SOFTWARE & TECH

# The Sensible Thing F Scott Fitzgerald Summary

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## Introduction: Unpacking a Masterpiece of Ambition and Heartbreak

F. Scott Fitzgerald remains one of the most celebrated chroniclers of the Jazz Age, a literary titan whose works such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night* continue to captivate readers nearly a century later. Yet among his vast collection of short fiction, one story stands out for its intimate exploration of love, ambition, and the painful compromises of youth: **The Sensible Thing**. This relatively lesser-known gem, first published in *Liberty* magazine in 1924, offers a distilled version of Fitzgerald's recurring themes. For anyone seeking a **The Sensible Thing F Scott Fitzgerald summary**, this article will provide a thorough breakdown of its plot, characters, and the enduring lessons it holds. We will journey through the story's autobiographical echoes, its sharp critique of the American Dream, and the timeless tension between passion and practicality that defines the human condition.

## Background and Context of The Sensible Thing

To fully appreciate any Fitzgerald short story, it helps to understand the biographical and cultural soil from which it grew. Fitzgerald wrote *The Sensible Thing* during a period of intense personal and professional upheaval. He and his wife Zelda were living in Great Neck, New York, grappling with financial pressures and the strain of his rising fame. The story mirrors Fitzgerald's own courtship with Zelda Sayre, who famously broke off their engagement in 1919 because she doubted his ability to support her. This real-life betrayal—and the subsequent reconciliation after Fitzgerald found success with *This Side of Paradise*—became the raw material for the narrative.

The early 1920s were a time of social transformation in America. The post-World War I boom gave rise to a new ethos of materialism, and Fitzgerald's fiction often critiqued the hollow pursuit of wealth. In *The Sensible Thing*, he condenses these anxieties into a love triangle that forces a young man to choose between romantic idealism and cold economic reality. The story's title itself is ironic: what society labels as "sensible" often involves sacrificing the very dreams that give life meaning.

### Publication and Reception

Released during the height of Fitzgerald's commercial popularity, *The Sensible Thing* was widely read, though it has since lived in the shadow of his more famous novels. Critics have praised its tight structure and emotional resonance, noting that it encapsulates the author's signature blend of lyrical prose and sharp social observation. For modern readers, a **The Sensible Thing F Scott Fitzgerald summary** serves as an entry point into Fitzgerald's short fiction, revealing the same themes of love and loss that dominate his longer works.

## Plot Summary: A Tale of Broken Hearts and Second Chances

The story opens with George O'Kelly, a young civil engineer working in a small Tennessee town. He is deeply in love with a beautiful Southern girl named Jonquil Cary. George has everything a young man could desire—ambition, talent, and a bright future—except money. When he proposes marriage, Jonquil gently refuses, not because she doubts his love, but because she does not believe they can survive on his modest salary. This is the first "sensible" decision: practical considerations override romantic impulses.

Devastated, George leaves Tennessee and throws himself into his career. He takes a job in South America, works relentlessly, and eventually amasses a modest fortune. A year later, he returns, confident that he has become the man Jonquil always wanted. On the surface, everything seems to have worked out: Jonquil is impressed by his success, and they pick up their relationship as if no time has passed. Yet the reunion is bittersweet. George senses that the magic of their original love has faded. They go through the motions of courtship—picnics, walks, quiet conversations—but the spontaneous joy is gone, replaced by a comfortable, almost sterile arrangement.

### The Turning Point

The climax arrives when George realizes that Jonquil has changed during their separation. She has become more worldly, more pragmatic, and perhaps slightly cynical. In a poignant scene, George confronts her about the past: "Was it only the money that mattered?" Jonquil admits that yes, part of her decision was practical, but she also believes they were too young. George, in turn, understands that his quest to "win her back" was something they both imagined would restore their youthful passion, but true love cannot be rebuilt on a foundation of calculation. The story ends with George leaving once more, this time with a heavy heart, recognizing that the sensible thing—waiting until he had money—has cost him the very thing he valued most: a pure, unconditional love.

## Major Themes in The Sensible Thing

Fitzgerald was a master of weaving multiple themes into a compact narrative. Below are the most prominent ideas explored in this short story.

### Love Versus Pragmatism

The central conflict in *The Sensible Thing*is the eternal battle between heart and head. Jonquil's decision to postpone marriage because of financial insecurity is presented as rational and even wise. Yet Fitzgerald subtly undermines this logic by showing that the compromise destroys the spontaneous affection that once existed. George becomes fixated on earning enough money to prove his worth, but in doing so, he loses the very innocence that made him attractive. This theme resonates with anyone who has faced the dilemma of choosing between a secure future and a passionate present.

### The American Dream as a Trap

Fitzgerald often critiqued the idea that wealth guarantees happiness. George achieves the American Dream—he goes from poverty to prosperity through hard work—but instead of finding fulfillment, he discovers emptiness. The story suggests that the relentless pursuit of material success can corrupt human relationships. The "sensible thing" that society applauds (saving, planning, delaying gratification) may actually be the path to regret. This is a subtle but powerful critique of the materialism that defined the Jazz Age and continues to haunt modern culture.

### Youth and the Irretrievable Past

A persistent theme in Fitzgerald's work is the loss of youth. In The Sensible Thing, George and Jonquil try to recapture their earlier love, but time has changed them. The innocence of their first romance cannot be revived simply because George now has money. Fitzgerald writes with aching nostalgia, implying that the best moments in life are fleeting and cannot be bought or bargained for. The story is a meditation on how the decisions we make in our youth shape our destinies in ways we cannot fully foresee.

Character Analysis: George O'Kelly and Jonquil Cary

### George O'Kelly: The Ambitious Idealist

George is a classic Fitzgerald protagonist—a young man with dreams larger than his circumstances. He is hardworking and earnest, but also naive. His conviction that money will solve all his problems reflects a common societal illusion. Over the course of the story, George evolves from a lovesick youth into a successful but emotionally scarred adult. Fitzgerald portrays him with sympathy, making his eventual disillusionment feel like a universal tragedy. Readers see themselves in George's struggle to balance ambition with genuine feeling.

### Jonquil Cary: The Practical Romantic

Jonquil is a more complex character than she first appears. She is not a gold digger; rather, she is a young woman who understands the harsh realities of the world. Her rejection of George is not heartless but cautious. Yet she, too, pays a price. When George returns with money, she tries to rekindle the spark, but she cannot pretend that the year of separation never happened. Jonquil represents the compromise that many women of her era were forced to make: social and economic security often came at the cost of personal freedom. Fitzgerald treats her with compassion, allowing readers to see her decision as a product of her time rather than a personal failing.

## Writing Style and Literary Devices

Fitzgerald's prose in *The Sensible Thing*is elegant and economical. He uses vivid imagery to evoke the Southern setting—the heat, the slow pace of life, the scent of flowers—which contrasts sharply with the frantic energy of New York where George later works. Dialogue is sparse but loaded with subtext; a simple exchange between the lovers carries immense emotional weight. The author also employs irony, especially in the title. The "sensible" choice ultimately leads to sorrow, while the "foolish" choice of rushing into marriage might have preserved their love. This inversion of conventional wisdom is a hallmark of Fitzgerald's storytelling.

## The Sensible Thing in the Context of Fitzgerald's Oeuvre

This short story is often compared to *The Great Gatsby* (published the following year in 1925). Both explore how the pursuit of wealth can poison love. However, where Gatsby is an epic tragedy, *The Sensible Thing* is a quiet, personal drama. George O'Kelly is a less extravagant version of Jay Gatsby—he, too, reinvents himself for a woman, but he lacks Gatsby's grandiose self-deception. Fitzgerald also revisits similar themes in his story "The Cut-Glass Bowl" and the novel *Tender Is the Night*, though *The Sensible Thing* offers a more concise and poignant treatment. For readers seeking a **The Sensible Thing F Scott Fitzgerald summary**, it serves as a perfect introduction to the author's central obsessions.

## Lessons for Modern Readers

Why does this nearly hundred-year-old story remain relevant? Because the dilemmas it presents are timeless. Today, young people still face the pressure to postpone love for career advancement. They still weigh the risks of following their hearts against the safety of a sensible path. Fitzgerald's story cautions that too much rationality can kill the very thing we are trying to protect. It invites us to ask: at what point does being sensible become a form of cowardice? The story does not offer easy answers, but it forces readers to confront the cost of their choices. In an age where hustle culture glorifies relentless ambition, *The Sensible Thing*is a quiet reminder that some treasures are lost forever when we trade them for practicality.

## Conclusion: The Enduring Power of a Quiet Tragedy

In a few thousand words, F. Scott Fitzgerald captured the ache of a love that crumbles under the weight of good

intentions. The Sensible Thing is not a story about villains or heroes; it is about ordinary people making the decisions they think will lead to happiness, only to find that happiness has slipped through their

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**The Sensible Thing F Scott Fitzgerald summary**, this article has covered its plot, themes, and significance. But the story is best experienced firsthand, in Fitzgerald's own luminous language. Read it, and you will recognize the familiar ache of wanting something you once had, only to realize that the sensible thing—whatever that means—does not always lead to the life you imagined. Perhaps that is the most painful, and most human, lesson of all.

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