

Alcohol Made F. Scott Fitzgerald

By. Joshua D. Glawson

“First you take a drink, then the drink takes a drink, then the drink takes you” (Fitzgerald 248). Words that seem to be echoed throughout history by those openly struggling with alcoholism, but haunting coming from one of the most gifted writers in American history who attempted to ignore his personal struggles with alcohol, his relationships, and later his career. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald would be dead by the age of 44, but not before becoming one of the most gifted and significant writers, capturing a decade and influencing his times, all while being influenced by those very times (Tate 19). Primarily, it was his alcoholism that influenced his writing the most, and made him the writer that he was.

To understand what alcoholism is, by definition it is a chronic and progressive disease that includes problems controlling drinking, being preoccupied with drinking, and continuing to use alcohol even when it continues to cause problems. Alcoholism is created through genetic, psychological, and social factors (Mayo Clinic).

Looking at Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald’s life, it is easier to understand some of the factors that created his dependency on alcohol. Born September 24th, 1896, to an upper-middle class Catholic family, and by around age ten his family had sent him to Catholic school. This separation from his family would later serve as a trigger for his dependency on alcohol to fill in the void of feeling alone in the world (Mizener 43).

After graduating high school, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald attended the

prestigious Princeton University in 1913. It was during his college years that he began to focus on his writing as a leisurely hobby outside of his classes and football (Helliker 74). During these few years, he also fell in love with a young lady by the name of Ginevra King (West 2). Between writing, school, football, friends, and Ginevra King, Fitzgerald began consistently abusing alcohol.

Fitzgerald's personal writing, due to the time it was taking away from his studies, and his abuse of alcohol became problematic for the budding author, so much so that his grades at Princeton University began to fail, and he was put on academic suspension, barring him from the school and his football sports team (Helliker 74).

Soon after Fitzgerald's release from Princeton University, his first love Ginevra King left him to marry another man. This abandonment left Fitzgerald broken, and put him on a never ending downward spiral into alcoholism and writing. He never fully left Ginevra King in his past, as he continued to use his memory of her in his writing, such as the character Daisy Buchanan in his book *The Great Gatsby* (West 31).

By July 28th, 1914, the First World War broke out, and many young men were enlisting in the military to serve the United States and its allies in Europe. Due to Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's struggles in school and the end of his relationship, Fitzgerald nobly entered into the military in order to fight and die for his country (Brucoli 67).

In training he quickly acquired the title of Second Lieutenant while in Kansas preparing for his tour in war. Seeing how dangerous and deadly the war was becoming, fellow soldiers and acquaintances dying, Fitzgerald began to fear for his own mortality

encouraging him to begin writing frantically before ever being shipped overseas (The F. Scott Fitzgerald Society). The stress of wanting to write what he believed would be the last thing he would write before his promising death, as well as the stresses of knowing how gruesome this particular was ushered in more alcohol abuse.

Fortunately, for Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald, he never had to witness the horrors of the battlefield, as The Great War ended November 11th, 1918 (Brucoli 172). Nonetheless, the perils of war and the knowledge of what it did to some of his comrades that did deploy, left Fitzgerald with stresses that he would continue to carry throughout his life.

War stress, fears, post-traumatic stress syndrome, shellshock, etc. were often looked at as cowardice and the commonly held belief was that such men should be shot for their retreating from fighting in the war. One of the most common ways such soldiers would handle their stress was to intoxicate themselves on alcohol (Ferenczi 91). This normalcy of alcohol abuse was running rampant in the platoons and such was the case for Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald (Brucoli 119).

The 1920s was a decade known as the “Jazz Age” and the “Roaring Twenties.” It was a decade of significant change in the United States, both good and bad. A time of freedom, social and technological progress, as well as economic prosperity and growth. It was also a time of the American Prohibition, organized crime, and alcoholism. No other author captured this decade as well as Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald. It was his writings that encapsulated the period; while, simultaneously, the period shaped the man that would

later define it (Moore 86).

In fact, it was F. Scott Fitzgerald that coined the phrase “The Jazz Age.” It was so named because of the growing interest in jazz music which was played over the radio on various radio stations, first introduced during these years (Moore 5).

The jazz scene was known for its dancing, night clubs, freedom from inhibitions, sexually promiscuous image, partying, care-free demeanor, live for today mentality, and alcoholism (Moore 90). The combination of Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald’s alcohol abuse due to his various personal reasons, the soldier norm, and then the cultural norm of alcohol abuse helped to permanently place Fitzgerald in this prison of alcoholism.

As the times would depict, alcohol was a large problem for far too many people in the United States. So, the government’s response was the beginning of the American Prohibition as of 1920. The Prohibition made the manufacturing and selling of alcohol illegal, but that did not stop people from going underground, and it surely did not stop people from consuming it; nor did it stop Fitzgerald (Moore 49).

With the continued infatuation with alcohol intoxication, Americans sought underground bars and illegal speakeasies (Moore 61). Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was a regular member of the social nightlife. He was able to see the underbelly of society through these nightspots. By partaking in the alcohol consumption, and being the social body that he was, he was able to write about the period and really capture its essence in his book *The Great Gatsby* in 1925. The alcohol and his love of writing were the perfect winning combo for his success. This remained true for all of his writing career (Brucoli

210).

In more recent years, medical science studies have shown that alcohol consumption inspires creativity within individuals. Although alcohol is not necessary for the creative process, alcohol consumption does assist in the mental process (Mayo Clinic). This further demonstrates the narrative that Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's alcoholism assisted his creative writing abilities.

Just as Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's writing career and social life involved heavy alcohol consumption, so did his personal life with friends and his wife, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald and Zelda Sayre met earlier in his life while he was stationed in Alabama for military training. Then, in 1920 they married, but only due to the success of Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's writing career. Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald proved to be a sort of fuel for F. Scott Fitzgerald's alcoholism and writing (Mizener 44).

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald and Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's tumultuous relationship was as toxic as the alcoholic binges that possessed them. From arguing in public, Zelda's materialistic lifestyle, and her verbal abuse of F. Scott Fitzgerald, all pushed Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald to continue writing while also intoxicating just to escape the reality around him. However, just as a catch twenty-two, his time devoted towards writing and his alcoholism would further alienate his relationship with Zelda (Mizener 47).

Without his struggles with Zelda and within his life, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald would not have been the writer that he was. Many of his problems were self-inflicted and stemmed from his abuse of alcohol. While on the other hand, it was his

alcoholism that inspired him, and it was his low points in life that gave him the things to write.

It is understandable that someone like Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald would become an alcoholic given his lifestyle and experiences. F. Scott Fitzgerald had separation issues with his parents from an early age, was abandoned by his first love for another man, was failing school due to his time dedication writing on his own, was suspended from his university and kicked off his football team, joined the military for one of the worst wars in World history, was fearful that he would be sent to fight and die, married Zelda Sayre only because of his financial success as she refused him prior due to his low income at that time, and had a toxic marriage and relationship with Zelda filled with verbal and mental abuse towards Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald. All this while he lived in a period that alcohol abuse was the norm yet it was also illegal to sell and manufacture, and he had heated competition to remain one of the best authors of his day (Brucoli 98).

Most people given the listed reasons for Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald's alcoholism would have equally fallen prey to such a condition. However, with Fitzgerald's natural ability and talent to write, all he needed was the proverbial kick in the stomach to bring him down and feel his way through his own writing. His alcohol abuse inspired his writing and created the necessary downward spirals and drama to give him the substance of story plots. Without alcohol, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald would have lived longer than the age of 44, but he would also have not been one of the greatest writers in American history (Brucoli 43).

In the end, Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was much like the period of time in which

he lived, fast and gone faster than could be appreciated. Self-destructing, toxic relationship, alcoholism, and seemingly free from inhibitions. Fitzgerald was dedicated to his craft of writing, and became one of the most respected writers in American history. When everything else around him was failing, he pursued his writing unfailingly for his own peace of mind, even until his last day. He also continued drinking alcohol (Mizener 212).

Works Cited

Berge, Kenneth. "Alcoholism." Mayo Clinic. 1 Jan. 2015. Web. 30 Mar. 2015.

<http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/alcoholism/basics/definition/con-20020866>>.

Brucoli, Matthew J. "A Brief Life of Fitzgerald." F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters.

New

York: Scribners, 1994. Print.

Ferenczi, Sandor. Psycho-Analysis and the War Neuroses. New York: International

Psychoanalytical Press, 1921.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Crack-Up*. New York: New Directions, 1945. Print.

F. Scott Fitzgerald Society, The. fscottfitzgeraldsociety.org. American Literature Association. Web. 16 March 2015.

Helliker, Kevin. "The Football Genius of F. Scott Fitzgerald." *The Wall Street Journal*. [Wsj.com](http://wsj.com).

6 November 2014. Web. 16 March 2015.

Mizener, Arthur. "F. Scott Fitzgerald: American Writer." Britannica.com. Encyclopedia

Britannica. 11 February 2014. Web. 16 March 2015.

Moore, Lucy. *Anything Goes: A Biography of the Roaring Twenties*. New York:

Overlook

Books, 2010. Print.

Tate, Mary Jo. *F. Scott Fitzgerald A to Z: The Essential Reference to His Life*. New

York: Facts

on File, 1997. Print.

West III, James L. W. *The Perfect Hour: The Romance of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ginevra*

King,

His First Love. New York: Random House, 2007. Print.