

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), tells the story of an Islamic woman teaching Western classics in Iran between 1979, when Muslim fundamentalists under the Ayatollah Khomeini seized control of the country, and 1997, when Nafisi emigrated to America. In addition to Henry James's *Washington Square* (1881), Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), and the Vladimir Nabokov novel cited in her title, her syllabus includes F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), which she assigns shortly after militants storm the US embassy on November 4, 1979, initiating a 444-day hostage crisis. Given the roiling anti-Americanism that Khomeini fomented, it is not surprising to learn that some of Nafisi's students at the University of Tehran attack this quintessentially American novel. More intriguing is how deeply – not to mention how differently – others are affected by the tale of the enigmatic millionaire whose unlikely presence in the ritzy enclaves of Long Island Sound upends old-money notions of *noblesse oblige*. One colleague risks being censured as “anti-revolutionary” for dubbing himself “Little Great Gatsby” because he owns a swimming pool. A fiery zealot decides that the only commendable character is George Wilson, the cuckolded garage owner who murders Jay Gatsby in the mistaken belief that he is responsible for the death of Wilson's wife, Myrtle; as “the genuine symbol of the oppressed, in the land of . . . the Great Satan,” Wilson serves as the smiting “hand of God,” meting divine justice to Fitzgerald's decadent materialists.¹ Offended by this religious rhetoric, a young woman argues that *Gatsby* is about the illusoriness of aspiration, a theme that to her reveals more about fallibility than all the sanctimonious talk of right and wrong.

In a risky move Nafisi invites her class to stage a mock trial meant to mimic (if not parody) the rampant public trials of state enemies. The goal is to decide not only *The Great Gatsby*'s defining theme but the purpose of literature itself. Called to defend Fitzgerald, the embattled instructor refutes the prosecution's claim that the plot is amoral because it centers upon an adulterous relationship (a charge that, perhaps unbeknownst to Nafisi, was leveled by some early reviewers):

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

You don't read *Gatsby* to learn whether adultery is good or bad but to learn about how complicated issues such as adultery and fidelity and marriage are. A great novel heightens your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals, and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil. (133)

As a fellow professor, I find it difficult to read Nafisi's story without a twinge of envy, for her students' debate makes palpable something that we who eke out our livings in the literature classroom desperately want to believe: because art spurs critical thinking, and because societies regardless of political persuasion will seek to suppress the potentially dangerous knowledge it circulates, educators have a moral duty to expose students to its prohibited content, regardless of the costs of our advocacy. Despite its Middle Eastern setting, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* belongs to a popular genre that dramatizes this contention. Including both novels (Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 1962) and films (the Robin Williams vehicle *Dead Poets Society*, 1989), these are narratives in which brave teachers suffer the slings and arrows of small-minded administrators and parents who object to any challenging of inherited moralities. Nafisi's witness-stand denunciation of "fixed formulas" is actually a defining plot point of the genre, which climaxes with the protagonist standing up to a repressive governing body by delivering a rousing panegyric on art's capacity to compel young people to new realms of insight.

Alas, one of the first things I discovered about teaching is that opportunities to speechify on literature's uplift are actually few and far between. For nearly a decade and a half now, I have worked at a "non-traditional" university, the kind that in a less sensitive era was condescendingly referred to as a "night school." Our 4,500 students are mostly working adults, many of them United States Air Force enlistees. When I joined the faculty in 1993 – as green and naïve as any freshly minted PhD beginning his first "real" job at twenty-eight could possibly be – the average age was thirty-three. Over the years, that number has dropped to twenty-six as economic downturns continue to force a higher proportion of recent high school graduates into the full-time labor force. What has not changed is the prevailing suspicion that literature is an elitist luxury with little relevance outside of the small circle of "experts" privy to its occult meanings. I can appreciate my students' adverse opinion of it because I am sympathetic to the pressures they must negotiate even to remain in school; there is nothing more eye-opening than having a 47-year-old African-American woman breakdown during a research paper consultation because she fears her employer is plotting a round of lay-offs, or to have a 27-year-old staff sergeant

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ask to complete the class after the semester because his unit has been deployed to Baghdad.

Because education on my campus is often a third priority behind work and family commitments, I find myself struggling to convince classes that literature can have real-world applications and that assigned readings can be more than mere hoops hopped through on the way to a degree. On bad days I defensively console myself by insisting that my advocacy is a necessary and perhaps even noble endeavor, but even on the good ones I am aware that it is hardly the stuff of riveting drama. The reason why memoirs like Nafisi's or Roberta Huntley's *The Hemingway Book Club of Kosovo* (also 2003), which substitutes *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) for *The Great Gatsby*, have proved so popular is that they make imminent the consequences of their Socratic insistence that literature will redeem the unexamined life. Their war-torn settings and the repressive regimes they oppose lend urgency to their literary purpose, and urgency is something that, for all the overhyped talk of the culture wars dividing the groves of academe, is not always easy to generate in the classroom. The simple reality is that few teachers like me will ever be commanded to drink the hemlock in the name of our pedagogical imperatives. The question likely put to most of us is not the one Nafisi's students pose when she encourages them to explore the mythic nature of Gatsby's love for Daisy Fay Buchanan: "What use is love in this world we live in?" (110). Instead, we face ones that are far more formidable impediments, such as I recently did when I encountered a forty-year-old business major at a local watering hole who was just pickled enough to protest about his curricular requirements: "Why do they make me take your class, anyway?"

Rather than resent such questions, I believe in taking up their gauntlet. In the spirit of Nafisi, the present volume is an invitation to explore a variation on her class's concern: what use is F. Scott Fitzgerald in this world we live in? The answer might seem self-evident, for in the popular culture Fitzgerald remains one of America's most recognizable literary icons, his physiognomy as prominent on the Mt Rushmore of national belletrists as Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, and Ernest Hemingway. Since the 1940s, when he was posthumously reclaimed from obscurity, the story of his rise to renown in the 1920s, his declining popularity in the 1930s, his alcoholism, and his doomed romance with his wife and muse Zelda Sayre has been kept alive through biographies and *romans à clef*, television documentaries and dramatizations, dour kitchen-sink melodramas and glitzy Broadway-style musicals. *The Great Gatsby*, his best-known novel, likewise long ago entered the public vernacular, inspiring movies, operas, and ballets while lending its dapper imprimatur to bars, streets, clothing lines, planned communities, and even, in the 1970s, sugar packets.² So assured

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Introduction*

is his status that to undermine it dissenters must resort to calumny: “Fitzgerald was a bad writer who has somehow gained the reputation of a good one,” reads a throwaway line in a recent biography of Arnold Rothstein, the New York mobster who inspired *Gatsby*’s shadowy Meyer Wolfshiem.³ Such statements smack of flippant contrarianism rather than reasoned argumentation, and they rarely rise above the persuasiveness of a minority opinion.

A far greater threat to Fitzgerald’s prominence is that the qualities sustaining it – elegant sophistication and the pathos of personal tragedy – rarely resonate with students like mine. This is frustrating, given that I live in Montgomery, Alabama, one of the three or four most influential sites in the writer’s biography. It was here, after all, that Scott first met Zelda in 1918, and certain parts of the city – which Fitzgerald dubbed “Tarleton, Georgia” in his fiction – still resonate with their fabled romance. Discussing “The Ice Palace” (1920), for example, I like to note that our local Oakwood Cemetery – a popular tourist attraction, thanks to its most famous occupant, Hank Williams – is the place where Sally Carrol Happer’s mellifluous meditation on Southern mutability takes place. Other significant locales include Taylor Field (now Maxwell Air Force Base, where many of my military students work), the former Elite Restaurant (one block east of our campus), Pleasant Avenue (where Scott courted Zelda at her parents’ house), Oak Park (where Zelda swam), the remnants of Camp Sheridan north of town (where Scott was barracked), and many others. Occasionally, I even round up students and take them to 919 Felder Avenue, where the Fitzgeralds wintered in 1931–2 shortly after Zelda was released from the first of her many sanitarium stays. Since 1987, this address has been home to the Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald Museum Association, which holds the distinction of operating the only house and grounds the couple ever lived in that is open to the public. Yet, as much as I try to impress upon students their good fortune at studying Fitzgerald in an environment that so shaped his fiction, our proximity to this history does surprisingly little to ignite their enthusiasm.

Another reason I find this lack of interest frustrating is that I have vivid memories of my own undergraduate introduction to Fitzgerald in 1985 as a sophomore at the University of Missouri-Columbia. Back then, it was not rare to encounter campus beaux scouring *All the Sad Young Men* (1926) for a line to impress their ladyloves, or coeds showing off the paper dolls they had crafted after perusing an outrageously priced copy of the Fitzgeralds’ scrapbooks, *The Romantic Egoists* (1973), in a used-book store. Young women toted paperback copies of Nancy Milford’s 1970 biography *Zelda* (usually borrowed from their mothers) to signal the wild, irrepressible personae they cultivated, and fliers featured Art Deco designs that evoked the covers of *The Beautiful and*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Damned (1922) and *Tender Is the Night* (1934). Occasionally, word of house parties requiring 1920s attire made the rounds, and the vintage-clothing outlets would be chockfull of aspiring revelers searching for affordable (i.e., used) tuxedo jackets and flapper dresses. More important, the more literary sorts strove to demonstrate their affinity with Fitzgerald's vibrancy and poignancy; to discourse on the beauty of the mascara tear that runs down a young woman's cheek in *Gatsby's* third chapter was to prove that, like the titular hero himself, one possessed a "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life."⁴

I assume such things still happen, though I suspect they are limited to that rather rarefied world of the traditional college English department, where the connection between life and literature needs no explication. As for my students, I find the reasons why they are not predisposed to share my passion for Fitzgerald both revelatory and instructive. For starters, for a working- and lower-middle-class population, the elite world of country clubs, debutante parties, and mansions in which the majority of his work is set can seem dubiously snobbish, preppy, and even effete. His *haut bourgeois* fixation with prestige and social distinction strikes them as aristocratic rather than democratic, which offends their proletarian sympathies. African-American students in particular find little reason to relate to him when contemporaries such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston speak more directly to their heritage. (I am proud to report that my campus is the most integrated of all Alabama colleges, with nearly thirty percent of our population composed of African-American women. Even in the twenty-first century, that is no mean feat in a Southern state with such a tortured racial history.) Interestingly, age proves as decisive a barrier as class and race. Fitzgerald's preoccupation with youth often strikes our post-thirty population as irredeemably adolescent. Our teens and twentysomethings, by contrast, find him irredeemably antiquated, especially in light of the casual bagginess that hip-hop has brought to their fashion and slang. Bred in a landscape of digital celerity in which the past appears to have little demonstrable connection to the here and now, this age group frankly considers the 1920s Jazz Age as remote as the Paleozoic era. A handful of my undergraduates may emulate the prose and personae of Hemingway, Jack Kerouac, or Sylvia Plath, but that is because these authors' expatriate forays, pharmaceutical experimentation, and raw adolescent anger are not quite so foreign to their maturation experiences as the whimsy of "The Ice Palace" or the lachrymose glitter of *The Great Gatsby*. Finally, there is the problem of Fitzgerald's romanticism, whose ornate, formal volubility alienates classes regardless of age or ethnicity. While never as willfully obscure as such "High Modernists" as James Joyce, Ezra Pound, or Gertrude Stein, Fitzgerald nevertheless wrote in a passionate, lyrical style whose emotional vulnerability is at odds with the insouciant irony

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Introduction*

that has dominated literary expression since the mid-1970s. Such obstacles demonstrate why teachers can never presume Fitzgerald's importance; classroom discussions must recognize student likes and dislikes in order to transcend them. Otherwise, the experience of reading will never rise above the drudgery of an assignment.

An essential issue for debate within this dialogue, I would further add, is the meaning of literary relevance itself. As I often admit to classes, I am not always certain that I know the line between trying to interest them in Fitzgerald and pandering to their interests. I talk openly of how, while I want to facilitate emotional connections with his work, I also hope to challenge the criteria determining students' personal likes and dislikes – much as learning from the reasons for their ambivalence toward him teaches me to interrogate mine. One of my favorite initial reactions to *The Great Gatsby* provides an excellent entry into this discussion: “I couldn't get into it,” a class member will say, by which he or she usually means, “This work had no personal relevance to me.” Classes are sometimes taken aback by my standard response: “Why should a work have to be *personally* relevant to you to be meaningful? Might there not be things worth learning about Fitzgerald and his place in American literature that have no direct bearing on your interests?”

My question is as useful as it is provocative because it allows us to debate the pros and cons of personal response, which is the interpretive strategy in which they and I alike were first trained. Influenced by the anti-institutionalism of the 1960s, this pedagogy emerged out of the then-fledgling field of composition studies, popularized by theorists such as Peter Elbow and Donald J. Murray. In general terms, personal-response writing insists that literary interpretation is a tool for empowering us to cultivate self-awareness and shape individual subjectivity, aims often celebrated under the vaguely self-help-sounding umbrella phrase “finding one's voice.” By the mid-1970s, this approach proved wildly popular in literature classrooms because it provided a method for engaging students unenthused by the prospect of explicating symbols and delineating themes. When I introduce this background during discussion periods, I usually enjoy a rewarding “Aha!” moment, one of those instances when students recognize the relevance of the point I invite them to ponder. That “Aha!” typically evaporates when I posit a more controversial idea: that interpretation performs the equally valuable service of encouraging a *loss* of self as well as its discovery. As I try to convey to students who cling a little too furiously to the “couldn't get into it” rationale, at least some relaxing of the “I”'s imperious tendency to view the world as a narrow reflection of itself is necessary if the true goal of education is to promote critical reflection. Such is Nafisi's aim,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in fact, when she discourages her class from the “self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil.” As she argues from the witness stand:

A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice; in this way is a novel called democratic – not that it advocates democracy but that by nature it is so. Empathy lies at the heart of *Gatsby*, like so many other great novels – the biggest sin is to be blind to others’ problems and pains. Not seeing them means denying their existence. (132)

Empathy is an excellent if unlikely byproduct of discussing relevance: it suggests the necessity of readers stepping beyond their individual enthusiasms to appreciate the significance of “others’ problems and pains” and acknowledge the larger world of experience surrounding them. Again, this imperative applies to teachers as much as students; it is a prerogative that we must demonstrate we pursue instead of simply preach. Otherwise, we cheapen the value of the intellectual capital we seek to cultivate by passively resenting our supposed irrelevance to “real” life rather than actively creating its pertinence.

To return to our defining question then: what use is F. Scott Fitzgerald in this world we live in? As the chapters that follow demonstrate, he has much to teach us about issues of ongoing valence, in regard to both literature and, more broadly, culture – and not merely American culture, either, as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* again demonstrates. Appreciating his relevance, however, requires rescuing him from a central misperception that has tainted his reputation. The long-held belief that he was ultimately a “failed” writer because his personal problems impeded his productivity and because he had fallen out of favor by the time of his December 21, 1940, death begs the question of why artists are compelling only when their lives can be deemed “tragic” and their promise “unfulfilled.” Contemporaries such as Eugene O’Neill, William Saroyan, and John Steinbeck suffered comparable ups and downs, yet their biographies exert little sway over the popular imagination. The reason is simple: their stories cannot be reduced to a parable as readily as Fitzgerald’s can. Thanks to his career trajectory – early, intense success followed by a long downward spiral – he has come to serve as our literary Icarus, the golden boy whose ambition and ingenuity took him too close to the sun, melting the wings of his talent. (The Icarus motif is especially appropriate when we remember Hemingway’s description of Fitzgerald’s “butterfly wings” in *A Moveable Feast* [1964]: “He became conscious of his damaged wings and of their construction and he learned to think and could not fly any more because the love of flight was

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Introduction*

gone and he could only remember when it had been effortless.”⁵ Failure is the essential component of his legend because, without it, he could not symbolize the lesson we have wanted to derive from his example – namely, that however hard we beat against our limitations, our weaknesses humble our gifts, and we are forced to abide in a world incommensurate with the capacities of imagination.

However appealing the Icarus myth, it distorts and distracts. It is responsible for the presumption that Fitzgerald produced only one truly “great” novel (*Gatsby*, of course), while the rest of his oeuvre is flawed and sloppy. For decades, this presumption proved particularly damaging to *Tender Is the Night*, whose perceived imperfections (a discursive narrative structure and inconsistent point of view) were attributed to the nine years it took to complete. Fitzgerald’s early novels, *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Beautiful and Damned*, suffer the even more degrading fate of being dismissed as “juvenile” or “apprentice” efforts. The myth has also caused a severe underestimation of Fitzgerald’s short fiction. To tease out the Icarus parallel, we might say that the sun responsible for the waning of his literary wax was the *Saturday Evening Post*, that mass-circulation paragon of middle-class respectability whose generous remuneration led him to squander his energies on silly love stories. Fitzgerald bears much responsibility for this commonplace. In a well-known 1929 letter to Hemingway, he described himself as an “old whore” whom the *Post* now paid “\$4000. a screw.”⁶ The metaphor does a vast injustice to the sixty-five stories he sold to the *Post* from 1920 to 1937, as well as the additional 100 he published elsewhere. Readers who encounter “Winter Dreams” (1922) or “Babylon Revisited” (1931) in a literary anthology will have a hard time understanding just how these classics represent a prostitution of talent. Even as one begins to recognize the plot formulae within lesser works, there remains an undisputable level of craftsmanship. Moreover, dismissing Fitzgerald’s stories as slick contrivances ignores the range of genre, style, and technique with which he experimented. Some of his best stories are comedies of manners (“Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” 1920), while others are fantasies (“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” 1922) and still others acute social commentaries (“May Day,” 1920). Once we remove the stigma of the “commercial” from them, we recognize that his contributions to the short story rank him among such certified masters as James, William Faulkner, and, of course, Hemingway.

The obligatorily “tragic” interpretation of Fitzgerald’s life also overlooks the fact that he was adept at comedy as well as tragedy. Early non-fiction pieces such as “The Cruise of the Rolling Junk” and “How to Live on \$36,000 a Year” (both 1924) are as funny as anything by the Algonquin wits. Indeed,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)

while the work of George S. Kaufman or Alexander Woollcott has aged poorly, these cheeky essays remain fresh because of Fitzgerald's self-deprecation, which allowed him to satirize the excesses of the Jazz Age by ribbing his and Zelda's own reputation as impulsive spendthrifts. There is also a great deal of humor in his fiction, whether in the coy repartee of flapper stories like "The Offshore Pirate" (1920) or in the skewering caricatures of wannabe artists such as Chester McKee in *The Great Gatsby* and Albert McKisco in *Tender Is the Night*. And while the disappointments of the 1930s disinclined Fitzgerald from exercising this side of his genius, his Pat Hobby stories pungently lampoon Hollywood narcissism and amorality. This is not to say that Fitzgerald's comedic instincts were unimpeachable; there is no more painful read in his canon than *The Vegetable*, his disastrous 1923 foray into theatrical farce. Nevertheless, wryness was as natural to his temperament as the melancholy for which he is remembered.

Once these misconceptions are corrected, several themes in Fitzgerald's life and works reveal their pertinence. His struggle for critical acknowledgment dramatizes the difficulty that "popular" authors face when trying to build reputations as "serious" artists. His signature storyline of middle-class beaux pursuing rich girls exposes sex roles and social barriers that remain entrenched in the twenty-first century. And while his flappers may seem quaint throwbacks to a time when bobbed hair and bared legs were sufficiently rebellious to shock elders, their struggle to break the repressive bonds of propriety in a culture that at once stigmatized and exploited female sexuality is no different from the dilemmas that contemporary women face. Moreover, the tendency of Fitzgerald's protagonists to succumb to dissipation and prodigality points to the consequences of glamorizing self-indulgence and irresponsibility, as Western popular culture has done since the Jazz Age. Finally, Fitzgerald's greatest legacy, his gift for evoking loss in fluid, aching strokes of prose, makes him an excellent resource for analyzing the affective power of metaphors, imagery, and other figures of speech.

Finally, although rarely recognized for his political substance, Fitzgerald helps us to appreciate both the appeal and the perils of nationalism, which ignited two world wars during his lifetime and continues (along with religious fundamentalism) to augur instability in our own. There is no hoarier cliché in Fitzgerald studies than the claim that his work addresses the "American Dream," though whether he celebrates or critiques it is disputable. Suffice it to say that few writers evoke the paradoxes of "America" as deftly as he does in *Gatsby* and short stories such as "The Swimmers" (1929). In the concluding paragraph of this unappreciated piece, Fitzgerald conveys patriotism and provincialism

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67600-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald

Kirk Curnutt

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Introduction*

simultaneously as Henry Clay Marston meditates on the metaphorical resonance of his homeland:

He had a sense of overwhelming gratitude and of gladness that America was there, that under the ugly debris of industry the rich land still pushed up, incorrigibly lavish and fertile, and that in the heart of the leaderless people the old generousities and devotions fought on, breaking out sometimes in fanaticism and excess but indomitable and undefeated . . . France was a land, England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter – it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered. It was a willingness of the heart.⁷

Out of context, the passage seems to endorse the American belief that its ideals are exportable models of global liberty; it invokes that “shining city on a hill” rhetoric that excites so much resentment in the non-Western world. One can only imagine how Nafisi’s militant students would react. They would likely point out that, up until 1979, the main Iranian beneficiary of American “willingness” was Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, whose US-backed regime was toppled by the Khomeini revolution. Nafisi would not fail to challenge this reading, however. She would note that Marston commends American “generosities” from the deck of a ship bound for France, where he will permanently settle. What sends Marston back to Europe is the gap between the promise of America and its reality. (For partisans tempted to denounce the story as anti-American, it is worth remembering that part of the source of his unhappiness in America is his unfaithful wife, who happens to be . . . *French*. Complexities abound.) Despite Marston’s disappointment, he is far from rejecting “America” – rather, the disparity makes him value his country all the more *as a symbol*. Nafisi might then point out that similar discrepancies mark all emblems. The ability to accept the inevitable gap between the real and the ideal is what separates the critical thinker from the ideologue, the true intellectual from the apparatchik and apologist. She implies as much in her memoir’s most striking moment, in which she compares the failure of Gatsby’s dream to those that doomed the Iranian revolution to replace the Shah’s monarchical abuses with Khomeini’s theocratic ones:

What we in Iran had in common with Fitzgerald was this dream that became our obsession and overtook our reality, this terrible, beautiful dream, impossible in its actualization, for which any amount of violence might be justified or forgiven . . . He wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and to the end he discovered that the past was dead,