

The following passage is the text of a letter written by Maxwell Perkins to a reader who had complained about F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald's novel is about a vulgar, lying bootlegger who seeks to seduce a woman already married to another man. Perkins edited the novel, and edited the books of several other famous American authors, including Ring Lardner, Thomas Wolfe, and Ernest Hemingway.

Aug. 28, 1928

Dear _____:

[1] We have read with interest your letter in criticism of *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, and we thank you for it. Probably if you had read the book through, you would not have felt any the less repugnance to it, but you would no doubt have grasped its underlying motive, which is by no means opposed to your own point of view.

[2] The author was prompted to write this book by surveying the tragic situation of many people because of the utter confusion of ideals into which they have fallen, with the result that they cannot distinguish the good from the bad. The author did not look upon these people with anger or contempt so much as with pity. He saw that good was in them, but that it was altogether distorted. He therefore pictures, in the *Great Gatsby*, a man who showed extraordinary nobility and many fine qualities, and yet who was following an evil course without being aware of it, and indeed was altogether a worshipper of wholly false gods. He showed him in the midst of a society such as certainly exists, of a people who were all worshipping false gods. He wished to present such a society to the American public so that they would realize what a grotesque situation existed, that a man could be a deliberate law-breaker, who thought that the accumulation of vast wealth by any means at all was an admirable thing, and yet could have many fine qualities of character. The author intended the story to be repugnant and he intended to present it so forcefully and realistically that it would impress itself upon people. He wanted to show that this was a horrible, grotesque, and tragic fact of life today. He could not possibly present these people effectively if he refused to face their abhorrent characteristics. One of these was profanity--the total disregard for, or ignorance of, any sense of reverence for a Power outside the physical world. If the author had not presented these abhorrent characteristics, he would not have drawn a true picture of these people, and by

drawing a true picture of them he has done something to make them different, for he has made the public aware of them, and its opinion generally prevails in the end.

[3] There are, of course, many people who would say that such people as those in the book should not be written about, because of their repulsive characteristics. Such people maintain that it would be better not to inform the public about evil or unpleasantness. Certainly this position has a strong case. There is, however, the other opinion: vice is attractive when gilded by the imagination, as it is when it is concealed and only vaguely known of; but in reality it is horrible and repulsive, and therefore it is well it should be presented as it is so that it may be so recognized. Then people would hate it, and avoid it, but otherwise they may well be drawn to it on account of its false charm.

Very truly yours,

TOPIC: In his letter, Perkins defends F. Scott Fitzgerald for having written a novel whose story is considered by some to be repugnant, and whose title character possesses many abhorrent or repulsive traits. At the same time, Perkins points out that many "people maintain that it [is] better not to inform the public about evil or unpleasantness," and concedes that "this position has a strong case." In your opinion, to what degree should an author be allowed to depict situations or characters that are immoral, distasteful, or grotesque?