

Fitzgerald within the concept of American literary modernism

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Key words: Fitzgerald, literary modernism, The Great Gatsby, Jazz Age, American Dream
Kľúčové slová: Fitzgerald, literárny modernizmus, Veľký Gatsby, Jazz Age, Americký sen

Introduction

America, ever since discovered by Europeans, has always been offering something ‘else’. She possessed the possibility that maybe fairytales were not just something of the past, maybe in America they were something of the future. By taking the rich cultural heritage and traditions of the past from Europe, and the unlimited possibilities of the future in America, they could work together to create that fairytale—a dream where both cultures had contributed to a new and wonderful modern society.

This ideal yet utopian, naïve zealousness and ardor of the Jazz Age, its openness and fragile vulnerability of the fatal promiscuous coquettishness with the human destiny, this self-consuming lack of a detached assessment of the tempting though unattainable prosperous ‘mirage’ that Jazz Age not only delivered but also augmented and expanded thus offered, quite contradictory yet conjecturally, a great space for a bitter and savage satire of its moral failure, which is placed within a perspective of American images of success and American history.

Being the witness of this tragic discrepancy himself, Francis Scott Fitzgerald mastered to capture the sense of romantic possibility being clashed and smashed by “...the rapacity that fuelled the nation’s expansion, destroying the gifts of nature in process” (Prigozy p. xxxii).

“The most expensive orgy in history was over.” (ibid. p. xx)

Francis Scott, the embodiment of the Jazz Age

Nested within the concept of modernist literature in its very pivot, though not possessing the extreme qualities of either Stein or Dos Passos, Fitzgerald is indubitably a modernist. Always aware of his responsiveness to the voices of serious literary and cultural criticism, he reported his wish to Edmund Wilson¹: “I want to be one of the greatest writers who have ever lived, don’t you?” (qtd. in Wilson 54)

In many of American consciousnesses, the popular image of Fitzgerald, something of a combination of the youthful Byron and the dying Keats, had undoubtedly contributed to the romantic, nostalgic, and even sentimental image of the excellent young annalist of the 1920s, saddened and emotionally bankrupt Hollywood writer vehemently fighting against alcohol, illness, and failure to achieve final self-respect and artistic success.

His works, like other works of the period of the World War I, gave expression to a mood of disillusion with the institutions of society and despair at its loss of values. Moreover, they were often consciously experimental works by the young post-war generation of American writers who visited Europe and were aware of new literary ideas and achievements with Modernism. Bradbury remarks that the generation of young writers, many from the Midwest, expressed a disillusion caused not least by the war itself, and introduced into their works a strong sense of historical dislocation, of culture displaced, of traditional American values in the process of collapse. (Bradbury 22-45) They wished to contribute a specifically American theme to literature by giving new artistic intensity and significance to the language they used. Fitzgerald’s style was marvelously sensitive to the sounds and cadences of

language. “For awhile after you quit Keats,” he wrote, “all other poetry seems to be only whistling and humming” (qtd. in Turnbull 88). Fitzgerald was also reading the novels of Joseph Conrad during this period, and was particularly struck by Conrad’s technique of deploying a single narrator who, like Nick Carraway (*The Great Gatsby*), is both participant and observer, and his attention to the power of the written word, to “an unremitting never-discouraged care for the shape and ring of the sentences” that aspired to “the magic suggestiveness of music – which is the art of arts.” (Eble 89)

Fitzgerald’s writing, as much as his ostentatious and lavish life style, had always been received with much of a doubt and disunity among literary critics, contemporary writers and not least the audience of readers. Two very influential figures of the literary criticism in the 1920s were H. L. Mencken and E. Wilson, both of whom urged the need for a national literature which would express the complexities of modern life, though their approaches were very different. Mencken looked for social criticism and strong social awareness in literature and a real sense of moral crisis, and deplored the typical hero of American popular novels as a figure whose role was essentially to achieve “what, under a third-rate civilization, passes for success” (LeVot 101). He called the first Fitzgerald’s novel (*This Side of Paradise*) “the best American novel that I have seen of late” (qtd. in Tate 252); however, his comment on *The Great Gatsby* was rather ridiculous – “The story is fundamentally trivial” (qtd. in Turnbull 500).

Unlike rather uncertain Mencken, Edmund Wilson, a contemporary and friend of Fitzgerald, was just beginning to establish his formidable reputation as an American man of letters in the early 1920s. In June 1921 he wrote to Fitzgerald of the obstacles to the growth of American artistic life in a materially rich but artistically new nation:

I do think seriously that there is a great hope for New York as a cultural centre; it seems to me that there is a lot doing intellectually in America just now – America seems to be actually beginning to express herself in something like an idiom of her own. But, believe me, she has a long way to go. The commercialism and industrialism, with no older and more civilized civilization behind except one layer of eighteenth-century civilization on the East Coast, impose a terrific handicap upon any other sort of endeavour: the intellectual and aesthetic manifestations have to crowd their way up and out from between the crevices left by the factories, the office buildings, the apartment houses, and the banks; the country was simply not built for them. (Wilson 64)

Wilson, prophetically correctly, had his finger on the pulse of American cultural life. America was beginning to assert its identity in an international context. In responding to modern European art American artists created a style of their own.² It was Wilson who introduced Fitzgerald to such experimental European works as T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, both published in 1922, while he was working on his masterpiece *The Great Gatsby*.

Fitzgerald’s role as a spokesman for and embodiment of the Jazz Age haunted him throughout his life. Although in certain ways the historiographer of the Jazz Age, which he named, he was ill-equipped for the task of being a documentary writer. John O’Hara, slightly mistakenly, paid him the tribute declaring: “He always knew what he was writing about...and had the correct impressions because, quite apart from his gifts, the impressions were not those of a man who’s never been there.” (O’Hara p. xii) Although O’Hara carefully repeated the word ‘impressions’, the implication that Fitzgerald was a master reporter is overgenerous. His control of detail was never as sharp or comprehensive as O’Hara’s. The most ‘famous car’ in American fiction is never identified.

Although he had a keen sense of history, Fitzgerald was indifferent to many of the causes and activities of the 1920s. As Brucoli cites Fitzgerald: "It was characteristic of the Jazz Age that it had no interest in politics at all" (qtd. in Brucoli 1985: 7). This generalization does not hold, but it applies to Fitzgerald himself. On the contrary, the twenties, largely because of Fitzgerald's writing and the lush way in which he saw them, are the central to the American sense of self. Fitzgerald, because of his life but even more because of his fiction, encompasses the Jazz Age that was once thought to have encompassed him. Many writers have been distinguished by a sense of the past; Fitzgerald possessed a complex and delicate sense of the passing present.

Because of his art – his talent for language and metaphor, his ability to create a generation from its gestures and to place those gestures in a pattern more significant than any of them – he transcends the era he portrayed and criticized, while retaining identity with it. Fitzgerald in his novel, via the means of language, symbols, and time fractioning, consciously sought effects that would represent the psychology and inner world of central characters. He did not work directly from models; he did not attempt to copy life. He transmuted his impressions. "Whether it's something that happened twenty years ago or only yesterday, I must start with an emotion – one that's close to me and that I can understand." (Fitzgerald 1965: 65-6)

Conclusion

Francis Scott has always lived as he dreamed. Despite the fact that a number of dreams he had could never come true due their timely corruption, and thus his seeking self, fraught with eternal doubt, could have never believed in the unerringness of his fate. Nonetheless, one of his hopes he always clinched to and that lead him through the tangled web of his own destiny could finally find its compensation, when in a letter to Perkins claimed: "I think my novel [The Great Gatsby] is about the best American novel written" (qtd. in Tate 104). As Brucoli rightly adds, "Critics praise timeless works, but a timeless work is one that people keep reading." (1985: 12)

Notes

¹ Wilson, Edmund (1895-1972), an American author, though preeminently a social and literary critic, regarded by many as the foremost man of letters and molder of literary taste of his time in the United States.

² Wilson gave intellectual weight to the recognition that America constituted a cultural phenomenon of the twentieth-century literature. New York was the new pivot of such activity, and The Great Gatsby gives significance to the city as a magnet in the post-war years.

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Abstract

As a writer sensitive to the times, Fitzgerald wanted to be a serious critic of the society in which he lived, and yet he longed for commercial success too. His independence was measured by the number of stories he had to produce each year. But his dependence increased with his needs; the temptation was reinforced by the rapidly rising fees he commanded, especially from the [Saturday Evening] Post. Fitzgerald was regarded, however, by the readers of the *Post* as the writer who best represented images of the new post-war generation of ambitious middle-class Americans wanting to enjoy the consumer spending boom of the 1920s. Fitzgerald seemed to embody the new Jazz Age, and wrote both himself and his wife into some of his short stories as well as into his novels, thus becoming one of the few permanent contributors to American literature to come out of an epoch of great experimentation and high productivity.