

Narration

- 7 Dreiser tells us a lot about Henry's house, furniture and surroundings. Why do you think he does this?
- 8 How does Dreiser use direct speech to reveal character? What do we learn about Henry and Phœbe from their conversations? What do we learn about the neighbours?
- 9 Do you think Dreiser 'moralises' in the story? Is he trying to teach us something about human nature?
- 10 What is Dreiser's attitude to his characters? Does he look down on them or is he sympathetic?
- 11 Is the story critical of society in any way? What might have happened to Henry in the USA/your own country today?

Atmosphere

- 12 How does Dreiser convey the isolation of Henry and Phœbe's lives?
- 13 Is there a difference between the atmosphere of the story before and after Phœbe's death?
- 14 Is there humour in the story? Where?
- 15 What is the overall atmosphere of the story? How does it make you feel?
- 16 Is it fair to describe *The Lost Phœbe* as a ghost story?
- 17 Is the end of the story happy? Why/why not?

Style

- 18 Dreiser writes in long, sometimes formal sentences, and he uses a wide variety of vocabulary. In which parts of the story is this particularly true?
- 19 What effect does the dialogue of the characters have? Is there a good balance between dialogue and description?
- 20 Sometimes, Dreiser addresses the reader directly, e.g. *You have seen the what-not of cherry wood, perhaps ...; You perhaps know how it is with simple natures ...*. What effect does this have?

Guidance to the above literary terms, answer keys to all the exercises and activities, plus a wealth of other reading-practice material, can be found on the student's section of the Macmillan Readers website at: www.macmillanenglish.com/readers.

The Baby Party

by F Scott Fitzgerald

About the author

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in 1896 in St Paul, Minnesota in the USA. He is best known for his novels about life in the US 'Jazz Age' which took place during the 1920s.

Fitzgerald was encouraged to write by his teachers at school and he wrote stories for the school magazine. Even at Princeton University, his writing was more important to him than his studies. He joined the army in 1917 and the following summer, when he was at an army camp in Alabama, he met and fell in love with Zelda Sayre. She was the young and beautiful 18-year-old daughter of a rich family. He desperately wanted to marry her, but Zelda wanted someone who was wealthy and successful.

Determined to win her, Fitzgerald worked hard on his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. It was published in 1920, sold well, and made Fitzgerald rich. Zelda and he were married, and moved to New York, where he wrote a second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned*. This was also a success, and the Fitzgeralds began to live a life of luxury and excess. Their daughter Frances was born in 1921.

Both Fitzgerald and Zelda suffered from health problems, which were made worse by their heavy drinking. In 1925, when they were living in France, *The Great Gatsby* was published, but it did not enjoy the same commercial success as his other novels. The Fitzgeralds moved back to the USA where, in 1930, Zelda had a nervous breakdown. Her treatment was expensive: when *Tender is the Night* was published in 1934, Fitzgerald hoped it would pay their debts. But it was not a great success, and by now Scott himself was ill.

In 1937, Fitzgerald moved to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter while Zelda stayed behind. He fell in love with Sheilah Graham, a journalist, and spent the rest of his life with her. Fitzgerald's last novel was *The Last Tycoon*, which remained unfinished when he died of a heart attack in 1940. Zelda died in 1948, in a fire at the clinic where she was being treated.

Ironically, the novels which were less successful in Fitzgerald's lifetime are now thought to be his best. Several of his books have been made into films, including *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. In addition to his novels, Fitzgerald also wrote over 150 short stories.

About the story

The Baby Party was first published in *Hearst's International* in 1925. It was later published in the collection *All the Sad Young Men*.

Background information

Children in the 1920s

Fitzgerald writes particularly well about a father's love for his little girl and the pride of parents in their children. He himself had a daughter, Frances, and is no doubt drawing on first-hand experience in his description of the child and her actions. He may also have attended a 'baby party' similar to the one in the story. The competitive attitude of the mothers and the behaviour of the children is described with humour and affection.

Fitzgerald writes that the children were *modern babies* and that they behaved well. He notes that they *ate and slept at regular hours, so their dispositions were good* and adds that *such a party would not have been possible thirty years ago*. The story takes place at a time when bringing up children was a full-time job for most mothers who did not work outside the home.

Middle class, suburban America

John and Edith Andros's style of life is that of a relatively prosperous couple who live in the suburbs and can afford a maid. We are told they have *endless servant problems*. John travels by train every day to his office in the city; Edith seems to be a full-time housewife. Next door, the Markeys' life seems to follow a similar pattern.

Appearances are very important to the families in the story. It is important that the children are dressed well and behave well at the party. There is competition among the mothers to see whose child is the best. Social status is important: Edith thinks that Mrs Markey is *common* and not as good as her. When the women argue and John and Joe fight to defend their families' honour, Fitzgerald shows us the passions and suppressed violence underneath the calm surface of suburbia.

Summary

It may help you to know something about what happens in the story before you read it. Don't worry, this summary does *not* tell you how the story ends!

John Andros is 38 and lives in a suburban town with his wife Edith and two-year-old-daughter Ede. Every day, he commutes by train to work in an office in the city.

The story takes place on the day of a baby party at the house of the Markeys. The Markeys live next door to John and Edith and have a little boy, Billy. Edith and Mrs Markey do not like each other but John and Joe Markey travel to work together and are quite friendly.

There are 13 babies at the party, all with their mothers. Time passes and the children grow noisier and livelier. They have something to eat and, soon afterwards, people begin to leave. Several fathers arrive to take their children home. Edith is anxious because John has not yet arrived and it is six o'clock. She wants him to see little Ede with the other children.

Ede suddenly sees Billy Markey across the room. He is holding a teddy bear and she decides she wants it. She pulls the bear from his arms. Billy tries to get it back and Ede pushes him to the floor. Billy's parents try to intervene but Ede again pushes Billy backwards. This time, the little boy hits his head on the floor and begins to cry. Ede laughs. Before she can stop herself, Edith laughs too. Mrs Markey is furious. Ede, seeing the effect she has produced, laughs again and soon her mother is also laughing helplessly. Mrs Markey tells Edith to leave the house and take her *brat* with her. Edith begins to cry and insults the Markeys. Mrs Markey orders her husband to send Edith out of the house. At this moment, John arrives and finds his wife in tears. Joe Markey tells him that his family is responsible for all the trouble.

Edith leaves with her child and Joe Markey challenges John to a fight. They fight together silently and furiously in the snow until both of them are bleeding and their clothes are torn. They finally stop fighting when they hear someone coming towards them. They shake hands and say goodnight.

Later that night, when John and Edith are looking at Ede asleep in her bed, the maid announces that the Markeys are at the door.

Pre-reading exercises

Key vocabulary

This section will help you familiarise yourself with some of the more specific vocabulary used in the story. You may want to use it to help you before you start reading, or as a revision exercise after you have finished the story.

Verbs to describe action or movement

The party

1 Look at the words and phrases in the left-hand column below and match them with the correct definitions in the right-hand column.

- | | |
|----------------------------|--|
| 1 grab | a) to hit someone or something so that they fall down |
| 2 finger | b) to take hold of something in a rough or rude way |
| 3 round | c) to take something quickly in your hand |
| 4 break away / break loose | d) to touch or feel something with your fingers |
| 5 rush | e) to accidentally hit part of your body against something, making it hurt |
| 6 squirm | f) to pull someone or something by making a short, strong movement |
| 7 knock over | g) to escape from a person, place or situation |
| 8 bump | h) to hurry in order to get somewhere very quickly |
| 9 seize | i) to move around something |
| 10 tug | j) to move by twisting and turning in a small space |

2 Complete this paragraph using a suitable form of the verbs above. More than one answer may be correct in some cases.

At first the child sat shyly on her mother's knee, *fingering* the edge of her dress. Then she began to around because she wanted to be down. Suddenly she from her mother and towards the little boy. She him over and the toy from his hands. The boy had his head on the floor and he began to cry. Furious, he jumped up and the table in order to reach the girl. He

of her hair and it hard. She eventually and ran back to her mother.

The fight

3 Look at the words and phrases in the left-hand column below and match them with the correct definitions in the right-hand column.

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| 1 toss | a) to try hard to do something |
| 2 slip | b) to walk in an uncontrolled way as if you are going to fall over |
| 3 swing | c) to change the position of your body when you are lying down |
| 4 thresh about | d) if you do this, your feet slide accidentally and you lose your balance or fall over |
| 5 strain | e) to throw something in a careless way |
| 6 roll | f) to walk with difficulty because of an injured leg or foot |
| 7 stagger | g) to try to hit someone by making a smooth, curving movement with your arm |
| 8 limp | h) to move your body in a violent, uncontrolled way |

4 Choose the best verb to complete these sentences.

- 1 The old man slipped/strained on the ice and broke his hip.
- 2 Sue limped/tossed the ball to another player and walked off the field.
- 3 The spy jumped from the moving train and staggered/rolled over several times.
- 4 After he was hit on the head, Jack felt dizzy and strained/staggered to the nearest chair.
- 5 The dog is limping/swinging; he must have hurt his paw.
- 6 The boxer swung/strained to sit up but he was too weak.
- 7 I knew he was in pain when I saw him rolling/slipping around on the floor.
- 8 The boys threshed/strained about and tossed/swung their arms in an effort to hit each other.

Words to describe noise

5 Look at the words and phrases in the left-hand column below and match them with the correct definitions in the right-hand column.

- | | | |
|---|-----------|--|
| 1 | drown out | a) to say something in a loud voice or make a loud noise because you are angry, afraid, excited or in pain |
| 2 | wail | b) to talk in a quiet voice that is difficult to hear especially because you are annoyed or embarrassed or are talking to yourself |
| 3 | yell | c) to shout or cry with a long, high sound to show that you are in pain or very sad |
| 4 | mutter | d) to prevent a sound from being heard by making a louder noise |
| 5 | burst out | e) a sudden noisy breath that is usually caused by surprise, shock or pain |
| 6 | gasp (n) | f) to suddenly say or shout something |

6 Complete these sentences using a suitable form of the above words.

- 1 I don't like teachers who at the children all the time.
- 2 The shouts of the children all other noise.
- 3 Sam spoke in a low voice to his wife: 'I've got to get out of here,' he
- 4 When the boy pulled her hair, little Gina and ran to her mother.
- 5 Mrs Brown gave a of horror when she saw the mess the children had made.
- 6 She tried to control her temper but it was impossible. 'Go home right now!' she suddenly

Main themes

Before you read the story, you may want to think about some of its main themes. The questions will help you think about the story as you are reading it for the first time. There is more discussion of the main themes in the *Literary analysis* section after the story.

Love

Fitzgerald looks at several different forms of love and friendship: the love between husband and wife (John and Ede, the Markeys), love between friends (John and Joe), and the love of parents for their children. Parental love is perhaps given the most emphasis: Fitzgerald describes very vividly the fierce love and protection that mothers and fathers feel for their children. John fights with Joe to defend his wife and child, but it is the thought that little Ede has been insulted that really pushes him into physical violence with a man who is his friend. He recognises this at the end of the story as he holds his sleeping child and acknowledges what he has fought for *so savagely*.

7 As you read the story, ask yourself:

- a) Are the different relationships described realistically?
- b) Which relationships are important to John?

Frustration

We know that John's life has not been easy up to now. We are told that he has had to fight poverty, and ill health and although he is only thirty-eight, he does not hold many illusions about life. His life is one of routine – travelling to and from an office in the city. We are not told in which ways John has found life disappointing, but a sense of frustration seems to cling to him. When he fights with Joe, he seems to be expressing a lot of repressed violence and resentment. The fight is about more than what happens at the party and gives John a kind of relief from his frustrations.

Fitzgerald himself felt frustration as a young man: his books did not always do as well as he hoped, and he and his wife experienced ill health and money problems. One feels that John and his inner feelings are based, at least partly, on the author's experiences and struggles.

8 As you read the story, ask yourself:

- a) What indications are there that John is frustrated with his life?
- b) Which aspects of Fitzgerald's own life are reflected in the story?