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Consumed by the Broken Staccato: A Feminist Reading of Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz*

Zelda Fitzgerald's name seems to carry a mystical quality—immediately, people seem to jump to a picture of a troubled young flapper that follows in the wake of her Jazz Age King husband. The bulk of scholarship written on Zelda Fitzgerald is written in a biographical context and reflects this stereotype. This opens up opportunities for readers to make certain conclusions about Fitzgerald's work, but restricts the depth to which her work can be analyzed. Scholars such as Nancy Milford and Matthew Bruccoli have collaborated with Scottie Fitzgerald, Scott and Zelda's daughter, to uncover details of the couple's past and discuss how this past impacts Zelda's work as an author, focusing primarily on her novel, *Save Me the Waltz*. As her only published novel, *Save Me the Waltz* provides valuable insight into Zelda Fitzgerald's inner workings that are frequently overlooked as scholarship confines her to the "mad wife" of an already famous author. *Save Me the Waltz* was written in 1932, during her stay at the Phipps Clinic of Johns Hopkins Hospital (Fitzgerald 3). Because this work was written during one of Fitzgerald's psychotic breaks, many critics dismiss her writing style as obscure and excessively hazy; however, with the application of French feminist Helene Cixous' idea of *l'écriture féminine* combined with Paul Atkinson and Michelle Duffy's implementation of affect theory in modern dance, *Save Me the Waltz* reveals itself to be Zelda Fitzgerald's attempt to imitate her affective state within the patriarchal environment she is confined while simultaneously liberating her creative spirit.

The novel tells the story of a young girl named Alabama Beggs, who marries an aspiring artist named David Knight and follows him to New York City to fulfill his dream of becoming a famous painter. The two live a life of revelry, surrounding themselves with admirers, parties, and fellow artists. After following her husband across Europe on his quest for fame, Alabama decides that she no longer wishes to play the role of wife and mother. Alabama begins taking ballet lessons under a Russian instructor only known as “Madame” and quickly becomes obsessed with dance. The more she practices, the more distant she becomes from her family and the more trivial the lifestyle of those around her become. Alabama becomes consumed by dance and chooses to follow her ballet teacher to Italy to perform in her very first professional ballet. Her dream of becoming a successful ballerina is shattered due to an unattended foot injury, and she settles back into the dull rhythm of her family. As the novel concludes, she must accept the role society has constructed for her. She returns back into the world of wife and mother but cannot function as she used to. Alabama now has to make a concerted effort to make sense of “normalcy,” but her brain “whipped its broken staccato into the only form she knew”, the form of rhythm, dance, and motion (193). Nothing she can experience now can compare to the freeing purpose she found within herself as she danced.

The very structure of Fitzgerald’s writing supports Helene Cixous’ idea of *l’écriture féminine* in her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa.” Her essay defines the oppositional binaries constructed by patriarchal society as interdependent and therefore vulnerable to one another. These binaries impose themselves upon writing, as women become conditioned by society to write in certain ways deemed appropriate for the female. Cixous urges that women should write as women; women must cease to function within the language and discourse created for men by

men. Women must break through the patriarchal hold on language, not simply subvert it. She claims that there should be no satisfaction in subversion—this should only trigger the courage and strength to completely shatter the socially constructed binary being imposed. According to Cixous, women must “dislocate this ‘within,’ to explode it...make it hers” (887). *Save Me the Waltz* provides an apt example of the explosion for which Cixous is calling. Fitzgerald at first appears to be only weakly subverting patriarchal oppression by her characterization of Alabama Beggs and David Knight. However, early in the novel David’s expectations for Alabama become clear, unimpeded by apologies from the author or excuses from Alabama. When courting Alabama, David writes to her, “My dear, you are my princess and I’d like to keep you shut forever in an ivory tower for my private delectation” (Fitzgerald 42). When Alabama reads this, she does not swoon; instead, she orders him to never mention it again. Zelda Fitzgerald’s very inclusion of this line illuminates the possessive attitude that men are expected to take towards women. The female is expected to perform upon the whim of the man, but instead Fitzgerald exposes this possessive mentality and creates a work that portrays a young woman’s drive to independent success and creative fulfillment.

Zelda Fitzgerald’s work does not stop at the deconstruction of the patriarchal ruling over the female body. Cixous urges, “Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth” (880). Female authors must take the initiative to reach beyond the barrier of language and literature to create works that acknowledge and then defy these barriers. Paul Atkinson and Michelle Duffy’s article, “The Amplification of Affect: Tension, Intensity and Form in Modern Dance”, examines dance as a mode of distributing and transmitting affect. Atkinson and Duffy highlight that the beauty in this theory is

that emotion does not have to be neither sentimentalized nor weakened, nor does it have to be disregarded. Instead, emotion can be incorporated into a work of art, utilizing both body and emotion to create “affect”, or the intersection where body and emotion are one. The theory of affect “marks the return to the body as a site for interplay of thought and feelings, and its importance derives from its refusal to reduce the body to the status of a container, for either the mind or, by implication, the emotions” (94). The body is the condition for transmission or distribution of affect while emotions are the particular type of containment and localization of affect within the body. I think that Zelda would be very much attracted to this idea, as both body and emotion pervade the texts she creates.

Zelda Fitzgerald’s text becomes performative, constructing her own identity through her creations, just as Alabama strives to do so with her dancing. Fitzgerald removes the barrier between herself and her writing, just as Alabama removes the barrier between her body and ballet. Alabama becomes so connected to dance, that the two things morph into one. Her physical movements and her emotions intertwine and unite as her affective state. She cannot even communicate with herself without this unification. Even outside of the dance studio, Alabama reflects that “her body was so full of static from the constant whip of her work that she could get no clear communication with herself (Fitzgerald 161). But with the removal of one barrier, comes the construction of another. As Alabama allows dance to consume her physical and mental well-being, she no longer feels connected to her family and friends. Alabama becomes an embodiment of her work and can only function within the constraints of her own affective state. Fitzgerald chooses to transfer the subject of affective identity through language of her own. She even goes as far as to take words from their traditional definition and incorporates them as she

wishes, deconstructing the phallogocentric language rules that have been pushed on her by her husband and various publishing companies trying to edit and stifle her work. The diction and sentence structure she carries throughout her novel transforms as the novel progresses, depending on Alabama's affective state. In the early stages of the novel, Alabama describes things in ways that seem to show she does not understand her own thought process. When she is at home with her family, sentences are choppy and inconsistent. Thoughts seem to pop in and out of the plot while Alabama experiences a life in which she is restless. However, when Alabama becomes involved in her Russian ballet classes, the sentence structure begins to seem more purposefully clear, offering a direct contrast to the syntax at the beginning of the novel. The more Alabama pushes herself in the ballet studio, the more confident, witty, and even egotistical she becomes. As Alabama's confidence in herself as a ballerina grows, so does her language. This could be read to directly represent the defiance of the patriarchal hold on society to which Cixous refers. Access to language is the first step to true liberation of the female writer; this access must accompany resilient and unapologetic use of this language. As Alabama learns to control her body, Zelda Fitzgerald too, appears to be learning to control the power of her language.

Zelda Fitzgerald's approach to diction, specifically to imagery, provides nontraditional visuals for commonplace events. Many literary critics fault Fitzgerald for her obscure use of imagery and some scholars even accuse Fitzgerald of trying to overcompensate in order to escape the literary shadow of her husband, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Yet, by examining her work closely, it becomes apparent that her strange descriptions, like the one found in the passage given

below, work to provide an example of the overturning of the language binary to which Cixous refers. Zelda Fitzgerald writes:

She crawled into the friendly cave of his ear. The area inside was gray and ghostly classic as she stared about the deep trenches of the cerebellum. There was not a growth or a flowery substance to break those smooth convulsions, just the puffy rise of sleek gray matter...Before long she was lost. Like a mystic maze, the folds and ridges rose in desolation...She stumbled on and finally reached the medulla oblongata. Vast tortuous indentations led her round and round. Hysterically, she began to run. David, distracted by a tickling sensation at the head of his spine, lifted his lips from hers. (Fitzgerald 40)

Many critics use this passage to criticize Fitzgerald's writing style; however, the passage's surreal quality negates what is expected to be Alabama's reaction to love. Alabama never mentions connection, compatibility, or similar interests as she is being courted by Knight. She does not mention reminiscing or daydreaming about him, yet the passage contains a dreamlike tone. Alabama's fantasy describes David's brain, focusing on "gray and ghostly classic" details that indicate curiosity and fascination, not necessarily romantic attraction. Zelda Fitzgerald's ambiguous imagery develops as Alabama develops, shifting from awkward descriptions of her infatuation with David to concrete and grotesque portrayals of herself and other ballerinas. The development of imagery also indicates Alabama's shift from concerns within the mind to concerns of the physical body as a vessel used to communicate emotions.

Zelda Fitzgerald's artistic composition, whether written or painted text, is an attempt to imitate her affective state, the state of being that exists at the intersection of the psychological and the physical. Her depictions of ballerinas are hauntingly beautiful and may reflect her mind's

eye of how she viewed herself and the other ballerinas she practiced with. In *Save Me the Waltz*, Alabama describes the other ballerinas in her dance company to have “sagging breasts like dried August gourds, and wound themselves on the pneumatic buttocks like lurid fruits in the pictures of Georgia O’Keeffe” (Fitzgerald 160). It is apparent that Alabama does not view the bodies of her fellow dancers as beautiful and sleek. Instead, she views them as worn out and weathered by work. The descriptions of ballerinas that appear throughout *Save Me the Waltz*, are consistent with the paintings Fitzgerald creates. In her painting, “Ballerinas Dressing,” Fitzgerald portrays women as bulging, faceless beings (refer to page 11 for painting). The hands and feet are enlarged and disproportionate to the ballerinas’ bodies. This exhibits Fitzgerald’s perception these appendages are the vessels through which ballerinas speak and listen. In *Save Me the Waltz*, Alabama compares herself to those who are not blessed to be dancers; her success, she felt, would be measured “when she could listen with her arms and see with her feet. It was incomprehensible that her friends should feel only the necessity to hear with their ears” (134). To Alabama, all senses that keep her from connecting to dance are disregarded as trivial and unreliable. The dancers in the painting are faceless, lacking eyes, nose, and ears. This can be interpreted that dancers are above worldly communication and find their purpose in creating art that marries the body and emotion. Alabama’s fate is reflective of the painted ballerinas; when Alabama rejoins her family, she is unable to think beyond her dance training and cannot make order in a world that keeps her from her one true mode of expression.

As Alabama attempts to forge her own path as a ballerina, she employs both her mind and body in an attempt to literally turn herself into a piece of art. Dancing is Alabama’s attempt at control. It can be read that she is not only searching for her own artistic voice, but she also

feels compelled to embody the very act of dancing. During her life in Europe, Zelda Fitzgerald also became very involved in ballet lessons; she pushed herself, allowing dance to consume a significant portion of her day. In her husband's eyes, it seemed as if Zelda was shirking her motherly duties; she was off "playing" ballerina while her daughter, Scottie, was being raised by a variety of nannies (Mizner 93). Because Zelda finds her passion in something other than motherhood and serving her husband, her husband claims she is in not her "right mind" (Cline 102). Zelda, just like Alabama, drives herself "until she felt like a gored horse in a bullring, dragging its entrails" (Fitzgerald 144). Both women possess the need for a combined mastery of the body and mind.

Unfortunately, this mastery does not come without consequences. In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler assesses scholars such as Michel Foucault, Mary Douglas, and Simon Watney. Butler examines the use of bodies and the "cultural inscriptions" that are placed on bodies by the dominant norms of society. She discusses the ways in which people become marginalized intentionally by society because these individuals use their bodies in ways that go against what is deemed heteronormative. Using Simon Watney's example of men afflicted with AIDS, Butler examines the treatment of these "polluting persons" (Butler 168). This notion that Butler criticizes can be expanded to those with mental illnesses, specifically women during Zelda Fitzgerald's time.

This idea that one must be marginalized if they choose to use their body for purposes beyond what is accepted by the dominant patriarchal society can be seen in Zelda Fitzgerald's frequent admittances into the psychiatric clinics and Alabama's ostracization from her family. Both women choose to use their bodies in ways that are not conducive to the "mother and wife"



lifestyle their husbands and friends feel they should lead and therefore become the “polluting persons.” Both Zelda and Alabama’s families treat them as if their dancing is causing unnecessary hardship. Scott Fitzgerald and David Knight do not display any care to understand their wives ambitions and begin acknowledging their wives as a force holding back the family, but in reality, these women are simply not catering to their husbands’ careers. It makes sense, then, that as Zelda Fitzgerald is sculpting her body into what she desires, spending most of each day in the ballet studio, that her husband would accuse her of becoming unstable under the weight of her obsession. As her husband fights against her dancing by undermining her confidence, Zelda Fitzgerald physically and mentally pushes even harder to become herself within the movement of ballet. To both Fitzgerald and Alabama, “to succeed had become an obsession” (144). However, in contrast to Zelda Fitzgerald’s experience, Alabama Beggs’ psychological transformation is portrayed positively. Alabama disciplines herself, focusing solely on her skills as a ballerina and the condition of her body; although her husband and friends condemn her, claiming she chases false hope, Alabama only relinquishes her career as a ballerina when she injures herself beyond repair. She makes the choice to leave mode of expression behind, whereas Zelda is coerced based off of medical assumptions.

Zelda Fitzgerald constructs *Save Me the Waltz* as a novel in which art, text, and body become synonymous. Her writing techniques, though often criticized, preserve the artistic liberation and affective state for which Fitzgerald seemed to strive. Zelda Fitzgerald breaks the barriers between the artist and her work, creating a novel that opens itself up to aspects of feminist theory that have not been explored until now.

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