Beyond the Flapper:

Zelda Fitzgerald's Representation of Middle-Class Female Artistry in her 'Girls' Series'

MA Dissertation

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Abstract

The present MA dissertation approaches the understudied short fiction of American modernist author Zelda Fitzgerald from a feminist perspective as part of a tradition of modernist women writers who published their short stories in middlebrow women's magazines. By analyzing three stories from the author's 'Girls' Series;' "The Original Follies Girl" (1929), "The Girl with Talent" (1930), and "Poor Working Girl" (1931); this dissertation aims to dissect how Fitzgerald's portrayal of working women and their quest for artistic realization exposes the difficulties and contradictions working women encountered in the 1920s and 1930s. In this sense, I argue that the author's artist-heroines are all faced with three main obstacles that prevent them from realizing themselves to their full potential; namely, the gendered double standards of the modernist conception of art, their struggle to balance the public and private spheres, and their commodified vision of their own bodies. Through a marked use of sarcasm to represent her flawed protagonists, Fitzgerald transcends the prevailing feminine stereotype of the flapper in women's magazines of the 1920s as well as their ideal of femininity. Likewise, she manages to subtly denounce the obstacles posed by a sexist social context for women artists, which also mirrors the underestimation of the work of modernist women authors like herself.

Keywords: Zelda Fitzgerald, 'Girls' Series,' Social Modernism, Middlebrow Women's Magazines, Feminism, Periodical Studies.

Introduction

From a Montgomery Southern Belle who was expected to seek a respectable marriage, to a ground-breaking flapper figure of 1920s New York, Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald is best known for being the eccentric wife of the celebrated modernist author F. Scott Fitzgerald. In Linda Wagner-Martin's biography, *Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald: An American Woman's Life* (2004), however, this customary portrayal of Zelda Fitzgerald is shattered in favor of a more humanized image of an ambitious and talented artist who was unable to reach her full potential. A modernist author of the 1920s and 1930s in her own right, Zelda Fitzgerald's literary output encompasses a wide range of genres; including articles, literary reviews, a theatre play entitled *Scandalabra* (1933), several short stories, and her best-known novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932). Taking this into consideration, Wagner-Martin rejects the pre-established narrative of Fitzgerald as a temptress-muse and recognizes the complex nature of her hindrances to her full development as a creator of literature: "Ambitious but ambivalent and unsure of her talents, she subordinated both her public image and her private artistic ventures to her role as a femme inspiratrice," (105) despite her awareness of her gift for writing: "She knew there was no reason she could not be a published writer." (108) Wagner-Martin's proposal, which builds upon Milford's ground-breaking *Zelda* (1970), echoes a relatively-recent trend in literary studies toward considering Fitzgerald as a proper author with real potential. Notwithstanding this, very limited attention has been paid to her short fiction beyond their biographic interest. Specifically, a key aspect that has not been approached is the intersection between gender, artistic expression, and class present in the struggles of the working-class female protagonists of her 'Girls Series.' It is thus the aim of this MA's dissertation to address this niche in the study of Zelda Fitzgerald's work to revalue her contribution as an author.

To fully comprehend Fitzgerald's approach to this intersection between feminism and the working class in her short fiction, it is first essential to establish her production within the context of first-wave feminism. This first wave, which was mainly led by middle and upper-middle-class women, focused primarily on the acquisition of women's equal legal rights and their education. After the achievement of white American women's right to vote in 1920 thanks to the role of suffragists, there was a surge in women's progressive entering into the workforce. It is also crucial to mention that this was in part possible because of the period of economic prosperity that the US experienced after the end of the First World War. Such a period was known as *The Roaring 20s* and it prompted the growth of the already established capitalist system in the country. Consequently, there was also an acceleration in consumer demand, which led to the rise of mass production and consumerist culture. The 1920s was also the decade that brought the rise of the figure of the *flapper*, a cultural symbol of sexual liberation for middle or upper-middle-class young women who broke social conventions. This decade entailed a fundamental step in the sense of freedom for these middle and upper-class women. What was, then, the situation of the working-class women who were joining the workforce? Most of them practiced *feminized* professions; in fact, "nearly a third of working women in the 1920s were domestic servants" (Pruitt), and they were unable to leave behind traditional women's roles. Considering this context, was it possible for a working woman to become a flapper artist like the women depicted in Fitzgerald's short fiction?

Central to Fitzgerald's proposal of a working-class female artistry within this context is naturally the figure of the flapper and its different media representations of the 1920s. Gaining popularity after World War I, the term *flapper* refers to a set of middle or upper-class young women who followed an unconventional lifestyle and social behavior compared to the *debutante*s of the previous century. They occupied spaces previously denied to them like jazz clubs, wore shorter skirts than their predecessors, smoked cigarettes, and generally showcased

attitudes typically associated with men. Zeitz further develops this characterization of the flapper by describing her lifestyle and place within the capitalist system as a recently enfranchised citizen: "Gainfully employed and earning her own keep, free from family and community surveillance, a participant in a burgeoning consumer culture that counseled indulgence and pleasure over restraint and asceticism." (8). Flappers were therefore successfully incorporated into this growing capitalist system of the 1920s and fully immersed into its consumerist culture, to the point where they have often been labeled as frivolous and superficial. From Zelda Fitzgerald's perspective, however, there is a clear distinction between *true flapperdom* as a philosophy and later superficial imitations of it. In her article "Eulogy on the Flapper," she contends that "Flapperdom has become a game, it is no longer a philosophy" (392) as newer manifestations of the so-called flappers are not revolutionary. Instead, they have succumbed to consumerist culture and no longer take risks, resembling their *debutante* predecessors. For her, the original flapper "was conscious that the things she did were the things she had always wanted to do" (391). In other words, she was non-conforming and subversive. This distinction is crucial to analyzing the protagonists portrayed in her short fiction. How does, then, Zelda Fitzgerald's defense of authentic flapperdom relate to her feminist portrayal of professional women artists?

Among the many portrayals of flapperdom in the media of the 1920s, the publication of flapper fiction in middlebrow magazines is particularly of interest for the analysis of Zelda Fitzgerald's short fiction. Her 'Girls Series,' which involved six short stories about different types of American girls of the time, was precisely commissioned by and published in one of the popular magazines of the time, *College Humor*. The magazine was addressed to a young audience, hence it featured topics relevant to this audience among which the archetype of the flapper stands out in the narratives published in it. It is important to note that, as Hirshbein points out, "the representations in popular magazines presumed a white, middle-class

audience" (112). Hence, even though Fitzgerald's stories have as their protagonists originally working-class women, the audience she was writing for was middle-class like herself.

Likewise, Fitzgerald's publications in these middlebrow magazines follow the trend of what critic Ashley Lawson refers to as *popular modernism*. According to Lawson, these middlebrow magazines entailed a convenient platform for women writers, who had yet to establish their place in the publishing industry, to publish their modernist short fiction (203). Female authors, like Fitzgerald herself, found in these magazines a space where they could challenge standard representations of women in literature, including flapper fiction, without being "confined by the expectations of the publishing industry, such as the masculine imperatives of modernism" (Lawson 203). In addition to this, Lawson also connects Fitzgerald's short fiction to that of her peer Dawn Powell, who also published her short stories in *College Humor*. Powell's narratives often played with irony to criticize stereotypical portrayals of women in magazines like the one she was writing for. Despite the audience of the magazine, the author is highly critical of "the wealthy as false agents of these unattainable ideals," (Lawson 211) focusing her critique on the upper-class superficial imitators of the flapper. Both Fitzgerald and Powell were using these magazines to criticize the very ideals these were promoting, pointing at more complex and realistic portrayals of femininity. Fitzgerald's 'Girls Series,' therefore, cannot be read without considering her recurrent use of irony and the intentions behind it, which are closely linked to the context she was writing in.

Equally important to the understanding of Fitzgerald's construction of her protagonists and the message that underlies them are the ideas already suggested by her feminist modernist predecessors such as Virginia Woolf or Katherine Mansfield. Fitzgerald's defense of the professionalization of female artists in her fiction certainly resonates with Woolf's contention in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), that is, that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (1). This is especially apparent in the struggles the protagonist of

Fitzgerald's novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932) faces in the development of her career as a professional ballet dancer, but also relevant to her 'Girls Series.' Yet Woolf's stream-of-consciousness prose, uneventful narratives, and prevailing focus on upper-class society women seem rather distant from Fitzgerald's more direct short fiction. Perhaps Mansfield's portrayal of femininity from different social classes in her short fiction is closer to Fitzgerald's women.

In this regard, it is worth highlighting Katherine's Mansfield short story compilation *Bliss* (1920) and particularly, her "Prelude," for its perspective on gender and social class. Revolving around the women of the Burnells family and their house move, "Prelude" deals with the issues and limitations of women of different ages and social classes. What all the women in Mansfield's narrative have in common is a lack of a sense of achievement and how constricted they are in terms of life choices as women. The author's social commentary on the limited choices of women, especially of those belonging to the working class, comes close to Fitzgerald's flapper-like protagonists and what she refers to as their "many bitter ends" (392).

Fitzgerald's short fiction, thus, originates within an environment of feminist vindication among modernist female authors and propels a similar set of ideas regarding the liberation of women. Nevertheless, her literary output appears to have received significantly less attention than that of both her male and female peers. As part of a highly famous couple, the mythology surrounding the Fitzgeralds' marriage has always been a source of interest for critics to the point where this relationship has somehow overshadowed her career as a writer. In "Zelda Fitzgerald: An Unromantic Revision," Clemens identifies the limitations of the four most notorious biographies about the Fitzgeralds up until the 1980s. While she points out that earlier biographies, such as Mizener's *The Far Side of Paradise* (1951) or Turnbull's *Scott Fitzgerald* (1962), revolved around the figure of Scott; Mayfield's *Exiles from Paradise* (1971), and especially Milford's *Zelda* (1970) place Zelda Fitzgerald at the core of their discussion. *Zelda* particularly paved the way for later biographies of Zelda Fitzgerald, including Taylor's

Sometimes Madness Is Wisdom (2001), Cline's *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise* (2002), or Wagner-Martin's aforementioned *Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald: An American Woman's Life* (2004); all of which reject the traditional approach to her figure as a mere "biographical companion to her husband" (Grogan 116). It is also worth noting that more recent biographies on the figure of F. Scott Fitzgerald, such as David S. Brown's 2017 *Paradise Lost,* offer a humanized and complex portrayal of both individuals. Brown's biography in particular dedicates a whole chapter, entitled "Zelda after Scott," to her life and artistic development after her husband's death. Therefore, critical interest in Zelda Fitzgerald, at least as a relevant personality of her own, appears to have progressively increased over the past decades. Although some of these sources fail to consider her authorship, more recent literature does value her career as an active creator of literature.

It is true that part of the scholarly interest in Zelda Fitzgerald's work arises from a concern in her contribution to F. Scott Fitzgerald's own literary production, as is the case of Storalek's "The Beautiful and the Damned: The Influence of Zelda Fitzgerald on F. Scott Fitzgerald's Life and Literary Output." Yet the work of scholars such as Lawson's "The Muse and the Maker: Gender, Collaboration, and Appropriation in the Life and Work" has broken away from the classic representation of Fitzgerald as a passive muse in her husband's creation process. In this respect, Petry's "Women's Work: The Case of Zelda Fitzgerald" is also worth mentioning as one of the first pieces of literary criticism to really re-evaluate the author's own work, including her long-disregarded short fiction. In her article, Petry also suggests Fitzgerald's husband's rigid guidelines on her creative work and a gender-biased literary scene as possible causes behind the author's critical neglect. Interest in her figure as an unvoiced author has hence developed over the last decades, with her best-known novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932) particularly capturing the attention of critics both for its biographical nature and modernist style.

Initially regarded as Zelda Fitzgerald's version of the autobiographical material narrated in her husband's *Tender is the Night* (1932), *Save Me the Waltz* is now appreciated for the author's accurate portrayal of women's struggle for self-expression, the world of ballet, and its highly metaphorical style. All of these are also at the core of her short fiction, especially her 'Girls Series.' Travernier-Courbin's publication of "Art as Woman 's Response and Search: Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz*" in 1979 precisely called attention to the neglect of the novel, denouncing how critics "look somewhat patronizingly upon Save Me the Waltz as a literary curio, seeing as its only value its relationship to F. Scott Fitzgerald's work and career" (23). Accordingly, later publications on the novel have aimed to transcend biographical readings in favor of exploring larger implications of the author's work, as is the case of Legleiner's "The Cult of Artistry in Zelda Fitzgerald's *Save Me the Waltz,*" published in 2014, or Delesalle-Nancey's "Writing the Body: Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald's Resistance in *Save Me the Waltz,*" published in 2019. What both publications reveal, despite their distinct approaches, is a prevalent concern with analyzing the novel as a complex modernist piece that displays how traditional views on womanhood still shaped the modernist female artist's experience (Legleitner 125). It would seem as though *Save Me the Waltz* is, at last, receiving proper critical attention as a novel of its own. Interestingly, this is not the case with Fitzgerald's short stories even though their approach to the struggles of female artists offers a more diverse range of perspectives through their distinct protagonists and their circumstances.

While Fitzgerald's short fiction was first compiled by Bruccoli in *The Collected Writings of Zelda Fitzgerald* in 1991, it was not until the 2010s that it started receiving proper attention. Prior to the publication of this compilation, only Alice Hall Petry's "Women's Work: The Case of Zelda Fitzgerald" is noteworthy regarding its attention to Fitzgerald's short stories. In this article, Petry puts forward the idea that "these stories stand collectively as Zelda's public statement that women's need to work (as a professional achievement, not an amateur

expression) is essential to their very survival" (72). Such reading of Fitzgerald's 'Girls Series' really resonates with feminist concerns of the time, but also with the vindications of second-wave feminism, as is the case of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan's defense of women's need to develop themselves behind their imposed roles as wives and mothers in conjunction with Petry's approach to Fitzgerald's 'Girls Series' could thus serve as a starting point for the analysis of said stories in this dissertation.

Among the scarce research carried out on the subject, three other approaches of the 2010s should also be considered; including Grogan's 2015 "Authorship and Artistry: Zelda Fitzgerald's 'A Millionaire's Girl' and 'Miss Ella,'" Pike's 2017 "Masquerading as Herself: The Flapper and the Modern Girl in the Journalism and Short Fiction of Zelda Fitzgerald," and Lawson's "Making the Most of the Middle: Zelda Fitzgerald and Dawn Powell in C*ollege Humor*." Grogan's approach particularly follows the evolution of Fitzgerald's narrators through two of her short stories in an attempt to determine the reason behind the flat nature of her earlier narrators, that is, "the problem of authorship that weighed on Zelda, who, like most women of her era, struggled throughout her life to have an identity of her own" (117). Once again, women's limitations to develop themselves in a seemingly progressive era are at the core of the discussion of Fitzgerald's short fiction. Alternatively, both Pike's and Lawson's, which have already been considered in this dissertation, focus on Fitzgerald's unique portrayal of the flapper within magazine culture. Lawson specifically addresses Fitzgerald's role in the development of modernist middlebrow magazines for a middle-class audience or, in other words, the development of a more *popular* modernism. This *popular* character, as previously mentioned, is precisely what differentiates Fitzgerald's modernism from that of most of her female modernist peers. Her short fiction implies the existence of a middle-class American modernism that seeks feminist vindication through artistic expression.

Considering the literature published on Zelda Fitzgerald, there is still room for research regarding her short fiction. Building upon the recent research that has already been carried out on her literary production, particularly Lawson's and Pike's work, this MA's dissertation seeks to examine the following research question as a result of all of the above considerations around Zelda's particular approach to writing: to what an extent is it possible to become a modernist artist as a middle or working-class woman according to Zelda Fitzgerald's 'Girls Series?' I thus contend that, through her portrayal of working women who seek a sense of fulfillment and self-expression by professionally realizing themselves as artists, Fitzgerald uncovers the challenges and contradictions of being a working woman in the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, I argue that the author's marked use of irony in her short stories acts not only as a facilitator of her social critique but also as a distinguishing feature of her aesthetics compared to her American modernist peers.

To dissect Fitzgerald's representation of middle-class female artistry, I will approach her 'Girls Series' from a feminist perspective, more specifically, from the perspective of feminist periodical studies. The first section of this dissertation will thus provide an overview of mass-market magazines addressed to a middle-class female audience throughout the 1920s and 1930s, placing special attention on the feminine ideal promoted by these magazines. I have then selected a corpus of three short stories from Fitzgerald's 'Girls Series,' including "The Original Follies Girl" (1929), "The Girl with Talent" (1930), and "Poor Working Girl" (1931). My analysis of the stories will be divided into three subsections, which correspond to three central concerns for Fitzgerald's protagonists and their development as working or middle-class professional female artists. In the first subsection, I will deal with the issue of the gendered double standards that they are subjected to while they struggle to be recognized as professional artists and are instead labeled as amateurs. Closely related to this first section, the second section will be devoted to their difficulty in finding a balance between professional realization

and their personal relationships, that is, their roles as mothers and wives. Intrinsically linked to the growing consumer culture in which the stories are set; the third subsection will examine how capitalism, and specifically, consumerism, affects Fitzgerald's working women, focusing on the author's critique of the commodification of their bodies. Through these three central concerns, I intend to trace Zelda Fitzgerald's female role model in her 'Girls Series,' reassessing both the author's neglected short fiction within her own literary production and her unique contribution to the feminist conversation initiated by her modernist predecessors.

Chapter 1

Establishing an Ideal of Middle-Class Femininity: The Role of Women's Magazines in the 1920s and 1930s

Although modernist little magazines addressed to an elite audience were crucial for the development of the modernist movement, the literature published in mass-market magazines allowed for a more popular strand of modernism to emerge, a strand in which Fitzgerald actively participated. Mass-market magazines addressed to a female audience, in particular, gained considerable influence during the decade of the 1920s and even became a lifestyle guide for modern white middle-class women. From fictional short stories to life advice and plain advertisements; mass-market magazines signified a "mediation not only between high and low culture, but also between the literary and the commercial." (Alexander 48). What had been previously reserved for an upper-class readership, was then more accessible to a wider audience. Perhaps the fact that Fitzgerald's short fiction was produced under such commercial circumstances partly accounts for their critical neglect. Yet it is precisely this democratization that positioned women's middlebrow magazines as powerful platforms for the dissemination

of certain ideals, more specifically of an aspiring ideal of femininity for the modern middle-class woman. Good! Aware of it, Fitzgerald probably saw middlebrow magazines as a medium to disclose her own feminist ideas. It is therefore essential to examine the ideal of femininity promoted in these women's mass-market magazines in order to comprehend how the author's portrayal of women artists transcends it.

In the book *Gender, Nation, and Consumerism in 1920s Magazines* (2021), Rachel Alexander studies the role of such magazines as literary texts, cultural artifacts, and commercial products; emphasizing their relevance in shaping the lives of middle-class women in the 1920s. During the decade of the 1920s, which she describes as "a golden age for general-interest magazine publishing" (18), magazines were key in both the consolidation of consumer culture and the promotion of certain values to their female readership:

> Magazines were crucial in this development as they stimulated and satisfied the desire for non-essential products, constructing consumption as an aspect of good citizenship and femininity. In addition, the magazines presented the notion of the creation of identity and self through shopping. They taught their readers how to consume, presenting the opportunity for improvement of the self through the purchase and use of commodities. (Alexander 18)

In other words, women's mass-market magazines publicized an apparently-achievable model of modern middle-class femininity through the notion of *self-improvement*, an ideal that could only be accomplished by consuming the products directly or indirectly advertised in the same magazines. The concept of *self-improvement* was then the unifying thread of the content featured in these magazines, and, most importantly, the core of their ideal of femininity.

Far from the image of the self-supporting New Woman that had taken precedence during first-wave feminism and World War I, the prototypical woman of these magazines resembled more of a *professional homemaker*. Accordingly, they devoted more content to "the efficient management of the home" than to professional women with established careers (Freedman 382). The aforementioned concept of self-improvement is thus closely connected to domesticity, more specifically, to the projection of a "successful image of the self as a wife,

hostess, and fashionable woman." (Alexander 43). Such adherence to domesticity greatly clashes with the lifestyle of the flapper, especially with Fitzgerald's vindication of, as previously stated, a truly subversive *flapperdom*. Considered to be the 1920s manifestation of the New Woman, the flapper was prominently featured in all forms of popular culture of the time, including women's mass-market magazines. Nonetheless, her portrayal in such magazines was either satirical or critical as she directly contradicted their morals. Unlike the professional homemaker they promoted, the flapper was completely disconnected from the domestic sphere and adopted attitudes typically associated with men. Consequently, their role model was constructed in opposition to these "undesirable" traits of the flapper (Alexander 45). In short, the middle-class ideal of femininity promoted in women's mass-market magazines was characterized by her constant search for self-improvement, but this self-improvement was always subordinated to her domestic role.

Having established self-improvement as the central characteristic of ideal middle-class femininity, in chapter 2 "The Art of Femininity: Aspiration and Self-Improvement," Alexander distinguishes between two forms of self-improvement. More specifically, she differentiates between a form of self-improvement that is more external and based on appearance and another one that is more internal and based on life experience (52). The publicizing of these two modes is intrinsically related to the challenges and contradictions experienced by Fitzgerald's protagonists in their attempt to become professional artists as working women, as I will argue in my analysis of the short stories. Precisely because they defy, or attempt to defy, this ideal of middle-class femininity, they are met with both internal and external pressure to adhere to it. Before examining Fitzgerald's protagonists and their struggles, however, it is crucial to further develop these two sides of self-improvement presented in mass-market magazines and consider how they were articulated in the short fiction published in such magazines.

Starting with the external form of self-improvement, women's mass-market magazines devoted a great deal of their content to beauty and fashion in promotion, in this case, of a visual ideal of femininity. It is significant to consider that it was during this first quarter of the 20th century that culture became increasingly visual due to technological developments; with the film industry, in particular, starting to gain considerable relevance. Within this context, physical appearance, especially for women, became even more important than it had previously been, something which was reflected in their consumer habits. In this sense, Alexander establishes a clear link between appearance and identity whereby women felt compelled to aim for a beauty standard in order to validate their womanhood (Alexander 70).

Paradoxically, this beauty standard was heavily based on the image of the flapper: "Although not all women of the 1920s described themselves as flappers, many adolescents and young women chose to embrace the flapper appearance, if not the lifestyle." (Fangman et al. 214). Whilst, as previously established, mass-market magazines completely rejected the ideology behind *flapperdom*, that is, their challenge of gender norms; the standard of beauty they promoted was built upon the young and "thin ideal personified by the archetype of the flapper." (Fangman et al. 228). Fangman et al. precisely examine their promotion of this body ideal in their quantitative and qualitative study of textual and visual content in 1920s magazines. Among the figures they consider, it is worth highlighting that "the percentage of body- and weight-related advertisements peaked in 1926, when 57% and 78% of all advertisements included within *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue*, respectively, addressed such issues." (228). Nonetheless, the promotion of this standard went beyond the advertising featured in the magazines. From their covers and illustrations to the heroines of their short fiction, all of the elements that composed these magazines pointed to the same picture: thinness, youth, and beauty as the epitome of middle-class femininity.

Regarding the internal form of self-improvement identified by Alexander, the short fiction of mass-market magazines often conveyed a moral standard through the construction of their female heroines. These protagonists, whose stories followed a fixed formula, were built for the modern middle-class reader to relate to them whilst still being a model they would aspire to emulate. In the words of Alexander:

> While the magazine fiction did vary significantly from issue to issue, many stories focused on the lives of women, engaged with repeating themes, such as morality, social mobility, and familial duty, and addressed shared and consistent concerns, including tensions between frugality and consumption, domestic and workplace roles, and restraint and desire. (54)

In her study of one of the most relevant women's magazines of the 1920s, *Ladies' Home Journal*, Alexander precisely analyses how this standard is embodied by the protagonist of the short story "In the Game Called Life" by Peter Clarke Marfarlane (54-56). The heroine of the story, Edith O'Brien, is a young telephonist telephone operator who falls in love with an upper-class lieutenant during World War I. Whilst her love interest, Arthur Raleigh, openly expresses his romantic feelings for her; Edith is emotionally restrained and moderate, a quality that is presented as positive throughout the story. Aware of her lower social position, she does not view herself as a marriageable option for Arthur. Moreover, she is also praised for her lack of extravagance and unwillingness to waste money, an attitude that is considered respectable and appropriate for a woman of her social class. In the end, Edith is "rewarded" by marrying her love interest because she embodies the ideal middle-class woman, that is, a woman that is restrained, slightly naïve, and unambitious. Previously a working woman, she switches her occupation to middle-class domesticity, a lifestyle that is presented as ideal. Alexander discloses: "Edith models a social mobility and a middle-class identity which is not predicted on social background or income, but rather on behavioral values." (56). The reader was thus encouraged to emulate the heroine's behavior and lifestyle in hopes of attaining her idealized domestic ending. Traits like ambition or independence, on the other hand, were left completely out of the picture for the heroines of mass-market magazines.

Alternatively, in the second-wave emblematic text *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan draws attention to 1930s-1940s constructions of working heroines in the short fiction of mass-market magazines. Contrary to the early 1920s heroines I have just discussed, in the chapter "The Happy Housewife Heroine," specifically, she argues that 1930s protagonists were actual New Women with active roles in their stories (24-25). These heroines distanced themselves from their domestic-driven predecessors and became career women with their own ambitions beyond convenient marriages. While they still projected a beauty standard for their readers, "the spirit, courage, independence, determination —the strength of character they showed in their work as nurses, teachers, artists, actresses, copywriters, saleswomen—were part of their charm." (25). Such heroines were, thus, much more in tune with the essence of Fitzgerald's middle-class artists in spite of having been written at least a decade later. Along those lines, Friedan provides the example of the short story "Sarah and the Seaplane," published in February of 1949 in the *Ladies' Home Journal* (26-27). The story features 19-year-old Sarah, who is secretly learning to fly, a career choice that helps her realize herself as an individual beyond the role of a docile daughter that she had always felt compelled to adopt. Sarah's story, Friedan claims, is a "passionate search for an individual identity that a career seems to have symbolized in pre-1950s decades." (26). Although Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* deals with a later period, its discussion of 1930s- and 1940s-short fiction in women's magazines reveals a clear evolution in their portrayal of middle-class womanhood that would later be reversed in the 1950s. The production of Fitzgerald's 'Girls' Series' (late 1920s-early 1930s) would thus be situated in the midst of this temporary evolvement. As such, they would also reflect both the imposition of the 1920s ideal of middle-class femininity and the search for personal and professional development typical of later protagonists of women's magazines' fiction.

Intrinsic to the mindset behind these later heroines is the concept of *self-actualization*, which Friedan proposes as a key solution for the detrimental lifestyle of 1950s American housewives, but also applies to Fitzgerald's protagonists. This concept of *self-actualization*, coined by psychiatrist Kurt Goldstein, refers to the human need to grow to one's full potential or the "highest excellence of which we are capable" (250), a growth that Friedan argues is denied to women. The switch from external and internal *self-improvement* to achieve ideal middle-class femininity to *self-actualization* for personal growth implies a significant change in women's mass-market fiction. Namely, it implies a shift from passive heroines who aspire to be marriageable to active heroines with further aspirations besides romance, heroines who wish to get married and pursue a career of their own. Having traced the general trends in women's mass-market magazines and their portrayal of working women for different purposes, it is vital to consider how Zelda Fitzgerald's middle-class artist heroines fit into this picture. That is, how do the challenges and contradictions they experience connect with the imposition of the ideal of femininity promoted in the short fiction of 1920s women's magazines? And, considering these issues, to what an extent can they be considered self-actualized individuals?

Chapter 2

Rewriting 1920s Feminine Archetypes: Zelda Fitzgerald's Portrayal of Working Women Artists

Published in the middlebrow magazine between 1929 and 1931, Fitzgerald's "Girls' Series" was commissioned as a series of six short stories meant to portray six different kinds of girls in modern American society. As with most mass-market short fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, the stories follow a pre-established formula whereby Fitzgerald sketched her protagonists as

popular feminine stereotypes of the time such as the Southern Belle, the Hollywood actress, or the debutante, among others (Pike 137). Yet, even if her protagonists are constructed within these apparently-superficial archetypes, Fitzgerald's complex portrayal of her artists and their challenges as working women manages to transcend them. Before analyzing their common issues, however, it is pertinent to establish who these women are and the circumstances in which their respective stories unfold.

Common to all of Fitzgerald's protagonists in her "Girls' Series" are their young age, with them being between their twenties and thirties, and their working or middle-class origins, with none of them coming from privileged backgrounds. Both characteristics are thus crucial to their portrayal as well as to the development of their stories. Her earliest protagonist, Gay from "The Original Follies Girl" (1929), manages to build a career of her own on stage even though "of course, she hadn't always had enough to live on," (Fitzgerald 294). Notwithstanding this, far from being admired for her art, she is instead perceived as a beautiful object condemned to lose value with the passing of time. With her job involving the exhibition of her own body, her success is limited by her condition as a woman and a gender-biased entertainment industry. Along similar lines, Lou, the heroine of "The Girl with Talent" (1930), is probably the best example out of Fitzgerald's protagonists of a woman from a non-privileged background who manages to succeed with her talent alone. A successful and devoted ballet dancer, Lou still experiences considerable pressure to conform to the domestic lifestyle that decades later Friedan would identify as the *feminine mystique* or the glorification of "woman's role as a housewife." (Friedan 195). The youngest heroine of the series, twenty-year-old Eloise of "Poor Working Girl," (1931) strives for independence and self-development "in the middle of a community that had of recent years grown very prosperous and so outgrown the capabilities of its older inhabitants." (Fitzgerald 337). Out of the three stories, "Poor Working Girl" is

probably the most reflective of the struggles of a young working woman who is undergoing the process of building herself an artistic career.

Having situated Fitzgerald's heroines within their respective circumstances and established their unifying characteristics, the following subsections will be devoted to the analysis of how their challenges and contradictions as working women of the 1920s and 1930s are represented. Namely, how they experience gendered double standards, difficulty in balancing personal and professional life, and the commodification of their bodies, as already established.

2.1. The Gendered Double Standards of Modernism

The conflict of the gendered double standards Fitzgerald's heroines encounter in their attempts to develop professional careers as artists is closely related to the presence of sexism in modernist ideology. More specifically, in the modernist discussion of who can actually produce art whereby art produced by women was often disregarded and considered of low quality as opposed to art produced by men. Such a conception of art often involved the relegation of women to the role of the muse, a figure that was also regarded as secondary and passive. The confinement of women to this passive role necessarily implies an inability to produce art on their behalf. In the article "The Muse and the Maker," Ashley Lawson precisely describes this dynamic as one that prevents women from being viewed as true artists regardless of their capabilities: "The muse is therefore doomed to be defined as a 'not-artist,' not just in relation to those specific works in which her image appears but also those which she has produced herself, no matter what kind of evidence exists to the contrary." (80). High art, as well as high modernism, became thus increasingly inaccessible to aspiring women artists, who found space to develop their careers in a more popular strand of the movement, as previously argued.

Furthermore, even when recognized as creators of art, their production was often labeled as amateur, frivolous, and of low quality. High modernism, Lawson explains, "was, in theory, a masculinist project that, among other goals, was bent on expunging intellectual laziness or more general forms of weakness from a culture that it codified as feminine;" (87) whereas popular modernism "became associated with feminine morals, concerns, and values, and thus such forms were targeted for ridicule." (87). Whilst the art produced by men was targeted at an elite audience, art produced by women was targeted at the masses, who were presumed to be unable to appreciate true quality art. Any form of art produced by women was thus deemed excessively emotional, commercial, trivial, and insincere. Their perceived inherent unfitness to become artists, Lawson argues, was attributed to their roles as wives, muses, and, ultimately, women (85). Such a biased misconception has most likely hindered the critical reception of the short stories themselves but is also present in each and every obstacle Fitzgerald's heroines come across as working women artists.

One of the author's earliest short stories, "The Original Follies Girl" (1929) already displays this concern with the lack of recognition women artists experience, especially those whose job, like Gay's, involves the exhibition of their own bodies. This would include dancers, actresses, or any kind of performer overall; all jobs which are featured prominently in Fitzgerald's "Girls' Series." When the narrator describes Gay and her successful career as a performer, the focus is on her physical appearance instead of on the quality of her performance, as can be seen in the passage: "That is to say, she had unquestionably the best figure in New York, otherwise she'd never have made all that money for just standing on the stage lending an air of importance to two yards of green tulle." (Fitzgerald 293). From the excerpt, one can gather that Gay's art is completely disregarded and stripped of any form of value by the general public and that her success derives merely from her physical attractiveness. She is not seen as an active creator of art but as art in itself, in other words, she is relegated to the role of a muse.

Such judgment has also influenced Gay's perception of herself and her performance: "I thought how appropriate she was –so airy, as if she had a long time ago dismissed herself as something decorative and amusing, and not be confused with the vital elements of American life." (293). In addition to being confined to the role of a muse, her *musedom* is also perceived as a form of lower art that is merely "decorative" and "amusing" with no further meaning or complexity. Gay is, thus, rendered incapable of producing any true form of art.

In order to properly comprehend these passages, however, it is worth recalling Fitzgerald's notable use of sarcasm in her narratives. The narrator's tone in the previous fragments, then, may be understood as a sarcastic remark about how Gay is perceived by others, instead of a true rendering of the narrator's own judgment of Gay and her artistic expression. This use of sarcasm becomes even more clear when Gay's success is also attributed to a previous marriage with a notorious and wealthy man: "Of course she hadn't always had enough to live on, but in the early years, (…) there had been a husband with a gift of fantasy that cost him five thousand dollars a year for the rest of her life. That left Gay free to pay her respects to the primrose path, undoubting." (294). Again, her success as an artist is linked to external factors that are completely unrelated to her own capabilities, namely, her physical appearance and her influential ex-husband. Both her performance and herself are then stripped of any kind of identity and artistic value as she is judged according to sexist conceptions of artistry.

In this sense, both Ashley Lawson in "Making the Most of the Middle" and Deborah Pike in "Masquerading as Herself" respectively point out the consequences that this judgment and lifestyle have on Fitzgerald's heroine, that is, the loss of her identity. Whilst Lawson points out the impossibility of constructing her own identity and conforming to the gender expectations that have been imposed upon her (214), Pike emphasizes her dependency on external validation as a direct factor that has contributed to the loss of this identity (138). As previously quoted, this is clear in the excerpt where the narrator describes Gay's perception of

herself as having "dismissed herself as something decorative and amusing." (Fitzgerald 293). Beyond Lawson's and Pike's approaches to the characters' loss of identity, I would further argue that the sexist conception of artistry upon which Gay is judged is a key factor in her loss of identity. Condemned to be regarded as a non-artist whose value lies in her physical appearance, Gay experiences *impostor syndrome*, as do the rest of Fitzgerald's heroines.

Perhaps Lou from "The Girl with Talent" (1930) is the only one of Fitzgerald's heroines whose talent is somehow recognized by the general public, as seen in the same title of the story. A highly successful ballerina, Lou is visibly committed to her professional career and has managed to make a name for herself in the New York ballet scene. Even the usually-sarcastic narrator of Fitzgerald's short fiction seemingly acknowledges her effort and dedication:

> She moved about under the light with preoccupied exaltation, twirling and finding it pleasant; twirling again, then beating swiftly on the floor like a hammer tapping the turns into place. A pleasurable effort shone in the infinitesimal strain on her face, and her outstretched arms seemed to be resting on something soft and supporting, so clearly did you sense their weight and pulling on the shoulder sockets. (322)

Yet again, a significant portion of her public appears to subject her to a particularly high standard whereby both the quality of her performance and her physical appearance are harshly judged. In spite of her gift for dancing, Lou is valued in terms of her degree of physical attractiveness instead of her stage performance; a judgment that completely strips her from her artistry: "'Why,' they loved saying, 'she can't *do* anything. She doesn't know how to sing or dance, and she's built like a beef-eating beer bottle.'" (317). As happened with Gay, she is seen as possessing an "object d'art quality" (293), not as an artist. Moreover, through the use of the expression "built like a beef-eating beer bottle," her "object d'art quality" is also diminished and ridiculed. In the eyes of a gender-biased public, Lou is neither an active creator of art nor beautiful enough to be admired as a muse.

Nevertheless, Fitzgerald chooses to characterize Lou as a perseverant and ambitious woman who, despite this judgment, pushes forward to build and preserve her career as a ballet

dancer. Such construction comes across as striking when considered in comparison to the average mass-market magazine heroine of the 1920s. Contrary to the examples I have discussed in the previous chapter of this dissertation, Fitzgerald's heroine is extravagant in her lifestyle, professionally ambitious, and does not appear to dream of an idealized domestic ending. Instead, Lou surprises her audience with her unconventional lifestyle, as is made clear in the following excerpt:

> Lou's show had shut, that amateurish, fresh flavor that she had on the stage proving not strong enough to carry a star part through a winter of the caprices of a New York public. (…). I thought when I read that the show was leaving that she would probably sink back into a more peaceful domesticity, away from the detested theatrical world. But nothing of the kind. (320)

Though labeled a mere amateur, i.e. a non-artist, and subjected to the fast-changing demands of the public, she refuses to conform to a socially-imposed lifestyle that will not fulfill her aspirations. This sexist double standard is also manifested in the questioning of the motives behind her choice: "Of course she was dancing all the time in a big hit and she didn't have to be eternally fabricating complex philosophical reasons for why she cared about the things she liked." (324). Since Lou's artistic choices are not justified by "complex philosophical reasons," it is implied that they must be banal and insincere. Nonetheless, in this case, Fitzgerald's sarcastic narrator seems to sympathize with the protagonist and describes Lou for what she is: a working woman artist who simply enjoys her occupation and prioritizes it over a more domestic lifestyle.

In the case of Eloise's construction in "Poor Working Girl" (1931), Fitzgerald depicts a different reality for working women artists: the reality of a working-class young woman who has yet to establish herself as an artist. Being the youngest of all three protagonists, Eloise is at the starting point of her career, a career that she is really struggling to build. As happened with Gay and Lou, Eloise's sense of artistry is diminished and her talent is reduced to only being capable of singing "the verse and choruses of all the popular songs for five years back," (337)

and having “a real relent for the ukulele” (337). Unlike her successful counterparts, however, Eloise still lives with her family in a rather traditional community, hence they are the ones expressing judgment against her career choices and lifestyle. While her father wishes for her to adopt domesticity as her lifestyle: “Father didn’t see why girls didn’t stay at home, but he had his own worries and he made it a rule never to complain until afterward.” (338-339), the women of her family do not view her career choices as serious: “The aunts thought that serious employment would be fine for Eloise.” (339). Without the support of her family or the economic means to build her career in New York, Eloise resorts to working part-time as a babysitter whilst also attending an academy to perfect her skill as a performer. But the balancing of these two tasks together with the constant belittlement on behalf of her family prove to be decisive factors in her failure to build a career. On her lack of perseverance, the narrator sarcastically comments:

> But to Eloise, all motivating power was of divine origin and people waited for its coming like a prisoner for a trial, with the expectation of release or a sense of black misgiving. Both these sensations were merged in her when she found herself at home again. She couldn’t decide whether or not she was as wonderful as she thought she was, and New York seemed awfully far from the yellow frame house full of the sweetness of big Sunday meals and the noise of the cleaning in the mornings and black shadows from an open fire. (341)

As happened with her more successful counterparts, Eloise experiences impostor syndrome and is eventually unable to realize her dream of becoming a performer in New York City. Instead, she has conformed to a lifestyle she did not appear to find satisfactory at the beginning of the story.

Beyond the protagonist’s flaws and a lack of support on behalf of her family that is rooted in sexism, Eloise’s failure to achieve her desired lifestyle is also influenced by a clear drawback: her non-privileged background. While it is true that Fitzgerald’s earlier heroines also come from either working or middle-class backgrounds, these are only alluded to in specific passages referring to their past lives. It is only in this short story that the author fully captures the challenges of being a working-class female aspiring artist. She is thus doubly

affected by gender-biased notions of artistry and class limitations, with the latter issue being accurately encapsulated in the last lines of her story: "The blood in Eloise's veins had worn itself out pumping against the apathy of weary generations of farmers and little lawyers and doctors and a mayor, and she couldn't really imagine achieving anything. She came from our worn-out stock." (342). Eloise, like the rest of her community, does not have the means to maintain the flashy lifestyle of *flapperdom* nor to live by her art, hence she has worn herself out in the attempt. According to Alice Hall Petry, this anticlimactic ending is "Zelda's reflection on a society that gives young women unrealistic, Hollywood-based tastes and expectations, and no options for financial survival beyond menial jobs or loveless marriages." (72). However, I would argue that through Eloise's failure to become a professional artist, Fitzgerald is also drawing attention to the added degree of difficulty a working woman faces to become an artist because of her condition as a woman and a working-class individual. Eloise's artistic ambitions are neither taken seriously nor realistically realizable due to her social position.

On the whole, it would seem as though Zelda Fitzgerald's distinct heroines all seem to experience some form of discrimination as their art is either not valued or undervalued due to their gender. Where Gay and Lou are relegated to the category of muses, namely non-artists, and judged by their physical appearances; Eloise does not even get the chance to develop her art. Moreover, when their artistry is even considered, it is deemed amateur and unworthy of true appreciation beyond mere entertainment. In other words, they are considered unable to produce real art, and thus, cannot become modernist artists in the eyes of their spectators. The depiction of this double standard becomes particularly relevant and plausible when considering the context in which the stories were produced, that is, the modernist movement and its sexist conception of art. Like Fitzgerald's protagonists, both the stories themselves and the magazines in which they were published were often discarded as mere commercial and mass-market

products with no artistic quality. Therefore, a clear link between the prejudice against the work of women modernist writers and the judgment against Fitzgerald's artist heroines can be established. Both forms of prejudice are rooted in the same misogynistic reasoning whereby women cannot produce art.

Having established this connection, it is also relevant to consider the heroine's common rejection of the lifestyle that is expected of them as women, which could be linked to the ideal of middle-class womanhood promoted in women's magazines. Following this line of thought, the following subsection will discuss the imposition of domesticity as one of the challenges Fitzgerald's working women artists experience.

2.2. Challenging the Notion of Internal Self-Improvement: The Struggle to Balance the Public and Domestic Spheres

The issue of gender conventions and, specifically, of the incorporation of women into the workforce and public spaces was extensively revised in post-war middlebrow literature written by women. Whilst most women's mass-market magazines focused on the promotion of domesticity and modesty as forms of internal self-improvement, authors like Zelda Fitzgerald reflected one of the greatest struggles these women encountered: the struggle to find a balance between their family and professional lives. In the chapter "A Crisis of Gender?" of the book *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s,* Nicola Humble discusses this revision of gender conventions that took place in the middlebrow literature written by women from the 1920s to the 1950s. The post-war change in gender roles, she explains, also entailed a questioning of gender conventions and romance: "Hero and heroine roles are fundamentally transformed, while shifts in attitudes to motherhood and marriage lead to an obsessive questioning about the trajectories of women's lives." (198). Given this shift, women writers reflected their concerns about the new lifestyles that middle-class women were then able to adopt. However, Humble clarifies, their discourse had to be toned down for it to be deemed

acceptable: “Anxious to be modern, but nervous of censorship or even prosecution, the middlebrow women novelists of the post-war period picked their way carefully (…) evolving a respectable discourse for the representation of the previously unmentionable.” (198). Such was the strategy utilized by Zelda Fitzgerald and her peer Dawn Powell in their short fiction, both of which, as previously mentioned in the introductory section of this dissertation, concealed their social critique through the use of sarcasm and popular feminine archetypes.

Nonetheless, it is also crucial to note that, in spite of the subversive nature of some of the author’s short fiction; the promotion of gender roles and domesticity remained present in the literature of the time, especially, as already shown, in the short fiction of women’s magazines. While the reimposition of domesticity is often associated with the 1950s, similar ideas were also notably present throughout the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s: “(…) in middlebrow women’s fiction, the reimposition of traditional modes of femininity that is supposed to be a major feature of the culture of the 1950s was neither new nor pervasive.” (Humble 198). Taking this into consideration, the concept of *the feminine mystique* that would be proposed by Betty Friedan in 1963, that is, the ideal image of the suburban housewife that has found true feminine fulfilment through domesticity (Friedan 7-8), has numerous connections with the lifestyle promoted in women’s mass-market magazines and the concept of internal self-improvement. The pressure that Fitzgerald’s artist heroines experience to conform to a domestic lifestyle is thus rooted in the same conception of gender roles whereby women inherently belong in the domestic sphere.

Even though this pressure to conform to domesticity is more prominent in the case of Fitzgerald’s older heroines, namely “The Original Follies Girl” and “The Girl with Talent,” Eloise from “Poor Working Girl” also receives some external pressure on her family’s behalf. As she saves money to move to New York and start her career as a performer, her family either wishes for her to find serious employment and abandon her artistic ambitions or to settle into

a more traditional lifestyle. As previously quoted, this is most notable in the figure of Eloise's father and his view of her daughter's lifestyle, as he "didn't see why girls didn't stay at home, but he had his own worries and he made it a rule never to complain until afterward." (338-339) Although he does not appear to insist on the matter, his outdated and rather Victorian vision of gender roles and the public and private spheres is very revealing of the obstacles young aspiring female artists encountered at the time the 'Girls' Series' were published. Whilst not at the same level as her more mature counterparts, Eloise's story certainly hints at this persisting pressure that shapes Gay's and Lou's career paths.

Through Gay's story, specifically, and her tragic ending, Fitzgerald denounces the incompatibility of the lifestyle of a successful female performer in the 1920s and traditional domesticity. Having made a name for herself and being constantly in the spotlight, Gay enjoys success but is unable to fulfil her wish of becoming a mother and building a family. Gay is thus forced to choose either path and, when she refuses to give up on either being a career woman or a mother, she is "punished" for it and dies giving birth:

> The next news of Gay was a small bit on the bottom of the front page. It was an obituary notice from Paris. The papers were sketchy and said pneumonia. Later, I saw an old friend of hers who had been with her just before she died, and she told me that Gay had wanted the baby. Well, the child lived. (297)

Gay's symbolic death may then be interpreted as Fitzgerald's critique of how social expectations of motherhood and domesticity for women are incompatible with women developing successful careers. Had Gay been a male performer, his outcome would have been much different. Therefore, rather than reflecting the imposition of motherhood upon women, the tragic ending of "The Original Follies Girl" reveals the impossibility of finding a work and life balance for those women who do wish to become mothers.

On Gay's tragic ending, in "Masquerading as Herself," Deborah Pike also points at her inherently toxic and performative lifestyle as a key factor for her demise: "Although Gay is

seemingly emancipated— free from conventional ties and boundaries, taking up opportunities previously unavailable to women, by traveling and performing—she is trapped within her own mask, utterly dependent on the public's demand for her image and thus imprisoned in her own system of self-surveillance." (139). Her success as a career woman is highly conditioned by the public's perception of her, which Is tainted by gender biased (as discussed in the previous section), and the façade she feels compelled to keep up, which also prevents her from finding a balance between work and personal life balance. With the impossibility of combining both, her job as a performer has become her life.

Out of Fitzgerald's heroines, Lou from "The Girl with Talent" is possibly the closest example of a successful female artist who has also managed to build a family. According to the narrator, Lou seems to have everything she needs to be happy: "(…) a beautiful picture of a baby playing in long curly grass, and by its side a newspaper picture of a handsome young husband, rich and famous enough to have claimed a good quarter of the front page. All these things were hers. (…) I couldn't restrain an involuntary, 'Such a lucky girl –you've got everything,'" (318). Yet she is really struggling to find a balance between her job and her family life, as evinced by the sense of guilt she feels whenever she is not at home with her family: "She was fond of him, I knew, and we were all having a good time, but even so she gave the impression of constraint and of awaiting the passage of time as one waits for the five-fifteen," (318). Hence Lou's story and dilemma display the pressure to conform to an ideal of femininity in which domesticity is central.

Lou's career as a ballerina and high workload constantly cause her to be absent from family life, creating a situation where the prevailing gender roles of the early 20th century are bent. While Lou is successfully occupying the public sphere that had previously only been reserved for men, her husband spends more time at home, the domestic sphere, than her. On this unusual dynamic and Lou's absence, the narrator comments: "Still no Lou –that is, no Lo

in the high and fine apartment. (…) No Lou to feel sorry for such a little baby eating such a lot of soup." (319). In pointing out how Lou was not home "to feel sorry for such a little baby," it is implied that she is failing at her role as a mother, being absent and devoting herself instead to her artistic career. Such a situation also causes a sense of resentment in her husband's behalf, who resents Lou's career choice: "'I wouldn't care,' he said, 'if it wasn't always these cheap theatrical folks. I don't see how Lou stands them –sitting on their laps, slobbering over them.'" (320) and is constantly irritated by her absence: "We were late, and her husband was terribly annoyed when we finally got there." (319). This conflict eventually causes irreparable damage to their marriage and they end up getting a divorce. It would thus seem that it is impossible for Fitzgerald's working artists to find a balance between their careers and traditional family life.

Through Lou's unstable lifestyle, Fitzgerald is conveying a tension between the pressure women artists feel to conform to domesticity, as evinced by the narrator's remark in "I thought when I read that the show was leaving that she would probably sink back into a more peaceful domesticity, away from the detested theatrical world. But nothing of the kind;" (320) and the choice of fully dedicating themselves to their careers. Lou is thus trapped in a cycle where she switches between committing to family life and fleeing from a lifestyle she is not fully sure she wants. Whenever she experiences burnout because of this pressure, Lou disappears and gets involved in an affair: "It was a week after that that she had disappeared. (…) She had been staying with some very discreet mutual friends of ours, and if the telephone hadn't got mixed up in the affair probably nobody would have known about it. (…) and Lou vanished off the face of the earth." (322-323). Only to later regret her choice and seek traditional family life: "She missed the baby terribly. I suppose we always feel a deep regret for the things we leave behind incomplete, but it is a regret mixed with human disappointment at human imperfections and fastens itself to one thing in the past as readily as another." (324). However, this is a lifestyle she never fully embraces as "She had never seen much of the child."

(324). The end of Lou's story makes it clear that the cycle she has entered is unbreakable, as she is at first determined to fully commit to her career "'I am going to work so hard that my spirit will be completely broken, and I am going to be a very fine dancer, (…) I am now on my way to work and make money magnificently,'" (325) but then attempts to form a family with a new husband without really finding a balance:

> Thinking that those were excellent defense plans that would never be carried out because of lack of attack, I made no comment. Neither could I think of anything appropriate to say later when somebody told me critically that just in the middle of a big success, when Lou was making an unprecedented hit, she ran off to China with a tall blonde Englishman. Now, I believe, they have a beautiful baby almost big enough to eat carrot soup from a spoon. (325)

Although it is not clear whether Lou truly desires this lifestyle or if she is only half-heartedly choosing it because of the pressure she feels as a woman, she certainly departs from the average domestic 1920s heroine in mass-market magazines. Fitzgerald is instead constructing a flawed and complex protagonist with professional ambitions and determination but who is still affected by societal expectations. With "The Girl with Talent," she is going beyond the flapper-like stereotype she had been commissioned to write about to reflect a very real struggle for the aspiring female artists of her generation.

The few scholars that have analyzed the 'Girls' Series' also highlight the pressure Lou feels to conform to social conventions and the guilt derived from not being able to fully adhere to them. In Alice Hall Petry's pioneer "Women's Work: The Case of Zelda Fitzgerald," she points out that "Lou feels an urge to be married and a mother, and that urge, which cannot be reconciled with a demanding international career as a dancer, mires her in a no-win cycle of home and work." (72). Moreover, she argues, because domesticity does not suit her personality and lifestyle, she feels "the need to professionally self-destruct" (72) and conform to the very same feminine ideal that was being promoted in the women's magazines of the time. Lou is therefore an example of a woman who, in spite of possessing the abilities and attitude to

become successful as a professional artist, is trapped in the myth of this sexist ideal of femininity and cannot reach her full potential.

Being produced in a period of rapid changes in gender roles and the places women were able to occupy in society, all three stories reflect, to varying degrees, the author's concerns regarding the imposition of a domestic lifestyle on middle- and working-class women and how this affects their professional paths. As seen in all three stories, this myth, which was greatly disseminated in the 1920s and 1930s through women's mass-market magazines concealed behind the idea of internal self-improvement, affected women of different ages and conditioned their personal and professional development. Nevertheless, Fitzgerald's approach to the issue of domesticity and motherhood for women appears to be rather complex as she also considers the case of those who do wish to balance both family and professional life with unsuccessful outcomes. What is clear is that Fitzgerald's heroines, like the working women of the time, experienced great difficulty in either balancing both aspects or openly choosing to prioritize their artistic careers. Having examined both how sexist modern standards and the imposition of gender roles concealed behind the concept of internal self-improvement shape Fitzgerald's heroines' careers as artists, it is also crucial to analyze how the notion of external self-improvement contributes to the commodification of their bodies.

2.3. Challenging the Notion of External Self-Improvement: Consumerism and The Commodification of the Female Body

As previously discussed in the chapter "Establishing an Ideal of Middle-Class Femininity" of this dissertation, the increasingly visual culture of the 1920s and its impact on middle and working-class women were boosted by the content featured in women's commercial magazines. With appearance gaining even more importance for the average woman, the readers of these magazines were encouraged to seek a form of external self-improvement based on iconography presented in them and the consumption of the products featured in them. Since

the average woman was believed to possess a "'natural disposition to decorate herself" (Alexander 71), she was also subjected to a higher standard of beauty. Notwithstanding this, Alexander also points out that, whilst an interest in appearance was expected of women, mass-market magazines also warned their readers against taking this interest to what they deemed a frivolous extreme. This put women to an unachievable standard whereby they would be judged unless they perfectly fit in an acceptable middle ground: "Take an insufficient interest in appearance, and be scorned as old-fashioned; dedicate too much attention to being beautiful, and be derided as a flapper. Situating acceptability in this manner ensured that appearance was circumscribed by the role of wife, homemaker, and mother, while being an essential component of the performance of modern femininity." (71). This ideology poses two main challenges for the working woman of the 1920s: the issue of overconsumption as a means to achieve this ideal and the sense of alienation from their own bodies they may end up feeling as a consequence.

In a context of economic growth that brought the growth and consolidation of consumer culture, consumerism was presented as the path toward achieving this ideal of middle-class femininity in the 1920s. In that respect, overconsumption as a means to attain external self-improvement for the average woman took the form of *beauty work,* which has been defined by Kwan and Trautner as "work that individuals perform on themselves to elicit certain benefits within a specific social hierarchy." (50). Refusing to participate in overconsumption and not conforming to this beauty ideal may thus pose a threat to their desired social and economic mobility. Although Kwan and Trautner's article "Beauty Work: Individual and Institutional Rewards, the Reproduction of Gender, and Questions of Agency" (2009) deals with the pressure individuals, especially women, experience in the 21st century; the situation they describe is directly comparable to that of the 1920s or the constraints Fitzgerald's heroines experience. This similarity becomes particularly apparent if we consider that: "Women face several contradictions when they perform beauty work. If she fails at beauty conformity, she is

powerless and condemned as ugly; if she is successful, she is still powerless in a regime that defines her value and worth by her appearance." (Kwan and Trautner 59). When it comes to Fitzgerald's protagonists, at least two of them (Gay from "The Original Follies Girl" and Lou from "The Girl with Talent") are successful but valued for their physical attractiveness instead of for their talent. Whether in the early 20th century or the 21st century, it would seem as though the notion of external self-improvement as a means to achieve the cultural ideal of the time is a rather prevalent practice.

This pressure is bound to have an effect on women's perception of themselves and their own bodies, resulting in a commodified vision of the self. From diet culture to the overconsumption of beauty products and fashion items, the average woman of the 1920s performed numerous forms of beauty work to achieve the flapper image; that is, thinness and youth. A direct consequence of this constant pressure to mold their bodies to an unattainable ideal of beauty is the perception of the self as a commodity or, in other words, a sense of alienation from one's own body. This phenomenon is extensively experienced by Fitzgerald's heroines since, in addition to their condition as women, their job involves the exhibition of their own bodies; which makes them more vulnerable to the public's judgment. Perceived as a visual product by the onlooker, the protagonists of the 'Girls' Series' may feel even more pressure to conform to the standard regardless of what that may signify. Taking this into consideration, this section will explore how all three protagonists experience this pressure and whether they have a commodified perception of themselves.

As previously quoted, Lou from "The Girl with Talent" experiences hard judgment by the public on her physical appearance as a ballet dancer at the height of her career: "(…) she's built like a beef-eating beer bottle.'" (317). Nevertheless, there are no indications throughout the narrative of how this may affect her perception of her own body or of herself. On the issue of overconsumption, however, the narrator does refer on several occasions to Lou's

consumerist habits and excessive lifestyle. Her expenses are directly related to her physical appearance, with most of them being fashionable clothing items as in: “Three expensive dresses lay pressing their Alice-blue pleats and twinkling buttons against discreet box tops.” (319). Although not explicitly stated, this habit partly reflects Lou’s longing for becoming the modern and fashionable ideal of femininity. According to Pike, she “spends, consumes, and pursues a regime of fashion and indulgence to maintain her impeccable mutable image. (Pike 141). Like the readers of women’s commercial magazines in the 1920s, Lou is constructing her identity by consuming and getting as close to the standard as possible. Her overconsumption becomes even more prominent when she leaves behind her first attempt at conforming to traditional family life and her lifestyle is more unstable:

> Lou asked for more money and got it, and asked for rake-offs in formidable couturiers’ and got them. She bought dark blue dresses with Peter Pan collars, and bright red dresses with skirts like carnations, and big hats that flopped over one eye and small ones that half covered the other. She bought masseurs to rub her in the morning, and too many sidecars before lunch, and underwear in which to find herself dead.” (322)

Besides Lou’s longing for the myth of ideal femininity, her consumerist behavior is also a reflection of the excesses of the Roaring 20s. Being written in 1930, that is, after the Crash of 1929, Fitzgerald’s criticism of this lifestyle is ubiquitous throughout the ‘Girls’ Series’ and especially prominent in the three stories I am discussing. Notwithstanding this, she does not really delve into the long-term consequences of such excesses and focuses instead on portraying consumerism as a mandatory form of beauty work for her working women artists.

Eloise’s consumer habits in “Poor Working Girl,” on the other hand, display a slightly different picture as her purchasing power is rather limited compared to her two counterparts. Part of a working-class community, Eloise is a “working-class girl who must find work to make ends meet.” (Pike 141). Therefore, her level of consumption cannot be compared to that of Lou and Gay as they are two successful performers who have achieved upward mobility in spite of their humble origins. In Eloise’s case, her relationship with overconsumption begins when she

starts her job as a babysitter with the goal of saving enough money to pursue her artistic career in New York City. Being her first time possessing a disposable income, Eloise is lured by the prospect of attaining the ideal of femininity into overconsumption:

> But then spring came right in the middle of things, as it always does, and the manufacturers flooded the showcases with shoes for tramping golf courses, and the smell of chocolate began to seep through the more open doors of drugstores, and music from the phonographs in the ten-cent stores became audible above the noise of the trolleys, and Eloise succumbed. (340)

In this excerpt, Fitzgerald is equating the beginning of the spring with Eloise's consumerist awakening. As she now has access to services she could not even consider before, she becomes hyper-aware of all the items she could potentially purchase, which results in her developing an unhealthy relationship with consumption. As explained by Pike in "Masquerading as Herself," "As she earns money, aspirations to improve her appearance and lifestyle escalate, but these desires focus on consumption and immediate gratification." (141). Trapped in this cycle of earning money and spending it immediately after, Eloise is unable to concentrate on her long-term objective of moving to New York and building a career. To reflect how detrimental this dynamic is, the narrator emphasizes how pointless her purchases are and how she engages in emotional buying:

> The first thing she bought was a tan coat much too thin to wear until it would be too hot to wear it. To make up for that, she wrote for more dramatic school prospectuses and wore the coat anyway, so she got the grippe. After that, she had an awful attack of loneliness on account of having been in bed and spent a lot of her money on some blue things with feathers and something green with pink hanging off. (340)

Overall, it would seem as though Eloise's impulsive buying stems from her need to improve her appearance and present herself as the ideal young woman of the early 20th century, that is, to perform modern femininity. Her body is thus a commodity that is not good enough in its natural form and should be enhanced following the beauty standard. In her case, however, this lifestyle is incompatible with her building a successful career as an artist.

The most extreme case, out of Fitzgerald's protagonists, of commodification is probably that of Gay from "The Original Follies Girl." Not only is she described by the narrator as possessing an "object d'art quality," (293) as I have previously discussed, but she has come to perceive herself and her body as a decorative object as well. She has internalized the objectification that the public has long subjected her to, regarding her body as something to be shaped to the ideal beauty standard, that is the thinness and youth of the flapper. As a consequence, Gay engages in dangerous dieting and jeopardizes her health in order to achieve this standard:

> I thought she seemed pale and fragile, but Gay was always on some sort of an ascetic diet to keep her beautiful figure. These long regimes would bore her so that afterward she'd go on a terrific spree and have to spend two weeks at a rest cure. She wore herself out with the struggle between her desire for physical perfection and her desire to use it. (297)

Given her job as a performer who is merely valued for her physical attractiveness, Gay is constrained by a role that has been imposed upon her and feels extreme pressure to maintain this façade. Unlike Eloise, who does not have the means to do so, Gay is successfully performing modern femininity even if that means losing herself in the attempt. This is clearly reflected when the narrator first describes her: "The thing that made you first notice Gay was that manner she had, as though she was masquerading as herself. All her clothes and jewellery were so good that she wore them 'on the surface,' as superficially as a Christmas tree supports its ornaments." (293). As can be seen, her performance of femininity, like that of her two counterparts, is constructed through consumption and the shaping of the self into the ideal of beauty. On this issue, Lawson highlights the impossibility of both constructing her own identity and conforming to gender expectations (214), claiming that she is "a stand-in for all women who become lost by making femininity their sole vocation." (215). Similarly, Pike argues that "she inflicts physical self-discipline as she pursues thinness in service of her masquerade" (139). Ultimately, her desire to become a creative agent, an artist, is limited by this objectified role she has ended up interiorizing.

Considering the commodification of Gay's body also involves taking into account how the aging process affects both her view of herself and her career prospects. Regarded as a commodity by the public, she loses value in their eyes as she ages. This is particularly detrimental to her career not only because she is a woman, but also because her job involves her exhibiting her body. Hence, even though she fits into the standard of beauty of the 1920s, she is bound to eventually be discarded when she is no longer considered young. In this way, the following fragment reflects how she is forgotten by the public and replaced as a performer by younger girls

> All these wanderings about took time, and Gay was being forgotten in New York like all people are who are not constantly being casually run into. There were other girls from fresher choruses, with wide clear eyes and free boyish laughs, and you heard less and less about Gay. (…) People said she was older than she was, when they talked about her—men, mostly, who were anxious that she should belong to a finished past. (296)

As can be seen, she is also perceived by her male audience as being older than she actually is and deemed as easily replaceable. Regardless of her notable success as a performer and her adherence to the beauty standard, this success is only temporal as her perceived value is not based on her talent but on her image and the public's perception of this image. Moreover, with all of the 'Girls' Series' heroines being young women, ranging from their late teens to their thirties, Gay's situation also poses the question of whether there is a place for more mature women in Zelda Fitzgerald's fiction. Although this is the only heroine of her 'Girls' Series' to experience ageism, in later instances of her short fiction such as "Miss Ella" (1931), she does explore the struggles of contradictions of womanhood for older women. For the sake of this dissertation, however, it is interesting to consider how ageism affects women artists as it is another obstacle they face in the development of their profession, one that may prevent them from building long-lasting careers as happens with Gay.

Overall, there is a clear link between overconsumption and the commodification of the female body in the experiences of all three protagonists. Such a link stems from an increasingly

visual and consumerist culture that placed special pressure on the average woman to appeal to the unattainable beauty standard promoted in women's mass-market magazines of the 1920s. As performers, Fitzgerald's heroines are more prone to be objectified by the public and end up resorting to extremes, that is, extreme consumerism and beauty work, to reach this ideal image. It is also worth considering that the stories were written in a period ranging from 1929 to 1931, right during the aftermath of the 1929 crash. It is reasonable that Fitzgerald would bring attention to how detrimental the excesses and overconsumption of the 1920s were from her own perspective. Although no explicit political statement is made with regard to the downsides of the over-capitalist system in which the stories unfold, the dynamics the protagonists develop with overconsumption do partly reflect how this context affected working women.

Conclusions and Further Research

Revaluing a sample of Zelda Fitzgerald's understudied short fiction through a feminist lens opens a necessary rereading of both the short stories published in women's magazines of the 1920s and 1930s and of the author's own production and contribution to the more popular strand of modernism. By analyzing Fitzgerald's portrayal of working women who seek to realize themselves by becoming professional artists, I have identified three central challenges that working women in the 1920s and 1930s underwent according to Fitzgerald's "The Original Follies Girl" (1929), "The Girl with Talent (1930), and "Poor Working Girl" (1931). From the sexist modernist conception of art whereby women are regarded as unable to produce art, to the struggle of balancing a professional career with traditional family life, and the pressure to adhere to an unattainable beauty standard; all three obstacles prevent Fitzgerald's women from fully developing their potential as artists. Considering these difficulties, it would seem as

though the path to becoming a recognized modernist artist as a working woman in the period between the late 1920s and early 1930s was an arduous one. Although no definite answer is given in this regard, I read Fitzgerald's reflection on their struggles in her 'Girls' Series' as potentially subversive against the stereotypical portrayals of middle and working-class women that prevailed in women's middlebrow magazines, including *College Humor*, of the time.

Having analyzed the tendencies in the short fiction of women's magazines of the 1920s and 1930s, Zelda Fitzgerald's short stories come across as pieces that transcend the ideal of femininity that was being promoted in these magazines. At first glance, her heroines seem to epitomize the popular feminine stereotypes of the time, which were heavily based on a limited conception of the flapper. Gay, Lou, and Eloise could well be perceived as superficial women with superfluous ambitions, but, through their struggles as working women, Fitzgerald reveals a sexist social context that severely limits their prospects. Her protagonists are ambitious and do not adhere to the image of the ideal of femininity portrayed in women's magazines but they are still affected by the impositions that accompany this ideal. They are thus much more complex than the average portrayal of the flapper in the 1920s. In addition to this, Fitzgerald neither idealizes nor completely condemns the choices and situations of her protagonists; showcasing instead how harmful these impositions are on them but also their unhealthy patterns from a rather detached perspective. As several scholars, namely Deborah Pike and Ashley Lawson, have already pointed out; the narrator's sarcastic pose allows her to be critical yet abstract enough in her critique to avoid censorship or extreme backlash. Fitzgerald's feminist stance is thus subtler and can never be read as overtly political.

On a different note, beyond the link that most critics have established between the author's fiction and her lived experience, I would like to bring attention to how her portrayal of the struggles and contradictions of working middle-class women artists accurately reflects the situation of her peer modernist women authors. I have previously referred to the

underestimation of popular modernism and, specifically, of the short fiction published in women's magazines by female authors. Similar to Fitzgerald's heroines, these authors were faced with constant sexist readings of their production, with them being deemed superfluous, commercial, and unworthy of proper critical attention. Fitzgerald's short fiction is thus part of a tradition of modernist women writers who, whilst still partaking in magazine culture, utilized their short fiction to denounce the struggles that women underwent even after having joined the workforce and living in a period of supposed female empowerment. This connection, I argue, is key to properly understanding Zelda Fitzgerald's fiction, in this case, her 'Girls' Series,' and should not be overshadowed by its autobiographical nature.

This feminist approach to Fitzgerald's 'Girls' Series' could be extended to the rest of her short fiction so as to track the evolution of her narrative and her portrayal of womanhood. In addition to the three remaining stories of the 'Girls' Series,' namely, "Southern Girl" (1929), "The Girl the Prince Liked" (1930), and her successful "A Millionaire's Girl" (1930); it would be interesting to consider her "Miss Ella" as a piece that reflects a more mature manifestation of womanhood and the additional struggles of it. I believe that, by including a larger corpus of Fitzgerald's fiction, a more in-depth analysis of her feminist contributions could be performed. On a similar note, this research could also be extended to other neglected women authors who also wrote short fiction for women's magazines of the 1920s and 1930s to gain a broader perspective of this more popular strand of modernism and its significance to women writers. It is thus my intention to continue researching these issues in a doctoral dissertation that would include, but not be limited to, an analysis of Zelda Fitzgerald's production of short fiction.

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