THE GREAT GATSBY and THE LADY WITH A DOG

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Although Anton Chekhov’s influence on F. Scott Fitzgerald was first noted by Doug Steinberg in his article “Lights from a Distance,” published in the F. Scott Fitzgerald Review (2009), Matthew J. Bruccoli’s “The Composition and Revision of The Great Gatsby” (in his introduction to the Cambridge edition) makes no mention of the potential influence of Anton Chekhov’s “The Lady and the Dog” on The Great Gatsby.

In the various collected letters of Fitzgerald, we find two references to Chekhov, both favorable and both penned after the publication of Gatsby (1925). The first occurs in a letter that Fitzgerald wrote to Maxwell Perkins in April 1926: “I’ve just finished Chekhov’s Letters on Literature. God, there’s a book” (Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald 202). The second occurs in a letter to Zelda Fitzgerald dated May 4, 1940: “You never could plot for shocks but you might try something along the line of Gogol’s ‘The Cloak’ or Chekhov’s ‘The Darling’. They are both in the modern library’s ‘Best Russian Short Stories’ which the local Carnegie may have in stock” (Fitzgerald and Fitzgerald 340). Fitzgerald’s advice to Zelda makes amply clear that he did not find it untoward to borrow from other writers.

Quite naturally, the question that springs to mind is whether “The Lady with the Dog” appeared in print while Gatsby was still in the gestation stage. According to Helen Sullivan, with the Slavic Reference Service at the University of Illinois, the story appeared in 1917 in The Tales of Tchehov, volume 3, translated by Constance Garnett.

Fitzgerald, who admired Chekhov, was likely to have known “The Lady with the Dog” in the Garnett translation, used here, and to have found in that story a template for Gatsby. The striking similarities between Dimitri Gurov
and Jay Gatsby cannot be lightly dismissed. Both woo a woman whom they do not initially intend to love: in Gurov’s case, Anna Sergeyevna, and in Gatsby’s, Daisy Fay. In fact, Gurov’s first impressions of Anna are unfavorable. “There’s something pathetic about her, anyway,’ he thought, and fell asleep” (7). After he makes love to her, she upbraids herself: “And now I have become a vulgar, contemptible woman whom any one may despise” (11). Gurov’s reaction is not sympathy but indifference or worse. He finds her otiose. “Gurov felt bored already, listening to her. He was irritated by the naive tone, by this remorse, so unexpected and inopportune; but for the tears in her eyes, he might have thought she was jesting or playing a part” (11).

Gatsby initially seduces Daisy because he does not have the material means to court her as a gentleman. “He took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had no real right to touch her hand” (149).

Gurov, whether owing to his middle age, Anna’s kisses, the summer heat, the smell of the sea, or the presence of others, feels that all or some of these elements have “made a new man of him” (13). On his return to Moscow, though, he is convinced that Anna was just another “episode or adventure in his life” (14), nothing more than a memory. But he discovers that Anna’s shadow follows him everywhere, and that he is haunted:

When he shut his eyes he saw her as though she were living before him, and she seemed to him lovelier, younger, tenderer than she was; and he imagined himself finer than he had been in Yalta. In the evenings she peeped out at him from the bookcase, from the fireplace, from the corner—he heard her breathing, the caressing rustle of her dress. In the street he watched the women, looking for someone like her. (17)

Unable to forget her, he travels to her provincial hometown and stands vigil outside her house. Meeting in the opera house, they proclaim their affection for each other. Dreading discovery, she promises to visit him in Moscow, and they rendezvous in a hotel.

Similarly, although Gatsby’s seduction of Daisy does not result in self-loathing, he feels himself, like Gurov, snared.

It didn’t turn out as he had imagined. He had intended, probably, to take what he could and go—but now he found that he had committed himself to the following of a grail. He knew that Daisy was extraordinary but he didn’t realize just how extraordinary a
“nice” girl could be. She vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life leaving Gatsby—nothing. He felt married to her—that was all. (149)

The telling word, of course, is intended. Like Gurov, Gatsby wanted to have a transient affair and then move on to his next conquest. But he discovers that Daisy charms him.

To this point, the similarities between the two stories lead, at best, to a discovery of influence but not to any insights. Hence we may fairly ask the question: Why are the stories similar? A constant thread, in both writers’ lives, is adultery. As a young man, Chekhov had a series of love affairs, his most stressful with the wife of a schoolteacher. As a married man, Chekhov was frequently absent from his actress wife, Olga Knipper; he lived in Yalta, she in Moscow. Olga’s 1902 pregnancy (which ended in miscarriage) led Chekhov to suspect that she had conceived with another man. The ensuing tensions surface in their letters (Chekhov, *Dear Writer, Dear Actress* 241; Rayfield 556–57.) At one time, Olga had been Nemirovich-Danchenko’s protégé and lover, which may explain why “The Lady with the Dog” and *The Three Sisters* make such extensive use of adultery. Few subjects can provoke as much jealous passion.

Witness F. Scott Fitzgerald’s own early preoccupation with the same theme in *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), a novel written even before Zelda’s adultery on the Riviera with Edouard Jozan, a young French military officer. But the novel that most profoundly shows the effects of the affair is *The Great Gatsby*, in which virtually every character is unfaithful.

A further inducement for Fitzgerald to find in Gurov a model for Gatsby is that neither character can escape the woman’s allurements. Gurov is enmeshed in a moral death, a never-ending affair, dependent on trysts and deceptions; and Gatsby, who cannot stop his ears from hearing Daisy’s voice, the siren song, is lured into an affair that results in his physical death. But arguably the principal reason for his using Chekhov is that Fitzgerald had to decide whether to risk having Gatsby and Daisy resume their affair after they reunite (ch. 5). A youthful affair is one thing, adultery another. Fitzgerald followed the lead of Chekhov.

The result of this decision can be read in Fitzgerald’s letters, where he worries that “[Gatsby] is rough stuff in places” (Fitzgerald, *A Life in Letters* 116) and that “It may hurt the book’s popularity that it is a man’s book” (92). Although Gatsby lacks Gurov’s introspection, in both cases the male is the motivational center of the plot. It is Gatsby’s mad pursuit of Daisy that leads to the resumption of the affair; Daisy’s own emotional reasons for
surrendering are never made clear, a fault that Fitzgerald admitted: “There is a tremendous fault in the book—the lack of an emotional presentment of Daisy’s attitude toward Gatsby after their reunion” (110). In fact, Daisy is, like Anna Sergeyevna, utterly passive. But whereas Chekhov never second-guessed his character, Fitzgerald fretted about his, especially in light of the book’s modest sales. “Women, and even intelligent women, haven’t generally cared much for [The Great Gatsby],” he wrote to Maxwell Perkins. “They do not like women to be presented as emotionally passive—as a matter of fact I think most women are, that their minds are taken up with a sort of second rate and inessential bookkeeping which their apologists call ‘practicallity’” [sic] (129). Fitzgerald had hoped that book sales would confirm his opinion that Gatsby was the best work he had done and would bear out T. S. Eliot’s judgment that “[Gatsby] was the 1st step forward American fiction had taken since Henry James” (137). Clearly Fitzgerald, unlike Chekhov, had misjudged his audience.

Gatsby takes place in 1922 and, for all the wildness of the Jazz Age, adultery was still abominated—if not by the flappers then by the general reading public, whose tastes ran to the conventional. Fitzgerald had to choose: keep Gatsby in a state of yearning or have the couple resume their affair. He found his answer in Gurov. A resumption of the affair heightens Gurov’s yearning. In Fitzgerald’s novel, the effect on Gatsby is the same, providing a reason for Tom Buchanan to lead George Wilson to believe that Gatsby is Myrtle’s lover, a belief that leads to Gatsby’s death.

**Works Cited**


