**Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald** (1900-1948)

Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald was an American dancer, essayist, novelist, and painter. She was also the wife of American novelist and short-story writer F. Scott Fitzgerald.

On July 24 1900, Zelda Sayre was born into a prominent Southern family in Montgomery, Alabama, the youngest of six children. Her father had a distinguished career in Alabama politics and jurisprudence, eventually serving on the Supreme Court of Alabama. Much younger than her siblings, Zelda was independent, headstrong, and enjoyed being the center of attention (Milford 21-22). She studied ballet during adolescence, but the demands of her social calendar overtook dance lessons in 1916. At the time, Montgomery was home to Camp Sheridan, a training facility preparing American soldiers for the First World War. Among Zelda’s many admirers was Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald. The couple first met at a dance in July of 1918. After a tumultuous long-distance courtship and a broken engagement, they married on April 3, 1920, and Zelda moved north to New York City.

The early years of their marriage saw the Fitzgeralds as the embodiment of the riotous “Jazz Age.” With her bobbed hair, fondness for dancing and jazz, and rebellious sense of style, Zelda Fitzgerald was one of the original American flappers. The Fitzgeralds’ only child, a daughter named Frances Scott (Scottie), was born in October 1921.

The Fitzgeralds travelled to France in 1924, where they met a then-unknown Ernest Hemingway, to whom Zelda took an almost instant dislike. The couple continued to live a life of excess, often beyond their means. An intensely creative person, Fitzgerald grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of an artistic outlet for her energies. She reportedly took her first painting lessons on Capri in 1925 and would continue to paint, at first sporadically and later with greater dedication, for the rest of her life (Lanahan 11). She also wrote cultural commentary on the Flapper and American womanhood as well as several short stories, though most of the latter were published under her husband’s byline as it paid more.

In 1927, Fitzgerald decided to resume her ballet studies and dedicated herself to becoming a professional dancer. She took lessons several times a week in Philadelphia and then Paris where she studied with Madame Lubov Egorova, who had danced in the famed Diaghilev ballet. To realize her dream, Fitzgerald practiced with fierce dedication, sometimes eight or nine hours a day (Milford 154). Twenty-seven was too late in life to achieve the prima ballerina status she had hoped for, but in 1929, her dedication paid off: she was awarded minor roles in a professional dance engagement in Nice and Cannes, France.

At the same time, she was becoming withdrawn, and her friends reported that her behavior was often eccentric. Finally, in April 1930, Zelda was admitted to a French hospital suffering from extreme anxiety. Not long after, she was diagnosed as schizophrenic. Fitzgerald would spend the rest of her life in and out of various hospitals and treatment centers, first in Europe and then in the United States.

Her husband was convinced that Zelda’s obsession with dance was the cause of her breakdown, and made her promise to give it up (Lanahan 13). After eighteen months of treatment, Zelda was released from a psychiatric clinic in Switzerland. The Fitzgeralds moved back to the United States and took up residence outside of Baltimore. Since she could no longer dance, Fitzgerald turned her creative energies to writing. *Save Me The Waltz* was drafted in two months in early 1932 and ignited an intense debate between the Fitzgeralds: Zelda’s autobiographical novel touched on material that Scott was planning to use in his current work in progress, *Tender is the Night*. Zelda agreed to submit the manuscript to her husband for his approval before its publication. Ultimately, the novel sold fewer than 1400 copies and did not fare well with reviewers. Despite its lackluster reception, it contains vivid and original imagery, as well as hints of the surrealist influences that would be more fully realized in her painting.

Fitzgerald suffered another breakdown in 1932 and was hospitalized again. Part of her treatment, in addition to talk therapy, was painting. She began to show her work locally in 1933. In 1934, Scott organized a show in Manhattan, but the reviews were disappointing. Despite this negative response, Fitzgerald continued to paint, and from 1934 onward it was her primary creative outlet. Most of her surviving paintings date from the 1940s. Her paintings were often fantastical, depicting fairy tales, the Blue Ridge Mountains, scenes evocative of her former life in New York and Paris, and religious images which testified to her turn to the church in the last decade of her life.

In 1936, Zelda Fitzgerald moved to Highland Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina. This was her primary residence until her death in March of 1948.

**Major Works**

Fitzgerald, Zelda. *Zelda Fitzgerald* *The Collected Writings* (1991). Matthew Bruccoli, Ed. Macmillan: New York. The definitive collection of Zelda Fitzgerald’s writing, this volume contains *Save Me the Waltz*, *Scandalabra*, twelve short stories, twelve articles published in various periodicals, and a selection of letters that Zelda wrote to her husband over their lifetime.

**References and Further Reading:**

Eleanor Lanahan, Ed. *Zelda: An Illustrated Life* (1996). Harry Abrams: New York. The volume focuses on Zelda Fitzgerald’s artistic accomplishments and reproduces eighty of her paintings, most of which were produced in the 1930s and 40s.

Milford, Nancy. *Zelda: A Biography* (1970). Harper and Row: New York. Milford’s accessible but controversial biography provides a corrective to (F. Scott) Fitzgerald studies, which prior to its publication, tended to demonize Zelda and blame her for her husband’s frustrations and failures. Milford draws upon Zelda’s writing, both fiction and non-fiction, to present a more complex portrait of a conflicted woman who faced numerous challenges from societal expectations to psychological illness.

Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Zelda Sayre-Fitzgerald: An American Woman’s Life* (2004) Palgrave MacMillan: New York. Wagner-Martin dedicates more time to Zelda Fitzgerald’s Southern roots and argues that the cultural expectations of Southern womenhood shaped much of Zelda’s character despite the fact that, or perhaps because of it, she lived the majority of her adult life elsewhere.

Cline, Sally. *Zelda Fitzgerald: A Voice in Paradise* (2002). Arcade: New York. Cline’s biography is the first to take up its subject since Milford and draws upon new materials including letters from Zelda to her daughter and previously sealed medical records. Cline’s biography places greater emphasis on Zelda’s artistic accomplishments and the cultural forces that worked against her.

Taylor, Kendell. *Sometime Madness is Wisdom: Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Marriage* (2001) Ballantine: New York. Taylor’s book aims to be the biography of marriage, but it focuses primarily on Zelda and the way that her identity as Mrs. F. Scott Fitzgerald stifled her artistic ambitions even as it enabled a lifestyle of glamour and celebrity.

Paratextual:

Image of Zelda Fitzgerald: <http://uramericansinparis.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/happy.jpg> Original image from Visual Materials Division, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries

Watercolor of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City by Zelda Fitzgerald: <http://static.squarespace.com/static/507dba43c4aabcfd2216a447/t/533c781de4b01b8f6b73c1eb/1396471851751/> Published in *Zelda: An Illustrated Life* (above).