Semester 3

F. Scott Fitzgerald: The Crack -Up

　The “*Crack-up*” essays are made up of “*The Crack-up,” “Pasting It Together,”* and *“Handle with Care,”* and they were published in Esquire in February, March, and April 1936.According to Andrew Turnbull , his biographer, “*Crack-up*” essays are “a post-mortem on his nervous and psychological breakdown.” His Pitiable conditions are frankly set down in the essays. Many critics have considered the essays also to be “a post-mortem” of American society, and find out the difficult conditions of America in the 1930s suffering from the Depression in the predicament of Fitzgerald himself at the same period. Fitzgerald went through exhaustion of creativity and adverse financial predicament. His alcoholism and the mental disorder of his wife, Zelda, which were caused by their dissipated life style in the 1920s, urged his life to decline. It was Arnold Gingrich, editor of *Esquire*, who extended a helping hand to Fitzgerald in adversity. Gingrich encouraged Fitzgerald to describe frankly why he had fallen into such a painful situation. As a result the “*Crack-up*” essays were published in *Esquire* in 1936. The pervasive theme of the essays is the crack-up of America, which had already taken place in the boom of the 1920s, the economic and social collapse of 1929, and the depression that followed. According to Grenberg, in the “*Crack-up*” essays, the problem which Fitzgerald had from the 1920s through the 1930s expands into that of America in the same period of time. Grenberg considers Fitzgerald as “a pained observer and reluctant recorder of the demise of ‘old America’”. He suggests that the truth of Fitzgerald’s problem, namely America’s problem is “the demise of ‘old America’.” The Crackup explores his psychological state in the period leading up to and immediately following what he obscurely refers to as a collapse of his “nervous reflexes.” Fitzgerald was living in relative obscurity and financial duress at the time of the publication of the “*Crack- up*” essays but the response to his “*Crack-Up*” pieces was immediate and passionate. Fitzgerald was flooded with correspondence from old friends, writers, and even complete strangers, letters that covered a range of emotions from genuine sympathy to thinly veiled contempt. Esquire, which had encouraged reader participation from the very first issue, was also inundated with responses. In the June 1936 issue, Gingrich recanted his initial skepticism about the articles and admitted, “Seldom has as much interest been aroused by anything printed in our pages.”Moreover, the discussion was not limited simply to Fitzgerald’s acquaintances or readers of the magazine. Cultural critics and journalists from around the country remarked on the pieces, both publicly and privately. In addition to all of the attention these pieces received during Fitzgerald’s lifetime, and no doubt as a direct result of it, they have also attracted a significant amount of attention from scholars in subsequent years. It was an overwhelming sense of failure that sent Fitzgerald into an alcoholic depression for a few years that culminated with the publication of “*The Crack-Up*” in February 1936. These essays marked a turning point, an admission of his failure and subsequent breakdown that allowed him to recommit himself to the craft of writing. He moved to Hollywood in 1937 and got a steady job as a scriptwriter for MGM. During this time he sobered up, paid back some of his debts, got involved in a serious relationship with British columnist Sheilah Graham, and finally began work on a new novel about Hollywood, a book that he thought would be the crowning achievement of his career. Tragically, his magnificent comeback was cut short by the stroke that took his life in December 1940.

Despite otherwise wide discrepancies in opinion among critics, regarding tone, and philosophical orientation, every one of these critics reads these pieces as a personal revelation of failure and a public declaration of change; ample evidence to suggest that Fitzgerald did not envision the essays as a straightforward confessional narrative. In his own ledger, which lists both published writings, organized by year of publication, and the amount Fitzgerald was paid for each piece, he listed the “*Crack-Up*” essays under the heading of “Biography.” While the “*Crack-Up*” essays might certainly have come out of his own personal experience and employed details from his life, he did not necessarily see them as a pure revelation of his character or as a simple transcription of his desires. Moreover, Fitzgerald immediately denied in personal correspondence that these pieces reflected a major breakdown, and as soon as they began to receive attention, he approached *The Saturday Evening Post,* who paid contributors significantly more than *Esquire*, about doing a similar series for them. Fitzgerald’s desire to spin his series off into a larger body of work was in no way unusual for him or for other writers in the 1930s, a time when editorial budgets were decreasing and a series of stories could guarantee a paycheck from month to month. These projects also created an extra source of income, as the stories could easily be put together and published in a collection. He came to realize that he would have to change according to the changing circumstances of his life. Fitzgerald’s supposed goal is characterized as a fluid target perpetually re-created in response to changing material conditions, and not as a static ideal that would function as a beacon in the final years of his life. In the concluding part of *The Crack-Up*, the narrator seems to be asserting “total power of self-control and self-determination” through the clean break, and positions an equally sensational conclusion. Fitzgerald only needs to commit to his new life and the previous failures will simply fall away. Kirk Curnutt, a critic dismisses such a contradiction as “curious.” He then writes off the stoic tone of the ending, which again directly contradicts a “triumphant” reading of the text. This feature was noticeable, Curnutt admits, and was striking enough to draw commentary from the readers of Esquire.

These essays may be read not simply as a sensationalized confession, but as an attempt to explore the psychological and theoretical undercurrents of a generalized nervous breakdown. His vague commentary on a past full of “too much anger and too many tears” should not necessarily call to mind the detailed biographical picture we have of Fitzgerald in the 1930s.Instead, it draws attention to the very absence of personal details and could be seen as a reference to any number of issues explicitly mentioned in the text, such as the narrator’s anguish over America’s rapidly changing cultural landscape or the sense of persecution he seems to feel in relation to his profession.