The Diamond as Big as the Ritz Study Guide

The Diamond as Big as the Ritz by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's story "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" first appeared in the June 1922 issue of *The Smart Set*, a popular magazine of the 1920s. Fitzgerald had attempted to sell it to the *Saturday Evening Post*, which had published many of his other stories, but its harsh anticapitalistic message was rejected by the conservative magazine. In September 1922, the story appeared in his second collection, *Tales of the Jazz Age*.

The story was inspired by Fitzgerald's 1915 visit to the Montana home of a Princeton classmate, Charles Donahoe, and was one of Fitzgerald's few forays into the realm of fantasy. It tells of young John Unger, who is invited to visit a classmate at his impossibly lavish home in Montana. Gradually, Unger learns the sinister origins of his host's wealth and the frightening lengths to which he will go to preserve it.

In this story, Fitzgerald begins to explore many of the themes he used later when writing his best-known work, *The Great Gatsby*. The carelessness and immorality of the vastly wealthy and the American fascination with wealth are personified by Braddock Washington and his narcississtic family, who seem to believe that all others have been put on Earth for their amusement. The cataclysmic ending, in which the family and their home are destroyed, shows the result of their single-minded pursuit.

Author Biography

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, on September 24, 1896, to Edward and Mary ("Mollie") Fitzgerald. In 1898, the family moved to upstate New York, where Edward worked as a salesman for Procter and Gamble. By the time the family returned to St. Paul, Fitzgerald was twelve years old, and his parents enrolled him at St. Paul Academy. Though Fitzgerald's family was by no means poor, they were not nearly as wealthy as most of the families that sent their sons to the academy, and it was here that Fitzgerald's lifelong fascination with the lives of the extremely wealthy began. At St. Paul Academy, he wrote stories for the school magazine and performed in school plays. After the academy, he went on to the Newman School in Hackensack, New Jersey, a Catholic prep school. He continued his writing at the Newman School.

In 1913, Fitzgerald entered Princeton, where he made important friendships that would last for years to come. He spent so much of his time writing stories and plays for college publications, however, that his academics suffered, and in 1916, he withdrew from Princeton due to low grades. In 1917, he entered the army but was disappointed that in his fifteen months' service, he was never sent overseas. One of the most significant results of Fitzgerald's military service was that, while stationed in Alabama, he fell in love with Zelda Sayre, the daughter of a judge on the Alabama Supreme Court. Also during this time, he wrote the first draft of his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*.

Fitzgerald was discharged from the army in 1919; in March 1920, *This Side of Paradise* was published. A week later he married Zelda Sayre. That same year, Fitzgerald's first collection of short stories was published, entitled *Flappers and Philosophers*. These two books established Fitzgerald's reputation as the official chronicler of the Jazz Age, the name used for the 1920s. He was especially known for his stories featuring flappers, young women exploring the new social and fashion freedoms and rebelling against the restrictive mores of the past.

In October 1921, Zelda Fitzgerald gave birth to the couple's first and only child, a girl named Frances Scott Key Fitzgerald, whom the couple called Scottie. Then in 1922, Fitzgerald had two more books published: *The Beautiful and Damned*, a novel, and *Tales of the Jazz Age*, his second collection of short stories, which includes "A Diamond as Big as the Ritz."

Fitzgerald's relationship with his wife Zelda was a tempestuous one, even during their courtship, and the combination of their extravagant lifestyle, Fitzgerald's heavy drinking, and Zelda's gradually deteriorating mental health took a toll on their marriage. In 1924, the couple spent time in France, where Fitzgerald wrote his best-known novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In France, Fitzgerald also became good friends with Ernest Hemingway.

After *The Great Gatsby*, the quality of Fitzgerald's work was erratic, affected by his continued drinking and his stressful relationship with Zelda. However, his 1926 collection of stories, *All the Sad Young Men*, garnered favorable reviews, though it did

little to improve the Fitzgeralds' financial situation. Despite mounting debt, the couple lived extravagantly, much like the characters in Fitzgerald's fiction. In 1930, Zelda suffered a complete mental collapse and was hospitalized.

In an effort to get out of debt, Fitzgerald wrote dozens of short stories during this time, including many that were not up to the quality of his former work. In 1934, he finally finished his fourth novel, *Tender Is the Night*, which he had been working on sporadically since 1925. At the time of its release, critics were not fond of the book, feeling that it was a less successful treatment of the same themes explored in *The Great Gatsby*. Unsurprisingly, the antics of the fabulously wealthy were not as well received by a nation mired in economic depression. In 1935, Fitzgerald published a collection of short stories entitled *Taps at Reveille*, which was reviewed by few critics. Fitzgerald was aware of the decline of his work and wrote a series of essays on his own emotional decline as an artist, published in *Esquire* magazine.

In 1937, Fitzgerald moved to Los Angeles, California, to find work as a screenwriter. While working in the film industry, he began writing a novel set in Hollywood, to be titled *The Last Tycoon*. Before he could finish the book, however, Fitzgerald died suddenly of a heart attack on December 21, 1940. The unfinished novel was published posthumously in 1941. He was survived by his wife Zelda, who died in a hospital fire in 1948, and his daughter Scottie, who died in 1986.

Plot Summary

As “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” opens, sixteen-year-old John T. Unger is leaving the small middle-class town of Hades to attend St. Midas School near Boston, “the most expensive and the most exclusive boys’ preparatory school in the world.” His mother packs his trunk, his father gives him money, and after a tearful goodbye, John T. Unger is off to attend school with boys from the country’s wealthiest families.

In his second year at St. Midas, John meets Percy Washington. Well-dressed and reserved, Percy has little to say about his home or family, until he invites John to spend the summer at his family’s home in Montana. On the train ride to Percy’s home, Percy tells John that his father is “the richest man in the world” and that he has a diamond “bigger than the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.”

The train stops in the dismal village of Fish, inhabited by twelve men who gape at the wealthy travelers. From here John and Percy take a buggy to another location, where an elaborate, luxurious car (which Percy dismisses as “an old junk”) awaits them. At one point two black servants attach cables to the car, and it is hoisted over a rocky passage and set down on the other side. Percy tells John that his father has managed to prevent his land from ever being surveyed, and the only thing that could ever be used to find them is “aeroplanes”; fortunately, his father has anti-aircraft guns at the ready.

John is taken aback at this information until the sight of the Washingtons’ impossibly lavish home sweeps all other concerns aside. As they walk through the halls, John discovers some are carpeted with fur, and some are made of crystal with tropical fish swimming beneath; at dinner, the family and their guest eat off plates made of solid diamond.

The next morning at breakfast, Percy tells John his family’s history. Percy’s grandfather, a direct descendant of George Washington, discovered the mountain-sized diamond when he went west to start his own ranch, just after the Civil War ended. He realized that if he tried to sell such a diamond, the bottom would fall out of the market. So after gathering a workforce of black slaves, whom he fooled into believing that the South won the Civil War, he set out to sell his diamonds in secret to assorted kings, princes, and other dignitaries. His son Braddock continued his work, and when he had amassed enough wealth to keep his family living in luxury for generations, he sealed up the mine.

After breakfast, John takes a walk on the property and runs into Kismine, Percy’s younger sister, with whom he falls in love instantly. She tells him she likes him, as well. They walk back to the house together.

Later Percy and his father show John around the property. Mr. Washington shows him the slaves’ quarters, housing descendants of his grandfather’s original slaves. The current slaves still do not know that slavery has been abolished. He also points out the golf course, which is entirely a green, “no fairway, no rough, no hazards.” Finally, they come to a deep pit, covered with an iron grating. Down in the pit, two dozen men are

imprisoned. Mr. Washington tells John their crime: they are aviators who accidentally discovered the diamond mine and now must be prevented, at all costs, from revealing the Washingtons' secret.

As the end of summer nears, John and Kismine decide that they will elope the following June, since her father will never allow her to marry someone from John's lowly social and financial status. Kismine casually mentions some visitors she and her sister had. When John inquires further about these visitors, Kismine admits that her father had them murdered at the end of their visits, so they could not reveal the Washingtons' secret; she also admits that the same fate awaits John. Outraged, John tells Kismine they are not in love anymore and announces his intention to escape over the mountains before Mr. Washington can have him killed. Kismine tells him she wants to go with him, and John softens, realizing she must really love him. They plan to escape the next night.

Later that same evening, however, John is awakened by a noise, and thinking it is someone sent to kill him, he gets up and goes into the hall. He hears Mr. Washington urgently summoning his servants and realizes some crisis has occurred. He goes to Kismine's room; she tells him that there are at least a dozen airplanes over the property and that her father is going to open fire on them with his anti-aircraft guns. John and Kismine waken Jasmine, Kismine's older sister, and the three of them flee to a wooded area where they watch the battle.

By four in the morning, the planes have destroyed much of the Washingtons' property. John, watching from a distance, hears footsteps. Curious, he follows the sound and sees Braddock Washington on the mountain with two of his slaves, who are carrying an enormous diamond. Washington begins speaking, and John realizes he is talking to God—offering him the diamond as a bribe. He will give God the diamond if God will restore his life and property to its former glory.

The bribe does not work; the planes descend, and Washington and his wife flee underground, beneath the diamond mountain. When John tells Kismine and Jasmine this, the sisters scream. "The mountain is wired!" Kismine sobs. A few moments later, the mountain glows a brilliant yellow, and the Washingtons' lavish home explodes. Both the Washingtons and their riches are gone.

After fleeing to a distance safely remote from the scene of the battle, John asks Kismine to show him what jewels she has brought with her, to support them in the luxury to which she has become accustomed. After showing him the jewelry she brought with her, Kismine realizes she accidentally brought rhinestones she received from one of their ill-fated visitors. John gloomily tells her they will have to live in Hades. Thinking of their poor future, they go to sleep under the stars.

Characters

The Prisoners

Underneath his all-green golf course, Braddock Washington has imprisoned two dozen aviators who had the misfortune to discover his property. They are a spirited bunch, shouting curses and defiant insults at Washington when he stops by for a visit but also trying to talk him into releasing them. When they hear that one of their number managed to escape, they dance and sing in celebration.

John T. Unger

John T. Unger is a young man from the town of Hades, “a small town on the Mississippi River.” His family is affluent, but not as fabulously wealthy as the other families whose sons attend the exclusive St. Midas School.

He is more sentimental than the ultra-narcissistic Washingtons (when he parts with his father to leave for school, there are “tears streaming from his eyes,”) but his blind adoration of wealth and the wealthy reveal him to be almost as shallow. The few early misgivings he has about the Washingtons are quickly swept away by his hedonistic enjoyment of their riches.

He tells Percy, “The richer a fella is, the better I like him.” He repeatedly brings up the Schnlitzer-Murphys, a very wealthy family he visited one Easter, describing their jewels and quoting Mr. Schnlitzer-Murphy. When John falls in love with Kismine, their relationship has all the maturity of two ten-year-olds at play. John’s love for Kismine is based on her physical perfection: “He was critical about women. A single defect—a thick ankle, a hoarse voice, a glass eye—was enough to make him utterly indifferent.”

Even after seeing the men Braddock Washington has imprisoned, John does not seem overly concerned. It is not until he learns that he himself will be murdered to prevent his revealing the Washingtons’ secrets that John becomes outraged.

Braddock Washington

The patriarch of the Washington family and the most extreme example of its arrogance and self-importance, Braddock Washington is a cold, unfeeling man who is “utterly uninterested in any ideas or opinions except his own.” He views people as either assets or liabilities, calculating what use can be made of them or what obstacle they might present. The most extreme example of this is his continued use of slave labor. Kismine echoes her father’s attitude when the attacking aircraft destroy the slaves’ quarters: “There go fifty thousand dollars’ worth of slaves . . . at pre-war prices.”

The pinnacle of Braddock Washington's arrogance comes near the end of the story when, with his home under attack, he climbs up the mountain along with two slaves carrying an enormous diamond, and offers the diamond to God as a bribe. In return, he requests that his life be restored to its former state. Even when speaking to God, Braddock is not humble; instead, he speaks with "a quality of monstrous condescension." Washington's idea of how life for himself and his family should progress is summed up in the design of his own golf course: "It's all a green, you see—no fairway, no rough, no hazards."

Jasmine Washington

Unlike Percy and Kismine, Jasmine shows small signs of being interested in people and events beyond herself. She had hoped to become "a canteen expert" during World War I, and near the end of the story, when it becomes clear that she, her sister, and John will all be poor, she volunteers to work as a washerwoman and support them all. However, the fact that she continues to invite guests to the Washington home, knowing their ultimate fate, and her great disappointment that the war ended before she could fulfill her "canteen expert" dream, indicate that Jasmine has not fully grasped the concept of compassion.

Kismine Washington

Percy's sister Kismine, who is about sixteen, is a curious combination of childlike innocence and callow self-absorption. Fitzgerald notes that both she and her brother "seemed to have inherited the arrogant attitude in all its harsh magnificence from their father. A chaste and consistent selfishness ran like a pattern through their every idea." While Kismine expresses sincere regret over the fate of visitors to the Washington home, her empathy is limited; she tells John she had not wanted to tell him about his impending assassination, because she knew it would make things "sort of depressing" for him.

Kismine's lack of empathy is somewhat understandable, however, given her complete ignorance of the world beyond her own home. She is clearly unfamiliar with the concepts of poverty and suffering; when John tells her they must flee her home to get away from the attacking airplanes, she cries, "We'll be poor, won't we? Like people in books . . . Free and poor! What fun!"

Percy Washington

Percy, John's friend from school, is much like the rest of the Washingtons: shallow, boastful, and arrogant. The first words he speaks in the story are: "My father . . . is by far the richest man in the world." He is fawned upon by his mother, who has little interest in her two daughters.

Themes

Immorality of the Wealthy

A common theme in Fitzgerald's work is that extreme wealth often leads to immoral behavior. In the case of the Washingtons, this effect is compounded by their near complete isolation from the rest of the world. Percy, Kismine, and Jasmine were brought up to believe they are better than all others by virtue of their fortune, and they were sheltered from anyone who might challenge this notion.

Imprisoning or killing visitors who might divulge their secrets has become a routine business tactic for Braddock Washington. Kismine finds this mildly upsetting, but her own distorted moral views are revealed when John asks her when her father has summer visitors murdered: "In August usually—or early in September. It's only natural for us to get all the pleasure out of them that we can first." Braddock Washington shares this belief that others are intended to be enjoyed or used by his family. Percy tells John that to design the Washingtons' chateau and grounds, his father simply kidnapped a number of design professionals and put them to work.

Does the acquisition of wealth lead to immoral behavior or is it that the people who pursue great wealth are already morally bankrupt? While Fitzgerald does not answer this question, he does illustrate how selfishness and delusions of self-importance are passed on from one generation to the next.

Freedom and Imprisonment

While most people equate greater wealth with greater freedom, this is not the case in "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz." Braddock Washington's prison is a luxurious one, to be sure, but it still isolates him from the rest of the world. He has no friends or colleagues, only slaves. He views others with suspicion. His children's visitors must be killed when their visit is over—certainly an impediment to their forming lasting friendships outside the family. His entire family is imprisoned by the diamond mountain they must protect at all costs.

There are numerous examples of imprisonment in the story. The most literal example is that of the aviators trapped under the Washingtons' golf course. Why does Braddock Washington imprison rather than kill the aviators? He seems to enjoy verbally sparring with them. Perhaps Washington, at some level, is so desperate for some peers of his own, some basic human connection, that he keeps them alive to fulfill that need.

Another example is the black slaves whom the Washingtons have tricked into believing that slavery was never abolished and that the South won the Civil War. Ironically, Washington's behavior towards the slaves, other than his obvious racism, is not much different than his behavior towards outsiders; since he views all people as commodities, it is not surprising he finds slave labor a sensible option.

When John and Kismine plan their escape from the Washingtons' property, Kismine is delighted at the prospect of being "free and poor." John tells her, "It's impossible to be both together." While there may be truth in this statement, it is also true that great wealth, for the Washingtons, has not resulted in complete freedom. The conclusion is that freedom is not a function of wealth or poverty at all, but rather a state of mind, a state of mind which, with their dependence on wealth and status, none of these characters has achieved.

American Idolatry of Wealth

John T. Unger personifies the fascination that the American middle class has with wealth and the wealthy. John quotes statistics about the number of millionaires in the United States, prattles on about the jewels owned by the Schnlitzer-Murphys, and sets aside his few reservations about the morals of the Washingtons when he sees their opulent home. According to Fitzgerald, John has been trained to feel this awe for wealth by his family and his hometown: "The simple piety prevalent in Hades has the earnest worship and respect for riches as the first article of its creed—had John felt otherwise than radiantly humble before them, his parents would have turned away in horror at the blasphemy." In the early 2000s, one can see the same fascination with the rich evinced by the success of tabloids that doggedly pursue rich celebrities, seeking to expose intimate details of their lives. One can imagine that John T. Unger would have been a big fan of the television show *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

Style

Point of View

“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” is told from the third person point of view, from the perspective of John T. Unger. Through Unger's perspective, Fitzgerald condemns not just the Washingtons’ amoral lifestyle, but also the middle-class attitude towards wealth that makes their lifestyle possible. The reader waits in vain for Unger to speak out, to express some outrage or horror at the Washingtons’ way of life, but until his own life is threatened, Unger seems willing to overlook almost anything to continue enjoying the luxuries and pleasures of their home. Because Unger is not as wealthy as his classmates at St. Midas, he is even more easily seduced by their lifestyle, and his astonishment at the home’s extravagance is more in line with what the average reader might feel.

Mythical Allusions

Many references to myths and fables make the story seem more like a fable itself. On the first page, when the reader learns that John is from Hades—the underworld of the dead in Greek myth—the story veers from the path of realism into the realm of fantasy. Characters in the story repeatedly make reference to how hot it is in Hades (“Is it hot enough for you down there?”), and when John leaves to go to St. Midas—another reference to a fable—his father assures him that “we’ll keep the home fires burning.”

Other references to historical and mythical figures abound. When Percy and John near the Washingtons’ property, John muses, “What desperate transaction lay hidden here? What a moral expedient of a bizarre Croesus?” Croesus was a Greek king known for his great riches. More than once, the Washingtons’ property is referred to as “El Dorado,” the name of a mythical South American kingdom fabled to be rich with gold. Finally, when Braddock Washington is offering his diamond bribe to God, Fitzgerald writes, “Prometheus Enriched was calling to witness forgotten sacrifices, forgotten rituals, prayers obsolete before the birth of Christ.” This is a reference to *Prometheus Bound*, a drama based on myth by the Greek writer Aeschylus. Prometheus was a mythological character who defended men from the Greek god Zeus; Zeus punished him by chaining him to a rock and having an eagle endlessly eat his liver.

All these references to legend and myth cause the reader to think of the story as a symbolic fable, rather than a realistic story. Moreover, they suggest that the themes in this story are universal and ageless.

Hyperbole

Fitzgerald’s use of hyperbole, or extreme exaggeration, increases the feeling of fantasy, and his descriptions of the Washingtons’ home have a surreal quality. By making the

chateau impossibly luxurious, Fitzgerald lets the reader know, once again, that this is not a literal or realistic story:

There was a room where the solid, soft gold of the walls yielded to the pressure of his hand, and a room that was like a platonic conception of the ultimate prison—ceiling, floor, and all, it was lined with an unbroken mass of diamonds, diamonds of every size and shape, until, lit with tall violet lamps in the corners, it dazzled the eyes with a whiteness that could be compared only with itself, beyond human wish or dream.

A diamond as big as an entire mountain, a clear crystal bathtub with tropical fish swimming beneath the glass, hallways lined with fur, dinner plates of solid diamond, a car interior upholstered in tapestries, gold and precious gems—all these extravagant, surreal elements add to the otherworldly character of the Washingtons' property. Furthermore, they seemed to suggest a sense that too much is indeed too much. The overkill is distasteful, even grotesque.

Religious Imagery

Fitzgerald uses religious images throughout the story to illustrate, among other things, the absolute corruption of the Washingtons, and to a lesser extent, the corruption of John Unger. From his hometown of Hades (Hell), John's parents send him to St. Midas School. It is easy to guess the priorities of a school that would elevate the mythical King Midas to sainthood and the priorities of the parents whose sons attend it. From there John goes on to the Washingtons' home, stopping on his way at the village of Fish, inhabited only by twelve men. The fish, of course, is a symbol of Christianity, and the twelve men recall Jesus' apostles. The twelve men of Fish, however, are "beyond all religion." They all turn out to watch the train come in and the wealthy passengers disembark. In this context, even the apostles are spellbound by wealth.

The Washingtons' chateau and property are described as a paradise rivaled only by Heaven itself:

The many towers, the slender tracery of the sloping parapets, the chiseled wonder of a thousand yellow windows with their oblongs and hexagons and triangles of golden light, the shattered softness of the intersecting planes of star-shine and blue shade, all trembled on John's spirit like a chord of music.

And, as with Heaven, John discovers that once he has arrived there, he cannot return to the mortal world, thanks to Braddock Washington, reigning god of this Eden. The climactic scene, in which Washington offers his bribe to God, illustrates that Braddock sees himself as God's equal, or even superior: "He, Braddock Washington, Emperor of Diamonds, king and priest of the age of gold, arbiter of splendor and luxury, would offer up a treasure such as princes before him had never dreamed of, offer it up not in suppliance, but in pride." When he finishes his proposal, he lifts his head up to the heavens "like a prophet of old." This perversion may be an allusion to Moses who in devotion goes up onto the mountain to receive the Ten Commandments.

These distorted, corrupted images of religion—apostles with no religion, a Heaven one can enter living but must die to leave, praying without supplication but with arrogance—are symbolic of the way the Washingtons' morals and values have become twisted by their own greed and materialism.

Historical Context

Isolationism and Prohibition

Before World War II (1939–1945), the United States had a tendency towards isolationism; Woodrow Wilson won reelection in 1916 running on the slogan, “He Kept Us Out of War.” However, the next year the United States entered World War I, after German submarines sank the *Lusitania*, killing nearly twelve hundred people, among whom were over one hundred children and one hundred and twenty Americans.

By the time “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” was published, the war had been over for almost four years, and the United States had retreated even further into isolationism. The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 became the first legislation to restrict immigration into the country, greatly reducing the number of immigrants allowed into the United States each year (immigration was even further restricted by the Immigration Act of 1924).

In addition to this retreat from the world community, Prohibition was in effect at this time. Ratified in 1919 and put into effect in 1920, the Eighteenth Amendment prohibited consumption of all alcoholic beverages. Also, the Sedition Act of 1918, which prohibited citizens from making public remarks critical of the government and its policies during war, had just recently been repealed in 1921. The combination of national isolation and restrictions of personal freedom caused many artists of the time to leave the country and spend time in Europe, most notably in Paris, where Fitzgerald himself lived while writing *The Great Gatsby*.

Postwar Economic Boom

The decade following World War I (1914–1918) was a prosperous time for the United States. More efficient methods of production had developed during the war to compensate for the reduced workforce. Now this increased productivity meant higher wages for workers and also shorter work hours, giving Americans both the means and the leisure to buy more goods. A new age of consumerism was born.

This was good news for Fitzgerald, whose stories often featured the antics of the extremely wealthy and frivolous. The popularity of his work declined considerably during the depression, in part because people struggling to make ends meet found these types of stories less entertaining and less relevant to their own lives.

New Freedoms for Women

Women won the right to vote in 1920, and they joined the workforce in greater numbers during this decade. These new freedoms, coupled with the prosperity of the times, gave birth to flappers, a term that refers to certain irreverent young women who challenged

traditional mores with their shocking manner of dress, cropped hairstyles, and risqué attitudes towards men and romance. Fitzgerald first rose to fame with his stories about flappers, and stories such as “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” “The Offshore Pirate,” and “The Jelly-Bean” are still reader favorites.

Critical Overview

“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” appeared in Fitzgerald’s second volume of short stories, titled *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922). Reviews of this collection were mixed, though many reviewers found it a definite improvement over his first collection, *Flappers and Philosophers*. In a review in the St. Paul *Daily News*, Woodward Boyd calls the collection “a better assemblage, on the whole, than *Flappers and Philosophers*.” Hildegarde Hawthorne of the *New York Times Book Review*, writes that “There is plenty of variety in the new collection, more than in the *Flappers and Philosophers*.”

However, many critics found the collection to be somewhat haphazard, featuring many lesser stories thrown in with a few of higher quality. A reviewer from the *Times Literary Supplement* notes, “none of the diverse elements in his book—fantastic, serious, or farcical—has been really mastered or drawn together.” In agreement is a reviewer in the Baltimore *Evening Sun*, as quoted by Jackson Bryer in *The Critical Reputation of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, who writes that the stories “give the impression of being tossed off in rather debonair manner to show how easy it all is.”

“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” fared poorly with many critics. In her 1989 book, *Fitzgerald’s Craft of Short Fiction: The Collected Stories 1920–1935*, Alice Hall Petry writes: “So excoriating were the reactions to “Diamond” that one feels only relief that Fitzgerald did not use it as the title of the collection as he had briefly wished.” Some of the critics were less harsh, however. As quoted in *F. Scott Fitzgerald in His Own Time: A Miscellany*, a 1922 article in the Minneapolis *Journal*, entitled “The Future of Fitzgerald,” states, “‘The Diamond as Big as the Ritz’ is not perfect, but it is remarkable” and goes on to assert that Fitzgerald’s strength lies in these imaginative types of stories, rather than in realism.

In hindsight, the story seems to occupy a more favorable light. First of all, attacking materialism, the American way of life, was unlikely to draw favorable reactions just a few short years after World War I. In addition, when seen in the context of Fitzgerald’s entire career, “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” stands out as a turning point in the development of a more mature style. James Miller, in his book *F. Scott Fitzgerald: His Art and his Technique*, explains: “‘May Day’ and ‘The Diamond as Big as the Ritz’ mark important steps in the development of Fitzgerald’s fictional technique . . . he was using experimental techniques, and these experiments . . . were to prove valuable to him in his longer works.”

Whatever the critics’ reactions in 1922, the story remained a favorite of readers in the years following, and it was anthologized in numerous collections of Fitzgerald’s work.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Pryor has a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Michigan and over twenty years experience in professional and creative writing with special interest in fiction. In the following essay, she demonstrates how "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" can be interpreted as an allegory for political events in Fitzgerald's time.

Because F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" is written so like a fable, it is natural for the reader to try and ferret out a moral, a lesson to be learned. Is it a cautionary tale against greed and materialism? An indictment of the entire capitalist system? Or an allegory for something else entirely?

Read in the light of these historical events, 'The Diamond as Big as the Ritz' can be interpreted as a political allegory in which the theme of imprisonment becomes more important than the indictment of materialism and greed.

The time period in which this story was written (the early 1920s) was an eventful one in U.S. history. If Americans had materialistic tendencies, as the story would suggest, then the postwar boom of the time would have made these tendencies more obvious than ever. The end of World War I in 1918 helped boost the economy, women had just been given the right to vote (in 1920), and average wages increased, putting the country in the mood to celebrate. This made the restrictions of Prohibition (the Eighteenth Amendment, which made the consumption of alcoholic beverages illegal beginning in 1920) even more chafing to those who, like Fitzgerald, enjoyed high living.

While the economy was booming, the political climate was one of isolationism and suspicion. In 1917 in Russia, communist revolutionaries called Bolsheviks overthrew the Russian government, and in 1918, they executed Czar Nicholas II and his family. In the United States, this action generated a so-called Red Scare, paranoia over communism that led to even more restrictions on Americans' freedom of expression. In addition, immigration restrictions drastically reduced the number of immigrants allowed into the United States. The country had become a moral dichotomy: On the one hand, there were the irreverent flappers, speakeasies, and wild behavior associated with the Jazz Age, but on the other hand, a puritanical segment sought to impose a rigid moral code on the country through Prohibition and other restrictions.

Read in the light of these historical events, "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" can be interpreted as a political allegory in which the theme of imprisonment becomes more important than the indictment of materialism and greed. In such an interpretation, Braddock Washington's hidden Montana empire represents the United States and capitalism. Washington himself seems to consider his land a country unto itself; when they reach the property, Percy tells John, "This is where the United States ends, father says." Logically, John asks if they have reached Canada, but Percy tells him they are in

the Montana Rockies, on “the only five square miles of land in the country that’s never been surveyed.” Washington’s country has its own anti-aircraft defense system, political prisoners (the aviators), even the capability to start war. (When Jasmine is disappointed that World War I ends before she can become a “canteen expert,” Washington takes steps “to promote a new war in the Balkans” for her benefit.) This country even has its own languages; the Washingtons’ slaves, so long isolated from the rest of the world, have developed their own extreme version of their original southern dialect, which only they can understand.

Like the United States, Washington’s country has beautiful vistas, great natural resources, and wealthy citizens. This fictional country has taken isolationism to its most extreme: anyone who dares enter must be killed or imprisoned. Obviously, the United States had not gone to such literal extremes in the 1920s, but this could be a symbolic representation of the increasingly restrictive immigration quota acts of the decade. Different nationalities and races are represented in the story: Mrs. Washington is Spanish, the teacher who escapes and brings on the Washingtons’ downfall is Italian, and one of the imprisoned aviators offers to teach Washington’s daughters Chinese. As in the United States, however, the power lies in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon majority. A proponent of the Immigration Act of 1924, Senator Ellison D. Smith of South Carolina, said, “Thank God we have in America perhaps the largest percentage of any country in the world of the pure, unadulterated Anglo-Saxon stock; certainly the greatest of any nation in the Nordic breed. . . . let us shut the door and assimilate what we have, and let us breed pure American citizens and develop our own American resources.” Braddock Washington offers up his own blatant racism when he explains to John that he discontinued private baths for his slaves because “Water is not good for certain races—except as a beverage.”

The exaggerated narcissism of the Washingtons could represent the U.S. refusal to become involved with the rest of the world, as when it declined to join the League of Nations or ratify the Treaty of Versailles. The country further isolated itself by placing tariffs on foreign goods, which greatly restricted foreign trade. The Washingtons are isolated not only geographically, but also by their wealth. Kismine shows how completely out of touch she is with the rest of the world when she says, “Think of the millions and millions of people in the world, laborers and all, who get along with only two maids.”

Visitors to the Washington property must be killed, because they might talk; in the United States, the right of free speech had been seriously compromised during World War I by the Sedition Act of 1918 (which remained in effect until 1921).

Even as a political allegory, the story is still a cautionary tale against materialism and the idolization of wealth. As is often the case in his work, Fitzgerald seems to be cautioning against the very vices to which he had fallen victim. Fitzgerald and his wife were notorious for living well beyond their means, fraternizing with the types of people he negatively portrayed in his work, people like the Washingtons. Like John T. Unger, Fitzgerald was aware of the flaws in these people and their way of life but could not resist the magnetism of wealth. Ironically, this attraction is what led many immigrants to

the United States in the first place, and it was a desire to retain that wealth, in part, that motivated the immigration restrictions. While Senator Ellison D. Smith spoke of preserving “Anglo-Saxon stock,” he also expressed the fear that the waves of new immigrants entering the country would deplete U.S. resources, leaving less property for the current population. In other words, the more people, the less wealth to go around. The idea that a more diversified population would also give the country greater intellectual and creative resources was not considered by Smith, though even Braddock Washington acknowledges the necessity of new ideas, by kidnapping “a landscape gardener, an architect, a designer of state settings, and a French decadent poet,” to help him design his chateau and grounds.

Fitzgerald usually took great pains to write stories that would be commercially viable, because with his way of life, he was frequently in debt. The irony of his writing “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” (which was one of his personal favorites) was that because it so harshly criticized the capitalist system, Fitzgerald was unable to make much money from it; it was rejected by the conservative *Saturday Evening Post*, which had bought many of his stories, and instead Fitzgerald had to settle for three hundred dollars from *The Smart Set*, a lesser magazine.

Whether interpreted as political allegory or cautionary fable, the story clearly reflects a discontent with the American philosophy of life that was shared by many artists during this time; many left the country to live in Europe. High living and materialism was to be short lived, however, as in a few years the stock market would crash and plunge the United States into the Great Depression.

Source: Laura Pryor, Critical Essay on “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• In telling the Washington family history, Fitzgerald refers to several actual historical figures. Research the following names and write a short paragraph for each one, indicating the relevance of the historic figure to the story: George Washington, Lord Baltimore, and General Forrest. In addition, Mr. Washington's first and middle names, Braddock Tarleton, have historic significance; include these names in your research.

• Research the size of the world's largest diamonds. How do they compare to the size of the Washington's diamond? Make a chart comparing the size of the top three diamonds to each other and to the fictional diamond in Fitzgerald's story. Given the monetary value of the world's largest diamonds, estimate how much a diamond as large as this fictional diamond would be worth.

• Using the description of the Washingtons' chateau as a guide, draw or paint your own representation of the outside of the chateau, the interior, or one of the rooms described (John T. Unger's room and bath, for example).

• Fitzgerald uses exaggeration to make the Washingtons' home and lifestyle as outrageously lavish as possible. Try the opposite: Use exaggeration to describe, in a few paragraphs, the smallest and most simple living quarters you can imagine.

• John T. Unger tells Kismine that it is impossible to be both free and poor. Do you agree with him? Write a short essay explaining your position.

Compare and Contrast

• **1920s:** Though more women are joining the workforce (21 percent of women aged sixteen and over—though most of them hold clerical, domestic, or factory jobs), women are still generally discouraged from working, especially if they are mothers. Therefore, most women's standard of living depends solely on the income of their husbands, and fathers (such as Braddock Washington) are reluctant to allow their daughters to marry men with unimpressive incomes. The average age for a woman to marry is twenty. (Zelda Sayre first refuses Fitzgerald and agrees to marry him only after he achieves some success with his writing.)

• **Today:** Over 60 percent of women aged sixteen and over are part of the U.S. workforce, and in over half of the country's married couples with children, both parents work outside the home. The average age for a woman to marry is about twenty-five.

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• **1920s:** Following World War I, the United States retreats into isolationism. Congress votes against joining the League of Nations, paranoia about communism is rampant, and immigration is restricted.

• **Today:** Advances in communication technologies and global business trade make a policy of isolationism virtually impossible. In the latter half of the twentieth century and in the early 2000s, U.S. intervention in the affairs of other countries is common (though not always popular). One recent example of such intervention is the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.

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• **1920s:** In 1920, the yearly tuition at Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, one of the country's most exclusive prep schools, is two hundred and fifty dollars. In the story, John T. Unger attends St. Midas School, "the most expensive and the most exclusive boys' preparatory school in the world."

• **Today:** The yearly tuition for day students at Phillips Exeter Academy is over twenty-five thousand dollars a year; boarding students pay nearly thirty-five thousand dollars a year.

What Do I Read Next?

• Many of the same wealth-related themes presented in “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” are explored in greater depth in Fitzgerald’s most famous novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Though the novel is more realistic, the main characters behave in a thoughtless, egocentric, and deadly manner, in some ways reminiscent of the Washingtons in “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz.”

• “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” was originally included in the short story collection *Tales of the Jazz Age*. It is also featured in *The Best Early Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (2005), which includes selected stories from each of Fitzgerald’s collections, explanatory notes, articles by Fitzgerald and his wife, and a short biography.

• Fitzgerald’s life and troubles are told through his correspondence to friends and family in *Life in Letters: A New Collection*, edited and annotated by Matthew J. Bruccoli (1995). The letters are arranged in chronological order and discuss both his work and his difficult private life.

• While Fitzgerald was living in France, he became friends with fellow author Ernest Hemingway. The relationship was a complicated one, however, and in his book *A Moveable Feast* (1964), Hemingway paints a decidedly unflattering portrait of Fitzgerald and of his wife Zelda, whom Hemingway despised. The book is essentially a memoir of Hemingway’s time in Paris and his friendships with luminaries such as Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and, of course, Fitzgerald.

• Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald was also a writer, and while recovering from periods of schizophrenia in a mental hospital, she wrote a novel entitled *Save Me the Waltz*. Available from Vintage (2001), it is a thinly disguised account of her own life with F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Further Study

Bruccoli, Matthew J., *Fitzgerald and Hemingway: A Dangerous Friendship*, Manly, 1994.

Bruccoli, considered one of the foremost experts on Fitzgerald's life and work, uses the correspondence between these two authors to analyze their friendship. He documents the progress of the relationship from its amiable early days in Paris in 1925 to its more contentious times in the 1930s, when Hemingway became increasingly critical of Fitzgerald.

Bruccoli, Matthew J., and Scottie Fitzgerald Smith, *Some Sort of Epic Grandeur: The Life of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, University of South Carolina Press, 1981.

This book is considered by many to be the definitive biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald, written by Fitzgerald expert Bruccoli and Fitzgerald's own daughter. An unsentimental and thorough examination of Fitzgerald's life, including his alcoholism and his wife's mental deterioration, the book includes examples of Fitzgerald's correspondence to friends and relatives.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott, *The Crack-Up*, edited by Edmund Wilson, New Directions Publishing, 1945.

This collection of confessional essays, letters, and journal entries describes Fitzgerald's gradual decline, both emotionally and professionally. The title essay was first published in *Esquire* magazine in 1936. The collection was edited by Edmund Wilson, a longtime friend of Fitzgerald.

Mangum, Bryant, *A Fortune Yet: Money in the Art of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Short Stories*, Garland, 1991.

In this book, Bryant Mangum, a professor of English at Virginia Commonwealth University, explores Fitzgerald's depiction of wealth and the wealthy in his short fiction, and the writer's simultaneous fascination with, and disdain for, the very rich.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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