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Zelda & F. Scott Fitzgerald's Relationship Through the Literature

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Tender Is the Night and Save Me The Waltz are in many ways the same story told from two distinctly different points of view; however, they ought to be judged equally as one-sided stories of a relationship.

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The relationship between Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald will forever be enshrined into the literary canon through their own works. Scott chooses to portray their relationship through Nicole Warren Diver and Dick Diver in the 1934 novel *Tender Is the Night*, going so far as to include actual letters from Zelda in the book. While Scott was working on *Tender Is the Night*, Zelda wrote *Save Me the Waltz* during her time in a mental hospital over the course of six months, choosing to portray their relationship through the characters Alabama Beggs Knight and David Knight. Much of literary analysis has focused on *Tender Is the Night* due to Scott's fame as an author, often looking at *Save Me the Waltz* as supplementary to Scott's novel, but there are some sources that focus solely on *Save Me the Waltz*. The analysis around these two works examines *Save Me the Waltz* as a piece of feminist literature that displays the struggles for independence that women experienced during the 1930s. Meanwhile, *Tender Is the Night* is looked at from many different perspectives, but the sources I will discuss in this essay analyze the women in the novel as either destructive or as objects of adoration; they also look at Dick's narcissistic tendencies. There are also critical sources that look at both authors together; these tend to focus on Scott's disapproval of Zelda's writing and Zelda's thoughts on Scott's appropriation of her life and work for his fiction.

Tender Is the Night and *Save Me The Waltz* are the same story of the same relationship, but told from two distinctly different points of view. F. Scott Fitzgerald represents his relationship with Zelda as one where the man is in a dominant position through Dick and represents Zelda as primarily a mentally ill, submissive woman first and foremost through Nicole. Meanwhile, Zelda writes primarily through the female perspective of Alabama, who is independent and attempts to separate herself from David, even though in the end she ultimately still ends up back with him. These two different perspectives represent the roles the two authors thought they had in their relationship. *Tender Is the Night* represents how Scott saw himself as someone with total control over Zelda and her work, while *Save Me the Waltz* shows Zelda being driven and independent and "rebelling" against Scott's control. Ultimately, both narratives end with the men in these relationships still having control, which ended up being true to Zelda's life and the story of her own literary work.

The literary sources which examine Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz* present the novel as a feminist piece of literature that intertwines Alabama with Zelda's own life experience and her need for independence. Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin's "Art as Woman's Response and Search: Zelda Fitzgerald's 'Save Me the Waltz'" makes the argument that *Save Me the Waltz* should be viewed as the search for self-expression and an independent identity, which is tied to Zelda's own life. This is the first of many sources to mention that Zelda felt like she had to live up to the female heroines in Scott's work, and Tavernier-Courbin says this about the novel overall as a reflection of Zelda's life: "It is simultaneously a response to a personal situation

(an unhappy marriage), to the social role its author was expected to play as a famous writer's wife and as a model for his heroines, and to the universal condition that comes from simply being a woman," (Tavernier-Courbin 24). This source argues that Scott expected Zelda to be one of these literary heroines (specifically the flapper archetype) while also submitting to him and his work. Scott did not enjoy the fact that Zelda wrote at all, wishing that she would leave the field of literature to him, as that was his domain. This becomes clear, Tavernier-Courbin states, when looking at the version of *Save Me the Waltz* that was published: "Ironically, though he (Scott) was then supposedly helping to edit it for Zelda's sake, he carefully scrutinized the book for elements which might damage his public image, but he let it go to press unpruned of tangled metaphors and misspellings," (Tavernier-Courbin 24). By letting the novel go to the public feeling "unedited," Scott showed that he held little care for Zelda's work or how it would be looked at by a public audience. This source also addresses *Save Me the Waltz's* title; the waltz is a dance led by the man that requires two partners. However, this is an ironic title that the actual content of the book rebels against, as for Zelda there is no place for men in dancing; *Save Me the Waltz* studies the feminine art of ballet and is dominated by female spaces from a female perspective. This ironic rebellion is all over the novel, and as this source argues, comes from Zelda's own desire to be independent from her husband and his control, particularly over her work.

Another source that analyzes *Save Me the Waltz* is "Writing the Body: Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's Resistance in 'Save Me the Waltz'" by Catherine Delesalle-Nancey. This source also looks at the ties between Alabama's dancing in the novel and Zelda's desire to create an independent literary canon separate from her husband. The argument here is that Alabama's body parallels the actual text, especially when her body breaks down from dancing as the text gets more difficult to decode, which Delesalle-Nancey argues is Zelda using the literature as a way of shielding herself. Delesalle-Nancey also argues that Zelda's writing is a way to reclaim her own life, which had already been written about from Scott's perspective. Delesalle-Nancey argues that "writing becomes, like dancing, a means for Zelda to reappropriate her life and turn it into artistic material. Creating her version of her story is a shaping of the textual body, a shaping which she intends to be her own, not a collaboration with her husband," (Delesalle-Nancey 113). Scott was writing Zelda as the above-mentioned heroine or flapper figure, and so, like Alabama, Zelda turned her life into her art as a way to claim what little independence she had within her own life. In general, Delesalle-Nancey argues that Zelda's writing style in the novel is her finding her own rhythm as she describes Alabama's dancing, which becomes necessary for Zelda "eventually to access her own body rhythm" in her own life (Delesalle-Nancey 117). Both Tavernier-Courbin and Delesalle-Nancey examine Zelda's writing as her need for literary independence away from her husband and argue that Alabama's dancing in the novel represents this independent female creative space for Zelda.

Looking at *Tender Is the Night* with a focus on the women in the book, literary critics have decided that the novel reduces women to two choices and that Dick Diver is portrayed ultimately as a narcissist. The source "Fitzgerald's Women in 'Tender Is the Night'" by Mary Verity McNicholas spends time looking at the female characters in *Tender Is the Night* and argues they all fit into two categories: destructive or for adoration. Nicole is of particular interest, since she starts as a woman to be adored when she is Dick's mental patient, but even then she has the possibility of being destructive. Doctors and nurses at the hospital repeatedly warn Dick of the dangers of engaging in a romantic relationship with Nicole, which is when the narrative starts to view her as one of these destructive women. This is foreshadowing, as Nicole ends the novel by leaving Dick alone, which ruins him and leaves him in a pathetic state. Mary Verity McNicholas also ties Dick Diver to Scott himself here, as "physically, Diver resembles Fitzgerald to a remarkable degree, his ruddy, sun-tanned skin radiating the youth and vitality to which Scott clung with such tenacity as to a prized possession" (McNicholas 41). McNicholas ties together these two points, arguing that the women in the novel's dual-nature of adoration and destruction comes from Zelda's own "ultimately devastating" relationship with Scott. "Dick Diver's Narcissistic Disturbance in 'Tender Is the Night'" by Tracienne Ravita examines the way that Dick Diver reacts to an eczema patient of his and how it reflects his own relationship with Nicole. This scene, Ravita says, represents how Dick confuses his roles as "lover and doctor"; moreover, Dick's refusal to empathize with his patients and his manipulation tactics both align with narcissistic tendencies. The article then goes on to extend this argument to Nicole as well, indicating that Dick uses Nicole as a way to fuel his ego and serve himself, and that he sees their marriage as a way to heal her while sacrificing himself. Then, when Nicole's mental health improves and she distances herself from Dick by "asserting her independence,"

Dick starts to crumble (Ravita 63). Like McNicholas, Ravita describes Dick's adoration of Nicole (though she calls it worship), but Ravita argues that his adoration represents his own need to be admired–another way he exerts his dominance over Nicole. Ravita circles back to the eczema patient as a stand-in for Nicole, as Dick uses her to "to play out the distressed damsel in his hero-fantasy" (Ravita 65). While only McNicholas extends Scott's writing of women in *Tender Is the Night* to his personal life, both sources point out the way that Nicole specifically represents a form of both destruction and adoration for the character of Dick Diver.

When comparing the two novels to the Fitzgeralds' marriage, literary critics tend to point out the way that both authors viewed their collaboration differently and how the female main characters in both novels have clear similarities due to the shared real-life material. "The Muse and the Maker: Gender, Collaboration, and Appropriation in the Life and Work of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald" by Ashley Lawson argues that by looking at the historical context of the period the Fitzgeralds lived in, one can gather a better understanding of the nature of their collaborative relationship. Lawson claims that Scott's resistance to Zelda's writing is a consequence of the period, as the modern idea during that time was that masculine literature needed to be "protected" from women writers. On the other hand, Zelda's writing career transformed as she moved from being her husband's "muse" (the idea once again of Zelda inspiring and being represented in Scott's writing) to being a collaborator–though that word might be contested by Zelda. A quote that appears in many sources, including Lawson, from Zelda herself is: "In fact, Mr. Fitzgerald . . . seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home," (Lawson 83). Zelda is referring to the fact that her letters and parts of her diary appear in Scott's writing without her permission. Ultimately Lawson seeks to establish the relationship between the two authors as "reciprocal" and to argue that their struggle over who was allowed to write about their life came from traditional gender roles of the era that said that, since writing was Scott's profession, it was his domain, and Zelda should not have attempted to write professionally, especially as a woman. Scott wanted Zelda to remain as his muse, but tolerated her writing as long as she did not attempt to become a professional;when she moved onto the professional landscape with *Save Me the Waltz,* Scott was angered since that was his "turf" (Lawson 90).

Another source, "Nicole Warren Diver and Alabama Beggs Knight: Women on the Threshold of Freedom" by Sarah Beebe Fryer, compares the characters of Alabama and Nicole. Like Lawson, Fryer looks at the Fitzgeralds and at Scott's opinions on Zelda's writing, stating: "Zelda Fitzgerald was receptive to the changes that would eventually allow women to pursue work that interested them; Scott, who wanted much of his insensitivity toward Zelda pardoned on the basis of his efforts to support her financially, clearly accepted the traditional values of Western culture" (Fryer 319). This quote restates earlier points made by multiple sources, that Scott's protesting of Zelda's work comes from the biases of his time and culture. The article also makes the argument that Alabama and Nicole are both female characters who "struggle with conflicts common to many twentieth-century women who are brought up to marry, not to work" and that they "both attempt to escape from overpowering father figures through marriage" (Fryer 321). Fryer here ties together both female leads as women subject to their circumstances–those circumstances being living and existing in a male-dominated society as women. The two characters once again overlap due to this, as Scott's character of Nicole has "conflicting ideals of femininity (submissiveness) and independence," while Zelda's character of Alabama is more independent, but still ultimately ends the novel unable to pursue her own work (Fryer 325). Fryer ties this to Zelda's fate, as Alabama seems to represent her own life–trapped in an "unhappy marriage" and unable to truly form her own independent identity away from her husband.

If there is anything these sources all agree upon, it is that both *Tender Is the Night* and *Save me the Waltz* are autobiographical portraits of the Fitzgeralds themselves. The disagreement between these critics is about how each author chooses to portray their relationship and their role in it. Starting from Scott's perspective in *Tender Is the Night*, the character of Dick is supposed to represent him, as McNicholas points out through his physical appearance. Dick is an established "career man," though his expertise is in psychology instead of writing. Ravita points out the narcissistic tendencies in Dick's character, and while she doesn't extend those tendencies to Scott, I would argue that Dick's inability to distinguish between his roles of "lover" and "doctor" aligns with Scott's own inability to distinguish between his role as Zelda's husband and her editor. Both Scott and Dick intertwine their professional life with their personal life through their romantic partners, and the asserting of this authority is part of how they take the traditionally masculine, dominant position in their marriages. On the other hand, Scott's portrayal of Nicole is primarily as a mentally ill woman who is, for

most of the novel, submissive to Dick. Her schizophrenia serves as a way she is "indebted" to Dick, as he is her doctor, and throughout Part 2 we see her actually becoming one with Dick.

[I would argue that the novel, and Fitzgerald himself, wants us to see this relationship as equal, and that both Nicole and Dick are destroying each other. This is the opinion of McNicholas, who argues that Scott is writing about the women in this book, including Nicole, as destructive to Dick. However, there are a few issues with this point of view. It doesn't take into consideration the context that, as her doctor, Dick has a power imbalance over Nicole. That power imbalance would also be present due to her lack of actual independence as a woman during the 1930s. There are also clues in the text that show how Nicole, in her mentally unwell state, is expected to be overly dedicated to Dick: "If you want to turn things topsy-turny, all right, but must your Nicole follow you walking on her hands, darling?" (F. Scott Fitzgerald 162). The implication is that Nicole is expected to be submissive to Dick and to follow him and whatever decisions he makes. These are the roles that Scott sees for himself and Zelda: One where he has the power, especially due to Zelda's role as a mentally ill woman in the 1930s. As the sources have repeatedly stated, Scott didn't take Zelda's writing seriously until it was a threat to his own career, at which point he was angered and explicitly banned her from publishing her work without his editing. Looking at their ever-present argument on who gets to write about their life makes this imbalance clear: Scott could (and did) publish Zelda's personal writings, but whenever she alluded to him in her writings, he wanted her to edit that out and to stop writing entirely (Tavernier-Courbin 27).

With this context about their life, Zelda's *Save Me the Waltz* can then be read as rebellion against both her expected role in their relationship and her role as a woman during the 1930s, which would end up being intertwined together. Unlike Scott, Zelda writes her novel mostly from one perspective, which is Alabama's. Alabama represents Zelda herself in many ways: both women were raised in the American South, and both end up pursuing ballet during their life. Notably absent from Alabama is Zelda's own struggle with mental illness, which can be interpreted a few different ways. Alabama's struggle with her body through her dancing does read as similar to Zelda's experience with her mental health, but the exclusion of issues of mental health can also be looked at as part of Zelda's rebellion against Scott. As has been mentioned numerous times, Scott would represent Zelda through the heroines in his novels and many of the sources mention that Zelda felt like she had to live up to these characters. One of these characters would have been Nicole, and many parts of *Tender Is the Night* represent Nicole not as her own person but as Dick's mental patient. By excluding mental illness from *Save Me the Waltz,* Zelda excludes Scott's narrative of her as a mentally ill woman from her own story. David Knight, then, is meant to represent Scott: both characters share a love for artistry, and like Dick as well, are primarily focused on their careers.

Zelda also puts Scott's own words into her character David's mouth, doing what Scott did to her in his novels. In an interaction between Alabama and David, David says: "I hope that you realize that the biggest difference in the world is between the amateur and the professional in the arts" (Zelda Fitzgerald 153). This is important because this is the exact language that Scott used to describe the difference between his writing and Zelda's: as Lawson explains, "Specifically, he employed designations of 'amateur' and 'professional,' rhetoric with an inherent gender bias that defined inferior writing as feminine (and female writers as lesser)," (Lawson 86). By including Scott's own language on Zelda's writing within David's language about Alabama's writing, Zelda is tying the two together explicitly, as well as making a commentary on the men's criticisms of the women's work. This is once again a statement of rebellion against Scott's control in their relationship: Alabama is proven to be a "professional" as her dancing improves through her effort, and it becomes something that is her own, independent of David. Zelda creates ballet as a feminine space, even having moments where Alabama states that she does not want David in the room since he "wouldn't understand" (Zelda Fitzgerald 152). Like Delesalle-Nancey and Tavernier-Courbin argue, Zelda's literary work is her attempt to gain independence away from Scott. Since by writing *Save Me the Waltz* Zelda is creating her own professional space, Alabama's insistence that David stay away from her dancing lessons serves as a warning to Scott that he "wouldn't understand" her work.

Of course, despite both of these perspectives on their relationship being present in the literature, both stories end the same way: with the male character in a position of power over the female character. In *Save Me the Waltz,* this male dominance is clear: despite Alabama's separation from David and her creation of an independent work, she ends the novel with an injury that ends her dancing career and the hospital calls

David to be with her. Through this ending, Alabama's independence is no more and she is once again subject to the male-dominated world that she lives in. However, the critical sources have been much more ambiguous about the ending of *Tender Is the Night*, which is less clear. Authors like McNicholas argue that Nicole ends up ruining Dick and leaving him pathetic, while Fryer makes the argument that Nicole ends the novel independent from Dick due to their divorce. I would argue that this isn't actually true though. The last two pieces of dialogue that we get in the novel from Nicole are "I'm going to him" and "I loved Dick and I'll never forget him" (F. Scott Fitzgerald 314). This alone does not give Nicole an ending away from Dick as the last words she speaks are about him–and even if she does leave him, her story still ends with Tommy, another man. The novel's last lines are Nicole wondering about Dick and being left with unanswered letters and questions about him. The narrative does not end with Nicole's independence–I would argue the opposite, as by ending the novel with Nicole wondering about Dick, she is forever tied to him and his world even while being divorced from him. While the actual plot of the novel agrees with the sources about Nicole's alleged independence, the narrative that Scott gives us the reader disagrees: because he is telling the autobiographical story of him and Zelda, and despite their different perspectives, there is one definitive end to that story. Both novels examine the relationship between the Fitzgeralds as an unhappy one, but both female characters end up back with their male counterparts, either mentally or physically. This is because, despite their clear unhappiness, the Fitzgeralds stayed together until Scott's death, and due to the time period that they lived in, Zelda did end up having to default to a man's world. At the time, women were mostly unable to achieve financial independence; as her husband, Scott was able to make decisions for Zelda with the threat of supporting her financially held over her head (which according to multiple sources he did remind her of frequently). Zelda's own life was ultimately controlled by Scott, including her writing, which was edited by Scott before it was "allowed" to be published.

Zelda's own narrative would follow a similar fate. Her work in most discussions is only remembered as a comparison to her more famous husband's writing career. To quote Delesalle-Nancey: "Accordingly, the novel has most often been read as a companion piece to F. Scott Fitzgerald's fourth novel, likely of interest only to Fitzgerald aficionados, or alternatively defended by feminist critics as a reappropriation of autobiographical legend, with Alabama Beggs and David Knight as transparent alter egos of the Fitzgeralds" (Delesalle-Nancey 103). When examining the sources available regarding *Save Me the Waltz*, it is true that the novel is often put into one of these two boxes. *Tender Is the Night* is often studied as a standalone novel or in conversation with the rest of Scott's work, while *Save Me the Waltz* is never on its own; the novel is either rebelling against Scott and his own work, or it's meant to represent feminist literature of the 1930s. It seems that, despite both novels being autobiographical in nature, only one is held to that standard as all it is meant to be. I would argue that this is for many reasons: the most important is misogyny. While the modernist view of literature that Scott was in conversation with viewed feminist and women writers as a danger to the literary field, that misogyny has not vanished. It is not lost on me that all sources cited here that reference *Save Me the Waltz* are from female literary critics: there is something to be said about even in our "modern" times how women are often separated into different fields and left solely to the "feminist" part of literature.

The other reason that this bias exists is because of the narrative that Scott worked hard to establish while he was alive through his writing: that he was the author of the relationship, and that he was in control. This is the narrative he gives in *Tender Is the Night* with Dick and Nicole, and it's the narrative he gives to everyone else of Zelda. Even leaving aside the likely appropriation of her creative writing as his own, Scott included (without her permission) her actual letters in the novel; moreover, he repeatedly prevented others from reading Zelda's diaries in case he wanted to use her writing in his own novels. And whenever she tried to branch out from him to claim her own story Scott lashed out at Zelda and her doctors until they apologized to him. Every path that would have led to Zelda creating her own narrative separate from her husband was denied by him, so if it is only him who is remembered as "the author" that is not by coincidence. Then, it seems almost inevitable that Zelda's own work can only be read through Scott or through a feminist lens; if Zelda herself could not escape that fate, how could her writing? This is the conclusion that literary critics seem to have come to as well; *Save Me the Waltz* is looked at only as a feminist novel that represents the need for independence of women in the 1930s, or as a counter-novel to the not yet published *Tender Is the Night* and Zelda's own chance to attempt to retell her own narrative. The autobiographical nature of both *Tender Is the Night* and *Save Me the Waltz* show the roles the Fitzgeralds see within their own relationship, though both

come to the same conclusion due to the historical context of Scott's dominance and control over Zelda because of her lack of independence as a woman in the 1930s.

So the question then becomes: how do we attempt to address this? The current answer in the literary field seems to be to increase the examination of Zelda's work, especially *Save Me the Waltz*, and her life as a whole. Though, I argue that often this results in the same problem of reducing Zelda to her attempt to escape Scott's shadow within her life and career, which is also tied to readings of *Save Me the Waltz* as a feminist novel yearning for independence. My answer then is that, if this fate is inevitable for *Save Me the Waltz*, it should also be the fate of *Tender Is the Night*. Both are one-sided stories from each of the Fitzgeralds, and so the literary criticism for *Tender Is the Night* should keep this in mind and look at the novel through the life and lens of F. Scott Fitzgerald just as much as the literary sources examine *Save Me the Waltz* through Zelda's life. Scott was as influenced by his social and historical context as Zelda was, so the literary discussions around these two books should consider both authors and their influences equally. I argue not that *Save Me the Waltz* should be read apart from Scott or Zelda's life, since that would remove needed context from the analysis around it, but rather that *Tender Is the Night* should be held to this same standard.

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