

# ZELDA FITZGERALD: A MODERN TRAGEDY

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“‘She’s the wildest one of the Beggs, but she’s a thoroughbred,’ people said. Alabama knew everything they said about her.... ‘Thoroughbred!’ she thought, “meaning that I never let them down on the dramatic possibilities of a scene – I give a damned good show.’”

(Fitzgerald, “Save Me the Waltz” 28)

THERE is a famous photo of Zelda Sayre: dressed in a ballet tutu, sitting among bushes flush with blooming flowers, before a performance. She is looking wistfully into the distance as if imagining a grand future in another time and place. To the viewer she looks like a pretty, fresh-faced girl at the beginning of a promising life.

But fast-forward to 10 March 1948 and they will see instead that Zelda Fitzgerald died horribly in a fire that raged through the Highland Hospital where she was staying (Milford 382). Trapped in a locked ward awaiting electroshock treatment, she never stood a chance of escaping. As the flames licked the walls and smoke clogged the room and she searched frantically for an escape, there must have been a moment when she wondered where it had all gone wrong.

No one from Zelda’s early life would have imagined this is where she would have ended up or the way her days would end: diagnosed as clinically insane and locked in an asylum as she had been for most of the past eighteen years, away from the world in

which she had been such a shining star. When Zelda was young, the future had looked so bright.



“Those girls... think they can do anything and get away with it.”

(Fitzgerald, “Save Me the Waltz” 1)

Zelda Sayre, as she began life, was born on the 24 July 1900 in Montgomery, Alabama. A free spirit from the beginning, she was the youngest of six siblings, with a seven-year age gap between her and the next, and with parents of wildly different personalities – her strict judge father Anthony Sayre and romantic and artistic mother Minnie Machen Sayre. Her mother’s characteristic decision to name her daughter after a gypsy princess in a favourite book proved to be apt. Zelda spent her childhood running wild around the neighbourhood of Montgomery, doing whatever she wanted, with her parents having no idea where she was. As the baby of a highly respected, if not rich, family thanks to her father’s position she could get away with just about anything, and “she...pushed those privileges to the edge of propriety” (Wagner-Martin 40). As she said, “[w]hen I was a child I had great confidence in myself, even to the extent of walking by myself against life as it was then. I did not have a single feeling of inferiority, or shyness, or doubt, and no moral principles” (qtd. in Stavola 31-32).

Locals of the time liked to think of Montgomery as the “Paris of the South”, a cultured, class conscious, and elegant place, that staunchly maintained its stately traditions and old-fashioned southern values (Wagner-Martin 45). But as the modern era swept through America, even Montgomery society was affected. In the 1900s and 1910s its rigid social hierarchy and standards were loosening and its workforce urbanising (Wagner-Martin 45-46). This environment prompted young people to dream bigger than ever before. Zelda’s childhood friend Tallulah Bankhead was one girl who capitalised on these big dreams, going to Hollywood to become an actress (Wagner-Martin 36). These rapid social developments bred in Zelda, a film fan, competing desires. “[She] wanted to be the glamorous Hollywood blonde who captivated every man that saw her, and she thought she wanted to leave Montgomery in order to become that glamorous blonde. But she loved her warm and comfortable southern city, for in Montgomery most achievements came easily for Zelda Sayre” (Wagner-Martin 40).

As a child and adolescent Zelda fit the proud traditions of Montgomery in some ways and didn’t in others. She was precocious, charming, pretty, and full of life. But she was also athletic and adventurous and irreverent of tradition, a true tomboy (Wagner-Martin). From an early age she stood out as daring and different.

But in early 1916, Zelda’s image underwent an overnight change from tomboy to celebrated southern belle. When, at the tender age of 15, she performed a ballet solo to open a night of ballroom dancing at the Montgomery City Auditorium, the crowd was wowed by her prowess. Afterwards she was flooded with dance requests from admirers and the male friend her mother had organised to accompany her there, unsure of how her tomboy daughter would fare at a dance, found himself alone for most of the night

(Milford 15-16). The city paper gave Zelda's performance a rave review in its society pages and immediately identified her as one of the most eligible young ladies in the community:

You may keep an eye open for the possessor of this classic profile about a year from now when she advances just a little further beyond the sweet-sixteen stage. Already she is in the crowd at the Country Club every Saturday night and at the script dances every other night of the week.

She has the straightest nose, the most determined little chin and the bluest eyes in Montgomery. She might dance like Pavlova if her nimble feet were not so busy keeping up with the pace a string of young but ardent admirers set for her. (qtd. in Milford 15).

With her sudden fame came her christening as a southern belle – a whole year younger than was traditional. (Wagner-Martin 44). It was an honour that, within the Sayre family, only her mother had shared (Wagner-Martin 22).

Being a belle was serious business in 1910s Montgomery. It was the highest standing for a young woman to achieve in that society, giving her status in the community as well as access to certain special privileges (Wagner-Martin 20-21). But Zelda used belledom as her own personal capital. Restless and ready for adventure as always, she now turned her attention to dating; and being a belle gave her almost free licence to date as many boys – or men – as possible. She broke local records for it, outdoing the already packed dating schedules of belles: up to three dates a night, every night, was not an unusual occurrence (Wagner-Martin 44, 46-47). The town's young men loved her: five college students created a fraternity, named Zeta Sigma (to spell the initials Z.S.), in her honour (Wagner-Martin 44). Eventually even her lenient mother had to

intervene. But it didn't stop Zelda from doing anything she wanted: scandalously dancing cheek-to-cheek, "boodling" (necking) in boys' cars late at night, smoking cigarettes, drinking, and, on one legendary occasion, wearing a flesh-coloured bathing suit that sent older local women into shock. But even in the midst of exciting modernist changes, Montgomery society remained highly traditional; and for all her antics, by Zelda's late teens she was only becoming more involved in its world. As a belle she knew her future lay in making a good marriage with the most eligible young southern man at a suitable age. And for a while at least she seemed content with that (Petry 70).

That was, until one night in July 1918 when she met Francis Scott Fitzgerald at a Country Club dance. He had been invited as one of the many soldiers stationed at nearby Camp Sheridan for the onset of World War I. This itself was an example of Montgomery's formal southern traditions relaxing: the attendance of soldiers, who hailed from any part of the country and whose social and personal backgrounds were entirely unknown, at such a dance represented an erosion of "the importance of family name and class standing" (Wagner-Martin 47). And Zelda had lately been taking full advantage of this change, for she loved soldiers and soldiers loved her (Milford 19). She performed the opening dance for the gathered guests, as was customary at these dances: a ballet solo to the *Dance of the Hours*. For 22-year-old Scott (as he liked to be called) in the audience, it was love at first sight. When her performance ended he frantically asked around the crowd for her name (Wagner-Martin 48). For her part, Zelda was struck by him from their first dance. In her characteristically poetic style, she wrote of it: "There seemed to be some heavenly support beneath his shoulder blades that lifted his feet from the ground in some ecstatic suspension, as if he secretly enjoyed the ability to fly but was walking as a compromise to convention" (qtd. Milford 31).

Scott differed from Zelda in many ways. He was a Yankee, studious and Princeton-educated, a prudish Irish Catholic, and desperately ambitious to be a writer. But they shared the same grand, romantic dreams, which they to some degree projected onto each other. Scott, who “had planned his life for story” (Zelda qtd. in Milford 34), had an idea of his ideal woman as selfish, beautiful, and belonging to the crowd, an image that Zelda seemed to fit well (Milford 29-30). For Zelda, “Scott was a new breed of man. Unathletic, imaginative, and sensitive, he represented a world she did not know and could not hope to enter, much less possess, without him... she decided that she loved him” (Milford 36).

In any case, Zelda’s meeting and falling in love with Scott prompted another complete change in her identity: from gracious and flirtatious southern belle to the brave new figure of the flapper. Scott, who famously dubbed her “the first American flapper”, explained his idea of the archetype in a magazine interview shortly after his wedding to Zelda. The ideal flapper girl – for she was, indeed, a girl – was “flirting, kissing, viewing life lightly, saying damn without a blush, playing along the danger line in an immature way – a sort of mental baby vamp”. He went on to say, “I married the heroine of my stories.” (qtd. in Milford 77). Zelda, meanwhile, at least at first saw the flapper as “brave and gay and beautiful” (qtd. in Milford 125-126), presenting an exciting new social role for her to perform – on a much larger stage.



*“Oh, we are going to be so happy away from all the things that almost got us but couldn't quite because we were too smart for them!”*

(Fitzgerald, “Save Me the Waltz” 45)

“However much one may argue that he was the best thing that ever happened to her... the fact remains that Scott Fitzgerald was also the worst thing that ever happened to Zelda Sayre”, writes Alice Hall Petry. “Indeed, in his own peculiar way he was arguably more of a liability for a multitalented, ambitious woman than were the facts that she was born in the wrong place (the Deep South) at the wrong time (1900). He had said repeatedly before their marriage that he wanted to keep her like a princess in an ivory tower, and in a way he did” (Petry 69-70). The Fitzgeralds’ love story was not always loving, not quite the fairy-tale the popular culture of their own time, or of ours, has romanticised it as being (Showalter). Their relationship was complex: Scott was at times a control freak and Zelda often let herself be controlled (Showalter). For all its glamour, it also featured a great deal of competitiveness, jealousy, loneliness, and unhappiness.

In the early twenties, the Fitzgeralds were hailed as a golden couple and they lived a life to match. As newlyweds they settled into the grand Biltmore Hotel in New York (Petry 70). The intention was for Scott to produce the great writing he longed to and make his name as an author, and for Zelda to relax into a life of glamour and leisure. Neither one of them expected her to be domestic – as a newly christened flapper that was not Zelda’s style – but there was no clear alternative role for her either (Petry 70).

It didn't take long for Zelda to become restless with her lack of anything to do. As early as 1925, she wrote of her famed image –

[t]he flapper! She is growing old. She has come to none of the predicted 'bad ends,' but has gone at last, where all good flappers go – into the young married set, into boredom and gathering conventions and the pleasure of having children, having lent a while a splendour and courageousness and brightness to life, as all good flappers should. (Qtd in Lanahan).

She gave birth to the couple's only child in 1921: Frances "Scottie" Fitzgerald, named for her father. Zelda had wanted to call her Patricia, but Scott insisted on naming the female baby after himself (Petry 77). She was always fond of her little girl, but they were not close: one of the great disappointments of Zelda's life (Milford 84).

When the couple's funds ran low partying in New York, they in 1923 moved to France on the advice of some friends that they could live more cheaply there. But it was in Europe that Zelda first began to show cracks. Scott became intensely involved in his writing world, finishing *The Great Gatsby* and honing his craft in the select company of Gertrude Stein's salon. She saw little of him, and when she did he was usually absorbed in his work. Lonely and isolated, she for some time threw herself into the world of socialising and parties, and often took Scott with her to the detriment of his writing. It did, however, increase their profile in the city (Milford 94-97).

Zelda was soon longing to assert her independence and do some work of her own. Her first impulse was to write – like Scott. But this began badly when in 1922, a few years after their marriage, Scott let Zelda review his first published book *The Beautiful and*

*Damned* for the *New York Tribune* as “an amusing publicity stunt” (Petry 71). But he got more than he bargained for when Zelda’s wrote how

...on one page I recognized a portion of an old diary of mine which mysteriously disappeared shortly after my marriage, and also scraps of letters which, though considerably edited, sound to me vaguely familiar. In fact, Mr Fitzgerald – I believe that is how he spells his name – seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home (qtd. in Petry 71).

Unsurprisingly, it was the last review Zelda ever wrote for Scott’s novels.

But Zelda’s writing was also more generally problematic for Scott because in her efforts, he sensed professional competition. In his eyes he was a professional, she an amateur who could damage his reputation (Petry 70); and because his main subject matter happened to be their lives and marriage, any mention she made of these was viewed as trespassing on his rightful territory (Petry 70). Scott also had a complex about domineering wives due to issues with his own mother, and this caused him to assume, anytime Zelda attempted to write, that she was emasculating him (Stavola 27). It was in spite of his resistance that Zelda sometimes succeeded with her writing, regardless, for example with a commission to write a series for *College Humor* magazine about the lives of six, fictional “girls” (aged 15 to 30) in 1920s American society. All had classical flapper traits: youthful, selfish, and with a “carelessness... only a decoy for their total control of social situations” (Milford 151). And yet the girls are passive figure with “a boredom of spirit” reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby*’s Tom and Daisy Buchanan, and not one has a happy ending (Milford 151). The stories speak for Zelda’s sadness, frustration, and growing cynicism about her own life (Petry 75).

Zelda's second attempt at expressing herself artistically came in the form of ballet. Zelda, athletic and graceful, had trained as a dancer throughout her childhood and teens and always enjoyed it. Indeed it was how she had first won fame, and then Scott's admiration, in her days as a Montgomery belle. But she had given it up upon getting married. By the time she decided to return to ballet, however, she was 27 years old, and it was difficult to progress let alone win professional success. For four years she studied with the best teachers, paid for by Scott, and became obsessed with the craft. With partying no longer satisfying her and Scott drinking more than ever, she saw ballet as her only hope. Looking back on it years later, she reflected "I loved my work to the point of obsession. It was all I had in the world at the time." (Zelda qtd. in Milford 160).

In the backdrop, Zelda and Scott's marriage difficulties were escalating. They were both prone to jealousy and while at first it stoked their love for each other, as time went on it caused more and more instability in their relationship. "Scott was used to young men falling in love with his wife, and it amused, perhaps even flattered, rather than irritated him" (Milford 110). But the great exception came when Zelda, after months of boredom on the French Riviera in 1924, met a young and handsome French aviator named Edouard Jozan and was suddenly "seriously reciprocating the attention" (Milford 110). They had a short, intense, but undefined romance. Then after six weeks, Jozan disappeared from their lives without explanation. He had a deep effect on Zelda, however, who attempted suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills (Milford 111). He later featured as a character in Zelda's only novel; she never quite forgot him (Milford 111).

But Scott and Zelda's jealousies were not just romantic. In 1920s Paris Zelda became jealous of Scott's close friendship with writer Ernest Hemingway (Milford 122). She resented the amount of time Scott spent with him and resented the man himself, who she called "phony" and "a fairy with hair on his chest" (Milford 122). Hemingway likewise disliked Zelda. He gave a fascinating image of her in his memoir *A Moveable Feast* as a hawk, with her narrow, focused eyes and long straight nose; a woman achingly jealous of Scott's work and conniving to keep him from it with parties and drinking (Hemingway 162-163). When he mentions an exchange with her at a party, he reminds the reader that "hawks do not share" (Hemingway 169). Scott felt torn between the two of them, at this time when Hemingway was one of the most important figures in his life, being both a fellow ambitious writer and a man whose masculinity he idolised (for Scott always had some insecurity over his own) (Milford 116).

With these real or perceived affairs and age catching up with them, the Fitzgeralds' relationship deteriorated during their time in Europe. Once, at a dinner party, Zelda threw herself down a flight of stairs after seeing Scott speaking to ballerina Isadora Duncan at a friend's dinner party (Milford 117-118). Her friends were utterly shocked; one "was sure she was dead" (Gerald Murphy qtd. in Milford 117). On another occasion Zelda, in a fit of rage, accused Scott of being in a homosexual relationship with Hemingway (Milford 153). All of these behaviours speak for her wild mood swings and erratic behaviour that were only increasing in frequency during their time in Europe.

The last straw for Zelda's mental state came unexpectedly but suddenly. As with writing, her talents in ballet were so great that not even her older age necessarily posed an obstacle to her success. In September 1929 she was offered a solo role in *Aida* for

the San Carlo Opera Ballet Company in Naples, Italy, with further solos to be announced later on in the season (Petry 69). This was the professional success Zelda had been training so obsessively for, finally within her grasp. But, while on a trip to North Africa with Scott, she rejected the offer, seemingly inexplicably (Petry 69; Milford 156-157). A few days later, she lent over and tried to steer the car Scott was driving her in off of a cliff (Petry article 69). It seemed she had finally snapped.

On April 23 1930, Zelda entered Malmaison mental hospital in Paris, where she stayed for just over a week. On 22 May she entered another hospital: this time Valmont clinic in Switzerland. The doctor's report notes her conversation went round and round in circles. First she needed to stay at the clinic to rest and recover; then suddenly she needed to leave to go back to Paris and dance ballet, "in which she believed she could find her only satisfaction in life" (qtd. in Milford 159). On 5 June, she was sent to Les Rives de Prangins hospital, this time on a long-term basis for ominous-sounding "extensive psychiatric treatment" (Milford 160). It required her to agree to temporary separation from her family (Milford 160). In a sad letter written on the trip there, Zelda admitted she was "completely insane" and tried her very best to accept these circumstances as the next – and last – main phase of her life (Milford 160).



*“...[I]t’s very difficult to be two simple people at once, one who wants to have a law to itself and the other who wants to keep all the nice old things and be loved and safe and protected.”*

(Zelda qtd. in Milford 21)

Zelda’s condition turned out to be much more severe than her, Scott or anyone else had suspected: she was diagnosed with schizophrenia by a Dr Forel at Prangins hospital (Milford 161). She would never fully recover. “It was as if once Zelda had collapsed there was no escape other than her spiralling descent into madness” (Milford 161). She was in and out of mental hospitals all the rest of her life, interspersed with some short periods of time living quietly with Scott in Europe or America. He took up extra writing work he disliked to keep her in the best care available (Petry 70).

One thing her long periods of institutionalisation granted her was an opportunity to be creative on her own terms. She soon took up painting, an art form which Petry believes “was probably exactly what Zelda had been looking for in all those years of writing fiction and studying ballet” (Petry 79). Painting was her own field – she was not in competition with Scott; it “led to something tangible” that stood as a permanent reminder of the work that had been put into it, unlike the “ephemeral” ballet; and the merit was all individual, with no risk of identity loss in a troupe (Petry 79). Zelda’s main subjects were ballet dancers, their legs and arms bulging with muscles with an element of the grotesque (Petry 77). In 1934 she put on the only exhibition of her paintings in New York, funded by Scott. It made little money. Adding insult to injury, *Time* magazine’s review of the show insisted on focusing on the decline of the artist

rather than the art itself. It began, in a tone that “read like an obituary” (Milford 291-292), “[t]here was a time when Mrs. Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was a more fabulous character than her novel-writing husband. That was when she was Zelda Sayre...” (*Time* qtd. in Milford 292).

In 1931 Zelda wrote her only published novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, after being assigned writing as a task for therapy. While Scott had not published a book in eight years, Zelda wrote hers in just six weeks in a furious fit of inspiration. It is a semi-autobiographical account which tells the story of Alabama Beggs, a free-spirited southern girl: her difficult family life in the south, the ups and downs of her marriage to artist David Knight, and her dogged ambition to become a ballerina – an ambition she, unlike Zelda, fulfills. Upon finishing, Zelda sent the manuscript directly to Scott’s published Maxwell Perkins, not trusting Scott to approve of it based on his past responses to her work. So impressed was the publisher that he agreed to publish it immediately – also without Scott’s approval. Though *Save Me the Waltz* was not a critical or commercial success, its “impressionistic technique and lush style” made it highly original (Brucoli 332).

But the novel had the effect of exploding her and Scott’s problems with each other into full view. Scott was writing *Tender is the Night* – as he had been doing for the past eight years – and saw Zelda as poaching his material for it (Brucoli 325). On 28 May 1933 they had a long and bitter argument between them in front of one of Zelda’s therapists, Dr. Rennie. Scott criticised Zelda as “a third-rate writer and a third-rate ballet dancer”, to which she angrily remarked “[i]t seems to me you are making a rather violent attack on a third-rate talent, then... Why in the hell you are so jealous, I don’t

know. If I thought that about anybody I would not care what they wrote” (qtd. in Bruccoil 349). As Scott insisted she not write anymore fiction on the subjects he was writing about and without his approval, Zelda said her life “has been so miserable that I would rather be in an asylum” (Bruccoli 350-353). They went on to say –

Zelda: Here is the truth of the matter: that I have always felt some necessity for us to be on a more equal footing than we are now because...I simply cannot live in a world that is completely dependent on Scott... I want to be able to say, when he says something that is not so, then I want to do something so good that I can say, “That is goddamned lie,” and have something to back it up...

Scott: Now we have found rock bottom.

Zelda: What is our marriage anyway? It has been nothing but a long battle ever since I can remember.

Scott: I don't know about that. We were about the most envied couple in about 1921 in America.

Zelda: I guess so. We were awfully good showmen. (qtd. in Bruccoli 349-353)

Zelda grew in her convictions as they went on, and ended their argument by giving Scott an ultimatum:

Z: Scott, you can go on and you can have your way about this thing and do anything until you finish [*Tender is the Night*], and when you finish the book I think we'd better get a divorce, and any decision you choose to make with regard to me is all right because I cannot live on these terms, and I cannot accept them. (qtd. in Bruccoli 349-353).

This remarkable argument shows Zelda's disillusionment with the flapper high-life she had lived with Scott for so long. She seems to have come to a realisation by the time of

this argument: that for more than a decade now she had felt forced to choose between two great loves in her life – Scott and her family, and her artistic talents and drives – and it had torn her up emotionally, mentally, and exacerbated her naturally fragile psychological state. It cannot be ignored that Zelda was only able to fully realise the creative side of herself living in isolation, away from Scott and from the wider world. She never did find a way to fully reconcile these two loves she had with each other; and so, as an adult, the happiness and carefree disposition she had as a child eluded her.



“I don’t want to live – I want to love first, and live incidentally.”

(Zelda qtd. in Stavola 54)

In a conversation with a friend in 1934, at a point when Zelda was in and out of mental hospitals, Scott reflected on Zelda’s fate. “That girl had everything... She was the belle of Montgomery, the daughter of the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court... Everybody in Alabama and Georgia knew about her, everybody that counted. She had beauty, talent, family, she could do anything she wanted to, and she’s thrown it all away.” (qtd. in Milford 282). And as Zelda herself wrote of her “trim, golden, dynamic” heroine in one of her stories: “I wonder if the reflections of the palace... [are] only for [her], to help her remember her best fairy story when life leaves her time for telling it” (Fitzgerald, “The Girl the Prince Liked” 240).

But perhaps the truth is that the end of Zelda's story happened because of, not despite, its beginning. Her exciting life continues to fascinate us in the present because in many ways it captured, in one person, the rise and fall of modernism in America (Nicol). She grew up as a child and then adolescent amidst loosening social standards in Alabama, taking all the leeway she could get. In her twenties during the roaring twenties, she along with Scott and their friends really did live life to the hilt with money, glamour, parties, and high spirits. But there is no soaring high without a plunging low, and Zelda also suffered the steep crash that inevitably follows –and “at the moment the country [did]” in the Wall Street Crash (R. Clifton Spargo qtd. in Nicol). In 1929 she was hospitalised for mental illness which she never fully recovered from. The flapper ideal was just that, an ideal – it was not sustainable for a person to live that lifestyle forever. Zelda was not the only woman to fall prey to this phenomenon, but she was one of the smartest, most charming, and most talented ones. She spent herself until there was nothing left. In this Zelda represents the paradox of the modernism of the 1920s, and its ultimate tragedy.

But she always did put on a damned good show doing it.



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