

F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald: Plagiarism, Destructive Ambition, and “Imposter Syndrome”?

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Abstract

Before she was committed to a psychiatric hospital for her self-destructive and erratic behavior, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, had been accused by her husband, the highly successful F. Scott Fitzgerald, of plagiarizing his work. She accused him of the same thing. And yet, there is a body of evidence that demonstrates that passages of F. Scott's writing were derived from her journals and letters, and that the work that was published under both their names as co-authors was actually exclusively her work. There was even one short story that was published under his name, but in reality, completely written by Zelda. The relationship that they had with each other, with their work, and the world at large gives rise to a number of interesting phenomena when two ambitious writers are in a relationship, the first of which is rivalry, followed by existential (or ontological) insecurity, protracted writer's block, and even the emergence of “imposter syndrome.” This paper reports the results of a close investigation of their history, their writing, and illuminating psychological and philosophical phenomena. It also contextualizes their central themes within literary Modernism and the “Lost Generation,” writing and influencing each other in the 1920s.

Introduction

I happened across “The Iceberg,” a short story by Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald that was written when she was 17, and contains a remarkable energy, fresh honesty about women, marriage, and society.

<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-iceberg-a-story-by-zelda-fitzgerald> Reading her work made me curious about her other short stories, many of which were published either under her famous husband's name or jointly or as though they had co-authored them, although she was sole author of all of them. Her tragic story and his self-destructiveness, made me contemplate the nature of influence, plagiarism, and the way that ambitious writers and artists who secretly consider themselves frauds are often drawn to each other, with often emotionally sickening results. How could any of these ideas have a bearing on the life, work, and dynamics of F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896 - 1940) and his wife, Zelda (1900 - 1948)?

F. Scott Fitzgerald: Plagiarized his own wife?

Over the years, critics have accused F. Scott Fitzgerald of being a plagiarist who battled writer's block after the great success of *This Side of Paradise*, and so was “inspired” by his “muse,” Zelda. The word “muse” was generally understood as meaning his emotional and spiritual inspiration. She was also consistently blamed for disrupting his “flow” and causing him to have a tremendous substance abuse problem – one that would ultimately strip him of all his creative abilities and cause him to die young (and broke) in Hollywood in 1940. Zelda, however, was a talented writer in her own right, and maintained journals, wrote letters to her husband, and wrote short stories, plays, and an autobiographical novel. She did this in spite of the great chaos of their lives, and then, her repeated institutionalizations for being “erratic” and later, “schizophrenic.”

Zelda Meets Scott: Similar Dreams and Ambitions

Zelda, a debutante, born to a wealthy family in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1900, died in 1948 in a fire that broke out in a psychiatric hospital in Asheville, North Carolina, where where Zelda had been a patient for most of the decade. Zelda, who had been locked in a room awaiting electroshock therapy, died along with 8 other women (Gordon, 1991).

F. Scott Fitzgerald, born to a middle class family in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1896, met Zelda in Alabama in 1918. They married a few years later after he had published his much-heralded and highly successful novel, *This Side of Paradise*, which was a highly autobiographical novel of life at Princeton. The novel depicts a young man who wants to be a literary phenomenon, who careens from grandiosity to absolute self-abasement. At the same time, he studies the ways and habits of the “slickers” of Princeton, with an eye to self-reification. The dual quests result in self-destructive behavior because even if he is brilliant, he is not the scion of a captain of industry or the elite. It also traces the relationship he has with a dazzling young beauty whose personality mesmerizes him. They moved to New York City, where they were vanguards of the “flappers” and the wild post-War, post Spanish flu 1920s. The novel describes a young man who knows himself better before he goes to Princeton than when he gets there; as an aspiring writer, he feels he has to act the part, and thus senses that he is something of a fraud. That “imposter syndrome” phenomenon is precisely what triggers all of his risk-taking, drinking, and self-destructive relationships.

With Zelda, he found a young woman who desperately wants to “be” something and who is not content with the idea of domesticity as her only role in life. She wants to be successful and to create. She writes journals, plays, short stories, paints, studies dance, sometimes in classes up to 8 hours per day. Her quest for self-actualization (in terms of becoming the person she wants to be), is never realized. With F. Scott Fitzgerald, she is able to leverage his name to get published, but the stories are published either as having been co-authored by him, or written by him altogether, as in the case of “A Millionaire’s Girl,” published in *The Saturday Evening Post*, where he received \$4,000. In the stories she wrote, but were published as co-authored, she received \$400. Her one published novel, which was published in her own name, netted her under \$200.00. These are just a few of the examples.

Styles, Themes, Characters

The highly lyrical writing that made Scott famous appears in Zelda’s descriptions of gardens, landscapes, and nature. The personification that is so characteristic of *The Great Gatsby* is one of the most salient features of Zelda’s work as well. Further, intense similes and metonymies are frequently found in the work of each. In “A Millionaire’s Girl,” the opening passage evokes the kind of lyricism that one finds, not in *This Side of Paradise* but years after he had married Zelda. One example is in *The Great Gatsby* in the opening of Chapter 2. Here is Scott’s description of the landscape:

This is a valley of ashes—a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air (<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/64317/pg64317-images.html>).

It is not known if or how Scott edited or redacted Zelda’s work that was sent for publication. However, it is telling that his writing dramatically changed after the publication of *This Side of Paradise*, and when he famously started having bouts of writer’s block. Here is a passage from the opening of “A Millionaire’s Girl,” written by Zelda Fitzgerald:

Twilights were wonderful after the war. They hung above New York like indigo wash, forming themselves from asphalt dust and sooty shadows under the cornices and limp gusts of air exhaled from closing windows to hang above the streets with all the mystery of white fog rising off a swamp (*The Collected Writings*, p. 327).

In the case of Zelda Fitzgerald, it does seem that both Scott and society collude to make her invisible and to brand her protests as the ravings of a schizophrenic. Further, there is evidence that Scott copied Zelda’s diaries word for word into his novels. Zora was not able to prove her allegation because her diaries and hand-written journals had “disappeared.” This was before the time of cloud backups or mailing / emailing a manuscript to yourself.

Where does influence trigger ontological anxiety?

One could argue that it is not only not surprising, but it would be expected that a married couple that is working together would start influencing each other. While this is true, perhaps another interesting story is what happens when two ambitious individuals who want to be famous for their brilliant writing and creative output, both suffer from a kind of imposter syndrome. Further, there is often inequality of status or access. For example, men and women have had different levels of access and respect in the literary world, resulting in the fact that the husband in a husband and wife team may have higher recognition, status, and prestige, even though the wife may be arguably the better writer. Further, the person with the higher level of recognition, reputation, and prestige is under more pressure to perform. Having more pressure could result in a potential for performance issues including burnout or writer’s block.

In *The Great Gatsby*, technology is what both brings people together and ultimately destroys them. The key technology is the automobile, as well as the shops used to repair cars. In Zelda’s short stories, the telephone is a constant presence. While we may take telephones for granted, in Zelda’s time, to have a dedicated line in one’s house was novel, and perhaps of the last decade or so.

It is interesting to note that *The Great Gatsby* and many of Zelda’s stories were written at the same time that T. S. Eliot wrote and published his modernist poem, “The Hollow Men” (Eliot, 1925). Eliot and Fitzgerald were widely acknowledged to be a part of the “Lost Generation” after World War I, where ideas of self, agency, and more were called into question, and instead of the decidedly optimistic ideas of the Victorians, the Modernists were negative and their works of art nihilist. There is no core essence or identity in the “hollow men,” just as there is no stable identity for the protagonists of Scott’s or Zelda’s work.

The absence of a constant, stable identity, or even the perceive loss of it, could constitute what has been described as “ontological anxiety.” Ontological anxiety is a hallmark of the “Lost Generation” of post WWI writers who began to question all ideals and aspirations that led to the World War I. Far from being a glorious elimination of oppressive caste, hierarchies, and concentration of wealth, it was a grisly, nightmarish descent into the bowels of chemical warfare. For men, in general,

One did not have to be a veteran of trench warfare and chlorine gas attacks to experience ontological anxiety after WWI. Instead, the anxiety is more widespread and diffuse: “ontological anxiety has to do with the absolute threat of extinction and ontic anxiety with the relative threat to self-preservation and self-enhancement. From this condition there is no escape” (Hendrix, p 65). What both Scott and Zelda were grappling with as they dreamed of accomplishment, global recognition and adulation, was the fact they felt they had to create a series of acts, or mirages, to hide the fact that they were “hollow” themselves and had no actual identity or existence, except that which might be provisionally extended to them.

“Imposter Syndrome”

Tellingly, her short stories involve profiles or sketches of “girls” (young women), most of whom are actresses, or are consciously “acting” in their lives, and the narrator hints that there is no core, stable self. The quest to become a woman she can be proud of being is ongoing and often fruitless. The stories that end in a successful marriage (to a wealthy person), are not framed in the idea of love or a meeting of minds. Instead, they suggest just one stopping point in the confusing and often exhausting set of behaviors that one cloaks oneself in to convince others that there is a worthy person at the core; the person involved in the act is not convinced of it. They seem to suffer what is commonly referred to as “imposter syndrome,” a feature that occasionally accompanies depression or generalized anxiety disorder, and manifests itself in the idea that a person thinks of themselves as an imposter, and not truly capable of the things that they have accomplished or produced (Doom, 2021).

Her novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, was published in 1932, and had to do with the breakdown of two individuals married to each other. One destroys himself through alcohol, while the wife drinks, but also has breakdowns. Zelda accused Scott of plagiarizing great chunks of her diaries and even her manuscript. He accused her of being a plagiarist and did it even more publicly. The fact that she agreed to have her work published in his name ultimately harmed her because it stripped her of credibility.

Literary critics have pointed out for years how much F. Scott’s muse was more than a muse – she was a direct source (Edgington, 2021). That argument seems to have been fairly solidly proven. What is most interesting to me is to see how two people have similar ways of expressing themselves in the world, and more pointedly, have the same desire to become known for their ability to create and inspire.

Further, both create protagonists who “act” themselves into existence (Zelda’s “girls”), or, as in the case of Gatsby, “sprang from his Platonic conception of himself.” The fundamental vulnerability of all of these characters is that they suffer from a kind of “imposter syndrome,” which ironically reflects what torments both Scott and Zelda. Even as they create a fiction for themselves, or a convenient mask, there is a sense of detachment from the self. In Zelda’s “A Millionaire’s Girl,” the narrator notices that “there was always that horizon quality in her eyes” (The Collected Works, p. 335).

Conclusion: A Vexed Situation and How to untangle attribution, and the prevalence of imposter syndrome in literature

When two people who are passionately pursuing the same goal, they are often magnetically (yet toxically) drawn to each other. When the ultimate goal (to be a great writer or artist) is culturally more condoned for one gender than the other, it is easy to see how frustrating it might be, and how the seemingly easy “work-arounds” (simply co-author or publish in his name), could ultimately be spiritually annihilating. The double standard for men and women artists was staggering, despite the strides made by “flappers” and women’s newly gained right to vote. Scott’s excesses were framed in narratives of “poetes maudits” and a kind of self-sacrificial heroic excess. Zelda was perceived as mentally ill, morally suspect, even dangerous, and incapable of being anything but a pale imitation of her husband (although she was the real author of work attributed to him).

And, if F. Scott did steal passages from Zelda’s diaries and passed them them off as his own work, any imposter syndrome he might suffer from would be exacerbated, since at that point, he truly was an imposter.

Sadly, Zelda Fitzgerald was not the only woman whose work was appropriated, repurposed, or simply subsumed by a male collaborator. It is not always easy to untangle the actual attribution, but it is time for it to happen,

particularly because it is assumed that women were simply silent. Were Shakespeare's plays written by a woman? John Donne's poems?

In the case of imposter syndrome, not only does it apply to the writers themselves, but it seems to be a feature of much of twentieth-century writing. To identify the cases of "imposters" in literature could also give rise to insights into the unifying core beliefs and philosophical positions characterizing not only the writing but the authors.

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