Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald, Partners or Rivals?
Autobiografiction, the Madness Narrative and Gender in *Save Me the Waltz* and *Tender is the Night*.

Supervisor: 
Dr. Birgit Van Puymbroeck 
2012-2013 

Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels-Nederlands” by Sarah Malfait
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Introduction

For the public at large, F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) and his wife Zelda Fitzgerald (1900-1948) are generally perceived as glamorous representatives par excellence of the Roaring Twenties and the flapper-lifestyle. The couple experienced the extravagant lifestyle of partying, drinking and spending money that Scott fictionalized and promoted in The Great Gatsby (1925). However, Zelda is also known for a less glamorous aspect of her persona, namely her mental problems, diagnosed as schizophrenia. This public image of Zelda as a madwoman was reinforced by the explicit portrayal of the schizophrenic Nicole, Zelda’s fictional counterpart in Scott’s Tender Is the Night (1934). For this reason, Zelda Fitzgerald’s only novel Save Me the Waltz (1932) is often read as a curiosity, the expression of a mentally unstable person who was interesting because she was the wife of the bestselling American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald rather than an author in her own right. In itself, Save Me the Waltz has earned little recognition, even though – as I will establish in this dissertation – it bears some unique qualities.

Much has been written about F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night, but only a few critics have made a comparative study of both Tender Is the Night and Save Me the Waltz. It has been acknowledged that the Fitzgeralds’ fiction is thoroughly rooted in their own lives, but I would like to take this observation a step further. Their fictional writings also affected the couple’s real life. Zelda and Scott dealt with more or less the same material in the novels at hand, but the fictionalisations of a shared experience caused severe tensions in their marriage. Therefore, I study the Fitzgeralds’ complex relationship between work and biography: I will show how Save Me the Waltz and Tender Is the Night reveal a tense dialogue between the Fitzgeralds, shedding new light on the novels as well as on the...
couple’s real-life relationship. There is a struggle between the spouses concerning self-expression and the self-fashioning of their image through their fiction. Both of them want to adjust or maintain the public image that exists of them. I elucidate this tension between the spouses and the relation between the Fitzgeralds’ biography and fiction by reading both novels from three related perspectives: autobiografiction, the madness narrative and gender.

In this dissertation, I read Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* alongside her husband’s last novel published during his lifetime, *Tender Is the Night*. I argue that both novels are examples of ‘autobiografiction’, a genre in which autobiography and fiction meet. Throughout the discussion of Zelda’s and Scott’s work, it will become clear that their fiction is thoroughly rooted in their own lives, leaving recognizable traces of experienced events, emotions and struggles out of their lives in both narratives. I indicate a number of these traces and examine the reasons both authors had for using the genre of ‘autobiografiction’ in their novels.

Since Zelda was diagnosed with schizophrenia, the Fitzgeralds’ lives were marked by moments of crisis, breakdowns and a series of hospitalizations in mental facilities. These experiences left a great impact on both Zelda and her husband Scott since they both devoted their novels to the subject. Because *Save Me the Waltz* and *Tender Is the Night* deal with mental illness, they can be called madness narratives, although it is more implicit in Zelda’s case. I explore the way in which insanity is portrayed by Zelda, who suffered from mental illness and by Scott who observed her mental breakdowns from up close.

I also examine how the novels reflect the socio-historical context in which they were produced, and more specifically the status and role of women in society. Despite feminist

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1 Fitzgerald’s last novel *The Love of the Last Tycoon* was left unfinished and published posthumously in 1941.
attempts at emancipation, the average American woman in the 1920s was considered subordinate to her husband. Her ultimate role in life was that of a good housewife and mother. I will analyse how Zelda and the female protagonists of both novels try to evade, if not transform gender limitations to achieve a sense of personal fulfilment outside the private sphere of the home.

Since the Fitzgeralds dealt with autobiographical experiences and events in their work, I start off with a biography of both spouses’ youth and lives. After that, I outline a theoretical framework of the three subjects that I will be dealing with: ‘autobiografiction’, the madness narrative and gender. Finally, I offer an in-depth analysis of the two selected novels from the perspectives indicated above.

In approaching the novels from three complementary perspectives, I aim to indicate just how much the Fitzgeralds’ lives were intertwined with their works. I demonstrate how their biographies affected their choices to write ‘autobiografictional’ madness narratives that problematize and reflect the subordinate role of women in society. At the same time, I would like to draw attention to the inherent qualities of Zelda’s often under-recognized Save Me the Waltz. Rather than considering Zelda as either a patient or the wife of Fitzgerald, she is considered as an author in her own right as is reflected in the structure of this dissertation that reads both as distinct artistic works, that are nevertheless closely interrelated.
1 Biography

As I will discuss in the chapter on ‘autobiografiction’ Tender Is the Night and Save Me the Waltz can be considered semi-autobiographical works (Milford 217, Parkinson 12). Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s backgrounds and shared life were a major source of inspiration for their fiction, including the novels described in this MA paper. Therefore, I will first discuss the biographies of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Zelda Sayre as well as their marriage and struggles in life. In order to keep this biography from being unnecessarily extensive, I will focus on their lives up until the publication of the above-mentioned novels.

1.1 Francis Scott Fitzgerald

Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, a conservative and aristocratic city (Eble 18). Scott was the only son of Mollie McQuillan and Edward Fitzgerald; two elder sisters had died before his birth; one sister had survived childhood (19). The family’s wealth depended largely on Mrs Fitzgerald’s family fortune, since his father was unable to sufficiently support his family, having failed in business twice (Donaldson 22-23). Scott’s access to the family fortune may have formed the basis of his money mismanagement later in life (Eble 19).

His mother Mollie was a dominant figure in Scott’s life. She found comfort for the tragedy in her own life (i.e. the death of several children) in a sentimental devotion to her only son (Eble 19). However, her overprotectiveness did not always work to Scott’s benefit. In school he was considered cocky by his fellow students because he talked too much and (pretended he) knew too much in a desperate attempt to make himself popular. This attitude was rooted in “the overweening sense of self-importance his mother had instilled in
him” (Donaldson 29). As Kenneth Eble states in his biography on F. Scott Fitzgerald (1963), “the family and the social world in which he was privileged to circulate among became a solid part of his fiction” (20). Scott’s stories generally brought forth a world of wealth and extravagance, even though the characters could not always afford it.

At St. Paul’s Academy Scott did not excel in sports or get good grades in other areas; he was too immersed in the invention of stories, plot summaries and character names (Donaldson 30). As early as age thirteen, he published his first tale in the St. Paul’s Academy’s school magazine. In addition, he wrote, produced and acted in a number of plays before the age of fifteen. Later he attended Princeton, but was forced to withdraw due to his ill health, low grades and time-consuming romance with Ginevra King, “a Chicago girl who enjoyed the wealth and social position to which Fitzgerald was always drawn” (Eble 21). In October 1917 the young Fitzgerald quit university once and for all in order to join the army as a lieutenant. It was in this function that he met his future wife in Montgomery, Alabama: Zelda Sayre (22).

1.2 Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald

Zelda Sayre’s origins are quite different to those of Fitzgerald. As opposed to her husband, she had never even been to New York City before marrying F. Scott Fitzgerald there in 1920. Zelda Sayre grew up in the South of the United States of America, more specifically in Montgomery, Alabama, as the daughter of Anthony Dickinson Sayre, a judge in the state capital. Her southern origins influenced her fiction. For instance, she named the protagonist of *Save Me the Waltz* for the place where she spent her youth: Alabama.
Zelda grew up in a family in which her conservative father, the judge, set strict rules, but it was her mother who raised her and her sisters and brother. The children’s relationship with their father was uncomfortable and distant, since he had little time for his children due to his strict working schedule (Milford 17). A model of marriage had been set for Zelda in which wives were to be submissive and had no power (Wagner-Martin 30). Even though her mother was artistically talented – she had musical talent and was a gifted writer – this was not valued highly by her husband (18). Further on, it will become clear that this situation is repeated in Zelda and Scott’s marriage. Scott had little respect for Zelda’s attempts at finding personal achievement through the art of dancing, painting or writing; she was expected to fulfil her role of submissive wife and “glamorous appendage” to her husband, the artist (Tavernier-Courbin 25).

During her childhood and adolescence Zelda liked sports, in particular dancing (a trait that she shared with Save Me the Waltz’s protagonist Alabama Beggs) and swimming, and she adored reading and being outdoors. Zelda was an adventurous, intelligent girl; she called herself an “excitement eater” (Wagner-Martin 36) and when asked to describe her childhood, she answered the following: “I was a very active child and never tired, always running with no hat or coat even in the Negro district and far from my house. [...] I liked to dive and climb in the tops of trees – I liked taking long walks far from town” (Milford 8). Zelda could be described as a tomboy with traits that can hardly be connected to the commonly docile and submissive role of most women in this time and region (Wagner-Martin 38). However, even though she did what she wanted when it pleased her, she was very much aware of the traditional expectations concerning virtue and chastity that were imposed on Southern women. She felt an inherent contradiction, testifying how “it’s very difficult to be two simple people at once, one who wants to have a law to itself and the
other who wants to keep all the nice old things and be loved and safe and protected” (Milford 21). Even if Zelda had wanted to become a docile wife and mother, the part simply did not match her character; she wanted a “law to [her]self” to do what she wanted and to find personal pleasure and achievement in it. Unlike her three older sisters, of whom she witnessed the process of finding the right spouse and eventually getting married, Zelda dreamt about leaving Montgomery and leading a glamorous life as depicted in the movies (40).

In Montgomery, Zelda acquired the status of ‘southern belle’ at age fifteen through her dancing – ballroom and ballet – for which she was admired by many (41). A ‘southern belle’ is a traditional beauty, desired by many men and she can almost be considered a local celebrity (Wagner-Martin 20). As Linda Wagner-Martin states in her article ‘Zelda Sayre, Belle’ the status of the ‘southern belle’ strongly depended on and reflected the high social standing of her father: “[t]he existence of the belle was a tribute to the power, and the self-conceit, of the higher classes within the South: it reaffirmed patriarchy in that the status as a belle was entirely dependent upon the social standing of the girl’s father” (20). Just like Scott, Zelda grew up in a rich family and she confirmed its status with her position as one of the young belles of Alabama. Being a popular ‘southern belle’ usually ensured that the girl in question was suitable for marriage and motherhood, traditionally the belle’s ultimate role in life (Wagner-Martin 22). Zelda’s mother, Minnie Sayre, made sure to teach her daughters the ‘no-lady’ rules that a lady and certainly a ‘southern belle’ ought to follow. It included rules such as “no lady sat with her limbs crossed”, or “[n]o lady pursues a man. The man pursues the lady” (Gourly 13). But Zelda, considering herself a modern girl, laughed these little rules away. She even kissed young men without the intention of marrying them, another breaking of the ‘no-lady’ rules (Gourly 14). Her future husband F. Scott Fitzgerald,
who had his roots in the North of the United States, probably knew little about ‘southern belledom’ (20). This might explain why Zelda defied expectations and actually exchanged her position as ‘southern belle’ for that of another female icon, the ‘flapper’ (cf. infra).

As a belle she dated a lot of college boys from respectable families. However, Zelda was everything but a traditional belle; she liked to misbehave, drink and quickly built up a dubious reputation in Montgomery (Milford 16-17). But Zelda did not care about what other people thought; as Catherine Gourley states in *Flappers and the New American Woman* “Zelda Sayre was a modern women, and she knew what she wanted. Of course, she would marry [...]. But before she settled down to become a society wife and mother, she intended to have some fun” (14). Her transition from southern belle to flapper later in life probably found its roots in Zelda’s rebellious nature, which reared its head already during her childhood.

When the United States of America joined World War I in 1917 and troops were based at the edge of Montgomery in Camp Sheridan\(^2\), Zelda described a release of energy:

> Then the war came and we had the inescapable feeling that all this beauty and fun—everything—might be over in a minute. We couldn’t wait, we couldn’t afford to wait, for fear it would be gone forever; so we pitched in furiously, dancing every night and riding up and down the moonlit roads and even swimming in the gravel pools under the white Alabama moon that gives the world a strange, lovely touch of madness. (Wagner-Martin 46)

Paradoxically, Montgomery became more alive and festive because of the war (Milford 19). The arrival of the military brought about an influx of young soldiers, whom the young

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\(^2\) The army needed airfields for the Wright flying school; the “air depot” was stationed in Montgomery. In 1917 Camp Sheridan opened and twenty thousand soldiers and flight personnel were stationed near Montgomery (Wagner-Martin 46).
women were excited to meet and dance with at the many community dances organized to welcome them (Wagner-Martin 46-47). Family name and class standing became less important and social boundaries weakened since details about the origins of the soldiers who came to Montgomery were unknown. When Zelda opened a Country Club dance with a solo performance in July 1918, she was noticed by one of the military lieutenants present: F. Scott Fitzgerald (48), a moment that signalled the beginning of their shared story.

1.3 Married life

During the war - assuming he might die in battle, even though the war was over before he could be sent to Europe - F. Scott Fitzgerald quickly wrote his first real novel, *The Romantic Egotist*, which was turned down by Scribner, his publisher (Milford 32). In the summer of 1918 Zelda and Scott spent a great amount of time together, but this did not withhold Zelda from seeing other suitors (or ‘beaus’, as they were locally referred to) – which made Scott desire her even more (34). Even though they loved each other dearly and wanted to spend their future life together, Scott still felt like he had to prove to Zelda and her family that he would be able to financially support her (36). With this objective, he returned to New York City and took up an advertising job, after being rejected as a journalist by several editors (39). In March 1919 the young lovers got engaged; shortly afterwards, Zelda wore her new engagement ring to a dance in the country club and she wrote the following to Scott: “You can’t imagine what havoc the ring wrought. A whole dance was completely upset last night” (Z. Fitzgerald qtd. in Milford 43). Even though Scott was a charming and attractive young man, he offered little stability en certainty for the future: “he had not graduated from Princeton, he was Irish, he had no career to speak of, he drank too much, and he was a
Catholic” (43). However, it is quite plausible that the rebellious Zelda was attracted exactly by Scott’s non-conformity. Possibly she hoped to combine both sides of herself – the traditional and the rebellious – in this marriage. In spite of their engagement and while Scott struggled in New York City, Zelda kept leading her adventurous life in Montgomery, and continued to interact with other men. Impatience, the distance and Zelda’s flirtations ultimately led to the breaking-off of their engagement (52).

In the summer of 1919, Scott quit his job, returned to his hometown St. Paul and decided to rewrite his first novel, *The Romantic Egotist*, using parts of the diary Zelda had given him “to help create the atmosphere of her charm” (Milford 55). By September he sent the manuscript to Scribner again, and this time he was offered a publication contract for *This Side of Paradise*, as the novel was now called (54). His new success gave Scott confidence and courage to resume contact with Zelda, which resulted in a renewal of their engagement in November 1919 (56). In the months that followed, Scott worked hard on new stories and his success ensured a more stable and prosperous financial situation (58). On April 3th, 1920, Zelda Sayre and Francis Scott Fitzgerald got married in New York City (62).

The couple’s life in New York was characterised by extravagant parties and excessive drinking; nevertheless, or perhaps precisely for this reason, they were admired as “models in the cult of youth” by many and their lives were put on display in gossip columns (Milford 69). However, the freshly married couple’s whirling way of life proved to be self-destructive, causing financial debt and marital conflict (Eble 69). In order to put their life in order, the Fitzgeralds bought a car and moved to Westport, Connecticut, so that Fitzgerald could write in peace. On Valentine’s Day 1921, Zelda found out she was pregnant (Milford 81). After a disappointing trip to Europe, they went to St. Paul to have their first and only child, Frances Scott Fitzgerald (84). Quickly, they hired a nurse to take care of the baby, so the couple could
resume their glamorous lifestyle (86). Contradictorily Fitzgerald said that “it seemed inappropriate to bring a baby into all that glamor and loneliness. But in a year we were back and we began doing the same things over again and not liking them so much” (qtd. in Eble 70). Notwithstanding the continuance of their partying, he managed to finish *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922) – which Scott insisted was not autobiographical, despite the obvious parallels with their own lives (81) – and several other more or less successful stories such as ‘The Curious Case of Benjamin Button’ (1922) and ‘The Diamond as Big as the Ritz’ (1922).

In the twenties, Zelda became the embodiment of the new modern woman designated by the term ‘flapper’. In an article she wrote called ‘Eulogy on the Flapper’ Zelda described the flapper as “someone who experimented with life, who was self-aware and did things she did consciously for their effect and to create herself anew” (qtd. in Milford 91). To the outside world, on the other hand, flappers were primarily negatively defined because of their denial of social and sexual norms, their drinking, their bobbed hair and new style of clothing that included showing more skin (Sagert). However, Zelda saw nothing wrong with the flapper lifestyle, according to her “[w]omen were to dramatize themselves in their youth, to experiment and be gay; in their old age (in their forties) they would be magically content” (Milford 92). In short, she was everything but the traditional southern belle for whom marriage and motherhood were the major goals in life (93). The lifestyle defined here was described and promoted in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s works. *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, could be considered to be the ultimate fictionalization of the Jazz Age. Characters such as Daisy Buchanan are identified as flappers and the decadent lifestyle of the Roaring Twenties is reflected in the novel.

For the Fitzgeralds, the Jazz Age was a time of drinking, partying and spending more money than they had: “[e]veryone wanted to meet them, to have them for dinner guests, to
attend their parties, and to invite them to their openings” (Milford 97). However, Scott’s drinking was becoming problematic: he frequently went on two or three day binges, not remembering anything afterwards (98). In an attempt to end the “destructive pace of their lives” and thinking they could live more cheaply in Europe, they moved to Paris in 1924 (103). Here the couple met Ernest Hemingway – an unknown young writer at the time – whom Scott would later call his best friend (114). They quickly left for the southern French Riviera, a trip that was elaborately described in Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* (106). Zelda loved the Riviera and believed that she and Scott would find true happiness here (107). However, she quickly became bored with her husband working all day and found a companion in Edouard Jozan, a young military aviator whom she also describes favourably in *Save Me the Waltz* with the name ‘Jacques’ (108). Their passionate affair came to a sudden halt when she told Scott she loved the aviator and wanted a divorce and furiously Scott locked her up in their villa. Shortly afterwards, Zelda took an overdose of sleeping pills in a suicide attempt (111-112).

Scott’s close friendship with Ernest Hemingway began to stand in the way of his relationship with Zelda as she disliked the man whom Scott admired so much. She was jealous of Hemingway and considered him a threat to their relationship (Milford 122) to the extent that she at one point accused her husband of having a homosexual relationship with Ernest (153). Hemingway, on the other hand, had told Fitzgerald when he first met Zelda that he thought she was crazy (116). Others also described her as different and mysterious; one of their friends remembered that “[s]omewhere, we always felt that her mind made different connections than most people’s” (Murphy qtd. in Milford 123).

After two and a half years in Europe, the Fitzgeralys returned to the United States, and more specifically to Hollywood where Scott would write a screenplay for Constance
Talmadge (Milford 127). Here he also met Lois Moran, a seventeen-year-old actress with whom Scott was immediately infatuated; she would form one of the subjects of Zelda and Scott’s quarrelling in the time to follow. When Fitzgerald had finished the script, the couple moved to Delaware, where they rented a big house. At age 27, Zelda decided to take up dancing lessons again as a reaction to Scott’s remark that Lois Moran at least did something with her life that required not only talent, but also effort. She devoted entire days to practicing in the front room of their house and later, when they moved to Paris again, she practiced up to eight hours a day with Madame Lubov Egorova, her ballet teacher (129-136). Just like the character Alabama in *Save Me the Waltz*, Zelda was determined to become a prima ballerina (141). This commitment to her dancing was to Zelda “a desire to find something of her own that might give her release from her life with Scott” (Milford 141). In addition to dancing, she also started writing and painting again, clearly searching for personal artistic achievement in life. Meanwhile, Scott’s drinking became increasingly problematic, as he now depended on alcohol in order to be able to write (141). In addition to this, he did not support Zelda in her attempt to become a professional dancer. Milford writes that to Scott “[i]t was impossible [...] to share her conviction that she would one day become a dancer of the first rank” (Fitzgerald qtd. in Milford 147). As a result they basically stopped communicating and Zelda said: “I lived in a quiet, ghostly, hypersensitized world of my own. Scott drank.” (Milford 147). Even though she was invited to join a ballet school in Naples, she did not accept the invitation (156). It is unknown why Zelda declined the opportunity, but the lack of support from her husband and her deteriorating mental health might have influenced her choice. She tried to make up for this missed opportunity by having her protagonist Alabama take the step to go to Naples in *Save Me the Waltz*. 
Zelda sank ever more deeply into her own private world, in which only dancing was of importance (155). Over time, her mental instability began to surface, for instance when on a steep road in the mountains she grabbed the steering wheel and tried to steer the car off the cliff, claiming that it seemed to her that the car had a will of its own (156). Not much later, everyone around her noticed a peculiar change in Zelda’s behaviour; she became very suspicious of her own friends and her ballet teacher witnessed an obvious shift in her gestures, face and voice. A mental breakdown and subsequent hospitalisation in a state of extreme anxiety followed (158). This was the first of many hospitalisations, since Zelda was diagnosed with schizophrenia (161). During treatment in Switzerland later on, she started to suffer from severe eczema, a trait shared by an unnamed female character in Scott’s *Tender Is the Night* (169). In fact, Fitzgerald used parts of Zelda’s letters to him in this novel to sketch the relationship between Nicole and Dick Diver (177). Earlier in his career, he had also used parts of her diary in *The Beautiful and The Damned*. Fitzgerald believed that their life and experiences, including their correspondence, belonged to him to use as material for his writings (cf. infra). After Zelda’s release, they moved back to Montgomery where they lived a relatively quiet life (193). Having been stable for a while, Zelda suddenly began suffering from eczema again – a physical effect of her mental instability. This was accompanied by two outbursts of hysteria in which she turned against Scott. As a consequence, she was voluntarily hospitalised in the Henry Phipps Psychiatric Clinic in Baltimore (208-209).

As a form of daily occupational therapy, Zelda wrote. The result of this writing was her first (and only) novel *Save Me the Waltz* (213). She finished the manuscript in less than three months and mailed it to Scribner’s immediately after it was completed (216). Only afterwards did she send the manuscript to Scott. Fitzgerald was furious because, according to him, she had stolen the material for his next novel – *Tender Is the Night* – on which he had
been working on and off over the past four years. He was frequently forced to suspend work on his novel in order to earn money by writing short stories to finance, among other things, Zelda’s stays in sanatoriums. Zelda had heard fifty thousand words of Scott’s next novel and according to him “literally one whole section of her novel is an imitation of it [Tender Is the Night], of its rhythm, materials...” (qtd. in Milford 216). Milford states that “[h]er novel was intensely, even naïvely autobiographical, and as she drew on her own life, so she drew on her life with Scott, for it was her material as well as his” (217). Unsurprisingly, Scott insisted that Zelda make some specific changes in the novel before publication. In Zelda’s letters to Scott, we read her apologies to her husband and she accepts his alterations to the manuscript (221). Meanwhile, he kept working on his own novel which at this time still carried the working title The Drunkard’s Holiday; he commented that it “will be a novel of our time showing the break-up of a fine personality” (Milford 218). For the character of Nicole Diver he thoroughly drew on Zelda’s life story, showing little concern about the effect that it would have on his mentally unstable wife (cf. infra).

Even though their marriage had its ups and downs, Zelda managed to stay relatively stable for a while. Doctors were now more worried about Scott’s health: he was still drinking heavily and seeing a therapist. Milford describes, “[t]he strain of trying to be a nurse to Zelda and a shield to Scottie³, of maintaining a semblance of balance in the household as well as working to complete his final draft of Tender Is the Night, had taken its toll” (268). Despite its author’s troubles, however, Tender Is the Night was published in 1934.

The following years were marked by Zelda getting in and out of several mental institutions. The contact between the spouses dwindled and Scott eventually moved to California where he worked as a script-writer. In Hollywood he met Sheilah Graham with

³ Scott and Zelda usually called their daughter Scottie instead of Frances (Scott Fitzgerald).
whom – despite still being married to Zelda – he had a relationship until he died of a heart attack in 1940. Zelda died in 1948 in a fire in Highland Hospital in North Carolina (Prigozy xx-xxi).
2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Autobiografiction

Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald strongly interwove their personal experiences in the characters and plots of their novels. As Kathleen Parkinson points out in her critical study of *Tender Is the Night* (1986), “[a]s always in [F. Scott Fitzgerald’s] fiction, it would be easy to name any number of incidents that were autobiographical in origin, including Zelda’s affair with a young French officer and his own friendship with a young American film-star travelling with her mother” (12). According to Nancy Milford’s *Zelda Fitzgerald, A Biography* (1970), Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* was even more thoroughly and “naively autobiographical” (217). As I have discussed in the couple’s biographies, the use of their lives as material for their literary work resulted in severe tension and feelings of competition after the publication of Zelda’s novel; Scott felt like his wife stole the material for the novel he was working on at the time, *Tender Is the Night* (216-217).

Even though the material of the novels under discussion is thoroughly rooted in the authors’ lives, they can hardly be considered formal autobiographies. It is important to make a clear distinction between autobiographical works and autobiographies. Therefore, I find Stephen Reynolds’ term ‘autobiografiction’ more appropriate for the analysis of *Save Me the Waltz* and *Tender Is the Night*. Reynolds coined this term in 1906 in his article of the same title: ‘Autobiografiction’ (1906). He calls it a portmanteau word for autobiographical fiction, or fiction “with a good deal of the writer’s own life in it, or for those lapses from fact which occur in most autobiographies” (28). He stresses the importance of a spiritual experience that has directly touched the author’s soul, such as the effects brought about by strong emotions, aesthetically pleasing objects, a work of art or simply love. Therefore he defines
autobiografiction as “a record of real spiritual experiences strung on a credible but more or less fictitious autobiographical narrative” (28). When we take a leap forward to Zelda’s Save Me the Waltz, it could be said that her changing relationship with her husband, Scott, and her mental breakdown could be interpreted as types of spiritual experiences that functioned as catalysts for the writing of her novel.

According to Stephen Reynolds, autobiografiction is found where autobiography, fiction and the essay meet. All three of these literary genres, however, are deemed unsuitable to express a spiritual experience appropriately: fiction Reynolds considers impracticable because “he does not wish, or is not able, to invent such a complicated apparatus for self-expression” (28); formal autobiography would require the adding of superfluous information if one wants to be chronological and complete about a (wo)man’s life; the genre of the essay thirdly, is too disconnected to serve for the expression of a spiritual experience (28). The better alternative then, would be to select or invent an amount of autobiographical information – possibly adding some fiction to the mixture – and building the spiritual experience on this; the result of this process is called autobiografiction, “a literary form more direct and intimate probably than any to be found outside poetry” (28).

As Max Saunders describes in his elaborate work on all forms of life-writing Self Impression – Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, & the Forms of Modern Literature (2010), contemporary critics seemed to have forgotten about Stephen Reynolds (1881-1919) and generously applied the term ‘autobiografiction’ to postmodern fiction as if they had coined it themselves “as a sign of postmodernism’s playful eclecticism” (Saunders 166). However, ‘autobiografiction’ emerged in a completely different period to identify (pre-)modernist

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4 At the beginning of the twentieth century, Stephen Reynolds still considered poetry superior to other literary genres, a view that has altered throughout the century.
literature of the turn of the twentieth century (167). It shed light, not only on the literature of the late nineteenth century, but also on what was to come: modernism (167). Max Saunders further elaborates on Reynolds’s term, claiming that it “is a very widespread and diverse practice; and that the recovery of its turn-of-the-century energies enables a new approach to modernism, one which shows that autobiografiction is a major literary presence there too” (Saunders 179). Modernist works are therefore more likely to be read from an autobiografictional perspective, shedding new light on the correlation between fact and fiction in these works (179).

Max Saunders adds that stories of personal spiritual crises in an autobiografictional form affect the reader much more because the fictionalization facilitates their empathy for two reasons. First, fictionalization “cuts the material free from the name and person of the author”, second, the aesthetic use of fiction presents a greater imaginative engagement with the material (Saunders 174). In other words, a fictionalized work leaves more to the imagination of the reader, allowing a greater empathic involvement in the often intimate material at hand. The unusual intimacy that describing a spiritual experience entails, creates the need for the author to distance him- or herself from the material (173). This distancing is possible through autobiografiction, since the author can safely hide behind the novel’s fictional protagonist and his or her experiences. In *Save Me the Waltz*, for example, Zelda’s mental breakdown is represented through Alabama’s foot injury, which thwarts the continuation of her ballet career.

Many writers discover that in expressing an uttermost personal feeling or experience, language is often too imprecise and that therefore “the desire for self-expression [...] is insatiable” (199). When approached from a psychoanalytical Freudian perspective, it is believed that the truth of the psyche cannot be reached and thus related consciously: “[i]t
will negate, distort, disavow, displace material, leaving the attempt at formal autobiography unreliable, full of gaps and contradictions” (199). However, this inaccessibility of the inner psyche can be overcome through art and fiction since the artistic devotion “allows a greater depth of self-expression” (Saunders 200). The subconscious is generally believed to be reachable through (day)dreaming, but it can also be reached through creative writing – which in a way is similar to the former since both activities take the subject away from the everyday world into a fictional world (200). This is why, according to Philippe Lejeune, works of fiction are truer autobiographical works than formal autobiographies could ever be (Saunders 198). Zelda Fitzgerald, wrote her first and only novel *Save Me the Waltz* as a sort of occupational therapy during her stay at a mental institution. In her case, the creative writing clearly led to a deeper, more profound knowledge of her inner self, since she was able to express her mental breakdown through the fictional experiences of her character Alabama.

Max Saunders proposes a “twin development” in life-writing in modernism (202). On the one hand, works and the self are becoming increasingly fictionalized; on the other, the fictional becomes more and more autobiographical. So, despite the insistence of some modernists on objectiveness and concreteness, the above-mentioned double process resulted in more autobiografictional works (202). Autobiografictional modernist works generally do not render an objective reality, but rather a subjective impression of the author, a representation of facts and experiences filtered through the mind of and constructed by the artist, rather than an unbiased representation of reality. Saunders adds that “[t]hat of course carries with it the possibility that what is ‘made’ by the artist might be ‘made up’, at least to some extent” (202).
Spengemann and Lundquist make a similar point in ‘Autobiography and the American Myth’ (1965) that, in my view, can also be applied to works of autobiografiction. They state that an autobiography uses metaphors to transform raw material – real-life experiences that are considered incommunicable – into a readable story (501-502). By employing metaphors and other literary transforming devices such as metonymies, a writer is able to render a strong spiritual experience into words. An author, when translating parts of his life into language, and fiction, creates a symbolic identity. Therefore, the process of writing combines the act of creation with the act of self-evaluation (502). In addition to this, Spengemann and Lundquist argue that the American autobiographers have drawn their material from a common source: the American myth, “a fund of metaphors which grow out of our shared experiences, assumptions and beliefs” (501). Therefore, they find autobiographical works suitable for cultural analysis; these works reflect values that are recognized by both writers and readers (501). In short, “[t]he act of writing about oneself brings together the personal, unassimilated experiences of the writer and the shared values of his culture” (502).

Max Saunders concludes that for modernist writers, autobiografiction offered a way towards a “fuller autobiography” (Saunders 205). Through this type of writing they can create a more human, complete picture, since they can portray the shameful as well as the honourable (205). This is possible because readers do not directly link the material of the novel to the historical figure of the author, even though the story is often strongly rooted in their own lives. In brief, autobiografiction offers, on the one hand, a protective mask from behind which a writer can safely mix autobiographical and fictional events without being held responsible for them; on the other hand, it offers the author a more profound insight into a deeper personal truth that cannot be reached through an ordinary autobiographical account.
2.2 The Madness Narrative

Since mental illness is a prominent theme throughout both novels under discussion in this dissertation, I will briefly discuss the most important traits of the ‘madness narrative’. In this chapter I will also look at how *Save Me the Waltz* and *Tender Is the Night* are situated within the genre. Susan Hubert defines the madness narrative as follows:

any firsthand account of the experience of ‘mental illness’ and psychiatric treatment, even if the narrative is presented as a fictitious account or a case study. [...] The term ‘madness narrative’ includes novels, journals, anonymous accounts, and narratives presented by an interlocutor, as well as traditional autobiographies. Also, the designation avoids the boundaries of asylum autobiography and therefore allows for the consideration of madness narratives that are not centered on the experience of hospitalization. (qtd. in Cuza 311-312)

Patients who are trying to write an autobiographical account of their life and experiences generally face some fundamental difficulties. Creating a coherent plot, written in a comprehensible language is a challenge for someone whose mind is characterized by what Julia Kristeva has termed an “excess of an unorderable cognitive chaos” (qtd. in Stone 18). As Brendan Stone points out in ‘Towards a Writing without Power: Notes on the Narration of Madness’ (2004), mentally unstable patients deal with issues that “exceed human understanding” and therefore they often resort to the use of images and similes (17). After all, as Jacques Derrida states, “madness is what by essence cannot be said” (qtd. in Stone 19). Therefore, madness narratives are not always straightforward stories of a mentally disturbed subject. Sometimes, the turmoil of mental illness is concealed behind a metaphorical story – as is the case with Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz*. 
What defines a madness narrative and why do authors produce them? Above all, writing helps the healing process of the mentally ill and it is therefore often prescribed as a therapy in mental institutions (Cuza 316). As Anaïs Nin insightfully describes it, “stories are the only enchantment possible, for when we begin to see our suffering as a story, we are saved” (qtd. in Cuza 312). Through writing, (wo)men try to give a place to their suffering and explain it to themselves in order to eventually achieve the “magical transformation of pain into substance” (Kate Millet qtd. in Cuza 314). In order to achieve this type of healing, fiction is often used as a defence strategy against both the mental illness and the memory of it. Through fiction – as mentioned in the chapter on autobiografiction – one does not only recreate the events, but also makes a story out of them (313). However, writing about the self is challenging as it is, and suffering from mental instability complicates the process even further. As Cuza states, “the writing of the self also entails [...] the unavoidable need for mediation between the I as ‘both the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance and contemplation’” (314). It is therefore important to be able to distance oneself from the self in order to write about it and subsequently find emotional relief.

The authors of madness narratives are faced with the challenge of distancing themselves from their own situation so that they may self-consciously reflect on it. When these writers can move beyond viewing themselves as unreliable narrators who are unable to produce a text that can be considered the work of a sane mind, these texts can offer them a “previously-denied voice” (Cuza 317). As a result, such a piece of writing “continues to communicate with madness [...] by dramatizing a dynamically renewed, revitalized relation between sense and nonsense, between reason and unreason, between the readable and the unreadable” (Felman qtd. in Cuza 317). The fictional work thus becomes the medium of the dramatization of the contrast between what society considers sane and insane. A madness
narrative can also help to return the subjects in question a sense of their own humanity. When outsiders read their experiences of madness, desolation and hope, it may encourage them to sympathise with the patients and realise that they are just as human as every other person (317). “Madness narratives are, thus, texts at the border between creative writing, pathography, scriptotherapy and political activism” (Cazu 312). The writing process is therapeutic for the patient, it results in a literary text and it teaches the reader something about mental illness and the policies used to “label and regulate deviation” (Cazu 311).

For mentally ill women in particular, writing is a “powerful act of self-affirmation” (Cuza 314). Female writers of madness narratives are challenged by at least three obstacles, one of which is specifically correlated to their gender, while the other two are more generally applicable to both male and female mentally disturbed writers. First of all, the female authors’ very status as women – especially in the early twentieth century – can result in their being taken less seriously than their male colleagues. Secondly, the process of giving meaning to past experiences and putting them into words can prove to be a challenge since events take on new meanings over time. And last but not least, their mental instability may call into question the credibility of their narratives (316). However, as Cuza states, “[m]any women have, nevertheless, managed to overcome these difficulties and save themselves through writing, even if only temporarily” (316). For Zelda as well, putting pen to paper offered some solace, but unfortunately it did not save her completely from mental instability. In fact, the original manuscript of Save Me the Waltz caused severe tensions in her marriage with Scott because she used similar material to that of his Tender Is the Night. Eventually, she ended up being in and out of mental institutions until her death.

When read without prior acknowledge, Zelda Fitzgerald’s Save Me the Waltz does not come across as an obvious example of an asylum autobiography, or more generally a
narrative of madness. Nevertheless, the novel was written during a treatment for mental illness at the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic in Baltimore and when read between the lines – and with knowledge of Zelda’s background of mental illness – the novel “both obscures and reveals a fragmented story of mental turmoil and incarceration […] a suppressed story of mental illness” (Wood 1994 148). Zelda translates her own mental breakdown into a narrative about Alabama’s physical experience as a ballet dancer (Wood 1994 148). This opposition between mind and body is interesting; it may be symbolic of Zelda’s attempt to escape her chaotic mind, just like she did with her ballet obsession. By focussing on the corporeal, the author hides the mental problems underneath the surface. As opposed to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night, Zelda’s Save Me the Waltz does not portray conventional images of the insane woman (148). Since Scott does overtly discuss Nicole Diver’s mental illness, his work is a more obvious example of a madness narrative – although from another perspective, since in this instance it is written by the sufferer’s spouse. By choosing not to write a traditional asylum autobiography, Zelda escapes the conventions that might shape and restrict her work (149). We should also bear in mind the effect that the production of these novels had on their lives. Mary Wood points out in ‘A Wizard Cultivator: Zelda Fitzgerald’s Save Me the Waltz as Asylum Autobiography’ (1992) that the canonical success of Scott’s Tender Is the Night has obscured Zelda’s own version of her life in Save Me the Waltz; instead, it enforced the popular image of Zelda as a mentally disturbed woman (Wood 249).
2.3 Gender, Patriarchy and Flappers

In my discussion of the novels, I will investigate the treatment of women in Zelda’s and Scott’s work. Do both spouses have a different approach where the portrayal of their female protagonists is concerned? And how is the changing status of women in American society in the early decades of the twentieth century reflected in both novels? These differences will be examined more closely, but first I will take a closer look at a number of aspects that intersect in the novels, namely those of gender, patriarchy, flappers and the slow emancipation of women in the nineteen-twenties.

When using denominations such as man/woman, male/female and masculine/feminine it is important to stress the difference between sex and gender. One of the most important theorists in this field is Judith Butler, and I will therefore briefly discuss her perspective on sex and gender. Traditionally, feminists considered ‘sex’ the corporeal, biological differences between a man and a woman. In Bodies That Matter (1993) Butler, however, states that sex is from the beginning a norm, a “regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices” (1). In other words, sex is an ideal that is materialized through time according to regulatory norms, rather than an inherent condition of the body. Ultimately these regulatory norms search to consolidate the “heterosexual imperative (2). According to Butler, sex is as socially constructed as gender is.

From this perspective, the traditional feminist belief that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex, makes little sense (Butler 1990 11). However, gender is culturally constructed (9), and Butler considers it independent of sex. In other words, “gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as
easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (10). Butler considers gendered behaviour as an act, a performance. As Simone de Beauvoir suggests in *The Second Sex*, “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (qtd. in Butler 1988 519). This entails that gender is not a stable identity that determines one’s actions, rather gender is “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (519). Through a combination of bodily gestures, movements and enactments gender is constructed; it can be considered a performance in which people come to believe and act according to it (520). In other words, a person’s gender receives meaning not through one’s sex, but through one’s acts and expressions in the world (521).

Some feminist theorists following Simone de Beauvoir argue that only the feminine gender is marked since the “universal person and the masculine gender are conflated” (Butler 1990 13). Therefore, women are defined in relation to their sex, while men bear a “body-transcendent universal personhood” (14). De Beauvoir designates women as the Other, the negative of men. Moreover, the body is considered female; so while the female sex is restricted to the body, the male subject disavows its embodiment and becomes an immaterial instrument of a radical freedom, a universality (16). The relation between the masculine and feminine gender is an asymmetric one that can be described in terms of a master-slave dialectic (17). It is clear that women are traditionally considered inferior to men, a notion that has long survived, even during the twentieth century. Women were granted suffrage much later than men, and for a long time, society expected them to devote their lives to marriage and motherhood instead of personal achievement or a professional career. Even though Zelda was destined to be a good wife and mother by her status of ‘belle’ in Montgomery, she nevertheless fought this submissive role by her overt appearance as a
progressive flapper. Despite these attempts, she fell under the patriarchal control of her husband and doctors when her mental condition deteriorated later in life.

As Lise Fortier states in her essay ‘Women, Sex and Patriarchy’ (1975), virtually every society, including our own, has been patriarchal; in other words, men rule over the women and children. In general, the patriarchal structure is reinforced by religion, the political system and culture (Fortier 278). She adds that “[i]n every individual society the shaping of an individual masculine or feminine personality is based on what the dominant male group values in itself and finds useful in subordinates: intelligence, force, efficacy in the male; ignorance, docility, virtue in the female” (278). This is a clear example of how culture and society influence the shaping and performance of gendered behaviour. Boys are supposed to acquire aggressiveness and become tough, while girls should passively obey and prepare for a virtuous life as wives and mothers. One reason why men think less of women, according to Fortier, are the superstitions that are attached to a woman’s sexuality; menstruation, for example, is found impure and disgusting in a lot of cultures (278). This impurity and the emotional instability that often accompanies menstruation, makes some people believe that women are only capable of doing menial labour (279). Religious myths as well support the patriarchal social structure and strongly interconnect women, sex and sin; we have to look no further than the biblical story of Adam and Eve (279). “Religions have been instrumental in keeping wives obedient to their husbands and in convincing women that they are inferior beings, to whom God does not speak” (279). But even psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud recognize women’s inferiority: “[i]n ‘Femininity,’ [Freud] writes about ‘the boy’s far superior equipment,’ the girl’s ‘inferior clitoris,’ her ‘genital deficiency,’ her ‘original sexual inferiority’” (279). Freud attributes women’s social discontent not to an oppressing society but to ‘penis envy’, a jealousy of the organ itself. Freud’s extensive theory of human
sexuality does not only justify but even glorifies the double standard at hand in Victorian society (279).

In the first half of the twentieth century, women and men were not treated as equals and society had a double standard when it came to expectations, capabilities and sexuality of men and women. However, during the nineteen-twenties some women – among whom Zelda Fitzgerald – “refused to recognize the traditional moral code of American civilization” embodied by the late nineteenth-century Gibson girl\(^5\): a modest and stable, feminine woman who valued maternal and wifely traits highly. Flappers – as this new, modern type of woman was called – embodied opposite values and were usually boyish, single, energetic and not afraid to sin (Yellis 44). The concrete differences between the Gibson girl and the flapper are remarkable if we consider the relatively small amount of time that separated the two contradictory models of cultural femininity (45). The flapper was “an extreme manifestation of changes in the life styles of American women”, especially visible in a new style of dress that entailed bobbed hair, shorter dresses that showed the legs and loose clothes as opposed to the tight corsages of the Gibson girl (45). Their aesthetic ideal was youth; therefore, flappers also tried to minimize their bosom to make it look small and virginal. Their goal was to hide maturity as long as possible (49). We could say that flappers tried to escape traditional female expectations by altering their gendered behaviour into a ‘performance’ that inclined slightly to that of men including shorter hair, looser clothes, drinking, smoking and sexual activity for enjoyment rather than for procreation.

As a reaction to this changing lifestyle of the American woman, a number of articles were written during the nineteen-twenties denouncing the demoralization of American society (Yellis 45). These articles emphasized the importance of “modesty, chastity, morality

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\(^5\) The Gibson girl as an ideal of feminine beauty was first introduced in the 1890s in the pen-and-ink illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson.
and traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity”; deviating behaviour that undermined these values was attacked in many of them (45). In fact, not a lot had changed over the decades when it came to the American middle-class opinion on gender (46). The writers of these articles were mainly concerned with the flappers’ ideas about sexual intercourse. In the nineteenth century, women were not supposed to have sex outside of marriage; moreover, they were not expected to enjoy it. Sexual intercourse’s only purpose was reproduction (46). However, flappers enjoyed sex and did not wait until marriage. This was considered a major threat to American society since the question was raised as to who would guard morality, if women no longer did so (46)? After all, the double standard granted men all the liberties and prerogatives, but they were also stigmatized as being less moral than women since they were the aggressor in sex and other activities (47).

In the 1920s, women also began to compete with men in the business world and thus acquired a new (financial) independence (46). Kenneth Yellis describes women’s new lifestyle as follows:

The economic independence, greater opportunity and ability to find personal satisfaction outside of the home life in which women had traditionally found fulfilment were both consequences and reinforcing causes of the social and sexual independence women were now beginning to exercise and which expressed itself in dress. (51)

Their social and sexual emancipation was thus reflected in their new dress; working women preferred comfortable, high quality dresses that were easy to put on; this resulted in the one-piece slip-on gown (Yellis 52). Not only working women, but housewives too were moving towards emancipation thanks to modern innovations such as ready-made clothing, canned goods and electrical devices that eased the housewife’s burden (55). Even though
some middle-classers worried about women’s emancipation, Yellis argues that “women, by and large, seemed pleased that the boundaries of their universe now extended past the front gate” (55).

The nineteen-twenties saw the emergence of a new woman whose looks and attitude broke with western, male-dominated civilization; therefore, this new cultural role was considered a serious threat to civilization (63). We can conclude that this period was a time of transition in which society was still male-dominated, but in which women were slowly gaining a personal voice and more rights. In the discussion of the novels, we will examine how Zelda’s and Scott’s female protagonists deal with male dominance and new emerging female emancipation through alternative cultural representations of femininity.

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6 For instance: women received suffrage in 1920 through addition of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution: “The right of citizen of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” (Norton 2012 A-13)
3 Discussion of the Novels: Autobiografiction

3.1 Autobiografiction in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night

As Fitzgerald stated himself, he was not the same person when he finished Tender Is the Night as when he started the novel (Donaldson 119). During these years (1924-1935), his personal world fell apart and the outside world deteriorated to decadence and depression (119). Scott Donaldson beautifully sums up what was going on in Fitzgerald’s life in this period between the two world wars:

Fitzgerald had an affair – or said he did – with the young actress Lois Moran, to balance the affair Zelda had – or said she did – with the French aviator Edouard Jozan. During drinking bouts Scott alienated friends, got into fights with strangers, and landed in jail several times. Zelda suffered through spells of ill health and at least one abortion. Living in a series of rented apartments and houses, the Fitzgeralds became estranged. Zelda threw herself into the dance with a fervency bordering on madness, then slipped over the line in the most severe of her recurrent mental breakdowns. The stock market collapsed. Scott’s father died. Zelda’s father died. All the fathers died, and with them went the assurance and the solidity of the era between the wars. (119)

Obviously, a lot was changing and above all deteriorating in the life of the Fitzgeralds, an evolution clearly reflected in the novels at hand. On the one hand, Tender Is the Night recounts the struggle of Nicole Diver with her mental instability, a story line most probably inspired by Zelda. On the other hand, the novel depicts the decline of a successful psychiatrist, Dick Diver, into alcoholism and oblivion, a parallel to Scott as he too was drinking alarmingly much by this time. Dick’s personal decline is embedded in a wider
context of “cultural malaise” (Donaldson 127). This feeling of cultural malaise was very present in the actual lives of the Fitzgeralds. The Roaring Twenties are generally associated with a decadent lifestyle of parties, spending too much money on materialistic things and – despite the prohibition (1919-1933) – alcoholism. However, by the end of this hedonistic decade, the United States of America were hit by a massive economic recession, commonly known as the Great Depression, which began with the Wall Street Crash of October 1929. The decade that followed was marked by massive unemployment, poverty and great economic uncertainty. The Great Depression affected a vast part of the American population, including the Fitzgeralds. Scott’s novels sold fewer copies than expected and he had to financially depend on the income he received from his magazine short stories (Stern 95-96).

Fitzgerald had read and was impressed by Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (1918) that brought forth a belief that “the West was in the throes of a fatal malady” (Donaldson 127). Spengler reacted – among other things – against changing gender roles; women were emancipating through the work field and gender distinctions were loosening. Spengler thought this would bring out the worst in both genders (Sanderson 145, 161). It supported Scott’s idea that there was something thoroughly wrong with Western civilization. Fitzgerald believed that this was exactly the reason for Zelda’s mental breakdowns: “[t]he world had proved too much for her, or, more specifically, the postwar world that invited women to compete against men” (Donaldson 128). In other words, Scott firmly believed in the traditional roles of men and women and thought that a reversal of these might precipitate the decline of the West. When we discuss the novels in the light of gender and patriarchy further on, we will look deeper into this subject, examining how gender roles were evolving at the time.
Stephen Reynolds, as mentioned before, said to believe in his article on ‘Autobiografiction’ (1906) that authors often use a spiritual experience that directly touched the soul as the basis for an autobiografictional work. F. Scott Fitzgerald himself wrote the following in his essay ‘One Hundred False Starts’ (1933):

Mostly, we authors must repeat ourselves – that’s the truth. We have two or three great and moving experiences in our lives – experiences so great and moving that it doesn’t seem at the time that anyone else has been so caught up and pounded and dazzled and astonished and beaten and broken and rescued and illuminated and rewarded and humbled in just that way ever before. Then we learn our trade, well or less well, and we tell our two or three stories – each time in a new disguise – maybe ten times, maybe a hundred, as long as people will listen. (Fitzgerald 86-87)

Zelda’s mental breakdown caught up in the severe cultural changes at the time might very well have been such an experience. He could use Tender Is the Night as an outlet for his strong feelings in these years. However, by using the form of autobiografiction instead of autobiography and therefore by intertwining these experiences in a fictional story, the analogy between work and life becomes less evident, thus allowing a more empathic reading for the reader. While it remains realistic and recognizable because of the autobiographical elements, the addition of fiction liberates the material from the author’s name and person and allows the reader to use more of his/her imagination in the interpretation (Saunders 173-74). This explains how it is possible that, for example, Save Me the Waltz has multiple readings that are all plausible (cf. next chapter). The informed reader will not fail to recognize the parallels in the story with the lives of the couple; however, the novel can just as well be read without prior knowledge and with the mere purpose of recreation. In addition, autobiografiction can also have a positive effect on the author. Because of the
distance he/she creates between the original experience and the fictionalized version, writing about these experiences can serve a healing function. Autobiografiction can function as a coping mechanism to process the original event by turning it into a story and eventually understanding it better too.

For the Fitzgeralds, their lives did not only influence their fiction, their fiction also affected their lives in some ways. First of all, they might have used autobiografictional writing as a coping mechanism to deal with overwhelming experiences in their lives. Second, Zelda was not left untouched by her fictional counterpart, Nicole. To say more, there was a feeling of competition between the spouses when it came to using their life experiences as writing material. Scott believed that the material belonged to him because he was the prime breadwinner of the household, even if the use of it entailed Zelda’s deteriorating mental health (Donaldson 134).

*Tender Is the Night*, however, is more than a story in which events and experiences out of the couple’s life are recreated. In fact, it is a literary masterpiece as was acknowledged more and more by the end of the twentieth century when “it had become admiringly recognized, appreciated, and praised as one of America’s great books” (Stern 96). Contemporary critics often dismissed the novel because they only considered the shallow surface of the materials: another story about the glamorous (love) lives of American expatriates. This kind of material was appreciated less than a decade earlier because of the grim economic situation at the time (Stern 96); According to the novelist Malcolm Cowely, *Tender Is the Night* “dealt with fashionable life in the 1920s at a time when most readers wanted to forget that they had ever been concerned with frivolities; the new fashion was for novels about destitution and revolt” (qtd. in Hindus 52). At first sight, Fitzgerald had lost touch with the cultural context of his day, which explains the minor success of the novel.
However, the intellectual and moral substance of the novel goes a lot deeper than what many contemporary readers made of it. Underneath the surface, it is, in fact, not a glamorous story but one of mental breakdown for Nicole and alcoholism and decline into oblivion for Dick. We see the couple growing apart and taking separate ways, undeniably another sad parallel to the Fitzgeralds’ lives. Therefore, we could argue that the personal decline of Nicole and especially of Dick in *Tender Is the Night* reflects a general feeling of decline in American society.

In addition, I want to stress that none of the characters of *Tender Is the Night*, including Dick Diver, can be fully identified with the person of F. Scott Fitzgerald himself. However, he does project certain personal emotions and experiences on his male characters, a typical trait of autobiografiction (Baughman). As Judith S. Baughman states in her article ‘Art Imitating Life in Fitzgerald’s Novels’ (2000), “[i]n his best work, fictional elements provide artistic form and moral order that life rarely yields; autobiographical elements invest the work with an intensely ‘felt’ quality” (Baughman). Fiction, after all, is best when the author writes about what he/she knows (Baughman). It is this ‘felt’ quality that facilitates the reader’s empathy: when an author writes about an experience(d emotion) – as opposed to completely inventing one – it will be much more heartfelt. The sincerity with which the experience is described, will more easily summon identification and empathy in the reader. Fitzgerald felt like his starting point had to be “an emotion that’s close to [him] and that [he] can understand” (Fitzgerald 87) in order to write something good. It is thus unmistakable that Scott’s personal experiences had a great impact on and even provided most of the ‘fuel’ for his writing. In what follows, I will discuss some of the most striking autobiografictional passages in the novel.
Book I of *Tender Is the Night*, which takes place in 1925 on the French Riviera and in Paris, focuses on a young and promising American movie star, Rosemary Hoyt. Rosemary falls desperately in love with Dick Diver and the glamorous life he and Nicole lead. Dick falls for the young actress as well and they have a brief romantic affair:

Dick had gathered that he was in love with Rosemary in some curious way Dick could not have understood. [...] Only the image of a third person, even a vanished one, entering into his relation with Rosemary was needed to throw him off his balance and send through him waves of pain, misery, desires, desperation. (TIN 102)

There is much reason to believe that the character of Rosemary was strongly inspired by the seventeen-year old Hollywood actress Lois Moran with whom Scott was infatuated. Moran starred in the movie *Stella Dallas*, on which *Daddy’s Girl*, the movie Rosemary makes her début in in *Tender Is the Night*, was based (Baughman, “Art Imitating Life in Fitzgerald’s Novels”). After the couple met the actress in Hollywood, Zelda and Scott quarrelled about Scott’s attraction to her. As a reaction, Zelda threw her diamond and platinum wristwatch out of the train window (Milford 131), an act of desperation, as she felt jealous of Scott’s interest in other women. In *Tender Is the Night*, Nicole too has a hard time dealing with – among other things – Dick’s attraction to Rosemary. This jealousy results in a mental breakdown in the bathroom of her hotel suite: “[a]nd now Rosemary, too, could hear, louder and louder, a verbal inhumanity that penetrated the keyholes and the cracks in the doors, swept into the suite and in the shape of horror took form again” (TIN 127). Scott most probably used his experience with Zelda’s mental instability as a model for the behaviour of Nicole. I assume that an author can only really accurately describe such a very distinct event if he/she has actually lived it, like Fitzgerald did. To say more, this scene might suggest

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7 To avoid confusion of names, I will use the abbreviations TIN when talking about Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night* and SMW when talking about Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz.*

Malfait 37
Scott’s awareness of the role he played in Zelda’s mental deterioration. By repeating Zelda’s behaviour in the character of Nicole, he acknowledges that his infidelity might have been a cause of or a trigger for his wife’s mental instability.

Another scene in *Tender Is the Night* is an even more literal depiction of an event that must have left a great impression on Scott. In 1929 the Fitz吉erals left the Riviera for Paris by car; while on a steep mountain road, all of a sudden, Zelda grabbed the steering wheel of the car and attempted to put them off the cliff, claiming that she felt the car had a will of its own (Milford 156). For Zelda, this was the harbinger of her first mental breakdown after which she was hospitalized in a mental institution and diagnosed with schizophrenia. This event, that could have meant death for the couple, is recounted in *Tender Is the Night* quite literally.

He had turned up a hill that made a short cut to the clinic, and now as he stepped on the accelerator for a short straightaway run parallel to the hillside the car swerved violently left, swerved right, tipped on two wheels and, as Dick, with Nicole’s voice screaming in his ear, crushed down the mad hand clutching the steering wheel, righted itself, swerved once more and shot off the road; it tore through low underbrush, tipped again and settled slowly at an angle of ninety degrees against a tree. [...] ‘You –’ he cried. She was laughing hilariously, unashamed, unafraid, unconcerned. [...] ‘You were scared, weren’t you?’ she accused him. ‘You wanted to live!’ She spoke with such force that in this shocked state Dick wondered if he had been frightened for himself – but the strained faces of the children, looking from parent to parent, made him want to grind her mask into jelly. (*TIN* 214-15)

As a psychiatrist, Dick Diver should be used to handling mentally disturbed patients. In this case, however, when his life and that of his children is threatened by it, he has difficulty to
maintain his calmness towards Nicole. It is very possible that in this passage Scott reproduced the fear and anger he felt when Zelda tried to put them off the road.

The female character that most resembles Zelda in *Tender Is the Night* is, in fact, not necessarily, or not only, Nicole Diver. The unnamed woman patient in the clinic who is an artist and who suffers from severe eczema – closely connected to her mental instability – carries much resemblance to Zelda Fitzgerald as well. When Zelda’s nerves were triggered, she often started suffering from severe eczema; it was a painful physical effect of her mental instability (Milford 169).

The patient was a woman of thirty who had been in the clinic six months; she was an American painter who had lived long in Paris. [...] On her admittance she had been exceptionally pretty – now she was a living agonizing sore. All blood tests had failed to give a positive reaction and the trouble was unsatisfactorily catalogued as nervous eczema. For two months she had lain under it, as imprisoned in the Iron Maiden. She was coherent, even brilliant, within the limits of her special hallucinations. (TIN 205)

We know that Zelda as well took up painting and that she used to be considered very beautiful by men. Unfortunately, she developed a severe case of nervous eczema while treated for mental illness in a clinic in Switzerland; she suffered from it for several months (Milford 169). Thus, we should not search much further for Scott’s inspiration; the similarities are most probably no coincidence, but strongly rooted in his experience with Zelda and her mental instability.

After establishing just a few of the parallels between Scott’s life and work, the question arises of Zelda’s privacy. As is clear by now, Scott used much of Zelda’s life experiences, mental illness and even fragments of her letters in his work but “that she might object to it, be wounded by it, did not seem to have disturbed him. He saw it only from a
This is quite remarkable if we consider Scott’s anger and incomprehension with the first version of *Save Me the Waltz*. He – this includes his writing, his life and his material – felt used by Zelda (Milford 222). However, when it came to Zelda, there was no one to demand alterations in *Tender Is the Night* to protect her privacy, as Scott had claimed with *Save Me the Waltz* (284). The multiple allusions to her personal life profoundly affected Zelda. Scott “drew upon Zelda’s most terrible and private letters to him, written in the anguish of the early months of her illness in Switzerland, snipped and pieced them together in Book II with very little regard for Zelda’s reaction or for the precarious balance of her sanity” (Milford 284). Zelda, for example, sadly writes the following to her husband: “The mental trouble is all over and besides that I am completely broken and humiliated, if that was what they wanted” (Milford 285). Scott literally copied this into *Tender Is the Night*: “The mental trouble is all over and besides that I am completely broken and humiliated if that was what they wanted” (TIN 139). Zelda felt particularly mad and hurt because the fictional Nicole seems to ruin Dick’s life; she could not help identifying with Nicole because she shared so many experiences and characteristics with her. However, Zelda never felt like she was responsible for ruining Scott’s life (Milford 286). At the time of the serial publication of *Tender Is the Night* in *Scribner’s Magazine* in 1934, Zelda was hospitalized again. However, this time, the doctors saw no improvement (286); we can therefore question whether the impact of her husband’s novel had anything to do with her deteriorating mental state. This shows how the Fitzgeralds’ biographies did not only strongly influence their writing, their fiction also affected their lives, more than often in an unfortunate way.
3.2 Autobiografiction in Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz*

There is no real question about the autobiografictional basis of Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz*. As Scott Donaldson stated, *Save Me the Waltz* was thoroughly autobiographical, more even than *Tender Is the Night* was (133). Whereas Scott’s novel contains recognizable passages and characters, Zelda’s work recounts her own life story, covered under a thin veil of fiction. Scott’s immediate, furious reaction after having read the manuscript of *Save Me the Waltz* validates this statement. Since she drew on her own life for the material of the novel, she automatically also drew on his life and, above all, his writing material. If he had not felt personally attacked, his reaction to the manuscript would most probably not have been so severe. In addition to the resemblance in material, Scott felt ashamed that his wife completed a novel in a matter of weeks – despite her mental breakdown –, while he had been working on *Tender Is the Night* for seven years (Donaldson 132).

There were still some resemblances between both novels, but Scott was not bothered by them anymore; “*Save Me the Waltz* remained, after all, the story of Zelda Sayre – the narrative of an attractive and wilful Southern belle who marries a successful Northern artist, sees her marriage collapse through infidelity during a long period of expatriation in France, and recovers her dignity through immersion in the ballet” (Donaldson 133). It is striking that the preceding quote describes roughly Zelda’s as well as Alabama’s life story. The most conspicuous absent presence, though, is without a doubt Zelda’s psychological instability. She was advised by her doctors not to write about the subject because her two-hour occupational writing therapy a day was meant to take her mind off mental illness instead of focusing on it (133-134). However, *Save Me the Waltz* can most definitely be read as an asylum autobiography, even though it is not as notable as it is in Scott’s character of Nicole Diver.
Shortly after the publication of *Save Me the Waltz*, Zelda did turn to writing about mental illness. However, as soon as Scott found out about this, he insisted she put it to a stop immediately, since his novel-in-progress – *Tender Is the Night* – dealt with schizophrenia (Donaldson 134). This led to a famous literary battle between the spouses in which Scott insisted that their experiences were to be used by him only in his fiction because he was the breadwinner by his writing. Zelda reluctantly agreed not to write about insanity until after the publication of *Tender Is the Night*; “[a]fter that, she said, she would insist on her artistic independence, even if it meant divorce” (Donaldson 134). We can thus wonder whether, without the doctor’s advice and Scott’s insistence on her not writing about insanity, *Save Me the Waltz* would have been a more straightforward story of mental breakdown. And more importantly, would such a novel have helped Zelda to recover more rapidly and profoundly?

When we return to Stephen Reynolds’ definition of autobiografiction, we can assume that *Save Me the Waltz* was written by Zelda Fitzgerald as an outlet for the overwhelming experience of her mental breakdown. Zelda’s mental instability did not only affect her husband’s autobiografictional writing; to her as well it must have been an experience that left a great impact. To help coping with this dramatic event, Zelda began writing as a therapy, subtly covering her own life story with a veil of fiction and leaving out the dramatic event that had led her to writing in the first place.

In ‘Tender Is the Waltz or Save Me the Night: Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Alcoholism’ (2004) Ellen Lansky points out the following similarities between Zelda and her protagonist Alabama Beggs:

Alabama Beggs shares with Zelda Fitzgerald a Southern belle upbringing, a handsome and successful artist husband, a New York City celebrity honeymoon, an
unmanageable household in the suburbs, a charming daughter, a trip to France, a romance with a dashing French aviator, dance lessons, a hasty return to the United States for the father’s death. (Lansky 98)

From the first descriptions of Alabama’s youth and her Southern upbringing, we recognize Zelda’s youth in the story. Just like Zelda’s, Alabama’s father was a strict judge with whom she had only a distant relationship since “the judge lived apart, seeking only a vague and gentle amusement from his associates” (SMW 13). Nevertheless, Alabama – the youngest of the family and also considered a Southern belle – goes to dances in the country club with her beaus, quickly acquiring a rebellious reputation in town (SMW 28-29). But Alabama, just like Zelda, was also a tomboy; she wanted the best of both worlds and said: “I am going to play in the day and go out at night” (SMW 17). And then came the army officers, brought to the South by the war; “Alabama knew them all with varying degrees of sentimentality” (SMW 31). “Through the summer Alabama collected soldiers’ insignia. By autumn she had a glove-box full. No other girl had more and even she had lost some. […] Every night she wore a new one” (SMW 34). Among these soldiers, Alabama met lieutenant David Knight, fell in love with the artist and they quickly decided to get married (SMW 37-38). With the exception of the change in names, Alabama’s youth is close to identical to Zelda’s. The following years are quite similar as well. Fed up with the American lifestyle, the Knights move to Paris and from there on to the French Riviera. These events are almost identical to what I have depicted earlier in the couple’s biography.

Unfortunately, the American expatriate life on the French Riviera is not as glamorous as Alabama would have hoped and wished. David had to work on his paintings, and in the meantime she had to keep herself busy; “she began to blame David for the monotony” (SMW 93); a tension we have described earlier as existent between Scott and Zelda (cf.
Biography). Zelda found the attention she was searching for in the French aviator Edouard Jozan with whom she had a brief but vibrant romantic affair before Scott put a stop to it. Alabama’s love interest, Lieutenant Jacques Chevre-Feuille is quite certainly the fictional counterpart of Zelda’s Edouard Jozan (Milford 109). Alabama’s attraction to Edouard is described in more sensual terms than ever used to describe David Knight:

He drew her body against him till she felt the blades of his bones carving her own. He was bronze and smelled of the sand and sun; she felt him naked underneath the starched linen. She didn’t think of David. She hoped he hadn’t seen; she didn’t care. She felt as if she would like to be kissing Jacques Chevre-Feuille on the top of the Arc de Triomphe. Kissing the white-linen stranger was like embracing a lost religious rite

(SMW 91)

David as well is strongly opposed to Alabama’s flirting with the handsome aviator: “if I catch you making eyes at that young Dionysus, I’ll wring his neck, I warn you” (SMW 87). Zelda’s uneven relationship with Scott is reflected in the troubled relationship between Alabama and David Knight. The sensual description above of the lover, not the husband, therefore must have been a hard pill to swallow for Scott. In a novel that is this autobiographical there are little coincidental resemblances; therefore, it is not unimaginable that Scott felt personally attacked. The description of the unhappy marriage and the sensual affaire may have harmed his ego because he knew that Zelda probably exposed her genuine feelings about their relationship at the time. This might help to explain his fierce reaction after reading the manuscript of Save Me the Waltz.

The part of the novel that resembles Zelda’s life most is when Alabama decides she wants to become a professional dancer like Gabrielle Gibbs. She feels extremely jealous of Dick’s attention for the beautiful ballerina as “David opened and closed his personality over
Miss Gibbs like the tentacles of a carnivorous maritime plant” and Alabama therefore “was angry about Gabrielle – Gabrielle made her feel clumsy” (SMW 114). David is so impressed by Gabrielle’s beauty and charm that he only has eyes for her; he devotes all his attention to the ballerina. Therefore, Alabama decides that she as well wants “to be as famous a dancer as there are blue veins over the white marble of Miss Gibbs” (SMW 122). To Alabama, the attractive slender body, pale skin and visible veins of Gabrielle Gibbs prompt envy; she wants to be admired by others too. She is fed up with the superficial life of partying and living in the shadows of her successful husband. Zelda picked up dancing lessons at twenty-seven for the same reason; out of jealousy for Scott’s interest in the movie star Lois Moran, she decided that she wanted to accomplish something significant in life of her own (Milford 141).

Just like Zelda, Alabama practises intensively with a Russian ballet teacher in Paris. Soon, she gives up her social life and spends entire days at the studios, determined to star in a ballet production one day. She considers the dancing career she is pursuing as work, to be taken as seriously as her husband’s painting. Everyone around her thinks she is too old to become a professional ballerina, but Alabama is extremely determined and finds it hard to make her friends understand why she wants this so badly.

Alabama had never felt so close to a purpose as she did at that moment. [...] ‘Why’ was something the Russian understood and Alabama almost understood. She felt she would know when she could listen with her arms and see with her feet. It was incomprehensible that her friends should feel only the necessity to hear with their ears. That was ‘Why’. Fierce loyalty to her work swelled in Alabama. Why did she need to explain? (SMW 148)
As was the case in Zelda and Scott’s marriage, Alabama’s extreme devotion to ballet led to the deterioration of her marriage to David Knight. Alabama starts to live in an isolated world in which only ballet is of any importance; she stops communicating with her husband as he goes on with his glamorous lifestyle.

She wondered why she came to her lessons at all: David had asked her to swim at Corne-Biche in the afternoon. She felt obscurely angry with Madame that she had not gone off in the cool with her husband. Though she did not believe that the careless happy passages of their first married life could be repeated – or relished if they were, drained as they had been of the experiences they held – still, the highest points of concrete enjoyment that Alabama visualized when she thought of happiness, lay in the memories they held. (SMW 129)

The life at home was simply an existence of individuals in proximity; it had no basis of common interest. (SMW 160)

Even though she started dancing to have a goal of her own in life, it did not make Alabama a happier woman. On the contrary, her marriage started to collapse and the only happy times she could remember are in her memories. She and her husband stopped communicating since Alabama started spending even more time at the studio. Throughout her training process, we can detect a certain psychological deterioration as well, one that we will examine when discussing Save Me the Waltz from a madness narrative perspective.

In Save Me the Waltz, Alabama decides, after declining it first, to take up the offer of dancing a solo début in the ballet Faust in Naples. Even though the couple had promised to visit their parents in the United States, Alabama no longer cares about other people (SMW 165). “When she thought about giving up her work she grew sick and middle-aged. The mile and miles of pas de bourrée must have dug a path inevitably to somewhere” (SMW 168).
The ballet proved to be a success; she had accomplished her desire to become a prima ballerina. In Milford’s biography of Zelda Fitzgerald, we read that an almost identical chance was offered to Zelda in real life: a solo role in Aïda as her debut with the San Carlo Opera Ballet Company in Naples (156). It is unknown why she decided not to take the part, but her mental instability might have played a part in it. It seems as if Zelda tries to make up for this missed opportunity in real life by letting her fictional equivalent, Alabama, take the chance and – even only for a short while – be a professional dancer. However, after a while in Naples, Alabama begins suffering from a foot injury, a physical complaint that – according to Mary Elene Wood – conceals a mental breakdown (148).
3.3 Conclusion

We can conclude that both Tender Is the Night and Save Me the Waltz are thoroughly autobiografictional in nature. Zelda delivers a more literal reflection on her life story, while Scott incorporates certain personal experiences, emotions and people he met as part of a larger fictional story. The autobiographical passages that I have dealt with in this chapter are only a fraction of what can be found in both novels; I have chosen to deal with those events that show the most certain and meaningful resemblances between their lives and works. The use of autobiografiction does not only incorporate their lives into their works, their works also affected their lives. We could say that the Fitzgeralds’ writings added to the tension in their marriage.

It is thought that the Fitzgeralds used (autobiogra)fictional writing “as their primary method for interpersonal communication and their main problem-solving strategy” (Lansky 98). By the time both novels were published, Scott and Zelda’s marriage was falling apart and they had largely stopped communicating; through writing, the couple was able to communicate about their relationship, their fears and frustrations. James Mellow comments on “the transactional nature of Scott’s and Zelda’s writing, the private dialogue of exoneration and blame, image and counterimage, evasion and fact, that they resorted to in their otherwise fictional enterprises” (qtd. in Lansky 98). It is therefore not surprising that Scott reacted as he did when he found elements of his own life spread out in Save Me the Waltz, and that Zelda’s mental health deteriorated when she read Tender Is the Night and identified with Scott’s Nicole Diver who seems to ruin her husband Dick. Both spouses identify themselves with the characters in each other’s work, taking it as a personal ‘attack’. However, even though their fiction at times harmed the other spouse, autobiografictional writing can also be considered a coping mechanism to deal with overwhelming experiences,
as Stephen Reynolds has pointed out. The semi-fictional narratives provide the impetus to confront real-life events.

Through fiction, the couple tries to solve problems they were unable to solve in their private life (Lansky 98). However, this puts the reader in a difficult position as he or she seems to have to take up the role of problem-solver, “a rescuer whose task is impossible”. Lansky concludes that “[a]n intertextual reading of Save Me the Waltz and Tender Is the Night produces a triangular relationship that involves the two authors, their novels, and their readers” (Lansky 98). Many critics found this confusion between work and personal lives detrimental for the novels (Lansky 98). However, according to me, it adds an additional perspective to them. Not only does the informed reader learn more about the spouses’ relationship and struggles while enjoying a moving story, he or she is also challenged to question the impact of life on fiction and more strikingly, the impact of fiction on life. It is often neglected, but fiction can have serious repercussions in reality. It makes the reader realise that a novel often does not stand by itself, but should be read keeping the personal and socio-historical context of the author in mind. Reading the novels from an autobiografictional perspective thus gives us deeper insight into the stories and the lives of the Fitzgeralds, as well as the relation between both.

Moreover, autobiografiction facilitates an empathic reading. The fictionalisation of autobiographical experiences “cuts the material free from the name and person of the author” (Saunders 174); it creates an anonymity that facilitates the reader’s ability to “imagine [him- or herself] in the role of the narrator” (Saunders 174). To say more, the fictionalisation performs aesthetic work on the autobiography, encouraging the reader to engage more imaginatively and more deeply with the story (Saunders 174). Therefore, Saunders concludes that an autobiografictional story has the potential to be one of the most
intimate, moving forms of writing. It demands a more creative effort of the reader, which is not necessarily a burden, but also a challenge; he or she is called upon to fulfil the role of an empathic listener, rather than that of a problem solver, as Lansky calls it.
4 Discussion of the Novels: The Madness Narrative

In the previous chapter on autobiografiction, I have demonstrated the autobiographical basis of both *Tender Is the Night* and *Save Me the Waltz*. But apart from belonging to the genre of autobiografiction, the novels can also be considered madness narratives. As we have seen in the theoretical chapter on the madness narrative, this genre is defined as “any firsthand [sic] account of the experience of ‘mental illness’ and psychiatric treatment, even if the narrative is presented as a fictitious account or a case study” (Cuza 311-312). So, even though madness narratives *can* contain fiction, they are usually strongly autobiographical and based on first-hand experience. The genre of autobiografiction is thus somewhat inherent to that of the madness narrative. Therefore the examination of *Tender Is the Night* and *Save Me the Waltz* in both fields is interesting; both Scott and Zelda use their autobiographical experience with mental illness as a basis for their writing. While Zelda is more straightforwardly autobiographical in *Save Me the Waltz*, Alabama’s mental breakdown must be read between the lines. Scott however, is more ambivalent when dealing with autobiographical facts. Nevertheless, Nicole’s mental instability is amply described. Therefore, I would like to argue that – at least in these novels – there is a notable correlation between the ambiguous madness narrative and unambiguous autobiografiction in Zelda’s case, and between the unambiguous madness narrative and ambiguous autobiografiction in Scott’s case. In this chapter we will elaborate this point of view, supporting it with relevant examples and possible explanations for this reverse correlation between autobiografiction and the madness narrative.
4.1 The Madness Narrative in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Tender Is the Night

Even though Tender Is the Night was not written by a mental patient, it does give us insight into a mental breakdown and subsequent recovery. F. Scott Fitzgerald was not a complete layman when it came to the field of psychoanalysis. James L. W. West III states in ‘F. Scott Fitzgerald and American Psychiatry: A New Letter’ (2011) that

[i]n an effort to understand what had happened to Zelda he had read widely [...] in the literature of psychiatry. He was familiar with the theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Emil Kraepelin, Eugen Bleuler, and Alfred Adler; he had corresponded with Oscar Forel and Adolf Meyer, two of Zelda’s doctors, displaying in his letters a good comprehension of the treatment she was receiving. (West 63)

Fitzgerald read into psychiatry because he had lost some of the earlier trust he had had in Zelda’s doctors. Her mental instability persisted and the treatments applied had failed to restore her equilibrium (West 63). Therefore, Scott “insisted on participating as a consultant in her cure” (West 60); apart from being her husband, he wanted to take up the role of her doctor. Not only did he want to restore the old, mentally stable Zelda he had married, he also felt a major psychological and professional strain during her hospitalizations. In order to pay the high fees that come with hospitalization in the best mental institutions in Europe and the United States, he had to postpone his novel-in-progress to manufacture light, romantic short stories to be published in commercial mass-circulation magazines (West 60). Therefore, Zelda’s recovery was in the best interest of both Zelda and Scott. Scott had worked on Tender Is the Night for eight years, hoping for it to become as big of a success as The Great Gatsby. To accomplish this, he relied heavily on his and Zelda’s personal

8 Psychoanalysis is a psychological theory that finds its origins in the ideas of Sigmund Freud. It studies the causes of particular human behaviour, among which also madness.
autobiography since Scott believed that some of the best narratives are based on genuine experiences. Thus his main purpose with *Tender Is the Night* was to write a great novel on an interesting topic that hopefully would become a bestseller, it did not have any healing or curing purposes like Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* did (cf. infra). Unfortunately, *Tender Is the Night* did not ensure the author’s desired comeback and sales were not as high as Fitzgerald had hoped.

His considerable knowledge in the field of psychiatry made it possible to create the credible character of the successful psychiatrist Dick Diver (West 63). We could say that Scott projected an autobiographical aspect of himself on his male protagonist since Dick met his future wife, Nicole, while treating her for schizophrenia. Dick literally is both her doctor and her husband, a caring but straining relationship that Scott seems to have experienced to a certain degree as well. Just like Scott, Dick is an outsider to the psychological condition of mental illness; they do not suffer from it themselves but are nevertheless close to it because of their role as husband and/or doctor. The novel is written from the point of view of the observer rather than the experiencer. This observer perspective could explain why Scott’s madness narrative is more unambiguous than Zelda’s; the symptoms, cures and struggles that accompany a mental breakdown are clear to him, especially after his experience with his wife and considering he had read widely in the field of psychoanalysis. This might not have been the case for his wife, Zelda. She experiences it all as a patient, but the demarcation between what is normal and what is caused by mental illness might often not be so clear to her as it is to an observer. This dimness of feeling results in a much less straightforward story, with madness hidden underneath the surface (cf. infra).

Another factor that might have been of importance to Scott was his desire to please the audience and write an American bestseller. A novel could contain a certain degree of
ambiguity and mystery, but the larger public probably preferred straightforward narratives with a clear story on the surface. *Tender Is the Night* definitely contains this trait when it comes to the subject of mental illness: symptoms, cures and struggles of a mentally ill patient are directly touched upon in the novel. In other words, Zelda and Scott wrote from a different perspective: Scott uses his knowledge as an outsider to write an unambiguous madness narrative, while Zelda writes an ambiguous narrative from the patient’s perspective. To sum up, both novels were written with different goals and from another perspective, yet roughly deal with the same topic. For this reason, they are interesting to compare and read side by side.

Throughout book I, there are hints towards Nicole’s mental instability: a friend of the Divers, Mrs. McKisco, witnessed some mysterious scene which involved Nicole in the bathroom of their Riviera house; Dick warns Rosemary that “[Nicole]’s not very strong – she looks strong but she isn’t” (TIN 88). Nicole has difficulties keeping it together, rather than acting spontaneously, she does what she think is expected: “Nicole thought that the correct attitude for her was to sit staring straight ahead, hands in her lap. [...] ‘I am a woman and my business is to hold things together’” (TIN 94; my emphasis). Nicole knows that, as a woman, she is expected to be demure and keep a clear mind, and therefore she tries to act this way, even though she is struggling against a mental breakdown at this point. The informed reader with an eye for detail may have suspected something to be going on with Nicole, but only at the end of book I – when Rosemary witnesses Nicole’s mental breakdown in the bathroom – it is confirmed to the reader what lies behind the façade of the glamorous Nicole Diver.
In book II we go back in time and find out what probably caused Nicole’s schizophrenia and how she and Dick met. After hiding it for a while, Nicole’s father admits that he and his daughter had an incestuous relationship after her mother had died.\(^9\)

After her mother died when she was little she used to come into my bed every morning, sometimes she’d sleep in my bed. I was sorry for the little thing. Oh, after that, whenever we went places in an automobile, or a train we used to hold hands. She used to sing to me. We used to say, “Now let’s not pay any attention to anybody else this afternoon – let’s just have each other – for this morning you’re mine.” […] We were just like lovers – and then all at once we were lovers […]”. (TIN 146)

This unhealthy incestuous bond between parent and child has been designated by Sigmund Freud to be a likely cause of hysteria and mental illness (Cokal 76). Since Fitzgerald had read Freud, it is not unlikely that he had a Freudian framework in mind when writing the novel. By introducing this fictional element to the story, Scott lays bare his knowledge of psychoanalysis while adding a clear cause to Nicole’s mental instability. Susann Cokal uses Freud’s words to explain the psychological damage incest may have caused for Nicole: “she is a daughter […] ‘detained’ at an early stage ‘in the course of development through which the individual must pass’; therefore she has never ‘overcome the parental authority and never, or very imperfectly, withdraw[en] affection from’ her father” (76). This means that, because of the trauma at a young age, Nicole did not go through the necessary stages of development towards being a healthy adult; she will keep searching for a parental figure in her life. On the other hand, it also caused her general fear of men: “from sheer self-protection [Nicole] developed the idea that she had no complicity – and from there it was

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\(^9\) I would like to add that there is no evidence that leads us to believing that Zelda had an incestuous relationship with her father; therefore, this is most probably one of Scott’s fictionalizations of autobiographical experiences.
easy to slide into a phantom world where all men, the more you liked them and trusted them, the more evil—” (TIN 147-148).

A typical trait of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) – which has most probably caused Nicole’s schizophrenia due to the childhood incest – is repetition or re-enactment, a trait of PTSD Freud discusses as well. Re-enactment is the phenomenon in which a victim is unable to understand the original traumatizing event, and therefore repeats or re-enacts the same event over and over again in a cycle (Joseph 67). Not only do we get a repetition of mental breakdowns in the bathroom, her choice of husbands can be seen as such a posttraumatic repetition as well. Since Dick takes up the position of protective doctor/lover/father, he and Nicole re-enact the incestuous relationship she had with her father and that led to her illness. Nicole re-enacts this event once more by having an affair and later marrying Tommy Barban. Joseph concludes that “she is not cured, has not worked out the original neurosis, but simply switched doctors, under the pretext that the new man is a more forceful father figure than the man she has used up” (67).

Dick Diver takes on the role of the new father figure for Nicole through transference, a technique often used in psychiatry to relieve patients from their trauma (Cokal 90). According to Nicole’s psychiatrist, Dick and Nicole’s romantic relationship “was the best thing that could have happened to her, [...] transference of the most fortuitous kind” (TIN 135). Through transference, patient and doctor establish a parental relationship in which the patient sees the doctor as the person who has traumatized her in the past, in this case her father. Subsequently, the psychiatrist manipulates her into remembering and discussing the traumatic event that had been repressed, into analysing events and creating a story out of them in order to find her own cure. By doing this, it is possible for a patient’s symptoms to disappear; by analysing and dismissing symptoms, the patient can cure herself (Cokal 90).
However, when the psychiatrist starts being involved in the personal life of the patient, for example as a lover, the disorder can be perpetuated, even when the patient seems cured (Cokal 90). This is where we find the conflict within Dick and Nicole’s relationship; Nicole projects the idea of her father on Dick, but ultimately this leads to the recurrence of her mental breakdowns instead of her cure. Pamela Broker states that “[i]n every instance, when transference love is not translated into self-knowledge, both the doctor and patient are forced into a continuous and unrelenting role-playing situation: the patient forever repressing symptoms to earn love, the doctor upholding the image of protector and ideal” (qtd. in Cokal 90). When both Nicole and Dick start to give up on the role they are playing, their relationship as well as the persona of Dick falls into pieces. “Analyst and analysand, husband and wife, Dick and Nicole are trapped in the Warren family romance and cannot move forward with their own story” (91). Cokal therefore suggest that it is not Nicole who ruined Dick, but Dick who, as a psychiatrist, let into his desires, lost control and “finally slipp[ed] into chaos and obscurity” (91). Throughout the novel, Dick often struggles with this difficult equilibrium between being a loving husband and a professional, caring psychiatrist:

Dick tried to think what to do. The dualism in his views of her – that of the husband, that of the psychiatrist – was increasingly paralysing his faculties. In these six years she had several times carried him over the line with her, disarming him by exciting emotional pity or by a flow of wit, fantastic and disassociated, so that only after the episode did he realize with the consciousness of his own relaxation from tension, that she had succeeded in getting a point against his better judgment. (TIN 210)

Dick Diver gave up on a normal life in the hope to cure Nicole. But instead, his dual role as husband and doctor impeded her cure and at the same time sucked him into Nicole’s world,
preventing him from having a regular life and marriage and possibly also leading him into alcoholism.

Book III presents the reader with a shift towards Nicole’s point of view. She decides to let go of Dick as her parental figure and engage in a ‘real’ marriage with Tommy Barban, who is also a dominant male figure (Cokal 91). The reason for the Divers’ divorce is spelled out by Tommy Barban who says the following to Dick when he and Nicole announce their plan to get married: “You don’t understand Nicole. You treat her always like a patient because she was once sick” (TIN 337). Barban definitely has a point here; since their marriage originated from transference, Dick remained both doctor/psychiatrist and husband throughout their marriage. With the rupture from the parental figure in her life, Nicole seems cured from her mental instability and towards the end of the book her perspective is predominant. Nicole seems to substitute Dick as the (anti)hero of the story (Cokal 91): while he is disappearing into oblivion practising general medicine in small American towns, Nicole seems to be happily married; from what we can derive from the last paragraphs of the novel, she has her life and mind finally in order (TIN 343).

When taking the above into consideration, Scott shows through the content of the novel that he knew what he was talking about when it came to psychoanalysis. Therefore we could argue that another reason for the directness with which the story of mental illness is brought, could be to exhibit his elaborate knowledge of the field through the addition of a Freudian framework.
4.2 The Madness Narrative in Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz*

As has been mentioned above, Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz*, as opposed to Scott’s *Tender Is the Night*, is a straightforward autobiografictional narrative, in which she tells her life story, covered under a thin veil of fiction. The use of fiction in autobiographical works that deal with mental instability is explained by Cuza as “a defense strategy in the face of either the mental illness itself, or the unbearable memory of its ordeal” (313). Another defence strategy Zelda uses, is to leave the story of mental instability hidden underneath the surface, resulting in an ambiguous madness narrative. One thing we know for certain is that her doctors advised her to avoid the topic of mental illness in her novel in progress. Even though we cannot go into Zelda’s head and know for certain, this ambiguity could have several other reasons. It is possible that, by living with the mental illness, – and not experiencing it from a distance like Scott did – the symptoms were less clear to Zelda. When one is mentally unstable, it can occur that one’s mind has difficulties to distinguish between what is normal, expected behaviour and what is deviant behaviour, caused by the illness. Second, Zelda could have used the ambiguity to protect herself and her work from outsiders’ prejudice and judgement. A third and related reason could have been that Zelda was ashamed of her own mental instability and did not want the larger public to read her novel labelling it in advance as the story of a madwoman.

There has been some disagreement among critics concerning the status of Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz* as an example of a madness narrative. Many critics do not acknowledge an underlying mental breakdown for Alabama’s bodily experience. They have interpreted “Alabama’s dancing career primarily as a fulfilling expression within an otherwise frustrated life” (Wood 154). Sarah Beebe Fryer, for example, states in her article ‘Nicole Warren Diver and Alabama Beggs Knight: Women On the Threshold of Freedom’
(1985) that “Alabama [...] nearly succeeds in establishing her own sense of identity, independent of any man’s opinion. Her failure to become a professional ballerina results purely from chance, not from any lack of ability or dedication to her efforts” (325). Fryer, and other critics with her, does not perceive this failure and the abuse of her body as a metaphor for a psychological struggle that results in a mental breakdown. Even though I think this emancipatory reading of Save Me the Waltz is as plausible as any other, I prefer to follow Mary Elene Wood in her interpretation of the novel as an asylum autobiography. Save Me the Waltz is a thinly veiled autobiographical account of Zelda’s life and it would therefore surprise me that this uttermost determining factor in her life would be completely left out of Alabama’s story. In what follows, I will substantiate this argument with relevant passages of the novel that point to Alabama’s mental instability and eventual breakdown.

Aside from the prominent story line of Alabama’s dancing career, Wood detects a hidden, parallel narrative about her psychological decline and eventual mental breakdown. In Alabama’s immersion into the ballet, we find that she uses her female body as the material of art; in dancing, she is thus both artist and material. Therefore, we can say that Alabama is split from her own body, a typical trait of schizophrenia (Wood 155). In The Female Malady (1985), Elaine Showalter states that “the ‘withness’ [sic] of the flesh, and its proper management, adornment and disposition, are a crucial and repeated motif in the schizophrenic women’s sense of themselves as unoccupied bodies” (212 – my emphasis). The separation between Alabama’s mind and body results in disgust and a rejection of the body she cannot control (Wood 156).

The human body was very insistent. Alabama passionately hated her inability to discipline her own. Learning how to manage it was like playing a desperate game with
herself. She said to herself, ‘My body and I,’ and took herself for an awful beating: that was how it was done. (SMW 129)

Throughout the narration of Alabama’s ballet lessons, her body is described in an objectified way, for example in terms of meat. She compares her legs to “dangling hams”, her breast, she says, “hung like old English dugs” (SMW 159). Aside from objectifying her body, she also hints at it becoming ‘invisible’: “It did not show in the mirror. She was nothing but sinew” (SMW 159). In other words, she sees her body as “detached from her lived bodily experience”, again pointing to separation between body and mind as a sign of schizophrenia (Wood 157). Through dancing, Alabama searches an outlet for her emotions, which she fails to express in a common way:

At night she sat in the window too tired to move, consumed by a longing to succeed as a dancer. It seemed to Alabama that reaching her goal, she would drive the devils that had driven her – that, in proving herself, she would achieve that peace which she imagined went only in surety of one’s self – that she would be able, through the medium of the dance, to command her emotions, to summon love or pity or happiness at will, having provided a channel through which they might flow. (SMW 128)

Through perfecting her skills as a ballet dancer and gaining control of her own body, Alabama hopes to find a new way of expressing emotions which she fails to express with words. She is losing control of her mind and tries to acquire control over her body through ballet as compensation. The controlled movements that are essential to ballet are what keep her together. However, when Alabama starts to deteriorate physically – reflected in her hurting feet – she starts to lose control of her mind and body. The loss of the acquired
control of her body ultimately leads to her physical and mental breakdown. Since she can no longer use her new medium of expression, Alabama’s mind is chaotic and utterly confused.

The attempt to escape from her conventional life and marriage with David through artistic self-expression leads to a separation from the self. Not only does she separate her body from her mind by making it the material of her art, when hospitalized after her foot injury she also loses communication with the people around her, such as her husband and her doctors, which points further into the direction of her isolation (Wood 157-58): “Why did the doctor inhabit another world from hers? Why couldn’t he hear what she was saying, and not stand talking about ice-packs?” (SMW 199 – my emphasis). She feels like she inhabits another world than the people around her, a clear symptom of mental illness. She also suffers from severe hallucinations that, once again, bring her into an alternative world:

Sometimes her foot hurt her so terribly that she closed her eyes and floated off on the waves of the afternoon. Invariably she went to the same delirious place. There was a lake there so clear that she could not tell the bottom from the top; a pointed island lay heavy on the waters like an abandoned thunderbolt. [...] Crows cawed from one deep mist to another. The word ‘sick’ effaced itself against the poisonous air and jittered lamely about between the tips of the island and halted on the white road that ran straight through the middle. ‘Sick’ turned and twisted about the narrow ribbon of the highway like a roasting pig on a spit, and woke Alabama gouging at her eyeballs with the prongs of its letters.

(SMW 202)

Especially the recurrence of the word ‘sick’ in this alternative world of Alabama seems very significant. ‘Sick’, in this case, refers not only to her physical state, but also to how she feels psychologically: “physical and mental breakdown become indistinguishable” (Wood 157).

The isolation in pain described above reminds us of an autobiographical element from
Zelda’s own life. When her nerves were weak, she often suffered from severe eczema that could last for months – as is also reflected in the unnamed female patient in Scott’s *Tender Is the Night*. So, like for Alabama, for Zelda as well psychological illness was accompanied by physical illness, which rendered her completely isolated in a miserable world.

However, this physical and mental breakdown does not come all of a sudden. Throughout the narrative, there are various references that suggest Alabama’s schizophrenia and the deterioration of her mental health because of the extreme dedication to ballet. In a friendly chitchat with an Englishman, for example, she warns him: “I am only really myself when I’m somebody else whom I have endowed with these wonderful qualities from my imagination” (*SMW* 71). This self-description can be read as a harbinger of Alabama’s schizophrenia later in life. She has problems with being just herself, probably because she feels as if she has no real control over her emotions; it is exactly this control that she searches for in her devotion to ballet. Throughout the novel, there are references to the deterioration of her feet as a metaphor of her deteriorating mental health: “My foot hurts. [...] The nail has come off” (*SMW* 131); “Alabama’s feet were bleeding as she fell into bed” (*SMW* 177). This physical deterioration parallels a psychological collapse, which culminates towards the end of the novel.

In *‘Save Me the Waltz: An Assessment In Craft’* (1982), Linda W. Wagner points out another meaningful feature of the novel that reflects Alabama’s changing mental state: her writing style. At the start of the novel, Zelda Fitzgerald writes a very dense and ornamental prose, which might frighten off some readers, as it requires some effort to read through. However, this ornamental writing style reflects her emotional state in her childhood and adolescence: Alabama is happy and cheerful and knows no real tragedy in her life, a state of mind reflected through an impressionistic way of writing, according to Wagner (201). An
early passage demonstrates this almost poetic prose through the ample use of descriptions and colourful adjectives that trigger the reader’s imagination:

There is a brightness and bloom over things; she inspects life proudly, as if she walked in a garden forced by herself to grow in the least hospitable of soils. She is already contemptuous of ordered planting, believing in the possibility of a wizard cultivator to bring forth sweet-smelling blossoms from the hardest of rocks, and night-blooming vines from barren wastes, to plant the breath of twilight and to shop with marigolds. She wants life to be easy and full of pleasant reminiscences. (SMW 5-6)

However, towards the end of Save Me the Waltz, when Alabama has suffered a physical and mental breakdown and she has learned that her father died, Zelda’s style is “somber, spare [and] direct” (Wagner 201). This contrasts with the initial ornamental style of the novel; it reflects her change in mental state from young and carefree to tortured by physical and psychological distress.

“I’ve got to have some orange juice,” she thought she said. No, it was Bonnie who had said that. David will bring me some chocolate ice cream and I will throw it up; it smells like a soda fountain, thrown-up, she thought. There were glass tubes in her ankle like stems, like the headdress of a Chinese Empress – it was a permanent wave they were giving her foot, she thought. (SMW 200)

She progresses rapidly from one idea to another, most probably a sound reflection of the mind of a mentally ill patient. Even though her descriptions remain highly figurative, they are much more sparse in comparison to the previous fragment (Wagner 207). The fragmentation of the prose at the end of the novel reflects the destruction of her bodily control and rhythm. Alabama can no longer rely on her body to express her emotions and keep her mind
under control – originally her goal with dancing (cf. supra) – and because of this her mind wanders off into strange territories. Linda Wagner argues that “[f]ew writers have adapted their language and prose rhythms so capably to the emotional tone of the scene being described” like Zelda Fitzgerald (201). Zelda’s language has even been regarded as containing an unusual masculinity as “it is always vibrant and always sensitive” (Wood 162). It is considered masculine because the language does not subordinate itself to the story, apparently an unusual trait in women’s writing at the time (162).

Apart from the physical treatment for her foot infection, Alabama receives no real psychological therapy – at least not that we can derive from the novel. However, when the hospital stay has ended and the family returns to the United States, it is obvious that Alabama is not yet fully recovered. When Alabama visits her dying father, she asks him the following:

I thought you could tell me if our bodies are given to us as counterirritants to the soul. I thought you’d know why when our bodies ought to bring surcease from our tormented minds, they fail and collapse; and why, when we are tormented in our bodies, does our soul desert us as a refuge? (SMW 207)

When we read this excerpt keeping the above in mind, it is clear that Alabama reflects on what she has gone through before and during her mental breakdown. She acknowledges that she sought relief from the torment in her mind through the bodily, controlled movements of ballet. She asks herself, however, why when her body failed her by collapsing, her soul ‘left’ her person. Her father cannot provide her with an answer, and therefore, this loss of control will haunt her further, even when she feels ‘cured’.

Some of the things Alabama says suggest that she is still in search of a control mechanism to cope with emotions and unexpected events. At the funeral of her father – a
stressful event for someone who is still somewhat mentally unstable – she has difficulty coping with the chaos.

The cacophony of the table volleyed together and frustrated itself like a scherzo or Prokofiev. Alabama whipped its broken staccato into the only form she knew: schstay, schstay, brisé, schstay, the phrase danced along the convolutions of her brain. She supposed she’d spend the rest of her life composing like that: fitting one thing into another and everything into rules. (SMW 216).

Alabama compulsively searches for order and tries to accomplish that by using one of her old methods that she has been taught in dance classes: composing. She needs rules to make sense of the world around her.
4.3 Conclusion

We can conclude that Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* can be considered a thinly veiled autobiography, while Scott’s *Tender Is the Night* offers a more ambiguous narration of mental illness. He read widely in the field of psychoanalysis in order to assist Zelda and her doctors in the choice of an appropriate cure. Moreover, he witnessed mental illness from the first row, without suffering from it himself; this enabled him to have a detailed knowledge of the symptoms and possible cures. As a result, he delivers an explicit story of mental illness moulded into a Freudian framework by the (fictional) addition of the traumatic experience of incest in Nicole’s childhood.

Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* tells us a similar story of mental breakdown, but it is conveyed to the reader in a different, ambiguous manner. Zelda’s novel obviously differs from Scott’s novel in that it is a narration based on a personal experience, not that of a witness or a loved one, but of a mental patient herself. The novel provides us with a reliable portrait of what goes on inside the mind of someone suffering from mental instability. Despite the directness of the experience, Zelda’s novel is far less explicit than Scott’s. She succeeded in creating a narrative about physical deterioration with a second, interconnected narrative of psychological deterioration underneath the surface.

These observations can tell us more about the difference between a madness narrative written by an observer and by a patient. Another sufferer who tried to describe his mental illness was Daniel Schreber; he wrote the following about recounting details of his psychotic experience: “I cannot of course count upon being fully understood because things are dealt with that cannot be expressed in human language; they exceed human understanding [...] To make myself [...] comprehensible I shall have to speak much in images and similes. (qtd. in Stone 17). Because madness is defined by “its very difference from
“reason” (Stone 18), it is almost impossible to organize and arrange these experiences into a coherent narrative. While it was easy for Zelda to give a straightforward account of her life story, she struggled to incorporate the element of her illness into her novel. For this reason, she resorted to the use of metaphor to substitute the psychological breakdown with a physical one. It allowed her to remain vague about the subject of madness, while still laying bare her feelings of frustration in her relationship to F. Scott Fitzgerald. With her novel, Zelda probably also wanted to rid herself of the public image of ‘the mad wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald’, a perception her husband helped reinforcing in Tender Is the Night through the character of Nicole Diver.

As an observer, Scott had less difficulty to elaborate on the subject of mental illness. However, the observations of the ‘patient’ remain quite superficial; the reader never gets a look inside of Nicole’s head while she is unstable. For this reason, I wonder whether it is actually possible to write a narrative that truthfully describes what goes on inside the mind of a mental patient? If an observer can only grasp superficial symptoms and a patient cannot put all of his or her experiences into words because they exceed human understanding, then who can?

When it came to autobiograpfication F. Scott Fitzgerald, on the other hand, revealed less than Zelda about his own life in Tender Is the Night, probably because he wanted to keep up his public image. The rivalry between the spouses is laid bare again: while Zelda tried to clear her public image by proving she was intelligent and talented enough to write a good novel, Scott eradicated the effects by explicitly portraying Zelda’s fictional counterpart Nicole as a madwoman.
5 Discussion Of the Novels: Gender, Patriarchy and Flappers

In what we have seen so far, it seems as if Zelda as well as the female protagonists of both *Tender Is the Night* and *Save Me the Waltz* were subordinate to men. This was partially caused by the dominant societal values at the time, but the mental instability of all three women (fictional and real) definitely had something to do with it as well. In this chapter we will examine whether these women really complied with the strict gender roles as might appear at first sight. How do they try to evade gendered male-orientated societal norms in order to obtain a sense of personal achievement?

5.1 Gender in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*

Even though F. Scott Fitzgerald did not create the image of the flapper, he did offer the public a well-defined image of the new, sexually liberated woman through his writing (Sanderson 143). To Fitzgerald, the flapper “represented a new philosophy of romantic individualism, rebellion, and liberation”, values he celebrates in his early writing. Not coincidentally, his wife embodied all these features and Zelda is therefore often considered as the example of the flapper *par excellence*; Fitzgerald himself said in an interview that “[he] married the heroine of [his] stories” (Fitzgerald qtd. in Sanderson 148). Nevertheless, Scott’s vision towards flappers soon became ambivalent; he feared that this new woman embodied not only freedom, but also “moral anarchy and lack of direction” and used her ever more often as a symbol of conflict and social disorder (143). He even wrote the following to a friend: “[i]f I had anything to do with creating the manners of the contemporary American girl I certainly made a botch of the job” (Fitzgerald qtd. in Sanderson 143). We could therefore argue that Fitzgerald’s attitude towards the new
women is ambivalent in the 1920s. On the one hand, he was fascinated by the moral liberation of the flapper, on the other, gender roles disturbed him and he even feared that changes went in the direction of unruliness (Sanderson 144).

Other authors as well, such as Oswald Spengler and D. H. Lawrence, expressed their uneasiness towards the changing role of women in society. According to them, these new women who “abandoned their traditional submissive gender roles were causing ‘the decline of the West’” (Sanderson 145). In other words, these male authors – including Fitzgerald – “believed that men and women had complementary natures and feared that a loosening of binary gender distinctions simply encouraged each side to adopt the worst characteristics of the opposite sex” (Sanderson 161). According to these thinkers, loose gender distinctions would bring out the worst in both sexes. They believed that social and cultural problems could better be solved through improvements in the field of education, technology and social and natural science, areas still largely in the hands of men (145).

However, not only women’s roles were changing in the transition from the Victorian age to modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century, men’s roles evolved as well. In the Victorian age, masculinity was defined by self-control and hard work; men were “independent breadwinners who claimed heroism and respect in the world of business” (Vincent 5). With the emergence of women in the workplace and a social world in which leisure culture took precedence, men started to take up office jobs instead of manual labour and rely on stock market riches and ‘old money’ passed down from ancestors. Along with others, “Fitzgerald explored […] the emergence of a leisure culture that challenged the Protestant work ethic by insisting that entertainment, not productive labor, was life’s main aim” (Curnutt qtd. in Vincent 6). Women had been accepted into the workplace during the Great War when a substantial amount of American men were fighting in the battlefield; job...
openings needed to be filled and therefore women were engaged to work. However, this newly-acquired economic independence dissatisfied some men because it threatened husbandly authority (Vincent 6). Women got a taste of—up until now exclusively male—independence and longed to break free from traditional gender roles; as a result feminism thrived. Unfortunately, there was still a lot of opposition among the general population against this change in gender roles (Vincent 7). Victorian ideals continued to linger among the American population and they impeded a transition towards gender equality.

In a piece in McCall’s Magazine called ‘What Becomes of Our Flappers and Our Sheiks?’, Zelda Fitzgerald comments on the status of the flapper in the mid-1920s:

The flapper! She is growing old […] She is married ‘mid loud acclamation on the part of relatives and friends. She has come to none of the predicted ‘bad ends,’ but has gone at last, where all good flappers go—into the young married set, into boredom and gathering conventions and the pleasure of having children, having lent a while a splendour and courageousness to life, as all good flapper should. (qtd. in Zeitz 276)

Zelda’s words tell us that being a flapper—at least for her—is often just a phase girls go through before settling down and starting a family. It can therefore be considered a rite of passage from youth to adulthood during which young women experience a more extravagant and audacious lifestyle before taking up the responsibilities that come with marriage and motherhood. On the surface, flappers may seem more emancipated, but eventually the subordinate life as a wife and mother awaits them too.

The mother assumed a more important role in the education of the children, while men’s commitment to fatherhood decreased; women practiced the chief influence on the children (Vincent 8). As Stavola argues, this was a gradual evolution: “[h]istorically, since the Revolutionary War, the position of the father as the head of the family and the just regulator
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of his offspring’s development had been slowly deteriorating [...] the mother had assumed the place of dominance in the family, in education, and in cultural life” (qtd. in Vincent 8). This general trend is also present in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*, in which Dick can barely be called a father figure to his children. In the following fragment, the contrast between men/fathers and women/mothers in the 1920s is clearly laid bare:

“I’d like to draw you just the way you are now.” [...] “I envy you. At present I don’t seem to be interested in anything expect my work.” “Oh, I think that’s fine for a *man,*” she said quickly. “But for a *girl* I think she ought to have lots of minor accomplishments and pass them on to her children.” (TITN 160 – my emphasis)

While it is okay for Dick – as a man – to focus on work and on work alone, Nicole – as a girl – feels like she has to prove herself in other, smaller fields in order to acquire the necessary life knowledge to pass down to her children and to obtain some personal satisfaction in life. Nicole also acknowledges the subordinate role of women and mothers by calling herself a *girl*, while she calls her husband a (superior) *man* (Fryer 320).

A character that completely lacks a father figure is the young movie star, Rosemary Hoyt. She has been raised by her mother, Elsie Speers, a single parent who – adopting both parent roles at the same time – teaches her daughter to take up Victorian male values of economic independence (Fryer 11). She brings Rosemary up, as she says herself, “to work – not especially to marry” (TITN 49). Rosemary is ambivalent when it comes to her gendered behaviour. On the one hand, her mother encourages Rosemary to use her femininity and her beauty for her own economic advantages (11): “when she [Rosemary] blossomed out at sixteen with that extraordinary hair, [Elsie] rushed her to Aix-les-Bains and marched her unannounced into the suite of an American producer” (TITN 49). On the other hand, Mrs Speers teaches her daughter to become independent of men since “the emerging leisure
class had rendered them as unsure providers at best” (Vincent 12). Rosemary’s motivation for independence is thus not only feminist, to her (and her mother) it is also a necessity because men had become unreliable providers. Elsie imprints in her daughter that “whatever happens, it can’t spoil you because economically you’re a boy, not a girl” (TITN 49). For these reasons, we could argue that Rosemary performs masculinity as Butler describes it. In order to be economically independent, she acts out certain traits that are usually associated with masculine behaviour. Rosemary works, earns her own money and is therefore not afraid to take a risk; since she is economically self-sufficient, there is no need for her to depend on a man whose income might have become unstable. She, however, achieves a masculine independence by using her feminine assets, such as her looks and charm. Rosemary is a prime example of how gender is not fixed at birth; thanks to her mother’s upbringing, she goes against ordinary expectations and combines femininity and masculinity in her gendered ‘performance’ to achieve her goal of independence. However, despite her successful career, Rosemary seems to be unable to find true romantic love. According to Fryer, Rosemary embodies a traditional view, supported by F. Scott Fitzgerald, that “career women are unfeminine” (324). Because Rosemary puts her career first, some men might find her success threatening and for that reason she is unable to find real love. Therefore, the American woman in the 1920s could hardly achieve the same things in life as a man did; often, she had to choose between pursuing an own career with the risk of ending up alone or giving up her independence by marrying.

Another female character in the novel that takes on masculine traits is, surprisingly, Nicole. At the beginning of the novel her attitude towards men seems submissive and she is said to be “happy to exist in a man’s world – [she] preserved [her] individuality through men and not by opposition to them” (TITN 63). In other words, instead of revolting against men,
Nicole asserts her own identity through Dick. Through suggestion, she is able to indirectly achieve her own goals in life. (21). As it is presented in the character of Nicole, men should not always be treated as the ‘enemy’ against which women have to fight in order to achieve personal achievement. On the contrary, women can use the power they have over men to their own advantage. In Tender Is the Night, Nicole can have indirect achievements mainly thanks to her financial wealth, another masculine trait in a female body. When Dick and Nicole got married, Dick “had been swallowed up like a gigolo, and somehow permitted his arsenal to be locked up in the Warren safety-deposit vaults” (TITN 224). This fragment implies that Dick experienced forfeiting the financial control in their relationship to Nicole as an emasculating movement. He becomes financially dependent on Nicole; without her money he would not have been able to realise the same things in life, such as running the psychiatric clinic. Nicole’s financial status gives her the power to affect Dick’s life decisions and it offers her the possibility to realise goals in life by gently steering her husband in the right direction.

Thus, Nicole ‘uses’ her husband vicariously to attain her own ambitions, figuratively by financing big plans such as the clinic, literally in the following way: “[t]alk is men. When I talk I say to myself that I am probably Dick. Already I have even been my son, remembering how wise and slow he is. Sometimes I am Doctor Dohmler and one time I may even be an aspect of you, Tommy Barban” (TITN 182). She adopts male personalities to assert herself in a predominantly male world; Vincent calls it her “survival tactic in the face of illness and no chance of singular female achievement” (24). This fragment also illustrates how Nicole “preserved [her] individuality through men and not by opposition to them” (TITN 63). She does not revolt against men to preserve her own individuality; on the contrary, Nicole uses the men in her life to obtain her personal goals. Obviously, this fragment also reminds us of
Nicole’s schizophrenia that probably enables her to take up the role of another person as easily as she describes.

Even though Nicole financially has the upper hand in her marriage to Dick, she never feels fully independent of him because he is also her doctor. Therefore, when she leaves Dick for Tommy Barban, she is happy to end up in a conventional male-female relationship instead of one that is at the same time a doctor-patient relationship (Vincent 24). She experiences her affair with Tommy as liberating: she feels “a thrill of delight in thinking of herself in a new way. New vistas appeared ahead, peopled with the faces of many men, none of whom she need obey or even love” (TITN 321). Nicole wants to escape her dissatisfying marriage through romance; she “takes small but important steps toward her own personal freedom in a world dominated by men” (Fryer 324-25). However, by re-attaching herself to a man, she loses some of the newly gained independence again. Therefore, Fryer concludes that Nicole Warren Diver represents the twentieth-century American woman who struggles to find an equilibrium between submissive femininity and independence (325).

Dick, on the other hand, loses part of his identity when Nicole leaves him because his authority as a doctor is undermined since it is no longer recognized by his ‘patient’ (Vincent 24-25). He returns to the United States, but his attempts to be a successful doctor again all fail; neither does he succeed in publishing his medical treatise. Dick seems to disappear into oblivion while Nicole seems happy in her new marriage. We could see this as proof for the important role Nicole had in the Divers’ marriage. Even though she suffered from mental instability and had to deal with societal gender limitations, she did manage to assert control in her household. Without her guidance, Dick seems to have lost his determination as he fails to achieve any of his goals as a psychiatrist. Donaldson suggests that Scott, through the
story that he created in *Tender Is the Night*, imagines an alternative life story in which Scott/Dick would lose the ‘battle of the sexes’ while Zelda/Nicole would thrive (129). However, even though Nicole is liberated from the doctor-patient relationship in her new marriage to Tommy Barban, she ends up fulfilling the role of a housewife again. The thriving mentioned above should therefore, according to me, be taken with a grain of salt.

Since Scott supported Spengler’s belief that changing gender roles in society were at the base of the ‘decline of the West’, this scenario in which a woman conquers and a man fades away must have been a little bit frightening to him. He has always been the dominant person in his relationship to Zelda, because of his sex and her mental instability. However, after the success of *The Great Gatsby*, Fitzgerald never returned to the same level of accomplishment in his career. To financially support their opulent lifestyle, Scott was obliged to concentrate on short stories and movie scripts of lesser literary value. To make matters worse, Fitzgerald was a severe alcoholic, a malicious habit that most probably caused his early death at age forty-four. As a reader, we can only speculate about the motivation Fitzgerald had to describe the ‘triumph’ of the woman. Is it meant as a warning towards (the men in) society for the ‘decline of the West’? Does he acknowledge his own weaknesses through Dick? Unfortunately, we cannot answer any of these questions with certainty, but it is clear that Scott’s personal life, opinions and cultural surroundings resonate in *Tender Is the Night*. 

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5.2 Gender in Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz*

Too often, *Save Me the Waltz* is only read and appreciated in association with Scott’s *Tender Is the Night*. Even though I am also reading them side-to-side here, I do want to allow for its unique qualities. Unfortunately, Zelda too felt like a wife who functioned solely in the interests of her husband, and whose life experience could be used as Scott wished in stories and novels (Tavernier-Courbin 23). Therefore, Tavernier-Courbin argues that the reason for writing *Save Me the Waltz* is simultaneously a response and a search. Zelda responds to her own unhappy marriage to Scott in this novel: *Save Me the Waltz* portrays the struggle of Alabama, a gifted woman in a male-dominated world, seeking for self-fulfilment (23).

Generally, men in the 1920s felt as if a married woman was a man’s possession; at a party a man tells Alabama the following: “You need somebody to take care of you […] You’re a man’s woman and need to be bossed” (SMTW 118). Once a woman gets married, the quote seems to say, she has to give up part of her own identity in favour of her husband. As I have mentioned before, Scott married the heroine of his stories; he thus expected Zelda to behave in this way and – despite her rebellious side – fulfil her social role as the wife of a famous write. In the quote from McCall’s Magazine that I have discussed in the previous part it was established that even for the flapper, American women in the 1920s were, first and foremost, expected to be good mothers and wives.

At the same time, the novel is a search for identity, a “*cri du coeur* of a woman who wants to exist on her own terms and who is claiming back her life experience as her own material” (Tavernier-Courbin 24). In *Save Me the Waltz*, there is an explicit passage in which Alabama expresses this need for an own identity. While at a party, the men are talking about their professional lives, but “Alabama felt excluded by her lack of accomplishment” (SMW 109). Zelda as well as Alabama live in a world in which everything revolves around men and
their accomplishments and in which women are mere appendages to their successful husbands. As a result, women feel as if their own lives are insignificant. Zelda fulfils the need to reclaim her own life by writing a thinly veiled autobiography, material that traditionally ‘belonged’ to her dominant husband, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Because she used ‘his’ material, Zelda’s novel was thoroughly revised by Scott, cutting all parts that could harm his public image. As a result, the final novel focuses more sharply than it initially did on Zelda herself, turning it into a complex portrayal of a woman’s soul (Tavernier-Courbin 24).

As soon as Zelda got married to F. Scott Fitzgerald, their lives were dominated by his world, his work, his success and his friends; Zelda functioned as a “glamorous appendage” of Scott’s, a role she did not feel at ease with, as we notice in Save Me the Waltz (Tavernier-Courbin 25). Zelda had to carry the burden of living up to the image of the heroine that Scott had created in his writings; the flapper became Zelda’s alter ego. However, playing a role proved to be destructive and caused the loss of the self. Save Me the Waltz reveals how Zelda must really have felt about their glamorous lifestyle: Alabama feels lonely when her husband is working and she is frustrated that she cannot prove herself, even though she is a very intelligent and creative woman (Tavernier-Courbin 28). For example, while they live on the French Riviera and David has to work on his paintings, Alabama is very bored and restless: “’[w]hat can I do with myself,’ she thought restlessly. She tried to make a dress; it was a failure. […] She began to blame David for the monotony” (SMTW 92-93). She reads as a pastime, but lacks fulfilment in life and therefore turns to the ballet. To Alabama, ballet becomes work, and to her it is just as serious as David’s art is to him.

To make matters worse, Alabama also has to live with David’s extramarital affairs (Fryer 321). When he comes home from what was most probably a one-night-stand, he finds Alabama sobbing in their Parisian apartment. David sees no harm in his nightly pleasures, to
Alabama’s discontent: “[s]he wished she could help David to seem more legitimate. She wished she could do something to keep everything from being so undignified” (SMTW 119). Alabama seems to have no choice but to accept David’s extramarital affairs, while she is expected to show complete fidelity towards her husband. When David suspects that Alabama might be falling for Jacques, a pilot, he warns her: “You’re sick, Alabama, insane. If you see that man any more, I’ll leave you here and go back to America alone” (SMTW 95). He threatens to leave his wife for something that he himself sees no harm in doing; in addition, he calls her insane and sick because she shows interest in other men, a cruel insult considering her mental breakdown later on in the novel. It is clear that this society had a double standard for men and women; it differs not only when it comes to fidelity, but also in terms of personal achievement, independence and social expectations. Therefore, Save Me the Waltz implicitly offers us a substantial idea of gender differences in the 1920s.

Scott never supported Zelda in her searches for personal fulfilment; on the contrary he put her down repeatedly, not taking her writing, painting or her ballet career seriously. During a session with the psychiatrist, Scott said the following to his wife: "You are a third rate writer and a third rate ballet dancer. [...] I am a professional writer, with a huge following. I am the highest paid short story writer in the world. I have at various times dominated" (Fitzgerald qtd. in Tavener-Courbin 30-31). It is obvious that he looks down on his wife’s accomplishments and values his own realisations much more highly. In a way, Scott probably was reluctant to accept Zelda’s attempt at success because he feared that it would stand in the way of his own and maybe even overshadow it. In Scott’s view, he was the dominant male breadwinner in their marriage who deserved to be acknowledged. However, Zelda never accepted the opportunity to dance professionally, nor was her novel a
great success at the time. So in the end, Scott had nothing to worry about, it would take more for his own success to be overshadowed.

Zelda’s (and Alabama’s) decision to take up dancing should be read, according to Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, as “a massive attempt at expressing herself, at driving out of herself the deep-seated resentment aroused by her situation, an effort to bring meaning and order into her life and to retrieve herself” (30). Through dancing, Zelda and Alabama seek personal achievement, something that is completely theirs. However, pushing themselves to exhaustion in combination with unhappy marriages caused for Zelda/Alabama to have a nervous collapse (Tavernier-Courbin 30). Tavernier-Courbin finds a confirmation for this point of view in the ironic title of the novel. ‘Save me the Waltz’ is something a man usually asks a woman at a dance, him being completely in control, while the woman just has to wait passively and subordinately until she is asked. However, Zelda wants to go against these traditional gender roles and she wants to free herself from the subordinate role she has in a man’s world through dancing (32). Another interpretation of the title also points to a female search for personal fulfilment: it can be read as a sort of request, translated as ‘let me have the dance’. To Zelda, ballet was her personal territory and she asks for it not to be taken away from her.

Yeats, among others, has used the metaphor of dance to signify life activity or life as it is performed by an individual. Through dance, the individual performs her life and expresses emotions (Tavernier-Courbin 32). Alabama lives and breathes ballet, she lacks a real life outside the studio and through dance she expresses life (37). She tells a fellow dancer, Stella, why she dances, even though there is no need to financially: “To sit this way, expectant of my lesson, and feel that if I had not come the hour that I own would have stood vacant and is waiting for me” (SMTW 147 – my emphasis). For Alabama, ballet is a job. The
hour she has with her ballet teacher is hers, she owns it and it makes her feel needed in the studio. Tavernier-Courbin calls dancing “a way of owning her life, owning herself, and creating herself anew each day” (37); it gives Alabama purpose in life, a purpose she could not find in her subordinate role as the wife of an artist.

When Alabama’s foot injury (and mental breakdown) causes her inability to ever dance again, she is deprived of her own life and identity which she had achieved through dancing, and forced back into the world dominated by men (Tavernier-Courbin 38). This failure is understood, by Tavernier-Courbin, as a limitation to Zelda’s wish fulfilment. She could bear her heroine to take on the opportunity to dance professionally in Naples – a chance Zelda did not (dare to) take – but she could not let her succeed permanently. She argues that “[p]erhaps this mirrors Zelda's self-doubts as well as her belief that only an extraordinarily strong woman could overcome the overwhelming odds of womanhood, marriage, social pressure, education, and motherhood in the pursuit of art” (Tavernier-Courbin 42). Since Alabama is Zelda’s fictional counterpart, she dares to take a bigger risk by dancing professionally, but it seems too far out of Zelda’s reach to keep up this lifestyle in which a married woman pursues her own dreams and overcomes society’s many limitations. Therefore, I would like to argue that Save Me the Waltz shows us that a woman’s identity in the 1920s was almost always related to men. An awareness of this condition caused women to search for – and attempt to express – a personal soul, whether it is through dance, the publication of a novel or otherwise (42).

Feminist theorists such as Ostriker and Hélène Cixous have examined the phenomenon of “‘women’s writing’ based in female bodily experience” (Wood 162). Zelda’s writings incorporate the body into language through sensual imagery; we find this sensual imagery even in the parts that describe her struggle to control her body. As Mary Elene
Wood describes it, “[Save Me the Waltz] gives us a virtual litany of flowers, smells, body parts that [...] destroys the categories of disgust and pleasure even as it creates them” (Wood 162). Conservative and male readers often find reading about women’s body imagery uncomfortable and even inartistic as it would by a sign of narcissism, shallowness and even aggression. By incorporating this sensual imagery into her language, Zelda Fitzgerald goes against the male-dominated expectations that lay upon autobiographical writing. She violates the prescription for transparency of the autobiographical language which should give the reader “an illusion of realism’ (Wood 162). Other realistic psychiatric narratives generally described worlds in which women “remain the described, controlled objects of discourse” (163). This is definitely not the case in Zelda’s madness narrative; on the contrary, instead of describing the controlled bodies from a distance, she incorporates the female body into her language. By denying the ‘rules’ of the autobiographical novel, she draws attention to the language itself in Save Me the Waltz. Zelda’s prose is everything but transparent and as I have mentioned before, some readers even found it too dense and ornate to enjoy the story that is told (161). However, Zelda’s choice of language could be read as a reaction against male-dominated society and literary standards. Therefore, Wood concludes “by writing the body into language, it interferes with the reader’s impulse to see through language into the ‘real’ story of illness and cure, a story that would keep the female body under control” (164).
5.3 Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked ourselves the question as to whether and how women in the 1920s attempted to surpass limited gender roles. Scott expresses an ambivalence in his work: on the one hand, he promoted the flapper-girl in his early novels, on the other, he feared the long-term consequences of on-going changes concerning women’s assumed identities and positions in society. Despite their newfound independence through work and the new flapper-lifestyle, women, especially those that were married, remained subordinate to men due to lingering Victorian values. Rosemary in Tender Is the Night illustrates how it is hard for a woman to work and find true love; she cannot have both, while men can. Moreover, Rosemary’s economic independence thanks to her career in the movies can be seen as a performance of a masculine identity by a woman. Such a gendered performance can help women to achieve things that are usually reserved for men. Scott’s Tender Is the Night closes with Nicole’s happy marriage to Tommy Barban and Dick’s disappearance into oblivion. It ultimately reconfirms traditional values and gender roles, as Nicole finds happiness in marriage while Dick remains a solitary, but free character.

Zelda’s Save Me the Waltz can be read as a response to her unhappy marriage with F. Scott Fitzgerald in which she felt subordinate, lonely and – above all – personally unfulfilled. Yet, apart from a mere response or cry for attention, it is also a quest for personal achievement that is doubled by the protagonist Alabama. Through ballet - which Alabama/Zelda consider serious work, just like a men’s job – protagonist and author search for a purpose in life, besides from being appendages to their successful husbands. Since Zelda did not succeed in pursuing her dream of becoming a professional dancer, Save Me the Waltz can be considered a second big attempt to find personal achievement through the medium of writing. In her art, she tries to express and assert herself as an independent
human being. She also goes against the male-dominated expectations of the autobiographical novel by incorporating the body into her language through sensual imagery. Even though Alabama, as opposed to Zelda, does take the chance to dance professionally in Naples, she eventually breaks down and has to end her dancing career. The novel confronts the reader with the realistic fact that social limitations could not be easily overcome by married women, especially without any support from their husbands or friends. In contrast to Nicole Diver, Alabama does not find happiness in the end. Like the male protagonist in Tender is the Night, she remains a solitary character; yet one who is trapped within an unhappy marriage.

The end of Tender Is the Night and Save Me the Waltz and the state of its protagonists can also tell us more about the spouses’ conceptions on gender roles. Alabama remains unhappy in her marriage to David when Save Me the Waltz closes. In my opinion, this ending reflects Zelda’s pessimism when it comes to the overcoming of gender limitations. Just like she did not let her protagonist continue to thrive in her career as a professional ballerina, neither does she let her escape her unhappy marriage. Zelda seems to have lost faith in the possibility to escape traditional gender roles. As I have mentioned before, Scott was ambivalent when it comes to the role of women in society. While he prohibited his wife to keep seeing Edouard Jozan, he did allow his protagonist Nicole to find happiness in a new marriage. Dick, on the other hand, is free, but it is doubtful whether he is happy. By letting Nicole find happiness in marriage, F. Scott Fitzgerald actually confirms gender roles by acknowledging that women can hardly achieve anything, if not in association with men.
Conclusion

In this MA paper, I compared Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz* and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *Tender Is the Night*. I examined both novels from three different, but related perspectives: autobiografiction, the madness narrative and the performativity of gender roles. I questioned how both novels were influenced by the Fitzgeraldds’ own lives, by mental illness and by the socially prevailing gender distinctions in the 1920s. In the process, I have also tried to revalue Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* as a novel that is worthy of critical attention in its own right. Zelda’s extraordinary poetic prose tells us the story of an intelligent and creative woman who was obliged to live in the shadows of her famous husband. A confrontation between her and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s autobiografictional writings, furthermore, offers us a new perspective on their relation, their first- and second-hand experience of mental problems and their ambivalence towards the role of women in society.

First of all, we have noted a reverse correlation between autobiografiction and the madness narrative. Whereas *Tender Is the Night* is quite a straightforward madness narrative, explicitly portraying the struggles of the mentally ill Nicole, it is more ambiguous when it comes to autobiography, incorporating personal experiences and emotions into an overall fictional story. *Save Me the Waltz*, on the other hand, tells us Zelda’s life story covered under a thin veil of fiction; the novel is much more ambiguous in its portrayal of madness, since the mental breakdown is hidden underneath the surface of a bodily experience. Thus, with these two novels at hand, there is a reverse correlation between unambiguous madness narrative and ambiguous autobiography and between ambiguous madness narrative and unambiguous autobiography.

The use of autobiografiction allows the author to incorporate personal, genuine experiences while distancing him/herself as a persona from his writing. Therefore, this kind
of writing can serve as a coping mechanism, helping the author to process certain overwhelming events or emotions. For the reader, autobiografiction enables a more empathic reading. In contrast to a pure autobiography, an autobiografictional work is more aesthetic and it cuts the material loose from the persona of the author, therefore rendering it more anonymous and facilitating an imaginative reading.

However, the Fitzgeralds did not only incorporate their lives into their work, their work also affected their real lives. According to Lansky, their writing was a form of interpersonal communication between them as a couple (98). They recognized themselves in each other’s fictional characters, and they often experienced it as a personal attack. This also meant – to the discontent of certain critics – that the reader is sucked into “a triangular relationship that involves the two authors, their novels, and their readers” (Lansky 98). Lansky sees in this a ‘burden’ for the reader who is put into the position of ‘problem solver’. However, an alternative reading is possible in which the reader becomes an empathic listener. He or she is not ‘burdened’ but ‘challenged’ to participate in the creative dialogue.

Concerning the novels’ qualification as madness narratives, we have noted a big difference when it comes to directness and explicitness. Whereas Scott witnessed the mental illness of his wife from close by and had read extensively on the topic of psychoanalysis, Zelda experienced multiple mental breakdowns herself. However, Zelda’s directness of experience resulted in a more ambiguous madness narrative. Because madness exceeds all reason, it is almost impossible to organize it into a coherent narrative. Therefore, Zelda used the metaphor of the physical breakdown to substitute for a psychological one. Some of the other possible motives for the choice to leave mental illness as implicit as she did in Save Me the Waltz can be found in the advice of her doctors, self-protection against prejudiced readers or the fact that Scott explicitly prohibited her to write about...
schizophrenia until after the publication of *Tender Is the Night*. However, the fact that she obeyed her husband and doctors’ wishes when it came to the content of her novel also reflects women’s subordinate role in the 1920s. F. Scott Fitzgerald, on the other hand, created with *Tender Is the Night* an explicit story of mental illness. He displayed his knowledge of psychoanalysis, by embedding the story in a Freudian framework through the (fictional) addition of the traumatic experience of incest in Nicole’s childhood.

The reverse correlation between autobiografiction and the madness narrative reveals something about the goals both authors had with their novels. While Zelda wanted to clear her public image as the ‘mad wife of F. Scott Fitzgerald’, Scott wanted to keep up his (positive) public image. Therefore, he used little autobiographical facts that could put him in a bad daylight. He was not afraid to harm his wife’s public image, though; by creating the character of Nicole as Zelda’s fictional counterpart, he did not only damage Zelda’s image, but also her mental health. Zelda spoke freely about her life, because she wanted people to know her as an intelligent and creative woman, instead of a madwoman. Of course, one important factor is left out of her autobiografictional account (and recreated through a metaphor): the unspeakable, reason-exceeding component of her mental illness. This explains why Zelda’s work is so ambiguous when it comes to madness, and, on the contrary, so explicit regarding autobiographical elements. Even though both authors used the same material for their novels, their different goals and writing styles delivered two completely different narratives.

In the last part of the discussion, we examined the role of women in both novels, questioning how they try to escape their often subordinate position to men to find a sense of personal achievement outside the confines of the home. Even though women were achieving emancipation through the workplace and the flapper-lifestyle in the 1920s,
especially married women remained submissive to their husbands. One of the ways in which women tried to escape this position was by performing masculine gender traits, like Rosemary does in *Tender Is the Night*. Furthermore, I argued that Zelda’s *Save Me the Waltz* could be read as a response against her unfulfilling role as wife of a famous artist. After unsuccessful attempts at finding personal fulfilment through dancing and painting, *Save Me the Waltz* can be considered a new attempt at personal creative achievement. Zelda Fitzgerald went against the male-dominated expectations concerning the autobiographical novel by using a sensual language filled with female bodily imagery instead of the expected transparent, realistic language of her husband. Like Zelda, the protagonist of *Save Me the Waltz*, Alabama, searches for personal fulfilment in ballet. Even though she does succeed in dancing professionally, she eventually breaks down indicating the futility of her attempts to find personal fulfilment. This demonstrates that societal limitations for women were still in place in American society and that they were not easy to overcome, particularly by married women. The end of *Save Me the Waltz* also demonstrates Zelda’s pessimism concerning women’s overcoming of gender limitations. After having been forced to quit dancing and thus having lost the only thing from which she received personal fulfilment, Alabama is left unhappy in her marriage to David Knight. Scott’s Nicole in *Tender Is the Night* finds happiness in her new marriage to Tommy Barban. By choosing this ending to his novel, he confirms that women could hardly have any achievements of their own, unless in association with men, for example through marriage.

I have thus shown how *Save Me the Waltz* and *Tender Is the Night* not only reflected, but also influenced Zelda’s and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s personal lives. Since they used the same material for their novels, it created real-life tension between the spouses. In addition to this, their writings were a form of interpersonal communication for them, through which they
could relieve their frustrations, anger and resentment. Apart from that, the novels can also tell us a great deal about the position of women in the American society of the 1920s. Their personal situation as authors of the opposite sex trying to establish name for themselves in the literary world, as well as their distinct representations of the female characters in their respective novels show us some of the difficulties women struggled with in American society of the 1920s. Lastly, I would like to emphasize that Save Me the Waltz should not only be read because it was written by the wife of the famous American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel also tells us a fascinating, first-hand story of mental illness hidden underneath the story of bodily experience and physical breakdown. Through her poetic language, Zelda Fitzgerald succeeds in creating a moving narrative out of her personal biography, which intersected with, but did not depend on that of F. Scott Fitzgerald.
Works cited

Primary sources


Secondary sources


