wrote last summer was good but it was so interrupted that it was ragged + in approaching it from a new angle I've had to discard a lot of it— in one case 18,000 words (part of which will appear in The Mercury as a short story)."  

It is not clear whether the "new angle" was just the new narrative frame or a new plot as well. The fact that this short story, "Absolution," treats Catholicism led me to conclude that the summer 1923 draft was for the *Ur-Gatsby*. However, the two manuscript pages Fitzgerald sent Willa Cather indicate that the plot of the 1923 draft of *Gatsby* was probably close to the plot of the published novel.

It is clear, then, that Fitzgerald's rapid progress with *The Great Gatsby* on the Riviera in the summer of 1924 was aided by an earlier working draft. Since Fitzgerald usually exaggerated his progress on a novel, his claim to Willa Cather that he was "in the middle of the first draft" in September 1923 may be regarded with suspicion. Even if this draft was half written, there is no evidence that it was ever finished. The existence of the 1923 draft—of whatever extent—in no way diminishes Fitzgerald's achievement in completely rewriting *The Great Gatsby* between June and September 1924. The process did not end there, of course. He revised the typescript and galleys until February 1925.