



Closer (Than You Think)

S. C. Hays

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Grounded in close studies of novels, academic theory, and various stage and screen adaptations, this incisive play vivifies the lives and works of literary greats.

Trenchant and insightful, S.C. Hays's stage play *Closer (Than You Think)* dramatizes the works and marriages of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley and F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Fitzgerald.

This highbrow play adapts the subjects' writings to explore their marriages, veering from the "romantic extremes of joyous ecstasy and brooding despair." *Frankenstein* and *The Great Gatsby* are interpreted as love letters to their authors' spouses as the play switches between the Shelleys and the Fitzgeralds, using parallels to highlight the similarities of their stories, though they were set a century, and nations, apart.

Throughout, the couples share vignettes from their lives and reenact scenes from their stories. While the Shelleys' story is told in chronological order, the Fitzgeralds are treated in reverse, resulting in nuanced layers to their tales. And real-world figures double on stage as their literary counterparts, showing how the authors were inspired to come up with memorable characters like Victor and Daisy.

The play explores common themes in Shelley and Fitzgerald's works, too, including alienation, misbegotten idealism, and doomed ambition. The characters from *The Great Gatsby* even narrate parts of the Shelleys' history, further reinforcing these connections and influences. As a result, the play's observations about ghost stories, inspiration, poetry, and being an expatriate are incisive.

The dialogue is elevated and stylized: Zelda implores her husband to "put away that dusty heap of dead petals—bunch of busted daydreams." Its language is animated, packed with symbolism and stuffed with allusions. While it includes overwrought moments, it also soars through lines of jazzy musicality: "They'll just want to all see right through it—through you—right to our ruin. Status quo, Scott-o. This is the old drink that drowns when you fall into it." The cumulative effect is a deep and rich portraiture of the historical subjects that probes their influences, passions, and underlying motivations, peeling back layers of their lives and work. It runs much longer than the average full-length play, raising questions about the viability of its staging, though. Still, the ending is perfect, with each narrative thread concluded in a way that mirrors the ending of its respective novel—and with resonant, haunting images.

Lofty and intellectual, *Closer (Than You Think)* is an imaginative play that walks through the great passions of literary legends, shining new light on their canonical stories.

JOSEPH S. PETE (February 3, 2023)

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