

## Reflection Statement

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*"If they [my creations] are good, they will come to light one day."*

- Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald<sup>5</sup>

My major work takes the form of a historical fiction which fuses real and imagined moments from the life of Zelda Fitzgerald, whom I use as a surrogate for the experiences of 'silenced women' in history. Thus, the narrative also functions to vindicate Zelda Fitzgerald as a talented and worthy artist, separate from the confines of her marriage with F. Scott Fitzgerald. By dismantling her memories of their life together and excavating her brief writings in a personal, empowering piece of historical fiction, I explore the issues of authorship and jealousy that permeated the golden couple. In doing so, I seek to elucidate Zelda's creativity and humanise her in a manner which other texts fail to. The ironic title, *A Beautiful Little Fool*, serves my purpose in a two-fold manner; alluding to the demeaning perception of Zelda I seek to overturn whilst appropriating one of the most famous quotes Scott plagiarised from Zelda. Through my work, I hope to contribute to a wider discourse on female empowerment, pertinent in the epoch of #MeToo, giving voice to women and particularly paying homage to the unrecognised wives of other literary greats.

Conceptually, my early ideas were seeded in the Preliminary English Advanced unit "Reading to Write," specifically in the study of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>6</sup> Intrigued by his extravagant writing style and the apparent glamour of the 1920s celebrity lifestyle, I undertook brief research on how his context inspired the content and characters of

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<sup>5</sup> Seidel, Kathryn Lee, Alexis Wang, and Alvin Y. Wang. 2006. "Performing Art: Zelda Fitzgerald's Art and The Role of The Artist". *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 5 (1)

<sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction (15<sup>th</sup> ed.) (1995)

his novels. On exploration of his personal life, I was introduced to Zelda Fitzgerald, his wife with an "audacious spirit and brash risqué demeanour,"<sup>7</sup> who immediately piqued my interest. It became increasingly apparent to me that pop culture's memory and depictions of Zelda misconstrue and simplify her identity, leading me to redirect the focus of my major work towards vindicating and humanising Zelda. Harnessing the skills of emulation and appropriation gained from the "Reading to Write" unit, particularly relating to narrative voice, I consolidated a variety of excerpts of Zelda's writing, notably her published novel, *Save Me the Waltz*,<sup>8</sup> to guide the stream-of-consciousness style: "Why isn't she doing anything? Surely she's noticed all her stolen words floating about the Plaza," employed throughout my short story.

Undertaking the HSC Extension English elective "Worlds of Upheaval" opened up the potential of texts to activate a change in attitudes, perspectives and social circumstances, and challenged me to pursue the contemporary relevance of my narrative and characters. Specifically, through critically analysing the core texts, *Frankenstein*,<sup>9</sup> *Metropolis*<sup>10</sup> and *Waiting for Godot*<sup>11</sup> in response to their respective socio-political contexts, I appreciated that my narrative could serve a multifaceted purpose; a historical reimagining of Zelda's personal upheaval while also being a modern excavation of female mistreatment prompted by the #MeToo and #YouKnowMe movements. By recognising texts as catalysts for change, I was able to view my narrative concept through a holistic lens, expanding my purpose from strictly giving voice to Zelda to representing and paying homage to other unheard and diminished

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<sup>7</sup> "Zelda Fitzgerald". 2019. Biography. <https://www.biography.com/personality/zelda-fitzgerald>.

<sup>8</sup> Fitzgerald, Zelda. 1932. *Save Me the Waltz*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

<sup>9</sup> Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. 1818. *Frankenstein*. United Kingdom: Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor & Jones.

<sup>10</sup> Lang, Fritz. 1927. *Metropolis*. DVD. Germany: UFA.

<sup>11</sup> Beckett, Samuel. 1953. *Waiting for Godot*. Paris.

women: “Sophia Tolstaya, Dorothy Wordsworth, Valerie Eliot, Vera Nabokov and Anna Dostoyevskaya.”

Following my reading of *In the light of that dawn*<sup>12</sup> by a previous Extension 2 English student, Caitlin Williams, I discovered the historical fiction genre is far more complex than works merely set in the past. As described by Williams, the author must “balance precariously between fact and fiction,” borrowing pieces of historical truth and fusing them with imagined events, characters and dialogue to create an authentic and believable piece. Observing Williams' well-executed example of historical fiction catalysed my biographical research into Zelda, leading me to consolidate a variety of biographies, with *Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald: Sometimes Madness is Wisdom*<sup>13</sup> and *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise*<sup>14</sup> deepening my factual understanding of her life. This knowledge foregrounded my interweaving of factual accounts and verbatim quotes with fictional musings, which manifests as follows:

“I don’t want to live - I want to love first, and live incidentally.”<sup>15</sup>

Further, I chose to include fictional sentences amongst the factual ones:

“I don’t like being twenty-two. I hate it more than anything in the world.”

I found this layering of the factual and fictional provided authenticity to the imaginative narrativization of Zelda's life, enabling me to most truthfully convey her voice with my writing.

Initially, the stark parallels between the characters of Scott’s novels and Zelda and his relationship led me to structure my work through his novels, with Zelda merely imagining herself into the narrative. However, on revision, I felt this structure did not provide leverage

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<sup>12</sup> Young Writers Showcase. 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, Kendall. 2003. *Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald: Sometimes Madness Is Wisdom*. New York: Ballantine Books.

<sup>14</sup> Cline, Sally. 2002. *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise*. New York: Arcade Publishing.

<sup>15</sup> Fitzgerald, F. Scott, Zelda Fitzgerald, Jackson R. Bryer, and Cathy W. Barks. 2003. *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda: The Love Letters of F. Scott And Zelda Fitzgerald*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

for Zelda's voice to be empowered. Thus, I maintained the narrative structure based on the chronology of Scott's novels, however placed Zelda as the heroine in each, serving to humanise her and grant her the autonomy to confront Scott. When considering Zelda's characterisation, as stressed in *The Writing Book*,<sup>16</sup> it became clear that opening with Scott placed Zelda in a passive role and drew the reader's focus away from Zelda and towards Scott, competing with my overarching purpose. The description of characterisation as "the process that transforms real life people into characters in fiction,"<sup>17</sup> simplified the process for me, and drove my focus towards recalling Zelda authentically rather than romanticising her struggles and mental illness.

Instrumental to my editing process was the reading that stimulated my choice of framing device, being the women's voices. Inspired by an excerpt from one of Zelda's letters to Scott during her time in an institution, "Now I see odd things: people's arms too long or their faces as if they were stuffed,"<sup>18</sup> I was intrigued by how these voices may have sounded to Zelda, spurring me to fictionalise the unheard voices of other wives of literary greats, who become metaphors for Zelda's schizophrenia. Blending this historical fact with fictional musing gave birth to the hallucinatory voices of Zelda who emerge during and following her electroconvulsive shock treatments. These hallucinatory voices are marked throughout by italics and experimental typography:

*"Zelda"*

*"Don't forget."*

*"Take back..."*

*"...what is yours."*

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<sup>16</sup> Grenville, Kate. 2010. *The Writing Book: A Practical Guide for Fiction Writers*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Op Cit. Fitzgerald, F. Scott, Zelda Fitzgerald, Jackson R. Bryer, and Cathy W. Barks. 2003. *Dear Scott, Dearest Zelda: The Love Letters of F. Scott And Zelda Fitzgerald*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

These women's voices opened up a space to connect with contemporary audiences, adding relevance to Zelda's resurrected voice in the wake of the #MeToo movement. The visuality of the experimental typography implies fragmentation, symbolic that throughout history, these women's voices have been lost and are only now being pieced together. Characteristic of a postmodern sui generis style, I chose to rework the opening section to be narrated in omniscient, second person from the voices to directly address the reader, forcefully opening with, "Are you ready now?"

As in Williams' work, my use of first person is characterised by regular, seamless transitions between dialogue, description and, of particular importance, a stream-of-consciousness style whereby Zelda converses with the hallucinatory voices, evident in:

*"Find her Zelda...*

Where would she be?"

This use of stream-of-consciousness permeates my narrative, tracing Zelda's internal thought process and the ongoing deterioration of her mental state. To further my engagement with and understanding of Zelda's mental illness, the environment of the institutions and treatments administered, I sought readings from various medical analyses, with *Gendering Psychosis: The Illness of Zelda Fitzgerald*,<sup>19</sup> providing me an invaluable, objective understanding of Zelda's schizophrenia, and the likely effects of her electroconvulsive shock treatments. Further, engaging with the depictions of electroconvulsive therapy in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*<sup>20</sup> and Milos Forman's filmic adaptation of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*,<sup>21</sup> enabled me to accurately represent the procedure and Zelda's likely mental

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<sup>19</sup> Seeman, Mary V. 2015. "Gendering Psychosis: The Illness of Zelda Fitzgerald". *Medical Humanities* 42 (1).

<sup>20</sup> Plath, Sylvia. 1963. *The Bell Jar*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

<sup>21</sup> Forman, Milos. 1975. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. DVD.

state: “Documents and doctor’s notes were tacked up on the grey wall -- an injection -- and I would squint intently, trying to decipher -- a gel application -- their muddle of letters to ignore the jabbing.”

Stylistically, my reading of *The Paper Menagerie*<sup>22</sup> informed my use of magic realism to segue from Zelda’s reality in the mental institution to her involvement with Scott’s novels. Within Liu’s work, origami became a magical recurring motif, which I found effective in subtly fusing reality and fantasy, and appropriated into my own work through including the original covers, which serve a twofold function: they act as a segue into Zelda’s hallucinations, and allow readers to distinguish her true reality from her imagined reality inside Scott’s novels. To further the purpose of these covers, I chose to overlay sketches of hands holding the novels, which progressively become more complex and realistic as the story advances, emblematic of Zelda’s growing sense of agency and autonomy.

Directed towards audiences interested in historical fiction, my short story will particularly appeal to revisionists open to engaging with previously undiscussed perspectives relating to the 1920s as a literary and cultural era, and Scott and Zelda as emblems of the Jazz Age. Considering this, I believe my work pertains to the content published by the magazine *Kill Your Darlings*. More specifically, my story appeals to those passionate about restoring unheard women's voices, by providing a platform for these women to be heard and appreciated. In the wake of our current socio-political context and the advent of #MeToo, this readership is continually expanding and thus, despite empowering unrecognised women of the past rather than the present, my major work finds grounding in contemporary society. I envision the story

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<sup>22</sup> Liu, Ken. 2016. *The Paper Menagerie*. Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers Australia.

appearing in the Australian feminist journal, *Feminartsy*, which “seeks to create a space for new and diverse voices and experiences of feminism.”<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the English Extension 2 course, the process of crafting, reading and re-drafting has heightened my appreciation for Zelda Fitzgerald as an individual and the ability of short stories to give voice to those who have been silenced, unheard and misrepresented. I have found immense joy in researching, gaining feedback and experimenting with the creative liberties historical fiction affords. I hope that my final short story contributes a new perspective within the literary discourse surrounding Zelda Fitzgerald and, in some small way at least, pays homage to the unrecognised wives of the past whose voices remain under-acknowledged, underestimated, and under-represented.

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<sup>23</sup> "About - *Feminartsy*". 2019. *Feminartsy*. <http://feminartsy.com/about/>.

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