

The Crack-up by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Revisited

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to offer a brief analysis of *The Crack-Up* essays by F. Scott Fitzgerald. We tried to point out the tragic nuances of the content and to observe how the author manages to distance from his suffering ego and offer 'himself' to readers as another fictional character in these confessional to a larger extent pieces of writing, not unfrequently with a certain dark humor. We highlighted the changing of the writer's tone for the better from essay to essay; a true sign of recovering while committing one's anguish to a sheet of paper. One of the threads that we tried to pursue was, whether authors are really capable of complete honesty.

Keywords: autobiographical essay, depression, author's honesty, depression, recovery.

Introduction

Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) is one of the authors whose even the most tormented short-stories still manage to draw our attention; for they show the author's infallible sense of the contemporary epoch better than many other writers could ever do; we look into his best novels now and again to share the humanity and compassion endowed by him towards his characters and there is always something there—some 'greatness'—that most readers are ready to identify themselves with. He was not solely the chronicler of his generation, that of the "lost generation"; neither the one who celebrated the Jazz Age. He was the kind of writer who never said "No" to his trade, even when he as a person was totally broken down. By the year of 1936 when the famous magazine *Esquire* published Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up* essays in its three issues - February, March, and April, the author had been fighting with several demons for already several years. He decided "to open up" and talked about his predicaments in the above-mentioned essays mostly in an embittered way with a shade of black humor of sorts. His sincerity which was genuine to a certain extent caused mixed reviews—predominantly negative—both from critics and readers. Many of them thought that he should not have written them in the first place; confessional essays of this kind were not the usual sort of thing at that time and many stated that this kind of autobiographical writings full of bitterness and self-pity if not self-hatred, would considerably damage his career. A few bothered to note and recognize its literary value.

By the time the essays were published, there were several excruciating factors that undermined Fitzgerald's self-control and led him to the depression: first, it was the constant pressure to live up to the fame he had earned as a young man; then, it was Zelda's progressing mental illness and lastly, the bitter—rude awakening from his 'Jazz Age' youth.

Review of the Literature

If we closely read *The Crack-Up* essays, it will not escape us that the general tone and mood of the author is on the rise, his inner state seems definitely to be improving from essay to essay and though it must have been far from easy, Fitzgerald managed and emerged as a stronger personality after the publication and lived more or less fruitful four years before his untimely death in 1940, at the age of 44.

Most critics agree that despite the ups and down that Fitzgerald had in his life which inevitably flawed him both as a person and as a writer, his some works at least will forever remain as the best of the American literature classics. Rarely could any author capture the sounds and voices and hues of his own generation as Fitzgerald could. “Fitzgerald has recorded faithfully what he has felt and described what he has seen, and in piecing together such fragments of reality he has more than a glimpse into our dreams. In tune with his times, we would not understand the “Jazz Age” or Hollywood, the early Ernest Hemingway or the late Ring Lardner, quite the same way. He was, as Malcolm Cowley has suggested, the “atypical” spokesman for his generation” (Glusman,1982:546).

Many people will argue that there is no such thing as sincerity of writers. Are they really not able to, when it comes to writing about themselves? Or is it better not to discriminate authors from ordinary people and quote Oscar Wilde once: “I never travel without my diary. One should always have something sensational to read in the train” or another by him: “I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life. If I didn't write them down, I should probably forget all about them”. Fitzgerald was open on a selective basis. As it is known now, he tried to conceal his major problem—his alcoholism. Thus, it was not a straight autobiography. “In “The Crack-Up” Fitzgerald was working in a genre new to him...Fitzgerald was searching for a form but he had not quite found it” (Donaldson,1980:181).

Analysis of the Data

At the beginning of the first of the three essays, bearing the title name *The Crack-Up*, he tells the reader about the nature of his own breaking down that he calls a crack-up: “There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again” (Fitzgerald,1965:39).

“Too much anger and too many tears”, he writes. Yes, it is bitterness and self-pity bordering self-loath that permeates from the first essay. He seems tormented by the constant effort of keeping balance between two polar perceptions that had lasted for years: “I must hold in balance the sense of futility of effort and the sense of the necessity to struggle; the conviction of the inevitability of failure and still the determination to “succeed”—and, more than these, the contradiction between the dead hand of the past and the high intentions of the future” (Fitzgerald,1965:40).

He laments over his wasted youth, wasted talent and the forever lost sensation of *joie de vivre*. “I began to realize that for two years my life had been a drawing on resources that I did not possess, that I had been mortgaging myself physically and spiritually up to the hilt” (Fitzgerald,1965:42).

Yes, Fitzgerald seems almost hopeless case in the first essay, inconsolable. “I had weaned myself from all the things I used to love—that every act of life from the morning toothbrush to the friend at dinner had become an effort” (Fitzgerald,1965:42). Yet, he found some force and decided on telling some of his torturing existentialist problems to his readers. Maybe the problems—even if not all of them—committed to paper seemed as if half-overcome. At least the tone definitely changed in the second essay, *Handle with Care*.

In the second essay Fitzgerald tells us about the two incidents—two failures in his earlier life that thoroughly changed him. First it was due to his illness during the Princeton years: “To me college would never be the same. There were to be no badges of pride, no medals, after all. It seemed on one March afternoon that I had lost every single thing I wanted” (Fitzgerald,1965: 46-47). The other was due to the rejected proposal from the girl he wished to marry. And he sat down and wrote his first novel which brought him ‘early success’ and the money to win the girl back. Yet, “it came out all right for a different person” (Fitzgerald,1965:47). The author’s ambivalent attitude towards the rich lasted to the end of his life; he was both charmed and repelled by them.

In *Handle with Care*, he keeps amazing us even further when Fitzgerald reveals that during this self-imposed recluse period when he wrote the essays he *first* came to know what thinking process was: “Well, when I had reached this period of silence, I was forced into a measure that no one ever adopts voluntarily: I was impelled to think. God, was it difficult! The moving about of great secret trunks. In the first exhausted halt, I wondered whether I had ever thought” (Fitzgerald,1965:49).

Fitzgerald, as it is befitting to most writers (shall we call them ‘genuine ones’) also manages to distance themselves from their ‘egos’ and treat them like another character of their fiction. He writes in a playful manner, referring to himself as “this writer” or by declaring at the beginning of the second essay “Hence this sequel – a cracked plate’s further history” (Fitzgerald, 1965:46). Here he compares himself to a cracked plate which if handled with care, still might be of use in the household. And again, are writers able to completely forget about their personal ailments when taken away and cured by the writing process? At the end of the second essay Fitzgerald seems to have been cured.

Yet, for Fitzgerald fans, it is more than sad to observe how acutely he feels about the years spent in not a productive way. They will never forget the sleepless agony articulated by him: “In a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day” (Fitzgerald,1965:48). Or here it goes another, cinematic image, which probably for many of us may become embodiment of his depression: “A feeling that I was standing at twilight on a deserted range, with an empty rifle in my hands and the targets down. No problem set—simply a silence with only the sound of my own breathing” (Fitzgerald,1965:48).

Such a talent too soon wasted. Inevitably, it makes him embittered and resentful. As a recluse he stays in this and that small towns of the USA to be far from everybody who might demand something else from him.

Even as he was writing and getting these essays published, he was tormented by debts. In his letters and telegrams to Harold Ober, to whom he confided and entrusted not only literary issues but also the matters connected to Scottie, his only child, it is obvious that though as a man of letters he was back on the road after ‘confessional’ essays, financially he was still insecure: “The business of debt is awful. It has made me lose confidence to an appalling extent. I used to write for myself – now I write for editors because I never have time to really think what I do like or find anything to like. It’s like a man drawing water out in drops because he’s too thirsty to wait for the well to fill. Oh, for one lucky break!... Ah, well, everyone has troubles now. Except the rich, damn them” (West III, 2004: 488-489). At the end of the same letter, he writes a couple of P.S.-s and asks Ober first for 200 then for 300 dollars. One has just to imagine what kind of anguish he was in and how much is still left unsaid and unwritten besides these lines: “P.S. One last thing. I realize that I am at the end of my resources, physically and financially. After getting rid of this house next month and storing furniture, I am cutting expenses to the bone, taking Scotty to Carolina instead of camp and going to a boarding house for the summer. I have got to do that and get a sense of proportion

and give her one. The doctors tell me at this rate of work I won't last two years. Zelda and I did that twice when I was making more than I am now and had less expenses. This way I work all day and worry all night" (West III, 2004:489).

April 1936 saw the publication of the third essay called *Pasting It Together*. Keeping on in the vein of the previous metaphor, when he described himself as a cracked plate, the author now tells us how pieces can be pasted back together, that is how in order to survive he becomes determined to create a new, or 'refreshed' self. The thing that is greatly disturbing him is: "why I had developed a sad attitude towards sadness, a melancholy attitude toward melancholy, and a tragic attitude toward tragedy—*why I had become identified with the objects of my horror or compassion*" (Fitzgerald,1965:52).

The solitary months of exile that Fitzgerald imposed on himself was a true rude awakening for him for he saw that he was left with nothing but his unquenchable desire to go on with writing, "because that was my only way of life" (Fitzgerald,1965:53). In every other respect he had to change. With a plastic surgeon's precision he discusses what kind of a smile he is going to adopt and how together with his lawyer teacher he is going to change his voice. Playfully written as it is, these pages are full of limitless regrets: author thinks that he spent too much time and energy on giving himself away to others. Gone were the days when he was dreaming of becoming "an entire man in the Goethe-Byron-Shaw tradition" (Fitzgerald,1965:53).

Yes, he is determined to become a new person although he knows that the price will be too high: he won't be able to enjoy life as he used to be when most of the people used to look up to him. However, now "the conjuror's hat was empty" (Fitzgerald,1965:52) and there would be the sign *Cave Canem* attached to his front door. The image of his character Dick Diver (*Tender Is the Night*) comes inevitably to our mind. The heart and the soul of every gathering, everybody's helper and healer of the souls (for he was also a psychiatrist, hailed some dozen years ago as 'very promising') he loses everybody dearest to him and fades away in tiny towns of America. Unlike him, Scott managed to rise from ashes and write another great novel *The Last Tycoon*, though left unfinished.

Conclusion

To summarize, we revisited *The Crack-Up*, a collection of essays by F. Scott Fitzgerald written during his depression period, when he chose to leave the bustling scene and think and write alone. Our aim was to remind the current reader about the author who enjoyed a most spectacular early success and led a very spectacular life for years, and who suddenly realized that he had broken down. It is worth mentioning, that having poured his predicaments down to a sheet of paper, he considerably recovered and though facing quite mixed critical reactions, he managed to regain his utmost vocation—being a writer.

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