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DISMANTLING THE FLAPPER: THE REPRESENTATION OF AESTHETIC PRESSURE IN ZELDA FITZGERALD'S 'GIRLS' SERIES'

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This article explores Zelda Fitzgerald's critique of aesthetic pressure and the fear of aging in her 'Girls' Series' (1929-1931), which centers on young female performers struggling to embody a fleeting ideal of femininity. Her short fiction reflects how 1920s beauty standards, based on the flapper's idealized youth and thinness, contributed to the commodification of the female body. Focusing on her story "The Original Follies Girl" (1929) and referencing related stories like "The Girl with Talent" (1930), "A Millionaire's Girl" (1930), and "Poor Working Girl" (1931), this article analyses how Fitzgerald's female heroines internalize the gendered expectations perpetuated by middlebrow magazines such as *College Humor*. Considering Simone de Beauvoir's and Judith Butler's theories on gender construction, the analysis focuses on how these characters confront the paradox of 1920s ideal femininity: the pressure to stay youthful while facing inevitable aging. Ultimately, Fitzgerald's portrayal questions not only the longevity of an appearance-based value system but also the limited possibilities for self-definition and growth available to her protagonists.

Keywords: Zelda Fitzgerald; short fiction; gender performance; middlebrow magazines; “The Original Follies’ Girl”.

In her novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932), Zelda Fitzgerald’s fictional alter-ego Alabama Beggs develops an alienating relationship with her own body in her attempt to become a professional ballet dancer: “The human body was very insistent. Alabama passionately hated her inability to discipline her own” (1932, 118). Self-discipline, thinness, and a quest for perfection become her mantra as she rebuilds her identity as a female artist in the late 1920s. Yet Alabama’s, and Zelda’s by association, unhealthy self-perception is also symptomatic of two key contextual factors: the prevailing beauty ideal of the decade, that is, the youth and thinness of the emblematic flapper; and Fitzgerald’s own struggles with mental health during the last decades of her life as a result of her tumultuous and constraining relationship with her husband F. Scott Fitzgerald (Payne 1995, 47).

Beyond *Save Me the Waltz*, Zelda Fitzgerald’s underlying issue with body image is also a recurring theme in the rest of her fiction. This is the case for some of the author’s short fiction pieces, especially those belonging to her ‘Girls’ Series,’ (1929-1931), which have not received nearly as much attention as her novel. The flapper, as a cultural icon of the 1920s, was typically associated with middle- and upper-class young women who followed an unconventional lifestyle and challenged the rigid Victorian gender norms of the previous century. Yet this polarizing figure also represented a paradox: while it symbolized liberation, it also imposed a strict beauty standard defined by youth, slimness, bobbed hair, and fashionable clothing. These tensions are at the core of Fitzgerald’s ‘Girls’ Series,’ which features flapper-like heroines navigating beauty culture and their job as performers. The stories explore how women’s identities were shaped and constrained by the idealized aesthetic of the flapper. While Fitzgerald’s only novel, *Save Me the Waltz*, has received significant critical attention for its portrayal of anorexia and self-alienation (Payne 1995; Delesalle-Nancey 2019), her short fiction has been comparatively overlooked. This article addresses that gap by examining how the ‘Girls’ Series’

critiques aesthetic pressure, aging, and the commodification of the female body under 1920s beauty standards.

Fitzgerald's 'Girls' Series,' originally published in the middlebrow magazine *College Humor*, gained scholarly attention with the release of Matthew J. Bruccoli's compilation *The Collected Writings of Zelda Fitzgerald* (1991). Before the publication of this compilation, however, Alice Hall Petry had already examined the author's 'Girls' Series' "as Zelda's public statement that women's need to work (as a professional achievement, not an amateur expression) is essential to their very survival" (1989, 72). On a similar note, I would like to highlight the implications of three studies on Fitzgerald's short fiction published in the 2010s: Christine Grogan's "Authorship and Artistry" (2015), Deborah Pike's "Masquerading as Herself" (2017), and Ashley Lawson's "Making the Most of the Middle" (2018). All three of them direct their attention toward identity issues, with Grogan's approach following the evolution of Fitzgerald's narrators as a reflection of her struggle to develop an identity of her own (2015, 117); and Pike and Lawson emphasizing the stories' unique portrayal of the flapper within magazine culture and the significance of this figure to both the author and popular culture. While it is true that Pike addresses the topic of gender performance in her analysis, Fitzgerald's 'Girls' Series' has generally not been interpreted as a critique of the consequences of aesthetic pressure in the late 1920s, hence, this approach is worth considering.

Taking into consideration both Payne's (1995) reading of *Save Me the Waltz* as an expression of Zelda Fitzgerald's struggle with anorexia, and Pike's (2017) commentary on the compulsion her female heroines experience to perform femininity in her 'Girls' Series,' I intend to review a selection of Fitzgerald's short stories belonging to these series. Although the main focus will be on the story "The Original Follies Girl" (1929) due to its distinct critique of aesthetic pressure, the paper will also consider glimpses of "The Girl with Talent" (1930), "A Millionaire's Girl" (1930), and "Poor Working Girl" (1931). Since the author's critique runs throughout the entire series, it is worth considering how this is indirectly reflected in her subsequent stories, in contrast to her more straightforward style in "The Original Follies Girl." The story is a

sketch of Gay's life, a formerly successful performer whose popularity has significantly dwindled as she has aged. In her attempt to adhere to the ideal aesthetic image of femininity of the 1920s, that is, that of the flapper, Gay develops an alienated vision of her own body. More specifically, Gay's story is a manifestation of Fitzgerald's generalized critique in her 'Girls' Series' of the commodification of the female body promoted in the same magazines where she published her short fiction. For the sake of this article, I understand the notion of commodification in terms of Simone de Beauvoir's theories on gender as a social construction in *The Second Sex* (1949) and, specifically, of her claim that the female body "is not perceived as the subject of a relation to the world, but an object to be adorned, shaped, and manipulated" (de Beauvoir 1949). Connecting this notion with Zelda Fitzgerald's 'Girls' Series,' her heroines come to regard their bodies through this alienating lens, and Gay in particular experiences a crisis of identity in her attempt to maintain her façade as the epitome of 1920s flapperdom.

1. Flapper beauty within magazine culture: The notion of external self-improvement

To discuss "The Original Follies Girl" from this perspective, however, we must first establish what constituted the flapper beauty standard and its significance within the context in which the story was published. The story belongs to a series of six short stories, which have been typically labeled as Fitzgerald's 'Girls' Series' (1929-1931), representing different types of American girls in the decade of the 1920s. The series was published in the youth-oriented magazine *College Humor* (1920-1943), which repeatedly featured the archetype of the flapper in its short fiction. It is essential to note that *College Humor* was a middlebrow magazine, which in the 1920s came to represent a bridge between popular culture and Modernism, that is, what critic Ashley Lawson refers to as *popular modernism* in her article "Making the Most of the Middle" (2018). Middlebrow literature, and even more so middlebrow magazines, became a convenient platform for female authors to both establish

their careers in the publishing industry and challenge traditional representations of women in literature (Lawson 2018, 203). Considering this, it is clear why Zelda Fitzgerald, a female author seeking to develop a career of her own, would choose to express her frustrations over aesthetic pressure through middlebrow short fiction widely addressed to a female audience.

Middlebrow magazines were, paradoxically, also key disseminators of idealized images of modern white middle-class femininity. With the rise of mass-market magazines in the decade of the 1920s, which Rachel Alexander describes as “a golden age for general-interest magazine publishing” (2021, 18), these became lifestyle guides for the modern woman. Furthermore, Alexander specifically focuses on the portrayal of this ideal image of femininity in mass-market magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which they deemed achievable through the notion of *self-improvement*. Self-improvement in these magazines is both internal, based on life experiences, and external, based on physical appearance (Alexander 2021, 52). For the sake of my analysis, I will focus my discussion on the external form of self-improvement, an idea which was also widely present in the middlebrow magazines for which Fitzgerald wrote. In this sense, both the mass-market and middlebrow magazines of the 1920s featured a great deal of visual content related to beauty and fashion, whether in the shape of advertising, advice or implicitly in the physical descriptions of the heroines of their short fiction. The message behind these was clear: appearance should become an essential facet of the modern woman's identity. This beauty standard was, naturally, heavily tied to the prototypical image of the flapper—youthful and thin. Having been considered the embodiment of the flapper in her youth, Fitzgerald was fully aware of this pressure and reflected it in her fiction.

As previously mentioned, the promotion of said beauty standards in middlebrow magazines was widespread across their pages and inevitably led to damaging consequences on women's self-perception. To illustrate its scope, I would like to comment on Fangman et al.'s (2004) study on textual and visual content in 1920s magazines “Promoting Female Weight Management in 1920s Print Media.” In their study, they examine several appalling figures regarding weight-loss content, as seen in: “The percentage of body-

and weight-related advertisements peaked in 1926, when 57% and 78% of all advertisements included within *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Vogue*, respectively, addressed such issues" (2004, 228). Aside from weight-related advertisements, magazines also encouraged their mostly-female audience to perform what Kwan and Trautner (2009) identify in the 21st century as *beauty work*, that is to say, "work that individuals perform on themselves to elicit certain benefits within a specific social hierarchy" (2009, 50). Rejecting the notions of *external self-improvement* and *beauty work* as a means to achieve it could thus negatively affect social mobility. The female body was therefore presented as a malleable object that must be shaped to the standard of ideal femininity, which often resulted in commodified visions of the self.

To fully comprehend the effects of aesthetic pressure presented in these magazines, it is also essential to consider their role in the performance of the ideal of femininity of the 1920s. I would thus like to address Judith Butler's conception of beauty work as a fundamental aspect of gender performance. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2006), Butler defines gender as follows:

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions— and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (2006, 190)

Gender is then rendered a social construction that is generally agreed upon, hence the refusal to participate in it is faced with "punishments." Moreover, scholars who have reviewed Butler's convention of gender have also added that she intends to dismantle the notion that beauty is an inherent quality of femininity (Bonner, 2020, 91). Such a conception of gender as a construct to be performed in order to gain social acceptance deeply resonates with the message of middlebrow magazines of the late 1920s, and helps us understand Fitzgerald's representation of modern womanhood in her 'Girls' Series.' This is not to say that Zelda Fitzgerald's reflection on the aesthetic pressure inflicted by middlebrow magazines is in equal standing to Judith Butler's modern feminist

theories on gender performance, but rather that Fitzgerald's short fiction does hint at the artificiality of gender and its negative consequences. Butler's theories are, therefore, worth considering in my analysis of Zelda Fitzgerald's short stories.

2. Aesthetic pressure and self-alienation: "The Original Follies Girl" (1929) compared to later stories

Having established the context in which Fitzgerald's "The Original Follies Girl" was first published, the analysis of this short story will focus on the protagonist's commodified perception of her own body and the author's meta-critique of magazine culture. As previously discussed, the protagonist of the story is a formerly successful performer whose popularity has declined over time. Despite the topic of aesthetic pressure being pervasive in Fitzgerald's fiction in general and her 'Girls' Series' in particular, Gay's is probably the most extreme case of the commodification of the self. This is apparent from the very beginning of the narrative when she is first introduced by the narrator, who describes her as possessing an "object d'art quality" (Fitzgerald et al. 1997, 293). Gay is perceived by the public as a beautiful decorative object, whose talent as a performer is worthless compared to her physical appearance:

That is to say, she had unquestionably the best figure in New York, otherwise she'd never have made all that money for just standing on the stage lending an air of importance to two yards of green tulle. And her hair was that blonde color that's no color at all but a reflector of light, so that she seldom bothered to have it waved or 'done'. (1997, 293)

Through the narrator's strong focus on the protagonist's physical appearance, Fitzgerald reflects the audience's perception of her as a merely "the best figure in New York" who could have never succeeded without her beauty. Gay feels thus compelled to adhere to this beauty standard in order to maintain her position as a celebrated performer.

Fitzgerald's protagonist then becomes the epitome of the flapper through, as previously discussed, *beauty work* at the expense

of her physical well-being. She is both the ideal portrayed in middlebrow magazines and a victim of the same. Consequently, she engages in harmful dieting to shape her body to the standard, losing her identity in the process:

I thought she seemed pale and fragile, but Gay was always on some sort of an ascetic diet to keep her beautiful figure. These long regimes would bore her so that afterward she'd go on a terrific spree and have to spend two weeks at a rest cure. She wore herself out with the struggle between her desire for physical perfection and her desire to use it. (1997, 297)

As an artist whose craft heavily relies on her body, Gay faces an identity dilemma; she longs to express her art through it but at the same time feels constrained by the cultural imperative for thinness of the decade. Striving for “physical perfection” (297) also implies renouncing artistic self-expression, yet not adhering to the standard may also result in the audience’s rejection. Being constantly pressured to maintain this façade, Gay experiences an identity crisis and ends up developing a commodified vision of herself: “I thought how appropriate she was—so airy, as if she had a long time ago dismissed herself as something decorative and amusing, and not to be confused with the vital elements of American life” (1997, 293). Just like her audience, Gay comes to regard herself merely as “something decorative and amusing” (293), stripping herself of her identity as both an artist and a woman. She is no longer a performer, but a beautiful object worth admiration. In terms of Simone de Beauvoir’s conception of gender as a social construction, it could be argued that she has internalized her role as an object. As de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* (1949), a woman “is taught that to please, she must try to please, she must make herself object; she must therefore renounce her autonomy” (342). Gay’s aesthetic choices can thus be interpreted as a response to an external gaze, a male-centered gaze, that demands constant compliance.

The objectification that Gay experiences as a performer would eventually become a central concern in Fitzgerald’s fiction, from her earlier short pieces to her already-mentioned novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932). One of the most representative early examples of this concern appears in “The Girl with Talent” (1930), which features Lou, a successful ballerina who is perhaps one of the few

Fitzgerald heroines who is recognized for her artistic ability. Lou is an accomplished ballet dancer in New York whose dedication is even acknowledged by Fitzgerald's usually sarcastic narrator:

She moved about under the light with preoccupied exaltation, twirling and finding it pleasant; twirling again, then beating swiftly on the floor like a hammer tapping the turns into place. A pleasurable effort shone in the infinitesimal strain on her face, and her outstretched arms seemed to be resting on something soft and supporting, so clearly did you sense their weight and pulling on the shoulder sockets. (1997, 322)

Such a detailed description of the protagonist's dancing skills, "beating swiftly on the floor like a hammer trapping the turns into place," and characteristic self-discipline, "a pleasurable effort," as a ballet dancer aligns with Mary Wood's (1992) analysis of Alabama's relationship with ballet in *Save Me the Waltz* (1932). Although Lou's story merely brushes on this issue, it is clear that she experiences the unrealistic physical demands of the world of ballet toward its female dancers. Ballet becomes a means of self-expression for all three Lou, Alabama, and Zelda herself; "yet the female ballet dancer is both artist and material; her body is shaped both by the male director and by herself" (Wood, 1992, 254) and, in Lou's circumstances, by the demands of her audience. This is apparent in the narrator's sarcastic account of the public's criticism of Lou's physical appearance:

That quality was known to theatrical managers as hot stuff, to a large and discerning public as physical magnetism, and to a widish circle of enemies from lower theatrical planes as lack of talent. "Why," they loved saying, "she can't *do* anything. She doesn't know how to sing or dance, and she's built like a beef-eating beer bottle——". (1997, 317-318)

Not even an accomplished ballerina like Lou can escape the criticism of "enemies from lower theatrical planes" as they associate her talent, or lack of talent according to their standards, with her unfit physical appearance, comparing her to a "beef-eating beer bottle." Having said that, Fitzgerald does not expand on the consequences of this aesthetic pressure on her heroine, choosing to focus instead on her rejection of a traditional lifestyle, but her critique of this issue is still visible.

A similar preoccupation with aesthetic demands placed on female performers reappears in “A Millionaire’s Girl” (1930), which tells the story of Caroline, a sixteen-year-old aspiring actress with a working-class background. Another example of this objectification of the female body in the arts, Caroline is faced with the contradictions of being a woman artist in the decade of the 1920s. Originally from a working-class background, Fitzgerald emphasizes that “she started out empty-handed, equipped with only the love and despair in her father’s vague eyes” (1997, 328) and presents her as the epitome of the flapper:

Caroline was one of those. She was then about sixteen, and dressed herself always in black dresses—dozens of them—falling away from her slim, perfect body like strips of clay from a sculptor’s thumb. She had invented a new way to dance, shaking her head from side to side in dreamy, tentative emphasis and picking her feet up quickly off the floor. It would have made you notice her, even if she hadn’t had that lovely bacchanalian face to turn and nod and turn away into the smoky walls. (1997, 328)

Similar to Gay’s flapper image, Caroline is admired for her “slim, perfect body like strips of clay from a sculptor’s thumb” (328) and her captivating quality that “would have made you notice her” (328). In spite of her artistic ambitions and determination to succeed as an actress in Los Angeles, her success is largely attributed to three factors: the influence of her wealthy ex-partner, her embodiment of the flapper beauty standard, and her extravagant persona; all of which are closely related to the author’s own experience as an aspiring artist trapped in the image of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s flapper wife. For the sake of this analysis, however, it is particularly relevant how the author captures the public’s fixation on Caroline’s image and her similarities with Gay from “The Original Follies Girl.”

In “A Millionaire’s Girl,” the narrator mirrors the audience’s perception of Caroline by repeatedly praising those physical attributes that align with the beauty ideal, as is the case in “She was ambitious, she was extravagant, and she was just about the prettiest thing you ever saw,” (1997, 328) or later on in “There was always that horizon quality in her eyes, and nobody ever had a more symmetrical body to help her to stardom, or one that she could work so well. It was like a splendid mechanical installation in its trim,

impersonal fitness” (1997, 335). Caroline is constantly dehumanized as she is regarded as “a splendid mechanical installation in its trim” (335) rather than as an artist, which eventually causes her to follow in Gay’s steps by developing a flapper-like persona that transcends her identity. Like in Gay’s case, her obsession with succeeding at the expense of losing her identity, along with the public’s lack of recognition, are key reasons for her eventual breakdown: “The dramatic columns were full of laudatory account of the film, obviously written the night before; and the front pages were full of last-minute headlines and two-column stories of her attempted suicide on the night of her successful debut” (1997, 336). Once again, the public’s attention is on the extravagance of her persona. Interestingly, Fitzgerald showcases her sympathy for her heroine as she self-inserts herself in the story: “Having wrecked my own nerves years ago, I like advising people about their own. You’re going too hard,’ I told her, ‘and if you keep on living at such tension that you can’t sit in an automobile without grabbing the sides you won’t last long at your work’” (1997, 333). By alluding to her own breakdown, Fitzgerald is denouncing the effects of adhering to a flapper persona both aesthetically and psychologically on young women.

Considering the context in which all three stories are set, it is not surprising that Fitzgerald would choose to reflect upon the consequences of an increasingly visual culture where physical appearance had become central to the modern woman’s lifestyle. In her book *Gender, Nation, and Consumerism in 1920s Magazines* (2021), Rachel Alexander points to technological developments and the rise of the film industry as key factors behind this growing aesthetic pressure on women of the first half of the 20th century. As a result, physical appearance gained greater importance for the average woman, reinforcing the already-existing link between appearance and identity. In other words, conforming to the flapper beauty standard became a means to affirm their womanhood (2021, 70). Thus, through Gay’s loss of identity, Fitzgerald is expressing her frustration over a paradoxical beauty standard that prevents women from breaking away from their imposed roles as muses. On this issue, Lawson emphasizes the impossibility of both constructing her own identity and conforming to gender expectations (2018,

214), claiming that she is “a stand-in for all women who become lost by making femininity their sole vocation.” (2018, 215). Likewise, Pike argues that “she inflicts physical self-discipline as she pursues thinness in service of her masquerade” (2017, 139). As an active participant in the visual culture that Alexander mentions in her critique of mass-market magazines, Gay and her counterparts are successfully performing ideal femininity; she is “masquerading as herself” (1997, 293), but renouncing true self-expression.

Having discussed the promotion of weight loss and thinness in mass-market and middlebrow magazines and how Zelda Fitzgerald effectively captures this pressure in “The Original Follies Girl,” it is also worth examining the encouragement of overconsumption as another means to achieve external self-improvement. An evident link exists between the development of the visual culture I have just considered and consumerism, which prompts Fitzgerald’s protagonists to engage in excessive consumption. In Gay’s case, this is reflected in her relationship with overconsumption and her choice to lead an excessive lifestyle to uphold her idealized feminine persona:

This was in the stage of her career when she lived in a silver apartment with mulberry carpets and lots of billowing old-blue taffeta, (...) Gay was swamped in a flood of interior decorators’ pastel restraints. She knew she didn’t like the apartment, but the vanity of taking her friends there made her stick for quite a while. It had so obviously cost a lot. (1997, 294)

Her “silver apartment” supports her ideal façade even though it does not reflect her true identity, as she “knew she didn’t like the apartment.” With the story being published in July of 1929, it is also worth mentioning that Fitzgerald’s depiction of Gay’s excessive lifestyle and eventual breakdown somehow anticipates the Crash of 1929 which would take place in November, even if the issue of consumerism is not explored in depth. The author’s focus is ultimately on consumerism as a mandatory form of beauty work for modern women, but the link between the two is still worth mentioning as a reflection of the decade’s mindset.

In a similar manner, we may return to the case of professional ballet dancer Lou from “The Girl with Talent” and her relationship

with overconsumption. Like Gay, Lou's expenditure is directly connected to *beauty work* and external self-improvement as the narrator constantly refers to her consumerist habits. Although never explicitly stated, Fitzgerald subtly denounces the dangers of building one's identity around the modern ideal of femininity, as Lou indulges in a lifestyle of excesses and overconsumption:

In the Tudor splendor and oaken shadows of the tall living room, a handsome young husband sat straining his cheekbones white against the gloom and feeling strongly the poignancy of his tilted, famous chin. Three expensive dresses lay pressing their Alice-blue pleats and twinkling buttons against discreet box tops. (1997, 319)

As can be seen, every aspect of her life appears to function in service of constructing this image; from her "handsome young husband" (319) to the "three expensive dresses" (319). On Lou's overconsumption, Pike comments that she "spends, consumes, and pursues a regime of fashion and indulgence to maintain her impeccable mutable image" (2017, 141). Lou and Gay can thus be equated to the aspirational image promoted to the readers of women's commercial magazines in the 1920s. They are both victims and perpetrators of this unrealistic imagery.

Perhaps a more similar example to the readers of such magazines would be Eloise from "Poor Working Girl" (1931) due to her working-class background. The twenty-year-old heroine strives for independence as she attempts to build herself a career as an artist, being ultimately a "working-class girl who must find work to make ends meet" (Pike 2017, 141). It is for this reason that Eloise strongly resembles magazine readers, as her purchasing power cannot be compared to that of her counterparts in Fitzgerald's 'Girls' Series.' An avid reader of fashion magazines, Eloise's struggle with overconsumption starts as soon as she gets her first job as a babysitter. While her initial goal is to save money to pursue an artistic career in New York, this objective remains unfulfilled as she is tempted by the prospect of external self-improvement into overconsumption:

But then spring came right in the middle of things, as it always does, and the manufacturers flooded the showcases with shoes for tramping golf courses, and the smell of chocolate began to seep through the more open doors of drugstores, and music from the

phonographs in the ten-cent stores became audible above the noise of the trolleys, and Eloise succumbed. (1997, 340)

The previous excerpt reflects the myriad of colorful temptations that Eloise is surrounded by as soon as spring begins, which signals her consumerist awakening. Through her newly acquired disposable income, Eloise becomes hyper-aware of every potential purchase and ends up developing an unhealthy relationship with consumption. In that regard, Pike highlights the toxic cycle in which Eloise is trapped: “As she earns money, aspirations to improve her appearance and lifestyle escalate, but these desires focus on consumption and immediate gratification” (2017, 141). Unable to break this cycle of earning money and losing it under the pretense of attaining ideal femininity, Fitzgerald’s protagonist constantly engages in emotional and meaningless buying:

The first thing she bought was a tan coat much too thin to wear until it would be too hot to wear it. To make up for that, she wrote for more dramatic school prospectuses and wore the coat anyway, so she got the gripe. After that, she had an awful attack of loneliness on account of having been in bed and spent a lot of her money on some blue things with feathers and something green with pink hanging off. (1997, 340)

From the absurdity of a “coat much too thin to wear until it would be too hot to wear it” (340) to the vagueness of “some blue things with feathers and something green with pink hanging off” (340), it is clear that she too has lost control over her gender performance. Her impulsive consumption ultimately stems from her need to present herself as the ideal modern woman of the 1920s, hence her need to enhance her outward appearance and her perception of her own body as a commodity that must be adorned. In Butler’s terms, she has internalized her role as a modern woman and is attempting to realize it through a beauty ritual. Rather than focusing on the improvement of her skills as a performer to fulfill her initial objective, she gets lost in the fantasy of embodying the image of the flapper. Through Eloise’s failure to become successful unlike her peers, Fitzgerald reveals a contrasting viewpoint; regardless of their degree of adherence to the beauty standard, all of Fitzgerald’s protagonists are, to different extents, susceptible to the fantasy of ideal femininity.

It is evident that Gay's hyper-fixation with thinness and her and her counterparts' consumerist habits are a direct response to the pressure they experience to accomplish ideal femininity. In Gay's case, she achieves this means successfully but only temporarily as her aging process begins to affect her career prospects. Regarded by both herself and her audience as a commodity, she loses value as she ages and the public starts to overlook her. This becomes obvious when the narrator comments that:

All these wanderings about took time, and Gay was being forgotten in New York like all people are who are not constantly being casually run into. There were other girls from fresher choruses, with wide clear eyes and free boyish laughs, and you heard less and less about Gay. If you asked for news of her, a blank look or a look of hesitancy would cross the face opposite you as if its owner didn't know whether he should have news of Gay or not, since her present status was undetermined. People said she was older than she was, when they talked about her—men, mostly, who were anxious that she should belong to a finished past. (1997, 296)

The public's disregard of Gay in favor of younger performers marks the end of her artistic career regardless of her initial adherence to the flapper standard and notable success as a performer. According to the narrator, this is a rather common occurrence as she is compared to "all people are who are not constantly being casually run into," even inevitable. Her perceived value is thus not based on her talent but on the public's, and specifically her male public's, perception of her feminine persona. As she ages out of the acceptable age range for the feminine ideal, she starts to "belong to a finished past" and can no longer successfully perform femininity.

In this sense, it is also interesting to reconsider Caroline's position in "A Millionaire's Girl" (1930) as a rising actress. Originally 16 years old at the beginning of the story, she is considered to be the epitome of 1920s beauty with her "slim, perfect body like strips of clay from a sculptor's thumb," mirroring Gay's original status as the representative of the flapper ideal (Fitzgerald, 1997, 328). We may thus view Caroline as Gay's foil; she has managed to attain the status that Gay once had, but such popularity is ephemeral and bound to fade as she ages. One might even argue that her suicide attempt at the end of the story is somewhat

anticipating her eventual breakdown, highlighting the brevity of hers and Gay's success. The fragility of her career in the face of aging parallels Gay's downfall, raising the broader question, of whether there is a place for more mature women in either artistic performance or magazine short fiction according to Zelda Fitzgerald. While most of her heroines are young women ranging from their late teens to their thirties, we must consider the author's age when writing these pieces, as she was only 29 years old when "The Original Follies Girl" was published. It is apparent that she showed deep concern about how ageism can be an obstacle for women artists in their profession, which hinders them from establishing lasting careers.

3. Conclusion

In the present article, I have aimed to expand the exploration of aesthetic pressure and its consequences on late 1920s women in Zelda Fitzgerald's fiction beyond her novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932). The author's 'Girls' Series' (1929-1931) has proven to be a relevant source for the discussion of her subtle critique of beauty work as a form of gender performance and its effects on the construction of her heroine's identities. In my analysis, I have also considered the relevance of the literary context in which these stories were written and published, that is to say, the expansion of middlebrow magazines that took place in the second half of the 1920s. Their promotion of a flapper-inspired ideal of beauty, which is based on thinness and youth and portrayed as achievable through external self-improvement, plays a key role in shaping the commodified self-perceptions that Fitzgerald's heroines develop about their bodies. These protagonists are both consumers of the same magazines and the ideal portrayed in them. In De Beauvoir's and Butler's terms, their successful performance of this gender ideal both allows them to socially ascend and develop their careers as artists, but also hinders them by limiting their self-expression, as deeply conveyed in "The Original Follies Girl: "She wore herself out with the struggle between her desire for physical perfection and her desire to use it" (Fitzgerald 1997, 297). In brief, Fitzgerald's account of these performers' struggle with self-perception not only

reflects her own experience but also the wider picture for women in the late 1920s, that is, their battle with gender expectations, particularly with physical standards of beauty.

In conclusion, through her ‘Girls’ Series,’ and in particular through “The Original Follies Girl” (1929), Fitzgerald explores the contradictions of the beauty mandates of the decade that marked her youth. Among these contradictions, I would like to highlight the commodified perception that the story’s heroine, Gay—along with the heroines in the rest of the stories discussed in the article—develops as a consequence of the audience’s constant objectification of her body. Fitzgerald’s protagonists become women—because a woman is not born, she is made (de Beauvoir 1949)—by following the gender mandates of their social context under the pretext that these would facilitate social ascension and professional success. Yet these mandates eventually become serious obstacles in both their careers and personal development and, in Gay’s case, they are the cause behind her demise.

In the context of excess of the 1920s, where overconsumption was deemed a crucial aspect of womanhood, Fitzgerald highlights the absurdity of consumerism in both “The Original Follies Girl” and “The Girl with Talent,” and even presents it as a hindrance to one’s professional career in “Poor Working Girl.” However, the greatest contradiction of the 1920s ideal of femininity and its associated aesthetic pressure is its complete rejection of the prospect of aging. Exemplified by both Caroline’s (“A Millionaire’s Girl”) current position as the epitome of the flapper and Gay’s decaying career, Fitzgerald questions the longevity of gender performance. Regardless of their flawless participation in gender roles, they will all inevitably lose the public’s admiration as they age, which reveals the incongruity of the beauty standard promoted in middlebrow magazines and, on a bigger scale, of aesthetic mandates associated with femininity. In revealing the fragility of a femininity ideal defined by beauty standards and overconsumption, Fitzgerald’s ‘Girls’ Series’ offers a compelling critique of gender ideals that continues to resonate today.

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