

## **‘Acts of Music’ – Vaudeville and Music in the Short Fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald**

F. Scott Fitzgerald’s (1896-1940) growing up years coincided with the rise and popularity of vaudevilles, and Broadway musicals. A young man attending Newman School in Hackensack, he would often find himself irresistibly drawn by the glamour of the nearby metropolis of Manhattan and spend enraptured hours at the Broadway theatres.<sup>1</sup> The influence of theatre and music on Fitzgerald can be adequately gauged by his enthusiastic and active participation in the Triangle Club at Princeton. Fitzgerald’s short stories have often provided fruitful ways of understanding the interactions between the literary narrative and other mediums such as cinema and journalism. A relatively understudied area is his sustained dialogue with vaudeville and theatre in his writings. While stories such as ‘Head and Shoulders’, ‘The Off-Shore Pirate’ and ‘Myra Meets His Family’ have role playing and performance as their basic premise, ‘Mr Icky’ and ‘Porcelain and Pink’ have been framed like one act plays. It is interesting to note that vaudevilles had a tendency to challenge established social codes<sup>2</sup> and Fitzgerald would exploit this aspect of the vaudeville to subvert morality and codes of propriety in his narratives.

This presentation sought to examine the different ways in which Fitzgerald engaged with two specific cultural expressions – vaudeville and music – in his short fiction. His interlacing of narratives with recognisable characters or situations from vaudevilles or popular songs not only affirm the spirit of gaiety and licentiousness that the Jazz Age represented but also provide the vision of an alternative reality that the characters can escape to. The use of song lyrics in particular is done with a view to create parallel texts or what T. Austin Graham calls

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<sup>1</sup> His family had sent him to study at Newman School, Hackensack , New Jersey when he was about 15 years old.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Snyder: “Vaudevillians catered to an audience that was born to Victorianism but headed for a more libertine era, and they learned to acknowledge old mores while opening up opportunities for new ones.” (*The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York,* )

the ‘literary soundtrack’.<sup>3</sup> In stories such as ‘Winter Dreams’ or ‘Three Acts of Music’, popular music amplifies the emotional quotient of the narrative and offers a legitimate way of expressing emotions the characters are incapable of voicing. Though vaudeville gave way to cinema by the third decade of the nineteenth century, Fitzgerald continued to use the metaphors of acting and performing in his writings – something that he had picked from vaudevilles and musicals in the first place. This presentation attempted to analyse the interconnectedness of the literary narrative, vaudeville and popular music in the short fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald and contend that his modernity is largely an outcome of his negotiation with the show world.

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<sup>3</sup> Graham defines it as a ‘series of written references to specific pieces of music that compel extra-literary responses in readers and thereby heighten color, or otherwise comment upon the text that contains them’. (T. Austin Graham, ‘The Literary Soundtrack: Or, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Heard and Unheard Melodies’, *American Literary History* 21 (Fall, 2009): 518-549, accessed on 5 January 2016. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20638605>)