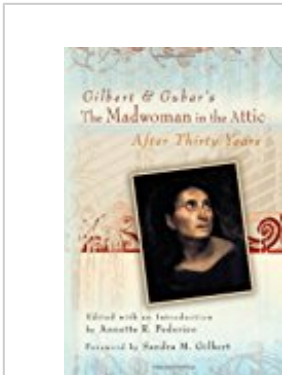
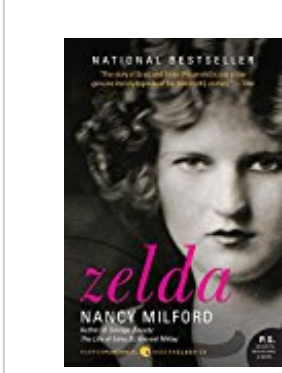


Jenny McPhee

## Zelda: The Madwoman in the Flapper Dress



"Is a pen a metaphorical penis?" Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar asked in their seminal study of women writers and the literary imagination *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979, reissued 2011). Their answer was a resounding, if complex, yes, resulting in our most robust and far-reaching feminist literary theory to date.



"In patriarchal Western culture," they wrote, "the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis. More, his pen's power, like his penis's power, is not just the ability to generate life but the power to create a posterity to which he lays claim." This power further implies "ownership" over all his "brain children" -- characters, scenes, and events. "As a creation 'penned' by man, moreover, woman has been 'penned up' or 'penned in,'" radically reduced to stereotypes (angel or monster) that seriously conflict with her own sense of self, liberty, and creativity.

They show how the pen -- indeed mightier than the sword -- has for millennia excluded and silenced half the human race. Paradoxically, the author "silences [his characters] by depriving them of autonomy (that is, of the power of independent speech) even as he gives them life." The authors quote the literary scholar Albert Gelpi: "The artist kills experience into art, for temporal experience can only escape death by dying into the 'immortality' of artistic form. The fixity of 'life' in art and the fluidity of 'life' in nature are incompatible."

Gilbert's and Gubar's book explored how women, increasingly becoming authors themselves in the nineteenth century, coped with ubiquitous literary paternity. A distinctively female literary tradition emerged: "images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors -- such patterns recurred throughout this tradition, along with obsessive depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia." In response to being both locked up in, and out of, language, "female art has a hidden but crucial tradition of uncontrollable madness."

Nancy Milford's fascinating and disturbing biography *Zelda* (1970, reissued 2011) tells the tragic story of a young woman from Montgomery, Alabama who had great self-confidence,

ambition, intelligence, artistic talent, and sex appeal, and who was, in effect, "killed into art" by her husband F. Scott Fitzgerald, the patriarchal culture she lived in, and herself. Her failed attempts to find artistic self-expression lead her to suffer from debilitating asthma, eczema, and mental illness.

Born in 1900, Zelda was the cleverest, prettiest, wildest, and most talented girl in town. Scott Fitzgerald, with whom she fell in love at seventeen and married at twenty, began his immortalization of her as the quintessential "Jazz-age" flapper in his first novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920) as Rosalind: "She danced exceptionally well, drew cleverly but hastily, and had a startling facility with words, which she used only in love letters... She was perhaps the delicious inexpressible, once-in-a-century blend."

Much later Scott told Malcolm Cowley, "Sometimes I don't know whether Zelda isn't a character I created myself." To create that character, however, Scott made a regular practice of using his wife's persona, experience, diaries, and letters, often verbatim, for his work.

Early in the Fitzgerald's marriage, George Jean Nathan, editor of the magazine *The Smart Set*, read Zelda's diaries. "They interested me so greatly," he said, "that... I later made her an offer for them. When I informed her husband, he said that he could not permit me to publish them since he had gained a lot of inspiration from them and wanted to use parts of them in his own novels and short stories." Zelda didn't object. Scott was the Great Male Writer, the chronicler and prophet of the age. She was his helpmate.

Asked to review Scott's *The Beautiful and Damned* for the *New York Tribune*, however, Zelda expressed her ambivalence toward Scott's thievery: "It also seems to me that on one page I recognized a portion of an old diary of mine which mysteriously disappeared shortly after my marriage, and also scraps of letters, which, though considerably edited, sound to me vaguely familiar... In fact, Mr. Fitzgerald... seems to believe that plagiarism begins at home." When Zelda wrote stories and essays herself, they were often published either under Scott's name alone or jointly.

With alcohol abuse and a disintegrating marriage making any collaborative pursuit with Scott impossible, Zelda turned to ballet. She trained obsessively, became dangerously thin, and in April 1930 had the first of a series of mental breakdowns that would continue until her death in 1948, when she perished in a fire while institutionalized. Her doctors summarized her mental condition as a "reaction to her feelings of inferiority (primarily toward her husband)." She was described as having ambitions that were "self-deceptions... causing difficulties between the couple."

While institutionalized, Zelda began to paint and to write again. In 1932, she produced a manuscript for an autobiographical novel entitled *Save Me the Waltz*. She sent it off to Max Perkins at Scribner's without first showing it to Scott, who became livid and accused her of stealing "his material." He made her take out chunks of the novel before allowing it to be

published. Yet Scott, then working on *Tender Is the Night*, was drawing extensively upon Zelda's most intimate and anguished experiences, diaries, and letters for his characterization of the mentally disturbed Nicole Diver.

A transcript from a conversation between Zelda and Scott as part of her treatment in 1933 reveals Scott's sense of literary entitlement and ownership.

Scott: It is a perfectly lonely struggle that I am making against other writers who are finely gifted and talented. You are a third-rate writer and a third-rate ballet dancer.

Zelda: You have told me that before.

Scott: 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...

Zelda: It seems to me you are making a rather violent attack on a third-rate talent then.

Scott: Everything we have done is my... I am the professional novelist, and I am supporting you. That is all my material. None of it is your material. [...]

Zelda: I tell you my life has been so miserable that I would rather be in an asylum. Does that mean a thing to you?

Scott: It does not mean a blessed thing.

Zelda: What is it that you would like me to do?

Scott: I want you to stop writing fiction.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy famously says when her daughter is born, "I'm glad it's a girl. And I hope she'll be a fool -- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." These were, in fact, Zelda's own words at the birth of her daughter, Patricia. In a newspaper interview she elaborated: "I think a woman gets more happiness out of being gay, light-hearted, unconventional, mistress of her own fate, than out of a career that calls for hard work, intellectual pessimism and loneliness. I don't want Pat to be a genius. I want her to be a flapper, because flappers are brave and gay and beautiful."

For many women of Zelda's generation, the flapper promised women a new way of being in the world, not a mere mimicry of the male experience. The flapper would discard restrictive conventions to discover a fresh, alternative freedom that would redefine the self, art, and society. Ultimately, Zelda, the flapper, was "killed into art," by the pen of F. Scott Fitzgerald. Zelda, the woman, who lived and struggled with and within literary paternity and patriarchal structures, continues to be vital generations on.

*Jenny McPhee's novels include A Man of No Moon, No Ordinary Matter, and The Center of Things. She lives in London but mostly she resides at [www.jennymcphee.com](http://www.jennymcphee.com).*