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Zelda Fitzgerald: A Failed Attempt At a Grasp For Control

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Zelda Fitzgerald's Save Me the Waltz *reveals how her body was the primary site through which she sought autonomy and control. Through her struggle with anorexia and body image, Zelda attempted to grasp for control of a life constrained by a misdiagnosis, misogynistic pressures, and the erasure of her creative identity.*

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Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, born July 24, 1900 in Montgomery, Alabama was the wife of novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. As a child, Zelda was already an impressive presence in the Montgomery social circle with her ballet recitals and country club dances. In 1920, just two years after graduating high school, Zelda and Scott got engaged and married just a few months later. Zelda became an instant celebrity and the inspiration for many of Scott's infamous heroines. Towards the end of the 1920s, Zelda and Scott's marriage began to break down as Zelda began to yearn for her own creative outlets, becoming, to Scott, a literary competitor. Zelda also became possessed by an obsessive desire to be a professional ballerina. This obsession ultimately led to her diagnosis with schizophrenia and subsequent institutionalization. In 1932, while staying at the Johns Hopkins University's Phipps Clinic, Zelda wrote and published her one and only novel, *Save Me the Waltz.* After giving up her literary career and her ballet career, and losing her husband, Zelda was institutionalized for the final time at Highland Hospital where she died when a fire swept through the main wing.

While Zelda was a very well known woman in society, she felt, rightfully so, as though she was portrayed in a demonizing, incorrect light by her novelist husband. In some instances, like the characters of Judy Jones in *Winter Dreams* or Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby,* F. Scott Fitzgerald fictionalizes Zelda as an unattainable symbol of male desire. Sure, these women are also depicted as glamorous, flirtatious, seductive and socially powerful, but the non-romanticized truth is that these characters show how deeply misunderstood Zelda was and how she was just seen as an object of aspiration. The most demoralizing fictionalized portrayal of Zelda by F. Scott is that of the character of Nicole Diver in *Tender is the Night.* As Zelda's psychiatric struggles intensified in the early 1930's, F. Scott began to include female characters in his novels whose identities and mental illnesses are inextricably linked. Upon Zelda's diagnosis of schizophrenia, F. Scott stopped idealizing her and turned instead to detailing the deterioration of her mental state through the lens of his own personal suffering. He wrote into his novels verbatim accounts of Zelda's breakdowns including her (but in this case 'Nicole') swerving their car off the road in an effort to crash it. These literary portrayals, first of a romanticized, seductive woman, later of a mad, insane girl, led to Zelda feeling suffocated, cringing in the light that her husband incessantly shined on her.

Six weeks. It took Zelda Fitzgerald six weeks to write and publish her first and only novel. *Save Me the Waltz* is a semi-autobiographical novel following the life of Alabama Beggs. As Alabama's husband David's painting career takes off, she feels overshadowed, and desperate to prove her own worth beyond being a muse or a wife. Alabama throws herself into ballet and becomes obsessed with it, leading to both her physical and emotional collapse. The novel provides an especially clear look at the inner workings of Zelda's mind despite the fact that F. Scott greatly edited the novel prior to its publication. In reading *Save Me the Waltz* it is incredibly obvious that Zelda struggled with extreme body image issues and her body became the only thing that mattered. Upon further research it seems that Zelda had always been obsessed with her body and appearance. Many academics discuss Zelda's potential anorexia and her immensely skewed image of her body. Zelda was documented to have always been quite underweight, at some points being described as weighing under 100 pounds, and constantly losing 15 pounds at a time. In light of these facts, I would argue that her diagnosis of schizophrenia was incorrect and she was actually starving herself to the point of hallucinations in an attempt to feel some sort of control. Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz* reveals how her body was the primary site through which she sought autonomy and control. Through her struggle with anorexia and body image, her obsession with ballet, and the depiction of malformed physical bodies within her art, Zelda attempted to grasp for control of a life constrained by a misdiagnosis, misogynistic pressures, and the erasure of her creative identity. Ultimately, Zelda's work—from *Save Me the Waltz* to her paintings—underscores that her pursuit of bodily control and autonomy was inseparable from her broader fight for her own creative identity away from her husband's and despite her valiant efforts, in the end, she did not succeed either in life or in her work of fiction.

Sally Cline, author of *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise,* writes that almost immediately after Zelda's marriage to F. Scott and his rise in popularity, she became second to him. As Cline puts it, "And Zelda? She became his consort. A witty consort. An articulate consort. But for the first time in their relationship a decorative accessory, an epiphenomenal adjunct known as 'the wife of Scott Fitzgerald'" (Cline 62). All Zelda seemed to be was a wife. Cline describes her as a "witty" and "articulate" wife, but nonetheless the only thing she could be was a wife. This led Zelda to feel the intense urge to develop her own artistic identity, at any cost. For Zelda, that meant ballet and the desire to be in complete control of her body. Catherine Delesalle-Nancey writes in her essay "Writing the Body: Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's Resistance in *Save Me the Waltz*", "Working on her body and giving it a definite shape also helps Alabama in her longing for completeness, a completeness she was unable to find in herself" (Delesalle-Nancey, 106). Sally Cline agrees that Zelda was desperate for both control and independence:

> What Zelda had not told Gerald, doubtless because he was a joint friend, was that her desire to perfect this art was also rooted in the belief that it would release her from her dependence on Scott. To this end, like Alabama in Save Me the Waltz, Zelda drove herself mercilessly, dancing to 'drive the devils that had driven her', believing that 'in proving herself, she would achieve that peace which she imagined went only in surety of one's self.' She felt 'that she would be able through the medium of the dance to command her emotions, to summon love or pity or happiness at will, having provided a channel through which they might flow.' (Cline 146)

Both of these authors explicitly express that ballet was Zelda's way of feeling complete. Zelda felt like she was dependent on F. Scott and was fully living in his shadow and she believed that achieving perfection in ballet was her escape.

Zelda's goal of being a professional ballerina caused her to fixate on controlling her body, leading her to develop anorexia and extreme body image issues. In "5'4" x 2": Zelda Fitzgerald, Anorexia Nervosa, and *Save Me the Waltz*," Michele Payne discusses Zelda's eating disorder in great detail and argues that she suffered from anorexia since before she even met Scott. To begin, Payne's title, specifically "5'4" x 2"" references a letter Zelda wrote to Scott while they were courting expressing

essentially how she wishes to be only two inches wide. Payne goes on to note that "An anorexic's body manifests both a cultural devaluation of femininity and a woman's desperate attempt to overcome that devaluation. In psychological terms, anorexia becomes an active attempt at "self-cure," a form of resistance to the very codes that discipline a woman to choose such self-denial and bodily violence…" (Payne 42) and adds that, "The rigid and rather violent control anorexics exert over their bodies represents an effort to ward off panic about being completely powerless" (Payne 42). Zelda experienced significant devaluation and feelings of powerlessness, especially when it came to her femininity, at the hands of her husband. Payne argues that for some women, anorexia is an attempt to resist the cultural oppression they face. Payne remarks that anorexics exert "violent control" over themselves which is very interesting to note in relation to ballet, an incredibly graceful and polite form of dance.

It is important to note the possibility of Zelda's misdiagnosis and mistreatment of schizophrenia in regards to her eating disorder. Payne argues that:

> After a couple of years studying ballet in Philadelphia and Paris, Zelda was fifteen pounds under her normal weight and would enter Malmaison Hospital in Paris within eight months, suffering her first breakdown…It is quite possible that the state of semi- or complete starvation…precipitated the anxiety and even the hallucinations that characterized her first breakdown. (Payne 41)

Anorexia was not formally recognized as a mental disorder until the 1980s, and in the 1930s very few diagnoses besides schizophrenia were made. In Nancy Milford's biography entitled *Zelda,* she argues that:

> Zelda's collapse was far more serious than Scott implied. She returned to her ballet lessons with a frenetic exuberance. Less than two weeks later she was dazed and incoherent. She heard voices that terrified her and her dreams, both waking and sleeping, were peopled with phantoms of indescribable horror. She had fainting fits and the menacing nature of her hallucinations drove her into an attempted suicide. (Milford 86)

Milford's inclusion of Zelda's fainting fits alongside her hallucinations greatly points to the fact that she was malnourished and exercising to the brink of her body shutting down. While being "dazed and incoherent" could be a symptom of schizophrenia, fainting is not. Milford continues by saying, "At the beginning of her stay Mrs. Fitzgerald declared that she had not been sick and that she had been taken by force to a sanitarium" (Milford 86). Though the information is vague, Zelda's explanation of not being sick may well have been caused by her getting basic care at the institution: for example, food, water, and sleep.

One of the leading indicators that psychiatrists used to diagnose Zelda with schizophrenia was her hallucinations. Specifically it is noted that she was hallucinating and dreaming of malformed and grotesque bodies. Alabama Beggs in *Save the Waltz* also sees these bodies. Catherine Delesalle-Nancey in her work "Writing the Body: Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's Resistance in *Save Me the Waltz*" focuses a lot on the parallels between Zelda and Alabama's hallucinations. Delesalle-Nancey shares that, "In a letter to her husband, [Zelda] expressed the feeling of alienation created by her ailing and disfigured body, which led her to hallucinate grotesque bodies" (Delesalle-Nancey 110). In that letter Zelda writes:

> I seem awfully queer to myself, but I know I used to have integrity even if it's gone now—You've got to come to me and tell me how I was. Now I see odd things: people's arms too long or their faces as if they were stuffed and they looked tiny and far away, or suddenly out of proportion . . . Please explain. . . . (Bryer and Barks 94) (Delesalle-Nancey 110)

Delesalle-Nancey continues by explaining that "Alabama, too, sees grotesque bodies. Even before her accident, after her successful performance at the opera, the lithe bodies of dancers turn before her eyes into disgusting figures, the object of beauty becoming abject, at once attractive and repulsive" (Delesalle-Nancey 110). At the height of Alabama's obsession with ballet, Zelda writes of her that:

> She didn't dare look at the girls in the dressing room; she tried to hold on to the magic for a long time. She knew her eyes would see the sagging breasts like dried August gourds, and wound themselves on the pneumatic buttocks like lurid fruits in the pictures of Georgia O'Keefe. (Fitzgerald 203)

Considering that *Save Me the Waltz* is a primarily biographical text, it is clear that Zelda struggled to a great extent with these hallucinations. That being said, Delesalle-Nancey makes a point to note that both Zelda and Alabama's hallucinations have one thing in common: bodies. Everything that Zelda experiences leads back to human bodies.

Another large part of Zelda's life besides her ballet was visual art. Zelda was a painter and took her first formal painting lesson in February of 1925. Zelda's main subject of her art was, unsurprisingly, bodies! Specifically, one of her paintings, entitled *Ballerinas,* depict two figures holding tutus. The figures are incredibly disproportionate with very small waists and very large legs. The figures' bodies look incredibly rigid and hard, not graceful in any sort of way. Sally Cline in *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise,* writes:

> When Zelda was asked why she painted her dancers, typically depicted as graceful and delicate, with alarmingly exaggerated limbs, she said "Because that's how a ballet dancer feels after dancing." She believed strongly the depiction of the swollen physical flesh had to reveal psychological emotions, and by creating her forms in this way Zelda consciously rejected traditional feminine shapes. (Cline 147)

Later in life, Zelda also made paper dolls, which her granddaughter, Eleanor Lanahan, compiled into a book. Just from the cover it is clear that Zelda remained consistent in her portrayal of human bodies. All of the human paper dolls are very slender and possess incredibly muscular legs.

Zelda Fitzgerald had extreme body issues. From her obsession with perfection, her compulsion to become a professional ballerina no matter what it took, her desire to be two inches wide, to her wildly disfigured painting of the human form, it is clear that Zelda had a skewed view of bodies. Had it been well known and studied in the 1930s Zelda most likely would have been treated for anorexia rather than schizophrenia and would have been met with proper treatment. Payne agrees that Zelda struggled with an eating disorder in the way of restricting eating and overexertion through exercise. Delesalle-Nancey and Payne state that the leading cause of Zelda developing her anorexia was the desire for control. Zelda lived her life in the shadow of a man and she desperately wanted to be able to escape that and develop her own creative voice. Many would argue that her very successful painting career and her equally if not more successful novel *Save Me the Waltz* led to her achieving her goal of having her own creative voice. I would argue that she did not achieve her goal and I think Zelda would agree.

To avoid harping on the easy answer as to why Zelda failed in forming her own creative voice, let's get one thing out of the way: Zelda earned a whopping total of $120.73, upon the novel's initial print run in 1932. Though it has gained significantly more popularity as the years progressed, *Save Me the Waltz* is still not a typically-studied novel. I had not heard of the novel, or of Zelda for that matter, until my senior year of college. On top of the obvious monetary failure, neither Zelda's nor Alabama's lives end in success. Alabama's ballet career comes to a screeching halt when she develops a blood infection. Zelda writes "The doctors told him about the infection from the glue in the box of the toe

shoe—it had seeped into a blister," and has one character say, regretfully, "If she had only disinfected." (Fitzgerald 199) This quote, and the doctor that says it, shows that Alabama's ballet career could have continued if she had just taken care of her body. Payne argues that Alabama "does not abandon ballet because of 'lack of ability or dedication to her efforts;' instead Zelda links Alabama's career end to what seems a passive action on her body but is at the same time an active, self-inflicted abuse." (Payne 49) This aspect of *Save Me the Waltz* does not align with Zelda's real life. Realistically, the end of Zelda's ballet career was a result of her turning down an opportunity in order to stay with her husband and family. This difference leads me to ask; why did Zelda change the ending of her ballet career in her novel? Does Zelda see Alabama fully giving over her body to the art a more heroic and complete way to end her career? Does Zelda wish she could have fully relinquished her body to ballet? I believe that giving Alabama no choice but to quit due to her whole body being infected was Zelda's last opportunity to exhibit bodily control. Though it is her physical body against her fictional body, to her, it is her body nonetheless, and being able to author her end was a final act of control.

Though the novel continues, and her life, too, after it, Zelda ending Alabama's ballet career was the last time she actually had control over her life. At the completion of both Zelda's and Alabama's ballet careers, they both turn back to the person they were trying to get away from—their husbands. This return to the one she was originally dependent on and desperately trying to get away from is a failure of Zelda's one goal. Zelda solidifies this failure in her tragically upsetting ending to *Save me The Waltz*. Zelda writes:

> "I'm going to air the room a little," said Alabama. "I wish people wouldn't set wet glasses down on the rented furniture."
>
> "Alabama," said David, "if you would stop dumping ash trays before the company has got well out of the house we would be happier."
>
> "It's very expressive of myself. I just lump everything in a great heap which I have labelled 'the past,' and, having thus emptied this deep reservoir that was once myself, I am ready to continue." (Fitzgerald 220)

Had Zelda been, or felt, successful in achieving her goal of making her name for herself away from her husband, she would not have ended her one and only novel in this tragic, devastating way.

In the end, Zelda Fitzgerald's life shows the painful reality of a woman constantly struggling to gain control. Throughout her marriage, her ballet training, her writing, and her art, Zelda kept reaching for a sense of autonomy that was always taken from her. From her misdiagnosis, to the expectations placed on her as a woman, to Scott's overpowering influence on how the world saw her, Zelda constantly fought to be freed from how society viewed her. *Save Me the Waltz* stands as her most direct attempt to reclaim that voice, yet even in this novel, Zelda's effort is overshadowed by edits, the limits she placed on Alabama Beggs, and the tragic ending she wrote for Alabama,and in turn, for herself.

Zelda's obsession with her body, her likely anorexia, her hallucinations, and her distorted paintings all point to the same truth: her body became the one place where she felt she could control something, even if that control destroyed her. Ballet gave her a temporary sense of release, but it also pushed her toward physical collapse and deeper deterioration. Her art also served as a direct view of how much she struggled with the pressure to be perfect and with her fear of being powerless in her own life. By ending Alabama's ballet career through a sudden, devastating infection, Zelda creates a fictional ending that still expresses her own lack of control. Alabama returns to her husband just as Zelda did, and the last lines of the novel show a woman resigned and obedient, not independent. This ending makes clear that Zelda did not believe she had truly escaped Scott's shadow, either in real life or in fiction.

The final failure Zelda faced was unfortunately in her death. In 1936, Zelda Fitzgerald entered

Highland Hospital, an exclusive psychiatric clinic in Asheville's Montford neighborhood under the treatment of Dr. Robert S. Carroll, whose treatments emphasized physical activity, which was great for Zelda, but also included electroshock therapy, insulin treatments, and injection of horse blood into the spinal column. Zelda was in and out of this hospital from 1936 to 1948, and confined regularly after her husband's death in 1940. On March 10, 1948, fire swept from the hospital's kitchen through the dumbwaiter to all four floors, including Zelda's. Of the twenty resident patients, nine perished. The others were led to safety. Fitzgerald, it is believed, likely died of smoke inhalation, but her remains were identified by only her charred slippers. Some reports claim that the doors on the rooms of the nine dead patients were locked and so they were unable to escape, even if they tried. Had Zelda been properly diagnosed with anorexia and treated eighteen years earlier, the first time she was institutionalized, she might never have been in Highland Hospital that day.

In 1922, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote the short story *Winter Dreams*. The story follows Dexter Green (a self-autobiographical portrait of F. Scott Fitzgerald himself) and Judy Jones (Zelda Fitzgerald) as Dexter tries to become a wealthy man. Dexter meets Judy Jones, classifying her as a glamorous, flirtatious, seductive and socially powerful woman who has men wrapped around her finger. Though they are on and off for a while Judy ends up marrying a different man. In this moment Judy turns from being a gorgeous woman to being "all right," and has settled down with an awful cheating man. This story, published around eight years prior to Zelda's first hospitalization, mirrored her fate as always remaining someone's wife. Despite Judy's incredibly promising future at the beginning of the story, F. Scott Fitzgerald could only conceptualize her as one thing. He could have had Judy Jones make a name for herself like Zelda aspired to do, but that would manufacture the same form of creative competition that Scott was so scared of the women in his life having.

Ultimately, Zelda Fitzgerald did not achieve the freedom she spent her life fighting for. But in her devotion to ballet, her novel, her paintings, and her letters, she shows just how courageously she tried to define herself despite the enormous obstacles she faced. While she may not have succeeded, her struggle reveals the tragic cost of living in a misogynistic world that refused to let her be anything more than a consort. A witty, articulate, consort.

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