***Wings Of Fire:*** **Volume 4 (2026), No. 1**

# *Zelda Fitzgerald's* Save Me the Waltz *in conversation with F. Scott Fitzgerald's* Tender Is the Night*: A Woman's Search for Autonomy*

MAE ANGLIM
Muhlenberg College

*F. Scott Fitzgerald only envisions women taking power in relation to men. But in* Save Me the Waltz*, Zelda Fitzgerald shows women seeking self-governance outside of a man's grasp and in a feminine sphere.*

Anglim, Mae. 2026. "Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz* in conversation with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*: A Woman's Search for Autonomy," *Wings of Fire*. Volume 4, No. 1.

Zelda Fitzgerald was known to the public as Scott's flapper wife; she, however, was an artist in her own right and was constantly seeking autonomy. Zelda Fitzgerald's novel *Save Me the Waltz* was written in six weeks while she was institutionalized in a psychiatric ward. While the novel was written during her confinement, it was also written away from the eyes of her husband. She first sent *Save Me the Waltz* to publisher Maxwell Perkins before her husband even knew of the manuscript's existence. F. Scott Fitzgerald was furious, and by the final draft, he had made significant cuts, but Zelda Fitzgerald still completed much of the book, avoiding her husband's control. *Save Me the Waltz* is often seen as a companion piece to F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *Tender is the Night*; this essay will use *Tender is the Night* as a companion piece to *Save Me the Waltz* instead. I will focus on the characters Alabama, Nicole, and Rosemary in the struggle for female independence, arguing that while F. Scott Fitzgerald could only see women gaining control through masculine channels and by disadvantaging men, Zelda Fitzgerald was able to portray a woman's self-governance as a trait distinctly feminine and outside of a man's grasp entirely. Zelda Fitzgerald in *Save Me the Waltz* portrays a world where women are strangled by their struggle between performance and identity, but despite this, they manage to embark upon a rich and strenuous search for their real selves.

Simone Weil Davis' ""The Burden of Reflecting': Effort and Desire in Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz*" presents the argument that Alabama's life in *Save Me the Waltz* is controlled by the gendered economic status and commodity culture. She tries to escape but cannot untangle its grasp. Davis states that, in the twenties, there was a "thingification" of women. An example she gives of this "thingification" is a scene wherein **"**Alabama's physique is economically equated with a piece of the clothing that could cover it," (Davis 332):

> "I'm sure you can [become a dancer] – you certainly have the body!"
> Alabama went secretly over her body. . . . "It might do," she mumbled…

> "Might?" echoed Dickie with conviction. "You could sell it to Cartier's for a gold mesh sweat shirt!" (Zelda Fitzgerald 108)

Alabama, as a woman, is not a human but an object to be owned and displayed. This essay also highlights Alabama's expression as performance imitating "'bits' from the other female impersonators around her," (Davis 341). Davis asks if Alabama can escape her fate through dance. She states that in the ballet studio "the dancers sweat, bleed, curse, and soar, hungering for some kind of transmutation." (Davis 329). The essay ends by stating that *Save Me the Waltz* "might have offered Fitzgerald an artistic structure graced …with exit doors, chances for egress, for emergence." (Davis 361). Davis believes that perhaps Fitzgerald was able to find an escape in her work, a mutation like Alabama looked for in ballet, and an exit from the mind F. Scott Fitzgerald had trapped her in.

The second source that informs this essay is "Writing the Body: Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's Resistance in *Save Me the Waltz*," by Catherine Delesalle-Nancey. This essay offers a direct comparison between Alabama's decision to take up ballet and "the author's own attempt to write a book that would be her own," (Delesalle-Nancey 102). Delesalle-Nacey asserts that *Save Me the Waltz* is a novel about searching for identity and individuality. The novel surrounds Alabama, who has a "lack" and a need to fill it. While Alabama tries to fill her lack with dancing, Delesalle-Nancey argues that Zelda Fitzgerald is using the writing of this book as a way to fill her own "lack" and distinguish herself from her husband. In *Save Me the Waltz,* Alabama believes that her husband David can find himself complete; however, Delesalle-Nacey states that no matter what Alabama does, because she is a woman, she will not find her own sense of completeness; even dancing, she says, is eventually seen as an "illusory" pursuit (Delesalle-Nancey 11). Delesalle-Nancey argues that Fitzgerald's writing is distinct from her husband's. While both have a beautiful poeticism, Delesalle-Nancey points out that Fitzgerald's use and confusion of the senses in her writing distinguishes her from her husband's work. Furthermore, the essay argues that, while Alabama's character feels more and more a lack of completeness and a loss of herself, Zelda Fitzgerald's own writing, in contrast, feels full, even rich with imagery. So, although Alabama cannot find her completeness, Fitzgerald herself builds her own completeness and independence through her writing of *Save Me the Waltz.*

"Fitzgerald's Women in *Tender Is the Night*," by Mary Verity McNicholas, argues that the women in *Tender Is the Night* have power over men when they step into a man's world. She asserts that F. Scott Fitzgerald gives "his recognition of woman's capacity to destroy – and his defense of her right to do so," (McNicholas 54). McNicholas claims that "[Dick's] downfall comes at the result of reciprocal actions between him and [a] gallery of formidable women [sic]," (McNicholas 68). He cannot retain a woman because of the women's gained independence. When they no longer need Dick is when he enters a "decline into oblivion" (McNicholas 68). The women can "destroy" Dick because they do not need him; Dick is "expendable," and when he realizes that fact, he is ruined. McNicholas argues that the women in *Tender is the Night* primarily have independence due to their economic self-determination. When they do not need a man to support them, they can use Dick as they need or want and then toss him to the side. Dick cannot stand not being needed and so he drives himself into madness.

Another important gender analysis on *Tender Is the Night* is "Gender Anxiety: The Unresolved Dialectic of Fitzgerald's Writing," by Faith Pullin. Pullin believes that in *Tender Is the Night,* F. Scott Fitzgerald exhibited a "psychological bisexuality" (Pullin 189) in his ability to align his work with female modernism. However, even in his inclination towards female modernism, Pullin states that "Fitzgerald clearly felt endangered by what Ann Douglas has called the feminization of America – the fact that American women had become dominant in family life and church." (Pullin 184). F. Scott Fitzgerald was not ready for the rise of female independence and identity that the 20s brought. His anxieties came to light in *Tender is the Night* through the character of Dick Diver; as Pullin argues, "In *Tender*, the development of capitalism has rendered the American female more potent. When the cure is completed and the case closed, the doctor can be dismissed" (Pullin 188). In addition, Pullin posits that in the capitalist society of the twenties, each character is playing a part; "All the central characters in *Tender* are

performers, their expertise sometimes slipping and becoming caricature. As Rosemary puts it to Dick: 'Oh, we're such actors – you and I,'" (Pullin 179). Pullin claims that the characters in *Tender is the Night* are performing gendered identities and that F. Scott Fitzgerald is able to accomplish these characterizations through his blending of the masculine and feminine in his writing.

The final source used in this essay is Sarah Beebe Fryer's "Nicole Warren Diver and Alabama Beggs Knight: Women on the Threshold of Freedom," which offers a comparison of two characters based on Zelda Fitzgerald, one written in her own voice and one in her husband's. Fryer asserts that both Alabama and Nicole are "representative [of the] twentieth-century American woman, embodying conflicting ideals of femininity (submissiveness) and independence," (Fryer 325). She believes that F. Scott Fitzgerald deserves "reconsideration, for his women invariably embody ideals of self-realization that their mothers did not share and confront role conflicts characteristic of women on the threshold of a new era of freedom," and that Zelda Fitzgerald "deserves to be recognized at last as a spokeswoman for the women of her generation stranded between the old ideal of feminine subservience to men and the new ideal of equality," (Fryer 325). However, while Fryer believes F. Scott Fitzgerald should be recognized for his modern depictions of female characters, she also draws attention to the constraints he put on his wife. For example, she draws attention to a moment when F. Scott Fitzgerald "stubbornly insisted that Zelda make 'an unconditional surrender' to him, relinquishing her 'idea of writing anything' in the interest of his career," (Fryer 318). Although F. Scott Fitzgerald can write female characters seeking independence in the twenties, he cannot accept Zelda Fitzgerald's search for her own.

Alabama in *Save Me the Waltz* is on a search for completeness. First, Alabama looks to do this by playing a role. Davis states that "Alabama experiences self-presentation as a high-stakes, highly gendered performance, and commodities become her props," (Davis 332). Alabama is the youngest sister and grows up seeing her other sisters be married off. Each of them follows the path chosen for her; each girl has moments of rebellion against their father, but none of them go against his wishes. "Alabama's expectations for her sister envisaged everything… It took her a long time to learn to think of life unromantically," (Zelda Fitzgerald 22); it was only through seeing her sisters' "insignificance" in their own choices did Alabama learn to think of herself as insignificant as well. Davis also offers that "what impresses her is [her sister's] careful work on her self-presentation," (Davis 338). Alabama learns that what is valued is how she presents herself. Nevertheless, Alabama continues searching for more in herself. From the very beginning Alabama was trying to find her identity; Alabama asks her mother to "Tell me about myself when I was little" and all her mother can manage to respond with is, "You were a good baby"; we are then told that, "The girl had been filled with no interpretation of herself" and that she "wants to be told what she is like," (Zelda Fitzgerald 3). Alabama is searching for her identity and learns that "the bones of her father could indicate her only limitations," (Zelda Fitzgerald 4). This signifies everything that will unfold in the novel: a woman who is trying desperately to gain an identity for herself but who is again and again defined by the perception of others instead.

Alabama wants more; she wants to be acknowledged in her own right. Her first attempt at this is in her adolescence when she takes on the role of "the wildest one of the Beggs"; she teases and flirts with lots of men, stating "I never let them down on the dramatic possibilities of a scene – I give a damned good show," (Zelda Fitzgerald 28). This upsets her father, but in the end, she continues the patterns of her sisters; she is still married off and settles as her sisters do. However, even through this act Alabama puts on, she is not satisfied; this is evident as she looks in the mirror and Fitzgerald states she looked "in hope of finding something more than she expected," (Zelda Fitzgerald 26). There is again evidence of this as Alabama sits on the porch with her parents and notes, "Oh, Daddy! I'm so tired of just sitting on the porch and having dates and watching things rot." The text continues: "She had a strong sense of her own insignificance; of her life slipping by" (Zelda Fitzgerald 30). Alabama is not fulfilled by her role as the rebellious sister because it is just that: a role, a performance. This role she put on was for the acknowledgement of others, for others to see her in a certain light, but not for herself. Alabama was performing for men with this identity, and so it could not fulfil her.

Alabama marries David Knight; David, like Alabama's father, does not see Alabama as her own person but as his. Alabama's father is first described as a "living fortress" and in David's letters to Alabama, he details a wish of his to keep her up in a tower. Alabama, in her adolescence, is constantly trying to break out of her father's "fortress" and when David writes to her about the tower, she asks him to stop. She does not want to be kept by someone; she wants to be a person in her own right. Her biggest fears are brought to light when David describes them together as "David, David, Knight, Knight, Knight, and Miss Alabama Nobody" (Zelda Fitzgerald 36). Still, Alabama marries David, and afterwards she does not find herself complete. Alabama continues to look for herself in other men during her marriage; this is because she has been taught that women are told about themselves through men's perception of them. In a conversation with an Englishman, he states "You're as good as a book," and Alabama responds "I am a book. Pure fiction." The Englishman then goes on to say that without "all these powers" she would have "pleased [him] anyway," but Alabama doesn't know who she is without her performance and this will destroy her (Zelda Fitzgerald 72). Later, Alabama states that she is capable of having her own life when talking to her daughter: "Because my daughter, I am so outrageously clever that I believe I could be a whole world to myself if I didn't like living in Daddy's better," to which David responds "The salt water's pickled your brain, Alabama" (Zelda Fitzgerald 84). Just as F. Scott Fitzgerald did not like the idea of Zelda Fitzgerald being her own person, David does not appreciate the concept of Alabama being independent from him either. Eventually, because of her constant performance for others, Alabama is driven into uproar: "'I can't stand this any longer,' she screamed at dozing David. 'I don't want to sleep with the men or imitate the women, I can't stand it!'" (Zelda Fitzgerald 121). It is at this point that Alabama turns to ballet.

Alabama views David's painting career as giving him identity. Since their courtship, David has looked in the mirror to find a sense of completeness; "as if he had taken inventory of himself before leaving and was pleased to find himself complete," (Zelda Fitzgerald 37). This is in parallel to Alabama earlier in the book, but while Alabama finds herself lacking , David has no pieces missing. She is attracted to David, just as she is to all men, because of their sense of self, something she herself is grasping for. However, Alabama finds that this is not a fruitful pursuit. As she sees David's identity in his work, she turns to find herself in art, gravitating towards ballet. Alabama's search for identity through ballet is a quest distinctly feminine. The dance world is purposefully out of the male sphere; it is a place for Alabama to assert herself outside of David's eyes and outside of society's impressions. One day, David and some of their friends come to visit Alabama at her ballet lesson, and it greatly upsets her. She says to Stella, "My lessons are not a circus. Why did you let them come in?" (Zelda Fitzgerald 147). Ballet is Alabama's sanctuary outside of structured society–for her friends to enter the space is for the falsities of her daily reality to be let in. Her friends being there created an opportunity for outside perception, for Alabama to be subjected again to her friends' view of her instead of creating room for her to find an understanding of herself. Her friend criticized the movement, saying, "It's abominable! She'll never be able to get up in the drawing room and do that! What's the good of it?" (Zelda Fitzgerald, 148). This questioning of Alabama's ballet practice is due to the fact that it will not be an asset she can show off at parties or be a role she can play in conversation; ballet makes Alabama more than a "thing." Fitzgerald describes this questioning as prompting something in Alabama; "[she] had never felt so close to a purpose as she did in that moment," (Zelda Fitzgerald 148). She does not allow her friends to come to the studio again. As Alabama spends more time dancing and distances herself from David, he becomes upset, saying, "Yet you can't stay with me! What's the use of having a wife? If a woman's only to sleep with, there are plenty available for that–" Alabama cuts him off, arguing, "What's the use of having a husband or anything else? You suddenly find you have them all the same, and there you are," (Zelda Fitzgerald 131). Alabama here asserts herself as David's equal; she now has a life outside of him, just as he does her.

While ballet is something classified as beautiful and refined, Zelda Fitzgerald's depiction of it is "no elegant, Degas-like representation of dancers. It depicts a far more intense, personal, and challenging experience for the body, presenting the artist's harrowing striving for self-expression and

also the difficulty of finding a personal rhythm," (Delesalle-Nancey 118). Both Davis and Delesalle-Nancey propose that Alabama, through dance, is searching for a transformation, and author Fryer contends that Alabama's turn to ballet is "one of the finest—and earliest—fictional representations of woman's capacity for wholehearted devotion to her work, which removes her from the conventional domains of romance, marriage, and family," (Fryer 323). Alabama puts her body through hell in the hopes of becoming someone new, in hopes of becoming herself. Just as Alabama begins to perform professionally, she develops a blood infection, rendering her extraordinarily ill and ending her ballet career. Although even before this, Alabama's connection with ballet had moments of doubt. For example, when the studio Alabama was studying in was shut down, she "searched behind the dismantled segments of the mirror for lost pirouettes, for the ends of a thousand arabesques. There was nothing but thick dust, and the traces of hairpins rusted to the walls where the frame had hung. 'I thought I might find something', she explained," (Zelda Fitzgerald 155). Alabama returns to the mirror, looking for something, looking for her identity, and once again finding nothing; "Alabama's furtive search behind the mirror (which so obviously typifies self-presentation) for something of substance, yields nothing." (Davis 357). Alabama as a representation of Fitzgerald is doomed to her same "fate of being locked into an unhappy marriage and foiled in her sincere efforts to pursue her work, [Zelda] once talked to her psychiatrist about her need to be 'on a more equal footing' with Scott; she disliked living 'in a world that is completely dependent on Scott,' and she wanted to develop some work of her own that could 'back [her] up' in her inevitable battles with her husband," (Fryer 325). Fitzgerald is fighting against her husband to claim her own identity in her creation of *Save Me the Waltz*.

Rosemary in *Tender Is the Night* also utilizes a form of art to gain independence from men. Rosemary is an actress, and F. Scott Fitzgerald writes that she is "economically… a boy, not a girl," (F. Scott Fitzgerald 51). This already differentiates *Tender Is the Night* from *Save Me the Waltz,* for Rosemary's independence is still seen as masculine, while Alabama's independence through ballet is uniquely feminine. F. Scott Fitzgerald writes Rosemary as dependent on her mother, listening to her mother's every instruction. It is because Rosemary's guidance comes from her mother and not her father that Rosemary thinks it is okay to intrude on a marriage; "In Elsie Speers, the power behind the child prodigy, the mother who had 'catapulted' her offspring 'onto the uncharted heights of Hollywood,' Fitzgerald presents a woman in many respects as ruthless and amoral," (McNicholas 53). Depicting Rosemary's mother this way aids in relieving Dick from some blame when it comes to his affair with Rosemary. Independence in *Tender is the Night* is masculine so when a woman has it it is portrayed as corrupt. F. Scott Fitzgerald portrays women as requiring a male figure to guide them. Rosemary stars in the movie "Daddy's Girl," but doesn't have a father; she finds a husband and father in Dick. Dick has the same dynamic with his wife Nicole, who grew up without a mother and lost a relationship with her father; Dick is not only her lover but her caretaker. Nicole's father sexually abused her, engaging in sexual relations with her, taking advantage of their relationship. Without a mother, Nicole and her father become too close, just as without a father, Rosemary and her mother become too close. Rosemary is too innocent to realize her actions are wrong, because she performs at the will of her mother's words. F. Scott Fitzgerald portrays the women as children needing to be cared for by Dick. Zelda Fitzgerald, in contrast, portrays David as controlling Alabama to fulfil his desires and forces her to present herself the way he wishes her to. Zelda Fitzgerald also shows Alabama's lack of control over her own child; David and the Nanny are in charge of the child's well-being, and Alabama's requests are disregarded. Both Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald show their female characters as subjected to their familial circumstances. F. Scott Fitzgerald shows women as infantile, incapable of having control over their lives. Zelda Fitzgerald, on the other hand, conveys that her female protagonist was prevented from gaining control by her husband and her father.

McNicholas contends that Fitzgerald, in *Tender is the Night,* gives women the right to "ruin" men; "As Nancy Milford observes in *Zelda*… 'He grants his girls, for all their potential ability to promote ruin among their men, their right to do it. And more than that, he admires their destructive high-handedness, for it is that quality which attracts him,'... the nature of the woman who is able to

reduce her men to pathetic figures," (McNicholas 42). This is, however, misguided; F. Scott Fitzgerald is not in favor of women having power over men–in fact, it frightens him. This is evident in the way he writes about women gaining autonomy. Alabama gains autonomy by staying away from men, while Rosemary gains it through her power over men. F. Scott Fitzgerald describes women who have power in *Tender Is the Night* as assuming male roles instead of having power in their own right, while it is decidedly important to Zelda Fitzgerald that Alabama is gaining autonomy completely outside of a man's world. McNicholas proves this point herself when talking about the character Mary North from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*. She argues that while Mary at first seems to be "a portrait of the woman content to be part of her man's world, Fitzgerald continues: 'She was a brave, hopeful woman and she was following her husband somewhere, changing herself to this kind of person or the other,'" (McNicholas 49). But when Mary breaks out of her subservience and stops following, leaving her husband to marry a rich man, Dick looks down on this, stating: "Little Mary North knows what she wants . . . Abe educated her and now she's married to a Budda. If Europe ever goes Bolshevik she'll turn up as the bride of Stalin," (McNicholas 49). F. Scott Fitzgerald makes it possible for Mary to escape her restraint only in marriage to another man, and then F. Scott Fitzgerald looks down on her decision through his character Dick. Pullin believes that F. Scott Fitzgerald was not an advocate for women ruining men but, in fact, afraid of women's growing power: "Fitzgerald clearly felt endangered by what Ann Douglas has called the feminization of America – the fact that American women had become dominant in family life and church," (Pullin 184). McNicholas is right that Dick is ruined through his relationships with Rosemary and Nicole, however, what F. Scott Fitzgerald does not realize–and what Zelda Fitzgerald *does*–is that women cannot gain autonomy through their relationships with men. Zelda Fitzgerald argues that women must isolate themselves from their husbands to find self-purpose.

Fryer got it right in her claim that, as "young women raised to believe in their own inferiority in comparison to men, Alabama and Nicole both attempt to escape from overpowering father figures through marriage," (Fryer 321). But this works for neither of them as their husbands simply assume the spot their father once had. Fryer explains that, "Although both women attempt to declare themselves adults by marrying, marriage offers no real improvement in their social condition, for, as women, they both remain subservient to men," (Fryer 321). They will each go on to search for autonomy: "Alabama and Nicole, who have been trained from infancy to be 'happy to exist in a man's world' perceive that the world they live in is slowly changing: they come into contact with women who work side by side with men and who consequently reap substantial personal (and financial) rewards traditionally available only to men," (Fryer 323). They want those rewards for themselves; Alabama will search for them in ballet, but Nicole will again turn to men and try to gain power through her relationship with Tommy Barban. Nicole will not find herself any more autonomous than she was in her relationship with Dick. She will still be playing a part; she will still be fitting herself into the confines of women's roles in twenties society. What Alabama does is different–she seeks to break out of societal detention entirely.

*Save Me the Waltz* is focused on a woman's downfall in a world built for men, while *Tender Is the Night* is about a man's downfall when women gain power in a man's world. Dick, like F. Scott Fitzgerald, "takes Nicole's intuitive ability and sensitivity for granted, and, in fact, he fails to appreciate any of her special qualities or achievements openly—except perhaps her beauty, which appears to be more important to him than to her—as he assumes control over her life," (Fryer 323). Pullin claims that F. Scott Fitzgerald is able to attain a modern femininity in his writing. This modern femininity in *Tender* that Pullin professes seems meek in comparison to Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz*. F. Scott Fitzgerald can only envision a woman's power in relation to men. It is Zelda Fitzgerald who can truly portray a woman trapped in a man's world, a woman who is trying to break free by grabbing hold of any terms of femininity available to her.

## References

Davis, Simone Weil. 1995. ""The Burden of Reflecting": Effort and Desire in Zelda Fitzgerald's Save Me the Waltz." *Modern Language Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 3: 327–61. https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-56-3-327.

Delesalle-Nancey, Catherine. 2019. "Writing the Body: Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's Resistance in Save Me the Waltz." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review*, vol. 17: 102-120. Project MUSE, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/747998.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. 1934. *Tender Is the Night*. Scribner, 2003.

Fitzgerald, Zelda. 1932. *Save Me the Waltz*. Albatross Publishers: Naples, Italy, 2020

Fryer, Sarah Beebe. 1985. "Nicole Warren Diver and Alabama Beggs Knight: Women on the Threshold of Freedom." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies,* vol. 31 no. 2: 318-326. Project MUSE, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0059.

McNicholas, Mary Verity. 1977. "Fitzgerald's Women in 'Tender Is the Night.'" *College Literature*, vol. 4, no. 1: 40–70. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25111150

Pullin, Faith. 2007. "Gender Anxiety: The Unresolved Dialectic of Fitzgerald′s Writing." *Twenty-First Century Readings of 'Tender Is the Night,'* edited by William Blazek and Laura Rattray, DGO-Digital original, Liverpool University Press: 177–91. JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vjbb2.15