OLLI Handout: “The Great Gatsby”

F. Scott Fitzgerald was born in 1896 into a middle class Irish-American family in St. Paul, Minnesota. With his talents fostered by his mother, Mary, né McQuillan, he attended school in St. Paul (1908-1911) and later a private school in New Jersey (1911-1913), from which he gained entry into Princeton. Fitz spent his college years mostly writing plays for the “Triangle Club.” But there he became close friends with John Peale Bishop, who was a distinguished poet, and Edmund Wilson, who was to become one of the most influential American literary critics of his time. Because of bad grades Fitz did not achieve his goal of becoming president of the “Triangle Club,” so instead, in 1917, he entered the U. S. Army. The war ended before he went overseas. During this time, he fell in love with the vivacious Zelda Sayre in Montgomery, Alabama. In 1917, he began to write a novel, based on his own emotional and intellectual development, called “The Romantic Egoist.” After Scott left the Army in 1919, Zelda broke their engagement. Then Scott rewrote. and finished his novel, now called “This Side of Paradise.” In 1920, his short stories began to be accepted by “The Saturday Evening Post,” and his first novel was published. It became a notable success, and Scott became the spokesman for the “Roaring Twenties.” Also in 1920, he married Zelda in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, New York.

After a spree of partying, heavy drinking, and wild behavior, Scott settled down to write a serious novel about the dissipated life of an artist and his wife, and the novel, entitled “The Beautiful and the Damned,” was published in 1922. By this time, Scott’s drinking habit had become serious. The family moved to Great Neck, Long Island, which would be the site of his next novel, “The Great Gatsby.”

In these years, a number of short story collections are published, confirming Scott’s position as depicting the spirit of the decade. In 1924, the family moved to the French Riviera, where Zelda had an affair with a French pilot, Edouard Jozan. Scott drafted “The Great Gatsby,” and his family became friends with Gerald and Sara Murphy, who would be models for the later novel, “Tender is the Night.” In 1925, “The Great Gatsby” was published, but it had disappointing sales. At this time, Scott made friends in Paris with Hemingway. In 1927, Zelda, at age 29, decided that she would become a ballet dancer, and she began intense training for ballet.

In 1930, Zelda had her first breakdown, to be followed by others. Diagnosed with schizophrenia, she would be in and out of hospitals for the rest of her life. In 1934, Scott published “Tender is the Night,” influenced by Zelda’s condition. Although it was not a financial success, it vies with “Gatsby” as his greatest novel. By 1936, Scott hit bottom, and he wrote three “Crack-Up” essays for “Esquire,” to the dismay of his friends..

In 1937, he got a contract from M-G-M studios as scriptwriter, and began an affair with gossip columnist Sheilah Graham. In 1939, he started a novel about Hollywood, “The Last Tycoon.” With the novel half-finished, he died of a heart attack in December, 1940. Zelda died in 1948 in a fire in a hospital in North Carolina. When he died, all his books were out of print, but within a decade, his reputation revived, and he began to rival Hemingway as the great novelist of the first half of the 20th century.