

Images in “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” Novella by F. Scott Fitzgerald

Nafosat Qudratova, Muhammedova Hulkar
Uzbekistan State World Languages University

ABSTRACT: “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” is a classic piece of social satire. In this novella Fitzgerald mocks his society by exaggerating certain aspects of American culture, particularly obsession with wealth. With the help of antagonists’ point of view the author demonstrates that extreme wealth often leads to immoral behavior. In the name of wealth, some men are prepared to sin and commit horrific crimes without thinking about consequences.

KEYWORD: diamond, America, character, image, immorality, novella.

“The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” is an imaginative fantasy novella by American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald. It published in 1922 in Tales of the Jazz Age. “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” lives up to its bravura title [1, p. 152]. Firstly, the title shows the idea of exaggeration. It is not just a large diamond, but a huge, enormous diamond the size of a giant hotel. Secondly, comparing the diamond to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel connects the fantasy wealth of Fitzgerald’s American readers.

This novella is a critique of American capitalism and America is portrayed as a country as obsessed with wealth. It is about a man who has discovered a giant mountain made of solid diamond – a diamond as big as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and needs to keep it hidden from the world at all costs. A common theme of “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” is that extreme wealth often leads to immoral behavior. Wealth replaces religion and terrible things are done in it which are imprisonment and murder. Fitzgerald showed that wealth is a prison. Those who chase it blindly lose their humanity and cannot even see the value in human life.

Young John T. Unger is the immature disillusionment of the schoolboy protagonist of “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” who is sixteen years old. He was born and grew up in Hades, Mississippi. He loves material goods and works to impress others because of it. John begins the story as guilty of wealth-worshipping as anyone else. “I like very rich people,” he states to Percy. “The richer a fella is, the better I like him” [2, p. 2]. However, although he obsesses over wealth, he is also a sensitive young man. When he is ready to go St. Midas’s school near Boston, he begins crying upon separation from his parents.

Moreover, he is not entirely self-motivated, as he may appear at first. In fact, he has a kind heart. He is appalled at the Washington’s for their lack of sensitivity for other humans and when saving himself at the end, he also saves Kismine and Jasmine, without a second thought.

To be sure, John is an outsider at both the Washington estate and St. Midas. He was born in an affluent family but they reside in a little town in Mississippi, where “a function that would be doubtless hailed by a Chicago beef-princes as ‘perhaps a little tacky’” [2, p. 3]. When he goes to school, he enters a new world – a

world where wealth reigns supreme. St. Midas is the gateway to this world and the Washington estate is the inner sanctum.

John's visit to the Washingtons' estate is intriguing because it is unclear whether he is there as a guest or a prisoner. Readers suspect from the start he will not be allowed to leave because of Braddock Washington's hidden secret. However, John does not realize this until Kismine reveals the game near the end of his stay. On the one hand he is treated like royalty but on the other hand the whole time the threat of being killed or imprisonment hangs over him.

When analyzing John's character, we think whether he has learned anything from his mess. He makes plans for his life in Hades after fleeing the chateau with Jasmine and Kismine. John has been disillusioned and he thinks that such disillusionment is valuable. It is difficult to say that John has learned his lesson about the dangers of extravagant wealth and the immorality of attaining it on the backs of others.

In Fitzgerald's satire the antagonist is Braddock Washington who is the embodiment of the values critiqued. He is Percy Washington's father and the richest man in the world. Braddock Washington is portrayed as an insatiable desire for wealth, the absence of religion, and the will to destroy others for personal gain. It is clear that Braddock is in many ways a symbol for America's own founding and expansion into the West, because he descends from George Washington and Lord Baltimore. This attitude is just the subject of Fitzgerald's story.

In addition to willing to exploit others for his own purpose, Braddock also believes that there is nothing wrong with it. He thinks it is "perfectly natural" as Kismine will later say, to get as much as you can out of other people. This is the attitude which led to things like slavery. Surely, the irony in it that Braddock is himself a prisoner to his own wealth and in his own chateau. He has the aviators imprisoned below the ground, but he has himself imprisoned in a much larger, much better disguised prison. In many ways, he is a slave to his own obsession with wealth. Hiding the diamond from others is his entire life function. He perfectly serves his obsession and therefore it is no surprise that Braddock eventually gets his just desserts. He dies in the explosion of his own gigantic diamond mountain after first attempt to bribe God. It is fitting that he dies inside the mountain – it is his prison, and he cannot leave even in death. Also, he enters deliberately (much as he is voluntarily committed himself to a jail of his own wealth), and that he brings his family with him – Braddock is a victim of his own decision.

Another main character of this story is Kismine who is Washington's youngest daughter and the love interest for the hero John. She is flawless like her father's diamond. The below the blossoming of first love:

"John was critical about women. A single defect – a thick ankle, a hoarse voice, a glass eye – was enough to make him utterly indifferent. And here for the first time in his life he was beside a girl who seemed to him the incarnation of physical perfection" [2, p. 11].

Kismine is like an extension of Washington's seemingly flawless beautiful chateau. However, like beneath the ground of the estate has the prison, she has a darker secret. She is only using John for the summer and at the end he will be killed. Despite being aware of this, she does nothing to stop it. She is upset but only in the way that having a headache on birthday would. Kismine does not see anything fundamentally or morally wrong with this picture. She is only sad that thinking about it will ruin her summer. "It is only natural for us to get all the pleasure out of them that we can first," she tells John. [2, p. 33]. She claims that she is "honestly sorry" about the whole mess, though admits that she would rather see John "put away than ever kiss another girl" [2, p. 41].

Kismine's lack of appreciation for the value of human life or death is the problem here. "We cannot let such an inevitable thing as death stand in the way of enjoying life while we have it," she explains to John. "Think how lonesome it would be out here if we never had anyone. Why father and mother have sacrificed some of

their best friends just as we have” [2, p. 39]. This valuation issue persists throughout the story. Kismine’s inability to comprehend the true worth of anything – not just its monetary worth is the result.

At the end of “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” Kismine brings rhinestones in her pockets instead of diamonds, she was the victim of her own shortcomings, just like her father was. “I think I like these better,” she says. “I am a little tired of diamonds” [2, p. 25]. Indeed Kismine is tired of luxury and easy life, providing once more that money cannot buy happiness. She is so bored with her life that she is excited about the prospect of being poor. “We will be poor, won’t be?” she says to John with childish delight, ‘free and poor’. What fun” [2, p. 26]

One of minor character Percy Washington is Braddock Washington’s son and John’s classmate. He is John’s in to a world of luxury, ease and garish wealth. Although at first we do not know, then we can find out that Percy willfully brings John to his home to die. Percy knows well that all his family guests are murdered by his father. As Kismine enters the picture, Percy disappears from the story, and we never get to hear his views on the matter or listen to his attempts to justify his behavior. However, we can assume that he shares his sister’s shallow feelings on the situation. After all, John concludes that both “Percy and Kismine seemed to have inherited the arrogant attitude in all its harsh magnificence from their father,” and that “a chaste and consistent selfishness runs like a pattern through their every idea”.

However, when Percy fills John in as to the history of the Washington family, he takes on important role. And from that part of the text we can start to see the connection between the history of the Washington family and the history of the US. Because of the unnamed narrator of his family’s history, Percy provides John and the reader with all background information we need. In the dramatic bombing scene we cannot see anything of Percy but we are told that he walks into the mountain to die with his family. We do not know how Percy feels about this whole thing, or what his reaction is to the attack. However, he seems to be fated like his father to go down with the ship.

Jasmine Washington is another sister of Percy Washington and a static character. She is also very hardened by the wealth and the readers do not learn much about her. She knows fully that the guests will be murdered at the end of their stay so she thinks little of inviting friends to her home. However, Jasmine is selfish, and she would rather have their company for the summer before they are murdered, than be without friends.

In this novella we can see other minor characters like The Prisoners Underneath Washington’s all-green golf course. Washington has imprisoned twenty aviators who had the misfortune of discovering his property.

By analyzing character of “The Diamond as Big as the Ritz” it will be obvious that the main character John is immature and imperfect one. It is hard to say whether he can learn anything about the dangers of extravagant wealth and loosening morality because of it. Fitzgerald criticizes both the Washington’s immoral way of life and the middle-class attitude towards wealth that makes their lifestyle possible through John’s perspective. John never speaks up or expresses any outrage or horror at the Washington’s way of life, but until his own life is in danger. In this novella the author aims the attention of the readers towards financial rewards and the life that comes because of this pursuit of material treasures. The author also shows that the real values were lost among social groups with the help of the demonstration of the unnecessary material goods.

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