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# How F. Scott Fitzgerald uses Europe to tell American short stories

Bachelor's project in MLSPRÅK

Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell

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*God damn the continent of Europe [...]. I think its a shame that England and America didn't let Germany conquer Europe [...]. I believe at last in the white mans burden. We are as far above the modern Frenchman as he is above the Negro. Even in art!*

- F. Scott Fitzgerald 1921 (Gillin 256)

## 1.0 Introduction

An element of F. Scott Fitzgerald's writing that has often been overlooked by scholars is his allusions to Europe<sup>1</sup> in his short stories. Being one of America's premier modernist writers means that most of his stories are set in America, nevertheless he still includes a plethora of references and allusions to European culture and society. A common struggle among American modernist writers was creating stories worthy of the same kind of attention that their European peers had held for centuries. Having European references in their stories might have helped to bring a sense of class or nobility that they felt would otherwise have been lacking. America had values that Fitzgerald admired, but he still wished for some of the European qualities, most notably class.

By looking at how Fitzgerald evokes European society and culture in his short stories we can gain an insight into how Fitzgerald views both American and European society, and by extension we can understand his characters even better. It can also grant us insight into how 1920s Americans view themselves in relation to the old world. Fitzgerald is not exactly representative of an average American man, but we can still use his insights to increase our cultural understanding. Fitzgerald has often been used as a pseudo-historical record for his time, whilst this is problematic, there is precedent for it (Elkin 95).

I will use "The Diamond as Big as the Ritz" as my primary evidence for my theory, and then find supplementary evidence in other short stories. "Diamond", in my opinion has the most relevant allusions and references for what I am looking into. The secondary short stories I will include are "Winter Dreams" (1922), "How to Live on Practically Nothing a Year" (1924), "Absolution" (1926), and "Babylon Revisited" (1931). These have been chosen to show how Fitzgerald uses European allusion in different themes and settings throughout his career.

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that when "Europe" is mentioned, both I and Fitzgerald usually mean western Europe.

## 2.0 Fitzgerald's Short Stories

The problem with analyzing F. Scott Fitzgerald's short stories is that they are tainted by commerciality. Because he, like his character Jeffrey Curtain, often lived short story to short story, he had to turn them out at an astonishing rate, which might have forced Fitzgerald to put more of himself into the short stories than in the novels. The novels are crafted, the short stories are more impulsive (Way 72). During his active years he averaged 5.3 short stories annually, this is without taking into account all unpublished work, the months he reportedly did no work (Pelzer 9), nor the time he spent on screenplays and novels. This rate is what gives me reason to believe that there are things to be learned from his short stories that are not as evident in the finely polished novels he published.

According to Robert N. Wilson, Fitzgerald thought that authors should live the way their characters lived, to wholly merge his personality and the society he lived in with the ones he created (482). This means that through his short stories we can learn how Fitzgerald viewed his life and his peers. The separation of art and artist is less vital when talking about F. Scott Fitzgerald because of this. In fact, Wilson felt so confident in the connection between Fitzgerald and his work that he diagnosed him with a psychological complex. In this diagnosis Wilson characterizes Fitzgerald as a man of high ambition and great competence. A man of great attention to detail and talent, in search of perfection. In Fitzgerald's own words: a man wanting to be "the greatest writer that ever lived" (484). It is this Fitzgerald that I would argue exists in his short stories, as well as in his novels. Therefore the short stories also merit academic close reading.

It is no secret that Fitzgerald hated a lot of his own short stories, what he called the "trash" (Wygherley 278). Some academics are therefore quick to dismiss these short stories as a purely commercial pieces of writing, that hold little value in scholarly research. In these short stories we can identify a certain formula, or at least a loose template that Fitzgerald used to write (281). This template allows for little exploration of the short story form, it was used to make it quicker and easier for Fitzgerald to churn out his "trash". But dismissing dozens of short stories written by one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's great writers on the basis that the author himself did not like them is ignorant. If we were to ignore all art that the artist did not like, the contents of our museums and libraries would be significantly reduced. The artist does not need to like their own art for that art to be good (Way 71).

### 3.0 The Diamond as Big as the Ritz

America has a tradition of borrowing names and culture from other countries. “Diamond” does the same thing. The titular diamond is actually giant compared to the Ritz, in fact it is a small mountain. Comparing something large to a mountain is a stale analogy, the Ritz however is only 20-30 years old at this point. By having an exotic and luxurious name in the title Fitzgerald does not only lure in American readers, but also peaks the interests of Parisians and Londoners who might pick up his short story.

The story starts off in the poor town of Hades, Mississippi. The main character, John T. Unger, is moving out of Hades and into a New England school called St. Midas. At this school he meets Percy Washington, who is at first not very talkative but at the end of the semester invites John to his house “in the West” (“Diamond” 94). Percy turns out to be incredibly wealthy because of a mountain their great grandfather found made out of solid diamond. After the first night at the “château” John meets Kismine, Percy’s sister. Kismine, like the rest of the Washington area, turns out to be superficially perfect. After a few days John discovers some unsettling things: Mr. Washington still own slaves, they capture and keep people who find them down in a giant hole in the ground, and guests that come to visit can never leave. Mr. Washington turns out to be quite a horrible man which makes John highly uncomfortable. John, Kismine, and her sister Jasmine begin their escape. During their escape the valley is bombed by the US Army. Mr. Washington flees from the war scene and climbs a mountain as the dawn rises on his now ruined château. At the summit he prays to God and tries to offer him a bribe to make the military go away and keep things as they were. God rejects the bribe. Mr. Washington blows up the mountain the château rests on whilst he is on it to destroy his pursuers and all evidence. John, Kismine, and Jasmine come to grips with their new life as poor people and fall asleep under the stars (“Diamond” 92-138).

The protagonist, John Unger, is not a tragic hero. He is not a protagonist one would find in old European literature. First of all he is not highborn, although he is able to go to “the most exclusive preparatory school in the world” (93), but apart from that he is fairly boring. He does not seek out Percy, he does nothing to get invited to the Washingtons, he does not orchestrate the attack, he does not even make the choice to move away from home and go to St. Midas in the first place. Fitzgerald has this idea that normal people are boring and rich

people are special, especially if they are born into wealth (Way 86 and “The Rich Boy” 142). Not until he learns that he is in mortal peril does he take his faith into his own hands. John is both the least interesting character in the story and the least wealthy. He even has a typical, catholic, American name, whilst Percy, Braddock (Percy’s father), Kismine, and Jasmine all have more unique and interesting names. As the main character, John is the one the reader is supposed to relate to, and he is the most relatable. Maybe the character(or lack thereof) of John tells us something about Fitzgerald’s view of his American readers. John is poor and middle class, therefore he is boring. The Washington’s are descended from the first American president and immensely wealthy, therefore they are interesting. Maybe Fitzgerald finds a dullness in the average American. Fitzgerald has admitted several times that he writes his stories for the audience, that is where the commercial problems arise from. I think we can see an example of this towards the end of this short story, after the mountain blows up:

“Will father be there?” she asked  
John turned to her in astonishment.  
“Your father is dead,” he replied somberly. “Why would he go to Hades? You have it confused with another place that was abolished long ago.” (“Diamond” 138)

The Hades/Hell allegory is not exactly subtle, but Fitzgerald still feels the need to explain it. Elkin points out that Fitzgerald would write for “whoever had enough elementary knowledge of the English language to read through a page of a novel” (93), and maybe Fitzgerald figured that some of these people did not have basic knowledge of Greek mythology, so he had to underline the allegory before wrapping the story up. This is emblematic of how Fitzgerald viewed his American audience.

In addition to that allusion to Greek mythology we also have the fictional St. Midas school in New England. There is no reason for it to be fictional other than it allows Fitzgerald to give it a name that evokes connotations of the European myth. New England is of course known for their excellent schools with a pseudo-European style. Throughout the story we find several allusions to European culture: John compares Kismine to Titania from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (101), Kismine detest having to wear lace that is inherited from European royalty because it is old (121), the prep school boys drive Rolls-Pierce town cars (evoking Rolls-Royces) (93), and the man that causes the downfall of the Washingtons was let out because he was going to teach Kismine and Jasmine Italian. These allusions may have been intended to give the story a noble anchoring among the gaudy wealth.

Regardless of these allusions, one thing is made clear, the Washingtons are American. During the dinner scene John asks who designed this estate. Percy explains that they had several people who had their go at it. They had a French poet in, but he turned out to be utterly too vague, and complained that he missed his “boulevards in spring” (“Diamond”120). A stage designer tried to make a series of tricks and contraptions that would have bored the Washingtons after a while. And both the architect and the landscape gardener had no original ideas. It turned out to be “the moving picture fella” (120), a director, who was the only one comfortable and able to work with an unlimited budget, although he did not have tableside manners and “couldn’t read or write” (120). So the old world artists are prestigious, but in the end unoriginal and boring. The new type of artist, an American artist, is exciting and possesses new skills that the old world artists do not have. One can imagine an American reader being prideful of this, realizing that in this amazing and special situation, only American brains is good enough. This sense of pride is probably also evoked by having the interesting people in this short story all be named Washington, and being descended from *the* American icon. The Washingtons are not princes and princesses, but they are the closest Americans can get to royalty. A rich family name gives nobility and historical validity to his characters. Fitzgerald will not use a highborn European characters in his story, but he uses the New World equivalents. The Washingtons also owning slaves makes this story even more American. I am not implying in any way that Americans are pro-slavery, the slaves are owned by the antagonist in the story after all, but it does tie the family’s connection to the first president even tighter. If the diamond mountain was found in Italy it probably would not have been mined by black slaves.

The man who owns the black slaves, Braddock Washington, is oxymoronically both a heartless psychopath and a character that is easy to understand. He is a man with an immense superiority complex and an ideology which is an extreme version of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”, an essay which had a great influence on American Modernist writers (Martin 6). We see evidence of this in the scene where he talks to the mariners he has captured:

"Let me ask you a few questions!" [the marine] cried. "You pretend to be a fair-minded man."  
"How absurd. How could a man of my position be fair-minded toward you? You might as well speak of a Spaniard being fair-minded toward a piece of steak."  
At this harsh observation the faces of the two dozen fell, but the tall man continued:  
"All right!" he cried. "We've argued this out before. You're not a humanitarian and you're not fair-minded, but you're human—at least you say you are—and you ought to be able to put yourself in our place for long enough to think how—how—how—"  
"How what?" demanded Washington, coldly.  
"—how unnecessary—"

"Not to me."

"Well—how cruel—"

"We've covered that. Cruelty doesn't exist where self-preservation is involved. You've been soldiers; you know that. Try another." ("Diamond" 116)

Fitzgerald compresses the essence of Braddock Washington in this short scene. He shows us how superior Braddock feels towards his prisoners, not only because he is a free man, but also because of his wealth. We can denote this from the words "a man of *my* position", he is superior because of who *he* is, not because of what position the mariners are in. Braddock's interpretation of Emerson is shown in his last line, he feels that self-preservation is paramount, more important than right or wrong. As we realize later in the story, Kismine holds a similar ideology: "We can't let such an inevitable thing as death stand in the way of enjoying life while we have it" (123). She is not talking about her own death in this line, she is talking about how the killing of their guests should not hamper the Washingtons' enjoyment of their company. The Washingtons' interpretation of the Emerson ideology is morphed to an unorthodox form, but that makes perfect sense as the Washingtons live unorthodox lives. Fitzgerald is exploring the outer boundaries of the earlier influential American texts. Emerson said that "[e]ach age must write its own books" (Martin 6) and that is what "Diamond" is. It is a story of extreme wealth and cruelty, that simultaneously reflects a part of American culture. By making the Washington's as American as he can and then distancing them from Europe, geographically and ideologically, he is defining American culture through what it is not.

In this unorthodox short story we see Fitzgerald highlighting American abilities and values whilst contrasting it to Europe throughout the story. We see that Europe is used to add validity and class to the story, but it is used scarcely, it is never put front and center. We see him valuing Americans, and at the same time acknowledging their shortcomings, notably their manners and their ruthlessness. The ridiculously wealthy Americans exists outside of New England and St. Midas, outside of their European heritage. By his use of "Ritz" in the title and allusion to the exoticism of Europe in the beginning Fitzgerald is luring in a European or Europe-loving audience, and then he tells them a brutal and gaudy American short story.

#### 4.0 Secondary evidence

In this part I will briefly outline how Fitzgerald has used allusions to Europe in some of his other works and what effect those allusion have. I believe that by showing Fitzgerald's use of

Europe in several short stories we see that this is a deliberate tool he uses often when the stories are in need of nobility or exoticism. I do not have the ability to go through all of his 164 published short stories, so please keep in mind that this list is in no way comprehensive.

#### 4.1

In “Winter Dreams” we follow Dexter’s rise through the class system as he gradually becomes a very successful man and gets the attention of a high-class girl. His mother was a Bohemian peasant that believed her son should stick to his role (“Winter Dreams” 4). Contrasting these notions, and seeing the positive results that come from living a high class life is Fitzgerald’s way of praising the flexibility of the American system, and critiquing the Old World. Dexter gains his wealth by learning a clothes-washing technique that makes him successful among the golfers because he knew the old English technique of how not to shrink golf-stockings and knickerbockers (2). Fitzgerald here highlights the effects of American entrepreneurial spirit and reinforces it with old European wisdom, a mixture of American values and European history.

#### 4.2

“Absolution” is set in a small town in Dakota, and as such it features only minor references to the Old World. The Catholic priest the story opens with is tempted by the Swedish girls outside his window. They represent something he can never have, and it is interesting that Fitzgerald chose “Swede girls” (“Absolution”) as a shorthand for temptation. One assumes that the girls are not actually Swedish, rather they are of Swedish heritage. Nevertheless their seductive qualities stem from their European background, as it is the only adjective used to describe them. Europe has an exotic allure that “Californian” or “Texan” does not have.

The main character of “Absolution”, Rudolph Miller, adopts an alter ego when he is not comfortable with being himself. That personality is named Blatchford Sarnemington, a name which makes this young boy sound like an old British lord. According to Rudolph, being Blatchford gives him a “suave nobility” (“Absolution”). Fitzgerald is again tapping into European culture when he needs to add more grandeur to something, in this case he needed to make a confident and admirable alter ego and evidently found a noble name to be a fitting shorthand. Fitzgerald achieves much of the same effect with the names in “Absolution” as the

does in “Diamond”. Of course the Washington name in “Diamond” carries American connotations, not European, but they still imbue history and nobility.

#### 4.3

“How to Live on Practically Nothing a Year” differs from most of Fitzgerald’s short stories in that it is set in France. This gives us a different perspective for how he uses Europe. In this satirical essay Fitzgerald outlines the wonderful parts of southern Europe and the more strenuous parts. Mostly we hear how wonderful the Mediterranean is with famous names like Catherine de Medici, Oscar Wilde, and Prince Edward of Wales sprinkled in as background information (“How to Live on Practically Nothing a Year”). This travel diary is in many ways escapism for the reader, a way to daydream. Several times the history of Europe is mentioned, adding a sense of nobility to the daydream. Fitzgerald was a fan of history, which helps us understand his attraction to Europe. Scottie Fitzgerald would recall that her father taught her a game that helped her memorize the chronological sequence of English kings and queens, again showing us Fitzgerald’s fascination with Europe and Nobility (Gillen 262). In this short story Europe is used as spectacle and exoticism.

During college Fitzgerald wrote in his notebook that

"When I like men I want to be like them, I want to lose the outer qualities that give me my individuality and be like them. I don't want the man; I want to absorb into myself all the qualities that make him attractive." (Gillen 253)

This does partially explain why Fitzgerald’s life looks so much like his characters’ lives, but maybe we can extend this thought process to his views on other cultures as well. From “Practically Nothing” we learn that he is attracted to Europe, he definitely sees the appeal of France, both monetarily and aesthetically. Although we also learn that he would ultimately had been better off at home, because when they are in France they are hoodwinked and scammed at every opportunity. In short, Fitzgerald is torn on Europe, he does not wish to be European, only certain qualities, such as the cheap and lovely food, the noble history, and the wonderful scenery. Brian Way has observed the same thing, stating that

Fitzgerald’s European experience was merely an extension of his American experience. [...] In France, prices were lower, the climate was more agreeable, and there was a welcome freedom from Prohibition, but beyond this his sense of difference does not seem to function very clearly. (86-87)

It could be argued that because the fictional Fitzgerald’s in this story act like morons that this story is in fact mocking Americans, and is instead a love letter to Europe. The characters bring their misfortune upon themselves to some extent, that the Americans are in the wrong

and Europe is in fact as wonderful as it seems. Personally I would not agree with this because we see more of Fitzgerald's cynical view of Europe in the short story "Babylon Revisited". A story which is also set in France, although in the capital and not on the Riviera. In "Babylon" Fitzgerald treats us to the same dream-like prose as the main character drives through beautiful boulevards up and down the Seine, but the main character also sees the city as a shell of its former self, more like a tourist attraction than a city. The American characters (which are all of them) never try to become Parisians, they always stay decidedly American, which would back up the argument that Fitzgerald likes Europe for the food, the history, and the scenery, but he prefers American values and people. Examples of the characters staying domesticated are as follows:

He woke upon a fine fall day - football<sup>2</sup> weather

[...]

The room was warm and comfortably American.

[...]

But the stillness in the Ritz bar was strange and portentous. It was not an American bar any more-he felt polite in it, and not as if he owned it. It had gone back into France. ("Babylon Revisited")

In regards to the last quote it is relevant to mention that there used to be plenty of Americans in the Ritz bar, but not at the time of the story, which is after the Wall Street crash. In the earlier days all the Americans in the bar appropriated it and made it an "American bar" (Babylon Revisited"), keeping it familiar whilst still being able to enjoy the food, the history, and the exoticism of Paris.

## 5.0 Conclusion

As the epigraph suggests, F. Scott Fitzgerald is not in love with Europe. The question then remains, why does he keep including European allusion and references in his stories? As was mentioned, Fitzgerald was a man of amazing talent and intellect, which would lead me to exclude the notion that these references are accidental or done with little forethought. They have a purpose, and my conclusion is that this purpose is to bring nobility, exoticism, validity, or a mix of all three to the story. It would make sense that Fitzgerald looked up to and simultaneously disliked the nobility and history of Europe, because of his well-documented inferiority complex (Curnutt 14) and life-long struggle to be more than what he was born to be. By using European allusions when he needs nobility or validity he shows us that he accepts the areas in which Europe excels to a greater degree than America, but through stories like "Winter Dreams" and "Diamond" he also shows us where America excels. Contrary to

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<sup>2</sup> My emphasis

what Fitzgerald says himself, he does not absorb what he finds attractive about Europe, he accepts them, enjoys them, but ultimately picks America. Fitzgerald does not dream about being European, he dreams about nobility, wealth, and greatness, things that are often found in Europe. Those are the qualities he wants himself and his stories to possess, sometimes he needs to borrow them from Europe, when he can he creates an American equivalent.

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